



Tri-service fleet maintenance staff from Gloucestershire Fire, Police and Ambulances joined forces to honour NHS staff as part of the nations 'Clap for Carers' tribute

## Covid-19 crisis: Emergency services deserve more than just applause and appreciation

The Coronavirus pandemic is one of the biggest public health crises faced globally, impacting every aspect of our lives. **Professor Paresh Wankhade** writes that while the nation has been saluting the selfless devotion of frontline staff by clapping and banging drums in the streets, this may not be enough

**T**he Coronavirus pandemic is one of the biggest public health crises faced globally, impacting every aspect of our lives. Its implications for our already-under-pressure emergency services are quite significant. As the pandemic continues, there is a greater pressure on the emergency first responders to respond appropriately and safely. In this article, I highlight why frontline emergency services staff deserve better pay, treatment and working

conditions than just our applause in their fight against coronavirus to protect general public and save lives.

### Funding crisis

Emergency services have witnessed massive reductions in their budgets over the past ten years which have impacted the response and service delivery of these organisations. For the

police service, funding from central government has [fallen by 30 per cent](#) in real terms since 2011 and police chiefs have expressed concerns about reaching a 'tipping point' over budget cuts. While the government's decision to recruit new 20,000 police officers should be welcomed, it has been met with scepticism in certain quarters whether it merely fills the gap in the number of officers lost due to budget cuts since 2010 and not be enough to meet the [future demands](#) of the service? The Fire and Rescue services have done a commendable job of absorbing funding reductions since 2010, but they also highlight risks to their financial and service sustainability. Similarly, the demand for ambulance services continues to grow rapidly but the increased funding has not matched service demand and it struggles to meet its [performance targets](#). In my work, I have extensively argued how the funding gap makes meeting the targets a '[mission impossible](#)' and [doing more with less](#) is proving impossible and should be strongly contested at the highest levels.

The Coronavirus pandemic has further exposed these fault lines. The Fire Brigade Union has alleged that cuts to the service are being 'rushed through' locally during the pandemic despite the commitment by the firefighters to volunteer for additional duties to support other emergency services during this national crisis. Concerns around budgets, staff pay, working conditions, staff numbers, equipment and pension, among other things, have been ignored in the past and need urgent attention.

### **Sickness absence and staff resilience**

The problem of sickness absence due to shift work is a much wider issue across emergency services. Ambulance staff have the [highest sickness absence rates](#) amongst NHS workers. Maintaining adequate staffing levels during the Coronavirus pandemic is one of the biggest challenges facing the emergency services. In a rapidly dynamic and fluid situation, [initial reports](#) emerged that one in five police officers are off sick or self-isolating in areas worst hit by the virus while absentee rates for other forces is

averaging about 10 per cent, and is predicted to rise to about 25 per cent as the virus spreads in their areas. Monitoring sickness levels and improving resilience amongst staff was also highlighted by police chiefs as a major concern while giving evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee recently. This aspect is crucial to maintain operational resilience and strategic capability when demand grows on emergency services over the coming weeks and months. Service chiefs will have to closely monitor staff availability to maintain adequate response capability in dealing with this unprecedented situation, while being sensitive to sickness absence cases. Cases of shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) for frontline staff have also been highlighted in press after concerns have been raised by staff unions. Protecting frontline staff in their efforts against the coronavirus pandemic is critical.

### **Mental health and wellbeing of frontline staff**

Another challenge facing frontline staff in addition to their physical health remains the psychological wellbeing. Latest evidence suggests that frontline staff have increased risk of 'moral injury' and mental health problems while dealing with the Covid-19 situation. I have also recently drawn attention to the [increased stress levels](#) for the emergency services staff due to current pandemic. Emotional accounts of frontline staff have emerged fighting burnout while tackling coronavirus in addition to dealing with PPE shortages, sickness or even death of colleagues. Frontline staff are being also exposed to trauma and in one instance, an officer was called to 15 Covid-related deaths in 24 hours. Working in such stressful environments, often alone, or called to homes is further exacerbated by the feeling isolation and not being able to share.

A healthy work force is '*sine qua non*' for effective working of the emergency services around the world. A package involving pre-incident training, managerial support accompanied by a nurturing organisational culture will go a long way for staff dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

*“Doing more with less is proving impossible and should be strongly contested at the highest levels”*

## *“Ministers need to have a real honest debate on addressing the issues I have highlighted”*

### **Conclusion**

The nation has been saluting the selfless devotion of frontline staff by clapping and banging drums in the streets every Thursday. However, this may not be enough. When services have been stripped of budgets, when frontline staff are facing PPE shortages and undergoing psychological trauma in the line of duty, ministers need to have a real honest debate on addressing the issues I have highlighted.

Worryingly, by elevating frontline staff to a status of ‘heroes’ and setting our expectations ‘too high’, we may be doing a disservice by putting them potentially under ‘more stress’ as the “guilt over not meeting those standards can be [detrimental to their mental health and effectiveness](#)”. Instead, it would be more rewarding to recognise the challenges faced by our emergency services and act upon them.



### **Biography**

[Professor Paresh Wankhade](#) is an expert in the field of public sector management with a known expertise in emergency services management. He is the Programme leader for the UK's first bespoke [Professional Doctorate in Emergency Services Management](#) and is Editor-In-Chief of [International Journal of Emergency Services](#). He has published widely in top academic journals and professional publications on strategic leadership, organisational culture, organisational change and interoperability between the emergency services. He regularly speaks at related events and through his opinion pieces. He works closely with blue light professionals for co-production of knowledge by exploring leadership and management perspectives in the emergency services, and specifically in the [Ambulance](#), [Police](#) and the [Fire and Rescue Service](#). He is also a Trustee at the [Fire Service Research and Training Trust](#). He is a Fellow at the Institute of Civil Protection and Emergency Management and chairs the [SIG on Blue Light Services](#).