



# Northumberland County Council

**COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**REPORT OF THE STORM ARWEN TASK AND FINISH GROUP**

**COUNCIL - 6 JULY 2022**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Storm Arwen was named by the Met Office on 25 November 2021. The Met Office reported that the storm brought severe winds across the UK overnight 26 to 27 November 2021, with it issuing a red warning for wind. The developing storm, tracking south to the north-east of the UK, brought northerly winds gusting widely at over 69mph. The highest gust speed was 98mph at Brizlee Wood, Northumberland. This was one of the most powerful and damaging winter storms of the latest decade. Although there were no deaths directly caused by the storm in Northumberland, three people died when they were hit by fallen trees in Cumbria, Aberdeenshire and Northern Ireland. Thousands of trees were felled across the north of the UK – including large mature trees – leading to major disruption. The unusual direction of the strongest winds - northerly as opposed to prevailing westerly – may have been an additional factor influencing the number of trees brought down. More than one million homes experienced a loss of power as falling trees brought down power lines, with over 112,000 homes (mostly in Northumberland, County Durham and Tyne and Wear) subsequently experiencing several days without power. The strong winds also brought various reports of structural damage to buildings. The storm brought large waves and dangerous conditions around the UK, particularly along the north-east coastline.
- 1.2 This was the first red warning issued for Northumberland since the Met Office's traffic-light impact-based warnings service began in 2011. Previous red warnings for wind were issued on 29 January 2016 for the Shetland Isles and before that 12 February 2014 for NW England and W Wales.
- 1.3 A range of impacts were felt across the Northumbria Local Resilience Forum (LRF) area, with the impact on communities varying by time and location. Initially the focus was the immediate damage caused by strong winds however over the coming days the position moved to ongoing and escalating severe issues due to loss of electricity and communications across a number of communities. This culminated in the declaration of a major incident, the deployment of the military and a further concurrent storm.
- 1.4 At its meeting on 1 December 2021, the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested that a review of the implications of the storm be conducted. On 5 January 2022, the Council passed a notice of motion endorsing the need for such a review from Councillor Bridgett and a scoping report for the establishment of a Task and Finish Group was agreed at the following meeting of the Committee on 12 January 2022. The following members were appointed to the Group:
- 1.5 Councillors Jeff Reid (Chair), Mark Mather (Vice-Chair), Steven Bridgett, Gordon Castle, Richard Dodd, Brian Gallacher, Colin Hardy and Nick Morphet.

## **2. EVIDENCE GATHERING**

2.1 Following the establishment of the Task and Finish Group the email address: [nccstormarwenreview@northumberland.gov.uk](mailto:nccstormarwenreview@northumberland.gov.uk) was set up and letters sent to all County Councillors, Northumberland Members of Parliament and Parish and Town Councils asking them to submit the challenges and experiences that they had of the storm and the aftermath to the review. A press release outlining the scope of the review and inviting Northumberland residents and businesses to engage with the process was also circulated.

2.2 The Group met on five occasions to consider 87 written submissions from county residents and businesses, Parish and Town Councils and County Councillors, an MP, the military, the voluntary sector and Openreach. Members also received the interim LRF Multi Agency Structured Debrief Report. These meetings included three evidence gathering sessions at which representatives from the following organisations attended to discuss the challenges they faced during and in the aftermath of the storm and the measures that they are putting in place in preparedness for future incidents:

Northern Powergrid  
Scottish Power Energy Networks  
Northumbrian Water  
NCC Communications  
NCC Adult and Social Care  
NCC Communities Together  
Northumberland Fire and Rescue

2.3 The Group also received a written submission from Openreach, but representatives did not accept my invitation to attend an evidence session to respond to our questions on the challenges they faced following the storm or measures put in place to respond to future incidents.

## **3. WRITTEN STATEMENTS**

3.1 The Review Group received 47 emails and letters from Northumberland residents and businesses. Many submissions gave a detailed outline of the difficult experiences and challenges encountered by correspondents, including many recurring themes. There was much appreciation expressed for the emergency response from Northumberland County Council staff, the Fire and Rescue Service, the military and crews from the utility companies in very difficult conditions, but there were also many concerns regarding areas where the response was inadequate. The main points arising from those concerns included:

- 3.1.1 Loss of power – many correspondents raised this issue particularly in respect of poor and/or misleading information from Northern Powergrid and Scottish Power. This included an inability to access their websites to either obtain the latest information on when power would be restored or details of the compensation process. Many complained that they were told that power would be restored on the following day, then the day after and so on, resulting in false hope and not being able to plan properly for a longer period without electricity. There were also many reports that compensation payments were for the wrong amounts or made out to the wrong payees.
- 3.1.2 Fuel poverty – the storm and the power cuts were a drain on the finances of many residents, particularly those who had lost fridges and freezers full of food. This meant that many residents had to eat out in restaurants and buy expensive pre-cooked food and burned their way through a whole winter's worth of coal or wood in just 10 days. However, even though Northern Powergrid compensated people for the money they spent on eating out and pre-cooked food, the compensation was very slow to arrive. As heating oil and LPG are sold in bulk, this made it difficult for many to buy the fuel they needed for generators in the aftermath of the storm.
- 3.1.3 Power lines/poles – there were reports that power lines had been allowed to hang dangerously near housing or roads and footpaths. Power poles were in poor condition which resulted in them falling too easily, suggesting a lack of maintenance.
- 3.1.4 Communication networks – partly due to the loss of power, but also due to poor or non-existent mobile signals, it was difficult for many communities to receive information of progress in restoring amenities in the aftermath of the storm or to call for help where it was needed. Although many people were directed to the relevant web sites, they were not accessible in some areas. There was also a complaint regarding the quality of practical information and updates broadcast by Radio Newcastle.
- 3.1.5 Structure damage – it had been difficult to access emergency tradespeople to make homes and other structures safe.
- 3.1.6 Temporary generators – whilst there had been deployment of generators in some areas, there were reports that the process for obtaining them was unclear.
- 3.1.7 Vulnerable residents – there were many comments regarding the poor or non-existent assistance offered to residents who the “authorities” should have known were vulnerable for many reasons. Some were

unable to use medical equipment or access food and water even though they were on a “priority list”. There were also comments on the need for the provision of emergency accommodation where appropriate.

- 3.1.8 Water supply – this dried up in some areas of the county and again, there were complaints regarding poor communication both in respect of when it would be restored and the availability of emergency supplies of bottled water.
  - 3.1.9 Volunteer Corp – there was a suggestion that groups of volunteers could be established to assist as a community response to emergency situations.
  - 3.1.10 Major Incident – should have been declared sooner to ensure that the maximum help and resources could be secured. There was also comment that notice of the oncoming storm should have been notified to residents and businesses sooner so that the necessary preparations could be made.
  - 3.1.11 Welfare vans – these were welcome as sources of hot food and drinks in areas without power, but there were complaints that they were not available in some rural areas.
  - 3.1.12 Emergency centres/hubs – a network of community buildings should be identified as emergency centres and communicated to residents so that they know where they can go to receive assistance when such emergency incidents occur in future. Such buildings should be properly equipped as appropriate.
  - 3.1.13 Emergency Committee – concern was expressed regarding the role of this Committee and its role in updating residents on emergency incidents.
- 3.2 The Group received 25 written submissions from Town and Parish Councils. Many of the issues raised were similar to the points made by residents and business as set out above. However, the following issues were highlighted in those submissions:
- 3.2.1 there is a need for the County Council and other agencies to work with parish and town councils to develop an emergency plan for each area. This would include the identification of community facilities which would provide shelter and sustenance for affected residents. There was an acknowledgement that funding streams would need to be found to ensure such facilities were properly equipped;

- 3.2.2 lines of communication between parish and town councils and the County Council and other agencies should be improved to ensure that problems on the ground be passed to the appropriate group and assistance be targeted and highlighted to those affected;
  - 3.2.3 the involvement of Northumberland Communities Together was welcomed, but there was comment that the services and assistance it offered should be promoted better in communities, and
  - 3.2.4 woodland areas had become dangerous due to fallen and the hazardous condition of trees affected by the storm and should be cleared.
- 3.3 Nine County Councillors provided the review with written submissions. Although some included a composite of issues raised by residents in their divisions already covered above, the following points were also highlighted:
- 3.3.1 Problems cause by rurality: some areas of the county were not connected to the mains electricity or water supplies and were often the last to have power restored; too far from the town and villages where emergency food and water provisions were available, and difficulties in accessing generators or alternative fuel methods.
  - 3.3.2 All care homes should have their own emergency contingency plans which should be tested with regular drills, so that managers can ensure that staff know how to respond to such incidents. Emergency generators should be made available so there is some functionality in kitchens and “common” rooms, so that residents have access to hot food and a warm area to rest. Consideration be given on whether those generators need to be “PAT” (portable appliance testing) tested to ensure that they are safe to use in those establishments. Ensuring the safety of care home residents should be a priority. Similar plans should also be in place to check on those in receipt of care in their own homes.
  - 3.3.3 Emergency contact details of all responsible officers and bodies should be circulated (with Council Tax bills, newsletters etc) and updated whenever practicable.
  - 3.3.4 Members should receive regular updates on progress with restoration works in their divisions so that information could be disseminated to those affected.
  - 3.3.5 Although there was an acknowledgement that there were data protection considerations, but could members be made aware of those

residents known to the Council as vulnerable, so that they could ensure that individuals receive the assistance and reassurance they need.

- 3.4 The Group also received a submission from Northumberland Community Voluntary Action (NCVA) who had had contact with a number of voluntary and community sector organisations that had suffered damage during the storm which had a detrimental impact on their delivery of services.
- 3.5 NCVA was aware that in other areas of the region additional grant funding was being made available to support the voluntary sector in the aftermath of the storm and requested that consideration be given for the provision of an emergency fund for any future emergency events.

#### **4. EVIDENCE SESSIONS**

The Task and Finish Group met on three occasions to take evidence from and ask questions of key council officers and partners involved in dealing with the aftermath of the storm. Although the sections below are divided into the evidence sessions of those participants, the discussions arising from that evidence sometimes broadened out into some wider, but still related issues and the recommendations at the end of each section were formulated as a result of those deliberations.

##### **4.1 Scottish Power Energy Networks (SPEN)**

- 4.1.1 David Climie, District General Manager (Edinburgh and Borders District) from Scottish Power Energy Networks, attended the session via Zoom.
- 4.1.2 He told members that the storm was forecast, and service partners were put on alert and lined up in readiness for a response. The forecast changed during the week and became more serious than anticipated. The storm was escalated to a red weather warning in certain parts. During Friday evening (26<sup>th</sup>) there were substantial faults with approximately 70-80 high voltage faults which were a serious issue. Networks were switched and customers restored where possible. On the following Saturday morning accident contact centres were opened and engineers were deployed. It was difficult for engineers to restore power as the wind was still very strong and there were multiple trees down making access difficult. On Sunday helicopters were deployed to assess the damage. Drones were also used, work continued throughout the week to restore all customers.
- 4.1.3 He reported there were many challenges, but the main problem was caused by the continuingly difficult weather conditions. He said that looking forward SPEN hoped to interface with as many Local

Authorities as possible and hoped to open Emergency Action Centres in conjunction with Local Authorities in emergency situations. SPEN also aimed to prioritise customers through referrals.

4.1.4 The following comments were made in response to Members questions:

- It was confirmed that all customer's power was restored by the end of that week.
- The main issue was not the network itself but trees falling onto the line. The main damage was where there was proximity to trees which brought lines and adductors down.
- It was clarified that there was a national pool of resources, however due to the scale of the storm the pool was at maximum capacity. It was confirmed that the national network was generally good but there was room for improvement and more resilience.
- There were approximately 100 poles replaced after the storm. They were not necessarily broken. Tree maintenance was complex as it required working closely with landowners to receive permission to maintain trees close to lines. It was confirmed they would continue to work with landowners especially in areas where there were High Voltage lines.
- Lessons were learnt regarding communications. It was confirmed that communications had to be accurate. Moving forward communications would be changed and updated when teams were on site giving accurate attendance times.
- The priority scheme with Scottish Power was an opt in scheme. This meant that anyone could opt in to become a priority customer. It did not necessarily mean those in the scheme are vulnerable and need to be prioritised.
- It was hoped through working closely with Local Authorities an operational list of identified rescue centres could be created.

**4.1.5 Members agreed that it was important that the Council continues to build on the good relationship it has with SPEN, that contact details are up to date and regular meetings are held between officers and all the utility companies so that when an emergency incident is called all parties can respond together in a coordinated and cooperative manner.**



#### 4.1.6 RECOMMENDATIONS

- (a) **that officers continue to liaise with colleagues at all the relevant utility companies to ensure that all partners are in a position to provide a coordinated response to future emergencies;**
- (b) **the Council's Community Resilience Project is shared with all relevant partners to ensure that resources are properly identified and allocated during an emergency incident, and**
- (c) **utility companies be encouraged to promote their priority customer schemes to ensure that as many vulnerable customers or those with "additional needs" are included on their databases.**

#### 4.2 Northern Powergrid (NPG)

- 4.2.1 Gareth Pearson, Head of Health, Safety and Training and Paul Glendinning, Policy and Markets Director gave members an overview of the challenges and response from Northern Powergrid.
- 4.2.2 They reported that Storm Arwen was an unprecedented event which had originally been designated as part of an amber weather warning, before moving to a red warning. There were gust speeds up to 92 mph. The highest level of ice accretion and wind seen in 20-30 years. Approximately 775 wooden poles were snapped during the storm.
- 4.2.3 In response, NPG staff were stood down from their normal planned work to maximise those put on standby in preparation for dealing with incidents arising from the storm. Calls began from 10.00 pm on Friday (26<sup>th</sup>) evening and continued throughout the week. Around 280,000 customers experienced a loss of power during the following morning, although 90% of those customers had their power restored by Monday (29<sup>th</sup>) morning. However, there remained approximately 30,000 customers without power. New faults were still coming in on Monday and Tuesday due to the continuous winds.
- 4.2.4 Workers were unable to climb poles or other structures etc. on Saturday as the wind was still too strong. There was extensive damage in Weardale/Teesdale area. In Northumberland there were pockets of power outage, but there were problems arising from the rurality of many of those areas and gaining access due to road blockages leading to them.
- 4.2.5 External communication had been a problem as the NPG website crashed due to the high volume of customers trying to access it, which drove enquiries to the call centres where call wait times were hours at

some times. Although the server to the website was enlarged, many customers accessing it were then advised by an automated response that electricity would be back on 'tomorrow', which in many cases did not happen. By Thursday (2<sup>nd</sup>) the plan had changed, and a list of postcodes were shown on the website that indicated when power would be restored. Other residents were encouraged to seek alternative accommodation; over 13,000 hotel rooms were booked. Members were advised that NPG was moving to a cloud-based website meaning that an infinite number of users could access it at once. Also, there would be improved postcode mapping to help users get accurate information regarding when their power would be resumed. Communication to people without power was challenging and staff eventually "knocked on doors" to try and communicate with customers.

- 4.2.6 Members were advised that 313 generators had been deployed and they were moved from village to village as required. A mutual aid agreement across the power sector allowed 400 linesmen to be called upon to help customers get power back. However, resources were stretched with up to 6 regions covered by NPG being affected by the storm.
- 4.2.7 Compensation to affected customers was still on-going. This was challenging as NPG do not bill customers therefore, they had very little data regarding bank details. 24,000 cheques were sent out before Christmas, however, 10% of those were addressed to the wrong person due to data not being up to date. OFGEM were reviewing the compensation process and a report would be published.
- 4.2.8 The following comments were made in response to Members questions:
- It was confirmed that utilising Radio Newcastle would be beneficial if used correctly. It was important to build a working relationship with local radio stations.
  - The vulnerable register for NPG was self-nominated. There was going to be a push to encourage customers to sign up to the vulnerable register in the summer. There was a hope that the vulnerability register would be coded to identify those who were electronically dependent over those who were vulnerable.
  - Sharing customer data between organisations would be beneficial in planning emergency responses. The working group at the Local Resilience Forum was looking into the sharing protocol as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) rules did allow some leeway during serious emergency incidents, however such a move would have to be managed appropriately.

- NPG confirmed that the network in Northumberland met standards set out by the Electricity Network Association. There was no suggestion that the network had to be built to a higher standard.
- It was acknowledged that poor communications were a serious issue and there was a major failing of the systems. It was confirmed the new website was undergoing testing and the information used would be correct and up to date.
- It was confirmed that moving forward they would try to use food vans from more local areas. Also, it was important to communicate where the food vans would be through different channels to ensure those without power would also be informed.
- It was confirmed that it was important to liaise with elected members and the Local Authority to identify rescue centres. There was scope to have communications and generators in place for those centres which had already been identified.
- NPG had a tree maintenance programme in place and works were continuing as planned. In some areas where there are High Voltage Lines it has obtained the corridor of land to ensure trees can be cleared. NPG would seek legal permission if necessary to clear problem trees.
- Patrols were undertaken every 10 years and there were aerial patrols of the lines every 2 years for safety and integrity.
- Communications with partners would be improved and information was shared for the storms which followed Arwen. There were representative on Tactical Coordination Group (TCG) meetings, however information could have been shared earlier regarding their internal major incident status.

**4.2.9 Members again highlighted the need to maintain a good working relationship with colleagues at Northern Powergrid as it was clear in the evidence received by the Group, that NPG had not been open and honest with the Council on its progress in restoring power and that it had over promised, but under delivered in many areas. The information was often inaccurate and gave false hope that power would be restored sooner than was actually the case. This led the Council to inadvertently mislead elected members, parish and town councils and residents to when power would be restored. We feel that people and organisations would have made different decisions about their welfare and circumstances if the information had been accurate. It is our view from the written submissions we received, that public trust in the utility companies and NPG in particular, has been eroded and it is important that that trust is restored. We feel that accurate information sharing in emergency situations is vital and that all partners are stronger if we all work together.**

**4.2.10 Members also took the view that NPG needed to work harder with the Council and parishes to ensure that food vans and other welfare measure were properly targeted and sited in the right locations.**

**4.2.11 We also had concerns regarding NPG's maintenance programme for the areas in the vicinity of poles, particularly where trees overhang power lines and agreed that its inspectors should consider the impact of structures close to those power lines as part of their regular patrols.**

#### **4.2.12 RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Further to the recommendations in 4.1.6:**

- (a) NPG be requested to work with the Council and other partners to ensure that all relevant information in times of an emergency is accurate so that decision making can be improved, and the appropriate actions be enacted, and**
- (b) NPG be requested to review its maintenance programme so that corridors of powerlines are kept free of obstructions that might compromise the network during severe weather conditions.**

### **4.3 Northumbrian Water Limited (NWL)**

**4.3.1** Ross Smith, Partnerships Manager, together with Dave Walsh, Regional Control Centre Manager (Incident Manager) and Claire Taylor, Emergency Planning Manager for Northumbrian Water Limited set out to members the response from Northumbrian Water and the challenges faced by NWL.

**4.3.2** Operational challenges included loss of power to 55 of its sites across the region. There was a loss of communication and a lack of data across those locations which meant visual checks were required. Access to certain sites had been a challenge due to fallen trees. Mobile generators were deployed to sites which had to be topped up throughout the time. NWL had not experienced an outage on this scale before – up to eight supply areas were seriously affected. Throughout the Friday evening into Saturday morning there was severe disruption in communications across the asset base and with customers. An incident management team was set up immediately which began taking calls from 6.00 am on that Saturday. The team continued in place for the same length of time as the Northumberland County Council incident team.

4.3.3 NWL had a priority service register for vulnerable customers which was used to identify those in the most need. Water was distributed to customers without a supply. Water was also supplied for livestock, which was outside the normal remit, but help was clearly needed. NWL was initially unable to provide public communications through its normal available channels, however partners such as the County Council helped deliver important messages to the public.

4.3.4 A review has been conducted by NWL to find lessons learned from the emergency incident and the debrief had been mainly positive. A preparatory group has been set up to be utilised when amber weather warnings are given by the Met Office. Identified vulnerable sites had been provided with generators. There was still work to do to improve emergency responses, these included: improving logging data within the incident team, creating a procedure for deploying generators, building relationships with the Local Resilience Forum, resilience of external communications, setting up contracts with alternative water suppliers and continuing work with the priority customer register.

4.3.5 The following response was given to Members questions:

- NWL confirmed that the new pumping facility in Berwick had a fixed generator on site, which covers the whole site should it lose mains power.
- It was confirmed that the alternative bottled water supplier was from Harrogate for several reasons: it had to be a big enough contractor who was able to supply the amount of water needed and be able to deliver the water within 6 hours. Static tanks were not used as they had to be filled and then water would need to be boiled by those collecting it, and there was no power to do so. Water in the supermarket did not meet the criteria for the water regulations and there must be a guaranteed supply.
- Distribution of water was difficult to manage as there were not enough staff to oversee it. It was recognised that it was beneficial to work with community partners and local Councillors to identify and distribute the water. This would also be beneficial for communication to residents as social media was not available to all those in need.
- There was a suggestion that local radio could be utilised to give out communications to residents.
- It was recognised that working with Local Authorities to identify community hubs would be beneficial where water could be dropped off.
- Residents that were on the priority customer register had water delivered to their homes. Members suggested that it would be

beneficial to promote the register to residents and information on how to register be circulated to all Councillors.

- Compensation payments were being made. NWL was working with Local Authorities to help identify all customers who were due compensation. Residents were encouraged to contact NWL if they had not received the compensation, they felt they were due.
- Local Resilience Forum, Tactical Coordination Group and Strategic Coordination Group meetings were beneficial, but it was suggested that questions were brought through one channel to ensure nothing was missed.

**4.3.6 Members were concerned that there had been communication issues between NWL and other partners including the County Council and, as with the power companies, work needed to be done to improve the culture of coordination and cooperation.**

**4.3.7 We also felt that NWL appeared to be too risk averse in what was an emergency situation: claims that it would not distribute bottled water from supermarkets because they did not meet industry standards or deploy bowsers as the water would need to be boiled would have been particularly frustrating for those communities which went without any water for long periods. It was our view that the situation was not perfect, but with the right level of communication and information these imperfect solutions should have been provided.**

**4.3.8 Members also noted that some of the fleet used by NWL were not appropriate for accessing parts of the county and this should be reviewed. Where pallets of bottled water were supplied, they were not always delivered to the most appropriate location, or the distribution properly supervised to ensure that it was received by those most in need. Again, we thought that this could be resolved through better communication with the Council.**

**4.3.9 We were particularly concerned to hear from colleagues that the interruption of the service to Berwick had implications for supply to the hospital and agreed that a contingency plan should be in place.**

### **4.3.10 RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Further to the recommendations in 4.1.6:**

- (a) NWL be requested to review its policy for the provision of emergency water supplies, recognising that in an imperfect situation and issuing the appropriate advice, communities and individuals should be able to make their own decisions on how to utilise it, and**
- (b) Berwick Hospital review its contingency plan to ensure that it has an uninterruptible water supply.**

### **4.4 Northumberland County Council Adult Care**

4.4.1 Neil Bradley, Service Director for Northumberland County Council Adult Services, presented to the Group the response and challenges faced by his service in the aftermath of Storm Arwen.

4.4.2 He advised members that the key tasks for Adult Social Care were to identify clients who may be vulnerable and assist in making sure they were safe; to co-ordinate with care providers regarding any issues that affect them, and to react to any referrals regarding adult care clients.

4.4.3 As soon as the scale and duration of the situation caused by the storm became apparent, welfare checks were extended to all clients open to adult social care, not just those identified as vulnerable. Data was used from NPG and crossed with vulnerable adult list. Contact was initially made by telephone. Where there were concerns or difficulties teams worked with the Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS), British Red Cross and mountain rescue to check individuals. As the incident continued, social care staff were deployed to carry out physical welfare checks. As the incident progressed welfare checks were carried out by Council staff and the Army which allowed adult care to focus back on those identified as vulnerable and any emerging issues. Domiciliary services continued and those care providers informed Adult Care of any issues they encountered. Notes were recorded on the SWIFT system where staff had made contact with clients. Each situation was approached case by case. Where support was needed the client was linked with support through NCT or social workers etc.

4.4.4 There were 4 care homes within the county where staff sought assistance as they lost power and did not have sufficient generator contingencies. Assisting the care homes was difficult as timescales for the power returning was unknown. The excellent joint working with the fire service and mountain rescue in the early stages was highlighted as

a positive outcome along with the co-ordination with Northumberland Communities Together (NCT). The staff worked superbly and were more than happy to work extra shifts on the evening and over the weekend.

4.4.5 Key issues highlighted included the inability to identify those who were affected. This resulted in resources not being targeted to those who were in need. The lack of knowledge about when the power would be coming back on made it difficult to plan solutions for vulnerable individuals. The adult care vulnerable list did not necessarily pick up all vulnerable people for this situation and therefore they extended the list to all clients known to social care. Some care provider's contingency plans were not robust enough. Adult Care have been pushing for providers to review their contingency plans since the storms. In some cases, co-ordination could have been improved. Contact with some individuals was being duplicated and in future there was a need to manage that better, so the service was as efficient as possible in a crisis. Fundamental changes were being made to the vulnerable adults list to enable teams to identify individuals quickly.

4.4.6 The following responses were made in respect to Members questions:

- It was confirmed there was a working group looking into data to identify what could be shared with partners to help make a comprehensive list. GDPR laws mean lists can be used in serious incidents, the Local Resilience Forum's data sharing agreement was being looked into and was currently with the Council's legal services for review. There was a suggestion that Parish Councillors should have been able to receive a copy of those on the vulnerable list to assist welfare checks and it was agreed that this issue would also go to the working group to be discussed.
- Thanks were given to all staff across the Council including, NRFS and NCT.
- It was confirmed that the Army were not qualified to help bring back the power on. They were brought in to help with welfare checks. It was important to manage expectations about what help can be utilised by declaring a major incident.
- Adult Care tried to contact all individuals on the vulnerable list regardless of their power status. Those that could not be contacted via telephone were triaged. There would be an attempt to contact family members if contact details were on record and if needed NRFS, Mountain Rescue and social workers would be deployed.
- It was confirmed that Care homes could be taken off their contract if their contingency plan did not meet the required standard.



- It was confirmed the priority customer registers used by companies such as Northumbrian Water were self-nominated and therefore may not have valid data of vulnerable people.

**4.4.7 Members agreed that the Council should review all the personal data sets it has in all its systems so that all those with particular needs, not just those who are vulnerable, are identified so that welfare checks and appropriate assistance can be better targeted in future emergencies. This would also ensure that those individuals and those delivering care packages received clear communications on any additional services that were being offered.**

#### **4.4.8 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- (a) all the Council's personal data sets be reviewed to ensure that assistance in emergency situations can be properly targeted;**
- (b) consideration also be given to how best personal data can be shared both within the Council and with partner organisations, and**
- (c) the Council's contracts with care homes and similar providers must include a condition that an approved emergency contingency plan be in place to ensure a continuing high level of care during future emergency incidents.**

#### **4.5 Northumberland County Council Communications**

4.5.1 Phil Hunter, Senior Service Director and Andrew Ward, Communications Manager gave a presentation to members on the role of the Council's Communication Team in the aftermath of Storm Arwen.

4.5.2 They reported that between Friday, 26 November and Wednesday, 8 December 2021, Communication and other colleagues engaged with residents and clients through press releases, online, social media, television and radio and word of mouth. County Council members received briefings, direct contact and via a dedicated Storm Arwen email. The briefings and dedicated email were also made available to Parish and Town Councils. Similar arrangements were also made for the county's MPs and other partners. During that period, the Council issued 17 News Releases, 11 County Council Member Briefings, 7 MP Briefings, 5 Staff Briefings, 208 messages over eight social media channels (reaching over 3 million people over 12 days), dealt with 22

Broadcast Media queries including Sky News, BBC Breakfast, Radio Four and ITV National. There were numerous print media enquiries including Daily Telegraph, The Times, Daily Mirror and from regional and weekly local press. Spokespeople used included the Council Leader, senior NFRS officers and senior Local Services representatives.

4.5.3 Members were advised that by Thursday, 2 December communication strategies changed. Thousands of homes were still without power and had little to no access to online information. The decision was taken to produce a paper flyer and there were 5,000 produced within 24 hours. The flyers were distributed by teams of volunteers/staff/NRFS crew/parish councils. The leaflet included information regarding financial assistance, advice on staying safe and useful telephone numbers.

4.5.4 In term of lessons learned, members were advised that in the event of future emergency incidents key spokespeople would be identified at an early stage; collaborative working between communications teams in the Council and power companies would be strengthened to efficiently get messages signed off and published; to residents without power physical flyers and support from local BBC services would be sought; communications and coordination between the County Council and Town and Parish Councils would be strengthened, and the right balance between transmitting and receiving key messages from residents, town and parish councils and County Councillors would be ensured.

4.5.5 The following comments were made in response to Members questions:

- It was confirmed that the communications would be a major part of future emergency response.
- Members were assured that communications would be co-ordinated down to Town and Parish level and members would be a vital part of passing on messages to residents. It was suggested that there should be more communication between councillors and executive officers with hierarchal structure cascading down to Town and Parishes.
- The Council communications were used to help convey messages from the utility companies. However, the communications could not be shared until they had been signed off which sometimes proved difficult.
- It was confirmed that utilising the BBC local radios would be investigated. It was suggested that relationships needed to be built

to help establish a protocol to broadcast communications in emergency situations.

- Members were assured that although a response was not always given, all emails were picked up that were sent to the Storm Arwen email address. Due to the volume of emails, it was not always viable to respond.
- It was confirmed that under emergency situations village halls were free to open and permission did not need to be sought in doing so.
- It was established that response hubs were open during Storm Arwen but not rest centres as there are differing definitions. Rest centres had safeguarding issues that response hubs did not.
- Officers confirmed that the Emergency Committee was supposed to be involved and briefed regularly. There was a lack of awareness of who was supposed to activate the committee. It was a unique committee to Northumberland County Council and should be used.
- It was acknowledged that the leaflet design made it difficult to print or copy. It was suggested that a generic leaflet with useful numbers on could be distributed to all hubs in advance.
- Resilience of telecoms needed to be discussed at partnership level.

**4.5.6 Members are grateful for the hard work of the Council's Communications Team, which was based in the control room in the period after the storm, in providing such information that was available to communities, councillors and parish councils.**

**4.5.7 However, it is clear to the Group that one of the most frustrating issues to emerge from the review was either the lack of information or misinformation experienced by residents or those seeking to offer support to them including to the County Council.**

**4.5.8 The County Council is keen to work with partners to ensure that timely and coordinated messages be given to all those affected in an emergency situation. Members agreed that the Council should work more closely with the BBC and other local media outlets to focus on the dissemination of information rather than on perceived failings in the process.**

**4.5.9 We agreed that the Council needs to work with town and parish councils to facilitate "preparedness" sessions to ensure local contingency plans are put in place. The plans would set out the facilities available in an emergency, ensuring that all key contact details were up to date, and information packs/material was available or could be made available at short notice. Parishes, particularly, but not exclusively, in remote areas should be encouraged to add practical advice to information notices to ensure that residents are properly prepared, such as having a**

supply of batteries, bottled water, portable stoves and radios, etc. Insofar as possible, information on entitlements should also be included, such as the availability of emergency accommodation. These would be reviewed annually and promoted on our respective websites and through parish notices.

**4.5.10** In addition, the County Council should have an Emergency Communications Winter Plan, again reviewed annually, to ensure that all its systems for responding to an emergency were in place and up to date. An annual report giving that assurance would be presented to the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

**4.5.11** Members were concerned about the role the Council's Emergency Committee had in the aftermath of the storm. We thought it appropriate that the Council's Community Resilience Project be reviewed and tested by the Emergency Committee annually.

**4.5.12** There was concern that, particularly in rural areas, street names were not sufficiently accurate to identify specific locations where emergency help may be needed. Members suggested that the Council and other partners consider whether the use of "what3words", an online application which divides the world into 3 metre squares and given a unique combination of three words, could be used to better identify some dwellings and other key locations.

#### **4.5.13 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- (a)** the Council's Communications Team ensure that all appropriate contact details are updated and regularly reviewed, and circulated to members and other key partners;
- (b)** the Council host winter preparedness sessions to be conducted annually to include contributions from town and parish councils and other partners as appropriate, which would include the promotion of personal responsibility in readiness for emergencies;
- (c)** the Council prepare an Emergency Communications Winter Plan in readiness for dealing with further emergency situations, and
- (d)** the County Emergency Committee tests and reviews the Community Resilience Project annually.

## 4.6 Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS)

- 4.6.1 Paul Hedley, Chief Northumberland Fire and Rescue Officer and Graham Binning, Deputy Chief Northumberland Fire and Rescue Officer reported on the service's response to Storm Arwen.
- 4.6.2 There was an awareness of the Met Office warnings and preparations were put in place. An incident support room was facilitated which was utilised by NCC and partners. TCG & SCG meetings were held virtually. Pre-emptive work was carried out by the principal officer which included: defining a list of processes; review staffing across the weekend; preparation of equipment and vehicles; increased staffing in fire control to compensate for the number of calls, and a recall to duty was prepared. During the storm there were multiple calls and multiple mobilisations. Everything was captured on a chronological log. There was a high volume of calls, and it was a busy time but not outside of the ability of staff. A mini-incident support room was set up to triage work and assist the Fire Control to allow them to respond to emergency calls.
- 4.6.3 The Service was conditioned to respond to emergency situations and had extensive training. There was an immediate response mentality and there had been extreme weather responses before, and the service was ready to respond. A Principal Officer was on duty throughout the whole incident. Their role included attending the TCG meetings to work with partners across the region. Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service assisted in the response as their region was not as badly affected.
- 4.6.4 The following comments were made in response to members questions:
- Members passed their thanks onto the Service for their hard work during Storm Arwen.
  - There was an increase in volume of calls during the Storm however the majority were low risk incidents. There was an incident where a car was trapped by fallen trees in a remote area. Through the special partnership with Mountain Rescue the incident was responded to appropriately.
  - Staff resilience was maintained throughout the incident and staff were willing to step up to help provide cover. It was also confirmed that safeguarding measures were put in place to ensure all staff received appropriate rest opportunities.
  - The vision statement for NFRS included 'make Northumberland safer' which meant the service had to be creative during emergency

incidents and had to have a coordinated approach by applying resources in an effective way to meet the needs of people.

- As NFRS is part of the County Council there was no formal process to go through to request mutual aid. It was a privilege to work with the Authority and to have that additional support.
- There was the option to request mutual aid through section 13 & 16 but there was not a need to do so.
- It was confirmed that there were approximately 200 calls and 96 incidents attended. When the service attended an incident, the area would be made so the situation could not worsen, and residents reassured before they left.
- It was confirmed that local contractors would not have been sign posted to priority work through NFRS. It was believed that vulnerable residents in housing association houses had priority visits from the Council.
- Members were assured that the Service acted appropriately according to the emergency protocol.
- The service expressed their appreciation to those 'unsung heroes' who cleared roads in their area. It was confirmed that winter contractors were on standby, however in certain areas, the electricity was off which made it difficult to contact them.
- Members were advised that a Fire Engine had capacity for 1800 litres and had the ability to draw water up from a water source. Therefore, the loss of water in areas was not necessarily a concern for fire related incidents.
- The service was open to reviewing equipment models in the future to include specialised equipment such as chainsaws in Road Traffic vehicles.
- There was a debrief that was well managed and areas of learning had been identified. The technical capability of the incident support room was identified as an area to improve. The log was a manual process, and it was felt that there was a need for an integrated automated response and logging system and work on this with IT was ongoing.
- There was also a need to exclusively define the purpose of the emergency response and the purpose of the incident support room to ensure it works effectively.

**4.6.5 The Task and Finish Group were pleased overall with the response from the Fire and Rescue Service during and in the aftermath of Storm Arwen. Members also noted the invaluable contribution of the Council's NEAT teams and other local services personnel who, together with local farmers and other volunteers in helping to open roads and clear up following the storm.**

**4.6.6 Members supported the suggestion that incident logging process should be automated and the actions proposed to implement such a system.**

**4.6.7 Members agreed that it was important that as many officers as practicable were trained in operating specialist equipment to assist in clearing roads when appropriate. There should be a review of the equipment carried on Fire Service vehicles to determine whether additional kit such as saws can be carried.**

#### **4.6.8 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- (a) the Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service take measures to improve the technological capability of the incident room, including the implementation of an integrated automated response and logging system, and**
- (b) NFRS officers be trained to operate road clearing equipment and service vehicles carry such necessary equipment as is practicable.**

#### **4.7 Northumberland Communities Together (NCT)**

**4.7.1** Maureen Taylor, Interim Executive Director Communities and Business Development and Paul Brooks, Head of Northumberland Communities Together reported to the Group on the response of the Service in the aftermath of the storm.

**4.7.2** The NCT approach to Storm Arwen was built on local knowledge, relationships and asset connections to support local delivery, including the use of locality coordinators to activate and connect local assets - identifying and addressing needs, securing local assets and resources, and coordinating offers of aid and assistance (outside of NPG). The team also monitored social media feeds and online networks to establish local needs which may otherwise have not been identified in a timely manner. Staff were deployed to assist welfare support and assistance checks, deal with non-urgent social care referrals and coordinate local delivery efforts. Community (COVID) support officers also assisted in welfare visits, food deliveries and distribution of aid. Close working relationships were maintained with NPG welfare officers to prioritise accommodation and energy support where required. Staff also attended local community sessions to provide advice, guidance and support and address issues of local concern.

**4.7.3** Members were advised that the service experienced the following challenges:

- Inconsistent and variable level of community resilience and response across communities - some communities sought permission or authority to respond locally, whilst others responded to challenges on their own initiative.
- There was no standardised platform to communicate with local responders to ascertain what was happening and what support was needed across communities leading to duplication of effort and delay.
- Level of expectation and type of support being offered varied across communities. There was a lack of clarity and communication regarding what support the Council was offering and the statutory responsibility of NPG and others, which led to some confusion and raised expectations.

4.7.4 The Group were advised of proposed improvements and solutions that the service planned to implement in light of the experiences gained from the emergency incident. They included:

- Proposed programme in partnership with Northumberland County Council Civil Contingency Team.
- Opportunity to further connect and enhance 'Council to Community' relationships and partnerships. Strengthening and building upon existing networks through VCS Infrastructures, CAN, NALC, NCT, etc. The programme will identify pre-existing or new assets (Village halls, Community Centres, Church halls etc) who wish to take a more proactive role in community response and resilience. The programme will provide the following:
  - resources, guidance and useful information on how to set up and run a Community Response Hub. Signage to help promote the Community Response Hub so people know where to go for assistance.
  - support groups to access funding and support to ensure sustainable delivery.

4.7.5 The intention was to have a new approach which strengthen what works well in communities on a daily basis, with what was needed at a time of emergency or challenge.

4.7.6 The following comments were made in response to Members questions:

- It was confirmed that declaring a Major Incident was a multifactorial process. It was not just the Council's responsibility.
- It was important to manage the public's expectations and misconceptions. The Army was not able to help remove trees or fix



electricity lines, but their role was to be additional footfall for welfare checks.

- There were lots of considerations to be taken when declaring an incident and the partnership seemed to be uncomfortable when the County Council declared it as in the past Northumbria Police had been the one to initiate it.
- The Emergency plan was written in 2019 and that plan was followed. The vocabulary used in the emergency planning documents was technical and it was suggested that it needed to be simplified for the public to help manage expectations and clarify what a declaration of a Major incident meant.
- It was suggested that local communities in partnership with County and Town and Parish councillors should identify appropriate sites for community response hubs. The Council would then patch in the work and support the community to make it successful. The service was working on a community resilience model.
- It was confirmed that there was still work on-going regarding information sharing. It was confirmed that the sensitive vulnerable list could not be shared with partners in advance. Lists could be shared during the emergency if needed but the format may be changed.
- It was important to create a plan to assist Town & Parish Councils to help communities take the ownership and initiative for the initial response. The community take the ownership of the community hubs and the Council would be there to assist.
- Members were assured that there was a business case being created to keep the community champions as a permanent feature as it was felt that losing them would be a step backwards.
- Members were informed that the Military Aid to the Civil Community process was prescriptive. The incident and the problem would be outlined in a formal application process and then an offer would be made to help achieve a solution.

**4.7.7 Members welcomed the contribution of Communities Together in supporting the relief efforts following the storm. We support the retention of the Community (COVID) Support Officers who we think should be embedded into our response structures.**

#### **4.7.8 RECOMMENDATION**

**The Community (COVID) Support Officers be retained and embedded into the Council's response structure.**

## 4.8 Openreach

- 4.8.1 Although representatives of Openreach did not attend an evidence session, the Group considered a written submission from the company.
- 4.8.2 The submission reported that the level of damage to its network in Northumberland was significant, with thousands of faults identified or reported to it in the days immediately after the storm. Local teams dealt with 2,700 faults caused by storm damage and there were several highly complex damage related faults, mainly in rural parts of the county. Despite engineers working around the clock, and often in difficult weather conditions, repair works were on a scale that they had not faced before, with each involving a huge amount of work and many needing heavy or specialist engineering equipment and skills. This included the movement of deep/hard rock diamond drilling machinery around the country, of which there are only a few in the UK. As a result of the storm, engineers frequently found damage in multiple locations along a cable route, requiring them to replace multiple damaged poles, with numbers sometimes in double figures. Large stretches of overhead cable were also brought down, needing replacement.
- 4.8.3 Openreach reported that its recovery from the storm was good, considering the widespread impacts. It stated that the safety of staff and customers was its priority. Additional engineers from other regions were brought into the worst affected areas, and the amount of overtime staff could work was increased, which freed up capacity from across the business. In total, an additional 2,000 days of extra engineering capacity was brought to bear on the situation – drastically reducing the potential repair times for damaged connections. Although over the Christmas period there was the lowest ever number of outstanding faults at an overall level, unfortunately there were still several very localised issues including significant infrastructure damage. In each case, experienced engineers were deployed to the locations and explored every possible solution to provide temporary phone and broadband services in lieu of a permanent fix. In some cases, this was not possible because the damage caused was too extensive, or because health and safety issues prevented a safe route for engineers – for example where cables needed to be installed across a busy road.
- 4.8.4 Openreach reported that although there were several positive takeaways from the storm response, including the ability to shift resource quickly to support the hardest hit areas; proactively notifying customers - via the media and its social media channels - of the potential for increased faults and explaining how they make contact with Openreach to identify them, and taking the opportunity to work more closely with power companies, including the possibility to deliver

more repairs in tandem when power networks are damaged, it recognised there were several areas where improvements could be made.

- There has been a review of incident management processes and residual recovery plans where there is major engineering/infrastructure damage caused by different kinds of incidents (e.g., wind damage v floods) – to understand how these vary in terms of approach, duration, and criteria for resolution.
- Full-Fibre incident management processes have been scaled up. New processes are already being implemented to make sure all faults relating to an incident are identified more quickly.
- More proactive fault identification - with many of the faults relating to power outages, Openreach is seeking to determine how infrastructure issues in one area are likely to result in further faults, and how to identify issues which were reliant on power.
- Review of proactive communications and escalations with customers as well as being more proactive with updates to local MPs.
- Improving management of third-party resource by further insourcing civil engineering work.

4.8.5 The impact of improvements to processes were demonstrated in response to the later storms in 2021 and 2022. Storms Dudley, Eunice and Franklin had a similar level of impact in terms of amount of damage, the rural nature of many of the communities affected in the Southwest, and the volumes of customers impacted. However, Openreach reported that its return to 'business as usual' was almost twice as fast, with copper services at normal levels within 18 days, and fibre services within 28 days (versus 30 and 54 days respectively after Storm Arwen).

4.8.6 Openreach also provided some background information on the digital switchover, but confirmed that in the aftermath of Storm Arwen, BT's consumer facing business made the decision to pause a programme of bulk migrations to its new Digital Voice product. Customers who do want to move can still do so, however, this pause is giving BT a further opportunity to consider how best to manage migrations and make sure more resilient back-up options are in place for customers who need or want them. This is particularly important for their

customers who may be vulnerable and therefore rely on connectivity to support healthcare devices.

**4.8.7 Members noted the comments in Openreach's statement regarding its response in restoring landline and broadband services, but felt that the breakdown of mobile communications was a major failure during the incident both in terms of isolating communities and hampering recovery efforts. The Group was disappointed that it could not question Openreach on those matters as part of the evidence gathering process. Indeed, members felt that poor mobile connectivity across Northumberland was a big issue for the county separate to this review and agreed that Openreach be invited to the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee to discuss its plans to resolve the Group's concerns.**

**4.8.8 Members also noted that the Civil Contingencies Act (2004), at Schedule 1, Part 3, identifies Category 2 responders to include "a person who provides a public electronic communications network which makes telephone services available (whether for spoken communication or the transmission of data) and agreed that as a consequence, Openreach, together with other providers, work much more closely with the Northumbria Local Resilience Forum to ensure greater understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each sector and better collaboration in responding to future emergency incidents.**

#### **4.8.9 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Further to the recommendations in 4.1.6:

- (a) Openreach be requested to formulate and publish an Emergency Communications Plan to be implemented in the event of future emergency incidents, and**
- (b) Openreach be invited to discuss its proposals to improve connectivity across all its services in Northumberland at a meeting of the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee.**

## **5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

- 5.1 The Group would like to thank all those residents and communities in Northumberland who showed tremendous resilience in the face of the challenges and hardships caused by the storm. Members would also want to express their gratitude to all the individuals and organisations who responded to the needs of communities and residents, often whilst enduring the most difficult of circumstances, during and in the aftermath of Storm Arwen.
- 5.2 We would also like to express our gratitude to all those who provided written submissions to this review and to those who attended our evidence gathering sessions and to our officers who supported this process.

Jeff Reid  
Chairman