

## **NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL**

### **COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

At a meeting of the **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee**  
on Wednesday, 2 February 2022 at 2.00 p.m.

#### **PRESENT**

Councillor J. Reid  
(Chair, in the Chair)

#### **MEMBERS**

Cartie, E.	Hardy, C.
Castle, G.	Mather, M.
Dodd, R.R.	Morphet, N.
Gallacher, B.	Richardson, M.

#### **CABINET MEMBERS**

Horncastle, C.	Community Services
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#### **OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE**

G. Binning	Deputy Chief Fire Officer
P. Hedley	Chief Fire Officer
J. McNeil	Assistant Chief Fire Officer
E. Morgan	Interim Executive Director for Public Health and Community Services
R. Murfin	Interim Executive Director of Planning & Local Services
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
J. Stewart	Strategic Housing Manager
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer

Councillor K Nisbett was also in attendance.

#### **45. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Bridgett.

#### **46. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS**

The Committee considered the Forward Plan of key decisions (February to May 2022). (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes).

In answer to a question, the Chair explained that an update on the Leisure Review – Phase 1 would be included as part of the Active Northumberland Update at a future meeting.

**RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

#### **47. SCRUTINY OF CABINET REPORT**

The Committee were advised that the following report would be considered by the Cabinet on 8 February 2022. Members were requested to comment on the proposals in the report.

##### **47.1 Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service: Community Risk Management Plan 2022-26 Consultation**

The report raised awareness of the consultation and the background to the development of the NFRS Community Risk Management Plan 2022-26. (A copy of the report is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

Paul Hedley, the Chief Fire Officer referred to the presentation that had been given to all five Local Area Council's the previous month and explained that all fire and rescue authorities were required to produce a Community Risk Management Plan which must:

- reflect up to date risk analyses;
- demonstrate how prevention, protection and response activities would best be used to prevent and mitigate the impact of identified risks on its communities;
- outline required service delivery outcomes including the allocation of resources;

The plan provided information to explain the risk analysis process and the 10 most frequently attended incidents in the previous 5 years. Over 93% of attendances were attributable to these incident types.

Officers believed the plan built on previous iterations of the document and provided more detail about the risk management process. Feedback was sought from residents, interested parties and identified stakeholders on the draft plan and whether there were any gaps. The consultation was open from 5 January to 16 February 2022 and available on numerous platforms including the county council's website, the new bespoke Fire and Rescue Service website and social media platforms, advertised through press and published media and publicly accessible meetings.

The CRMP was not a static document but would evolve and be subject to an annual review of performance, an assessment of the priorities and risk analysis of incident types and emerging risks which should give assurance on the risks and action required to address them.

Reference was made to the 6 priorities identified within the plan. During 2022/23 a review would be undertaken of operating models and service delivery to ensure that risks arising from British Volt and the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne Rail Line to ensure there was service capacity, training and equipment to respond effectively to those new risks.

Councillors and members of the public were encouraged to respond to the consultation on the plan which was in a draft form and would be shaped by the feedback.

Comments from the committee and responses from the Chief Fire Officer(s) were as follows:

- Officers were liaising with the Climate Change Team to ensure that the information from the Met Office in the Flooding and Water Rescue section on page 23 was accurate.
- Members expressed their support for the Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service and the very clear report and CRMP.
- To date, 30 responses had been received during the CRMP consultation which included 4 elected members, some neighbouring fire and rescue services and the majority from residents.
- The first year of the CRMP, which proposed a review of operating models and service delivery, was not contentious and therefore unlikely to generate a large number of consultation responses unlike past proposals.
- Group leaders were requested to encourage participation by members. Other members were of the view that they had participated in the consultation process at the Local Area Council meetings and did not feel that they needed to provide a separate response as they were supportive of the plan.
- Best practice and external advice had recommended inclusion of the demographic data.
- Experience following the recent severe storms had highlighted the problems caused by lack of power which had impacted on mobile technology masts, particularly in rural areas. It was queried whether information could be released in the future via a local radio station. Lack of communication was to be included within the Storm Arwen Review and officers hoped that outcomes would build in additional resilience including the capability and increasing capacity of satellite communication.
- An update would be provided to the committee on consultation responses and changes made to the CRMP.

Councillor Horncastle, Portfolio Holder for Community Services, which included responsibility for the Fire and Rescue Service, commented on the comprehensive nature of the plan and the action being taken to safeguard residents from the identified risks. He complimented officers on the Community Risk Management Plan and encouraged everyone to view the new dedicated website at [www.northumberlandfireandrescue.gov.uk](http://www.northumberlandfireandrescue.gov.uk) as it was a valuable tool.

**RESOLVED** that the report be received and that the comments be noted.

## 48. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORT

### 48.1 Update on Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) Round 2 Inspection report into Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS)

The report provided an update on the findings of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) following the publication of the second inspection report into Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) on 15 December 2021. (A copy of the report is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

Paul Hedley, Chief Fire Officer, introduced his colleagues also in attendance: Graeme Binning, Deputy Chief Fire Officer, and Jim McNeil, Assistant Chief Fire Officer, both of whom had been actively involved in the action plan, inspection and review of the service.

He explained that whilst the findings of the second inspection were that NFRS continued to Require Improvement, the narrative was much more positive and balanced than the report in 2019. He reported that the inspection had been brought forward by 6 months, which had impacted on preparation time and there had been a loss of activity against the first action plan due to a change in the ways of working due to the Covid-19. The latter had resulted in delivery of different service model which had supported the Council and Northumberland Communities Together's response to the pandemic.

The Committee were informed that the Lead HM inspector had acknowledged that there had been 'significant improvements since the last inspection in 2019' and that NFRS was 'an improving service'.

Additional investment in 2020 had enabled the capacity and resource issues to be addressed and the significant efficiencies target had been removed.

Jim McNeil, Assistant Chief Officer provided a synopsis of actions taken in response to the Cause of Concern (CoC) and plans for the future. A detailed explanation was provided of the 2-tiered safeguarding arrangements for those firefighters who provided dual on call / wholetime contracts, by Fire Control and Duty Managers to continually adjust rotas and start times, if required. He gave assurance that the 3 aspects raised in the CoC had been addressed. Furthermore, dual contractors enabled the service to maximise appliance availability and would only be used as an interim solution until the on-call recruitment strategy increased resilience of the service to provide 24-hour cover, 365 days per year. 3 on-call courses would be held in the next 6 months, the first of which was starting the following week. Variation of contracts and a reduced number of hours were assisting recruitment.

The HMI provided an opportunity for an independent review and benchmarking of the service and the 25 areas identified for improvement were issues that were at various stages of being addressed.

Graeme Binning the Deputy Chief Fire Officer confirmed that following his appointment, every system, process and department had been subject to review including strategic planning and performance as well as collaboration and partnerships. The Integrated Risk Management Plan had been extended and a performance and assurance framework developed. Monthly meetings and oversight of core measures and service measures were then provided at a quarterly Strategic Performance Board. Assurance was then provided to the Service Leadership Team on the corporate health of the organisation which allowed emerging risks to be monitored and the flexing of resource, finance or external support where required. The service was under continuous review and officers were optimistic regarding the future.

Comments from the committee and responses from the Chief Fire Officer(s) were as follows:

- Clarification was provided regarding the adjustment of start times for those on dual contracts if called out for less than an hour or an accumulation of several incidents via monitoring of incident summary sheets. The safeguarding review monitored both day and night shifts. Duty managers were responsible for confirming start times and arranging cover, if required.
- Results from the previous analysis, identified that 80% of incidents were under one hour duration and was evenly split between whole time and on call incidents.
- They aspired to provide 100% availability across all appliances, operating with a 4% variation to enable recruitment and retention. Some appliances had 98-98.5% availability and the recruitment strategy would be focussing on cover at those fire stations via flexibility of contracts.

Members gained assurance from the officers' presentation and information contained within the report.

Councillor Horncastle, Portfolio Holder for Community Services, was confident that the service was moving in the right direction and had full confidence in the officers and service.

**RESOLVED** that the contents of the report be noted.

## **48.2 Empty Homes in Northumberland**

The report provided an overview regarding the issue of empty homes in the county, the measures the Council were undertaking to bring them into use and the challenges that this represented. (A copy of the report is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

Elizabeth Morgan, Interim Executive Director for Public Health and Community Services, and Julie Stewart, Strategic Housing Manager, gave a brief outline of the work that had been taking place around empty homes. The following information was highlighted:

- Comparison of data provided by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities showed that 1.35% of properties eligible for Council Tax in Northumberland were empty which compared with the national average of 1.93%.
- There had been a slight increase in the number of long-term empty properties from 1,985 at 5.11.2019 to 2,070 at the present time.
- The highest number of empty properties were mainly located in urban areas, Ashington and Blyth. There had been a significant reduction in Ponteland and new areas of concern in Alnwick and Amble.
- The Private Sector Housing Team comprised 4 officers and worked closely with colleagues in Environmental Health, Environmental Protection and Planning and had brought 800 properties back into use in the last 5 years. Most had arisen as a result of negotiation with owners and some use of other initiatives such as Empty Dwelling Management Orders. A brief explanation of the complicated and lengthy process was provided. 15 properties were currently being managed for a 7-year period.
- Purchase and Repair had enabled acquisition of 12 properties with funding from Homes England, unfortunately this funding was no longer available.
- An updated Property Accreditation Scheme would be launched in the near future.
- It was acknowledged that some long-term empty properties were a cause for concern for neighbours. They were mostly uninhabitable or where no owner could be identified following the death of the previous proprietor. An Empty Homes Working Group had been formed to consider these difficult properties and comprised colleagues from Housing Services, Environmental Health, Environmental Protection, Legal, Planning and Building Control. Their combined powers were used to address these dwellings. They had a budget of £50,000 and focussed on a small number of these properties due to the complexity of the issues.
- A Housing review was considering the most effective use of resources to target problematic areas.
- Case studies had been included to provide examples of the complexity of the process.

The following issues were raised by members:

- A review undertaken by the Family and Children's Services OSC approximately 10 years ago had considered the limited legislative powers available; many properties empty then remained empty now.
- Empty properties in some wards attracted crime and anti-social behaviour which was having a significant detrimental impact on the health of neighbours. They were frustrated that the process could not be speeded up.

- Properties whose condition was so poor and were uninhabitable were not subject to a Council Tax charge and therefore there was no debt which could be used as a leverage for court action.
- There was demonstrable need for a dedicated Empty Homes Team.
- A review of delegations for Private Sector Housing Officers were being carried out to see if they could support inspections normally undertaken by Environmental Health and Environmental Protection.
- A comprehensive review was needed of some areas, such as Cowpen Quay, where there were a lot of absent landlords, properties in poor condition and fly tipping. Housing was aware of the regeneration programme in Blyth and were party to some of the discussions. A report on the potential for Selective Licensing in these areas was in the process of being finalised, funding sought and would be of assistance in that area. Unfortunately, due to the small size of the team, there was not enough capacity for a dedicated resource for that area.
- It was suggested that more of the long-term problem properties needed to be addressed rather than those that were easily solved as well as a review of certain areas. More enforcement was needed with stronger penalties. The team also needed to be given sufficient resource to address the issue an area at a time.
- The Landlord Accreditation Scheme sought to improve property standards to support tenant's health and well-being. These were voluntary and less successfully when landlords did not engage with the process. Enforcement powers generally sat within Environmental Protection and Environmental Health and the relevant teams were proactive and issued notices where this was appropriate and took actions where it could be recharged.
- It was acknowledged that the issue was a significant challenge, there were limited resources and needed all parties to work together.
- Funding opportunities for Purchase and Repair had ended. However, the Housing Delivery Team considered the potential to repurchase former Right to Buy properties where it was possible to bring them back under housing stock, where the condition and cost of bringing the property into a lettable condition, were viable.

Members supported the work of the Housing Team who they acknowledged had limited resources.

**RESOLVED** that the content of the report be noted.

### **48.3 Northumberland Infrastructure Funding Statement**

The report explained the purpose of an Infrastructure Funding Statement (IFS) and summarised what was reported for the year 2020 / 2021. (A copy of the report is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

Rob Murfin, Interim Executive Director of Planning and Local Services, explained that this was the second statement to be produced which reported on developer contributions via Section 106 agreements. The statement, which was submitted to the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities,

ensured transparency and accountability of contributions which were critical in delivering much needed affordable housing, necessary infrastructure and mitigation measures.

During 2020/21 the following figures were reported:

- The total amount of money to be provided under any planning obligations entered was £5,628,195.06.
- The total amount of money received from planning obligations was £1,568,156.24 3.
- 328 affordable homes had been agreed along with 175 school places.
- £1,117,970 had been secured by s278 Highway agreements for highway improvement works.
- The total amount of money from planning obligations allocated towards infrastructure and mitigation was £2,834,401.29.
- The total amount of money retained at the end of the reported year was £7,699,318.41.

Figures were broadly similar to the previous year with the exception of money received, which was approximately £700,000 lower. This was thought to be due to a decline in the number housing development commencements and completions, most likely due to the pandemic and delayed receipt of developer contributions.

Not only was the statement about a submission of information, but also to raise awareness about the process. Positive feedback had been received on the statement which was described as an 'excellent document, very clear and informative'. Members of the public could also provide feedback on how it could be improved in future years. The emerging Northumberland Local Plan would provide new policies against which planning obligations were secured and planning reform which might introduce a Community Infrastructure Levy.

It was suggested that it would be beneficial for the data to be provided to each Local Area Council.

Members were supportive that the recording system had been improved to ensure that all monies were collected. They commented that:

- They were in favour of localism so that the community that was most affected by the adverse impacts of a development, also benefitted.
- There should be flexibility in the use of developer contributions in that if circumstances changed between the planning and implementation, use of the funds should not be rigidly adhered to if this resulted in subsidisation of a bus service which was not used.
- Whether funds should be allocated within a shorter period, e.g. three years. The Interim Executive Director of Planning and Local Services suggested that a longer period was more beneficial as it might take the amalgamation of funds from several schemes to be able to fund improvements to education or healthcare.

- It would be beneficial if a monthly report was submitted to the Local Area Councils.
- Reference to Ashington Town Team within the statement should perhaps be amended to Ashington Town Council, as the former organisation was defunct.

In answer to a question, the Interim Executive Director of Planning and Local Services, stated that often there were many demands for funding across all areas which were more than a development could support. A strategic approach therefore needed to be adopted to determine priorities. He was of the opinion that the statement improved reporting and provided transparency. Policies within the new plan would make it clearer to developers on the level of contributions expected. He welcomed suggestions from Councillors and members of the public on how the statement could be improved.

Councillor Horncastle was in agreement that the statement provided clarity on section 106 contributions.

**RESOLVED** that:

- a) The purpose and requirement for an Infrastructure Funding Statement, be noted.
- b) The summary of the Infrastructure Funding Statement content for the financial year 2020/21, be noted.
- c) The forthcoming changes to the Council's approach to developer contributions, upon adoption of the Northumberland Local Plan, be noted.
- d) A summary be provided to the Local Area Councils.

#### **49. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATOR**

##### **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee Monitoring Report**

The Committee reviewed its work programme for the 2021/22 council year. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes).

Committee members were encouraged to contact the Scrutiny Co-ordinator with any proposals for inclusion in the work programme.

**RESOLVED** that the work programme be noted.

**CHAIR** \_\_\_\_\_

**DATE** \_\_\_\_\_