

Lothian and Borders Fire and Rescue Service celebrate a year on Twitter

✘ Lothian and Borders Fire and Rescue Service (LBFRS), the first Scottish fire service on *Twitter*, is hailing its first year using the micro-blogging service as a success.

Last month saw the Service break through the 1000 followers mark for [@LBFire](#) when a chemical incident in the west end of the city attracted a number of new *Twitter* users to the account.

Research has shown that the majority of new followers occur during and immediately after major incidents where local *twitter* users wish to be kept abreast of news through real time tweets from LBFRS.

On 4 March a white powder incident at Caledonian Crescent saw a number of streets sealed off as emergency services descended on the area, [@LBFire](#) received 48 new followers in the four hours from the time of initial call-out. Regular followers alerted locals to the fact that information was being posted via [@LBFire](#) and many people took the opportunity to ask for direct advice and information.

During the first year on *Twitter*, LBFRS say they have seen spikes for incidents including an attack on fire crews and vandalism to their hoses during a large fire at a derelict school and a huge factory fire in West Lothian on the same day the Papal visit to Edinburgh.

Watch Manager Lee Peyton who was instrumental in gaining permission to use the micro-blogging site for communicating fire safety messages and engaging with the public, said:

“It’s really great news that in the space of a year we have amassed so many followers. Whilst the numbers we attracted was never our focus, it is very good to know that there is an interest in what we do and that people have followed the account and stuck with us.

“Generally it’s after significant fire related incidents where you find [@LBFire](#) trending in Edinburgh.

“More than 500 of our 1,000+ followers are locally based (probably 1-2 % more than that number as there are those who haven’t specified where they live on their profiles) which means in the event of a major incident/civil contingency we can reach a fair number of the local population through our tweets and retweets of our key messages.”

The vast majority of local followers are based in Edinburgh with smaller concentrations in East Lothian and Livingston in West Lothian.

Media Manager Ruth MacLeod, who manages the account with Lee, said:

“We owe a huge thanks to all our followers, many of whom regularly tweet us with questions and comments about Lothian and Borders Fire and Rescue Service.

“It’s been really interesting to hear what people have to say about us and the positive and supportive comments we get, particularly when we are dealing with large scale fires or other high profile incidents have also been really humbling. We’ve found in particular when we’ve been dealing with a serious incident it’s resulted in high numbers of retweets when followers pass on our messages to others. This has been useful in cases where there has been a public safety message or disruption due to a fire or other emergency.

“We have also had a number of people arrange home safety visits through *twitter* where firefighters will come to your home and fit a free smoke alarm. We know that this service has

been well received because people will often come back to us to tell us about their experience. These positive comments are seen publicly and often result in further referrals.

“There are challenges, we can’t cover everything that happens but we aim to give a snapshot of what we do and also allow people to have a way of contacting us directly with questions or comments.

“The immediacy of *Twitter* also means we have to try and respond when people post images of our crews at work or ask what we are doing at a scene. In the past, we may have had longer to formulate a response or make the public aware of a situation whereas now with such immediate forms of communication we have to be prepared to explain scenarios, often against a backdrop of operational pressures or phones ringing and simultaneous media requests. Hopefully we get the balance right on most occasions and we are honest and open about what we do without compromising operational considerations.”

The Service has used *Twitter* to post messages about a range of issues including community safety initiatives and station open days, fire safety advice, live incidents and the role of firefighters in their local communities.

Lee continued: “More and more organisations are seeing the benefits of having a *Twitter* account. For us, as a public sector organisation, the fact that it’s a no-cost, relatively low resource way of communicating with more people and spreading the word about fire safety and other issues has made it very useful.

“*Twitter* also allows easy engagement and conversation and we’ve been really pleased that people have felt able to ask questions of us and also get advice. We’ve organised a number of home safety visits through *Twitter*, had positive feedback on our handling of high profile fires and rescues, had

messages of support over incidents of attacks on fire crews and vandalism to fire service property and had people share information with us about what's happening in their local communities.

"We hope people continue to use Twitter to find out about LBFRS and to get advice or to tell us what they think of the Service.

"Although a number of Fire and Rescue Services down south use twitter we were the first to have a presence in Scotland. Hopefully we've been able to demonstrate its worth for emergency services and in the process improved our relationships with local communities."