

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held at County Hall, Morpeth on Wednesday, 5 October 2022 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor J. Reid
(Chair, in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Carr, D.	Gallacher, B.
Cartie, E.	Lang, J.
Castle, G.	Mather, M.
Dale, A.	Morphet, N.
Dodd, R.R.	

CABINET MEMBER

Horncastle, C.	Community Services
Watson, J.	Healthy Lives

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

N. Carney	Strategic Tourism Project Manager
H. Hinds	Business Resilience and Emergency Planning Lead
P. Hunter	Interim Senior Service Director
M. McAllister (virtual)	Head of Tourism
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
M. Taylor	Interim Executive Director - Communities and Business Development
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer
N. Walsh	Head of Cultural Services
A. Ward	Communications Manager

1 member of the press.

16. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Communities & Place OSC, held on 31 August 2022, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

17. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS

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

A member queried whether a report should be considered on the relationship between highway repairs and utility companies.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

18. SCRUTINY

18.1 Endorsement of the Northumberland Destination Management Plan 2022-2032

The report sought approval from cabinet for the Vision, Partnership Principles, Strategic Aims and Priorities of the Destination Management Plan (DMP) for Northumberland 2022-32. (A copy of the report and presentation is enclosed with the signed minutes).

Councillor Watson, Portfolio Holder for Healthy Lives, referred to the importance of tourism to Northumberland given the number of employees working in the sector, numbers and expenditure of day and overnight visitors. He noted that the plan had regard to the needs of both residents and visitors.

Nigel Walsh, Head of Culture was in attendance with Neil Carney, Strategic Tourism Project Manager whilst Maureen McAllister, Head of Tourism was in attendance remotely. He commented that the importance of tourism was recognised in the Economic Development Strategy 2019-2024 and one of a few key industrial growth opportunities. Northumberland was a leading UK destination following a period of unrivalled growth in the previous 10 years and demonstrated in a comparison of visitor numbers and expenditure which had been assisted by the television series 'Tales from Northumberland with Robson Green'. The Destination Management Plan set out the challenge of growing private sector investment whilst balancing the needs of the environment, residents and communities.

Maureen McAllister, shared a PowerPoint presentation which gave some background information on tourism in Northumberland which had seen Visit Northumberland and the Council now operating as a single organisation with a 2 year partnership agreement, formation of a Board with strategic advisors, areas of focus and actions under three main headings of strategy, engagement and marketing.

Whilst visit numbers were not quite at the level prior to the pandemic, recovery was strong and she estimated that around 30% of new visitors to the county would come back, stop longer and recommended Northumberland as a destination. It was therefore important to manage the increase in vehicles, provide training, ensure the correct products were in place and the destinations and communities were ready to visitors. The aforementioned were the reason for the creation of the Destination Management Plan which

had been developed over the previous 18 months with key stakeholders. It included prioritisation of actions, allocation of resources and identification of stakeholders responsible for delivery.

Key areas of focus and the process for delivery by the Action Planning Forum, Partner meetings and DMP Board were summarised as follows:

- Data Evidence and Intelligence
- Destination Infrastructure and Connectivity
- Position and Profile
- Business, Product and People Development

There had been 2 meetings of the Action Planning Forum to date with the commitment from businesses and stakeholders acknowledged.

The following information was provided in response to questions from members:

- The nature, quantity and length of the funding had been discussed by Cabinet when the arrangements for Visit Northumberland had been agreed, previously financing had been agreed on a yearly basis. The 2-year period allowed time for the new organisation to become embedded although it was hoped that resources would be allocated in the future for a longer period as the plan covered 10 years, from 2022 to 2032.
- A 10-year investment plan had been established for Hadrian's Wall with colleagues looking to optimise Borderland's funding. Attractions along Hadrian's Wall were also involved in the DMP.
- A new website had been launched for Visit Northumberland in 2021 and any difficulties accessing the website would be investigated.
- Coastal areas received high numbers of visitors which had been closely managed by stakeholders including local services, AONB, National Trust, coastguard, Northumbria Police. Promotional activity for the autumn encouraged the dispersal of visitors to attractions and locations across the county. The DMP enabled problems, such as parking, to be logged and solutions to be found.
- It was important that the right products were developed to ensure that any images of activities and experiences in campaigns could be easily booked.
- The plan would be included on the next agenda of the Northumberland Cycling and Walking Board which was meeting in the next few weeks.
- Cycle tourism was important in the thematic development of product development and new business opportunities. The DMP had an active cycling group which met quarterly. They hoped to become a cycling tourism exemplar and create a virtual hub with information in one place to book suitable accommodation, hire cycles, plot circular routes etc.
- One of the DMP priorities focused on people development to ensure that the tourism industry was an attractive proposition. They were therefore working with colleges and businesses to facilitate this. Recruitment of some staff, such as chefs, was difficult across the country and best practice of those who were able to retain their staff was being shared. Accommodation for staff was also a key factor that was being considered and included at partner events.

- 30% of overnight visitors were staying with friends and relatives and it was therefore important to ensure residents had easy access to the right information at restaurants and attractions and considered as part of the Information Strategy. An annual 'days out' map was a useful tool for visitors and available locally. The links between attractions and communities were being developed by the tourism team.
- A wide variety of organisations were represented on the board from small independent businesses to larger hotel complexes as well as a geographical representation.
- The Service Director of Local Services was a key member of one of the working groups to ensure that investment opportunities were aligned with priorities for infrastructure improvements.
- Cabinet was aware of the impact on the availability of rental properties and Town and Parish Council funding arising from increasing numbers of properties becoming holiday accommodation in some areas. The Council was unable to prevent properties being bought as second homes or holiday lets although it was hoped new Council Tax legislation would provide some assistance.
- A membership list for Action Planning Forum and DMP Board would be shared with the committee when finalised. Representatives included individuals from The Alnwick Garden and Slaley Hall amongst others. Councillors were welcome to attend any of the meetings and were asked to contact officers if they wished to do so.
- In addition to the Council's annual financial contribution, income was also generated by a partner membership scheme and successful grant applications for marketing and product development.

Comments from members included:

- There needed to be cycling hubs and facilities for the hire of cycles.
- Camping facilities in the southeast.
- It was hoped that the creation of one organisation removed the previous duplication.
- Residents of Northumberland were rediscovering other areas of the county as evidenced by data from bus companies.
- New cost of living pressures with fuel and energy increases could have an impact on tourism; a 'normal' year was unlikely for a few years.
- Fair wages were needed for people working in tourism and other sectors in Northumberland.
- High-profile attractions were also experiencing difficulties recruiting staff in hospitality, despite salaries being significantly above minimum wage. It was also more difficult in the winter period and when students returned to university, particularly, when travel to rural areas were more expensive or problematic.
- The detrimental impact on residential rental markets and Town and Parish Council funding as a result of properties being converted to holiday accommodation.
- Officers needed to work with colleagues in the planning department regarding the provision of staff accommodation in rural areas.
- Awareness be raised of the 100th anniversary of Blyth Promenade in 2028.

The officers were thanked for the report and presentation which had been clear and informative.

RESOLVED that Cabinet be advised that the Communities & Place OSC supported the recommendation contained in the report.

19. OVERVIEW

19.1 Storm Arwen, Community Resilience Update

The purpose of the report was to provide the Community and Place OSC with an update on progress about the Community Resilience workstream prior to the winter and in line with the recommendations from the Storm Arwen review task and finish group. (A copy of the report is enclosed with the signed minutes).

Helen Hinds, Business Resilience and Emergency Planning Lead summarised the report and confirmed that further progress had been made in a number of areas since the report had been written several weeks previously. The following acronyms were explained:

NPg – Northern Powergrid
SPEN – Scottish Power Energy Networks
NWL – Northumbrian Water Limited
BT – British Telecom

She highlighted the following:

- It had recently been announced that NWL had been fined £20 million for the disruption to residents' water supply, primarily in Northumberland and Durham, following Storm Arwen.
- Relationships had been strengthened with most of the utility companies through daily engagement and via the Local Resilience Forum.
- NPg had been particularly proactive in the identification of suitable community buildings to receive generators if there was loss of power in the future. They had also made £7.5 million of funding available to enable communities to become more resilient through the creation of a new Foundation. Whilst Charity Commission approval was awaited, a soft launch had been undertaken in the areas worst affected by Storm Arwen and information shared with Town and Parish Councils with, so far, 11 applications for funding being made to date for different types of back-up power.
- The Northumberland Community Resilience stakeholder group had been formed and had met in August 2022 to work with the utility companies and Northumberland Communities Together (NCT), Community Action Northumberland (CAN) and Northumberland Association of Local Councils (NALC), Northumbria Police and Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service.

- Engagement with BT had been much more difficult with concerns continuing regarding the resilience of telecoms. Alternatives were being investigated to enhance rural telecoms.
- A number of successful events had been organised in recent weeks by Guy Opperman MP at Hexham, Bellingham and NCC at Newbiggin by the Sea. These had been well attended and had enabled contact to be made with some where there had been no previous engagement with the Civil Contingencies Team.
- The 30 days 30 ways social media campaign of preparedness had been suspended during the period of national mourning following the death of Her Majesty The Queen. The campaign would recommence the following week.
- Visits had been arranged with approximately 20 parish councils and community groups as well as communication with many others. An exercise was planned to take place in Rothbury on 15 October 2022 in partnership with the parish council.

Councillor Horncastle, Portfolio Holder for Community Services thanked Helen Hinds and the Civil Contingencies Team for the many extra hours of work they had carried out during and following Storm Arwen which had an impact on the whole of the county, but in different ways. He also thanked all staff, officers and Councillors for the assistance they had given, particularly to those who had gone above and beyond. He reported that significant work had been carried out by Northern Powergrid to replace damaged and weakened poles.

He commented on the role of the Emergency Planning Committee and confirmed that a meeting would be arranged in the near future to assess the recommendations of the Storm Arwen report with a possible emergency scenario. He stressed that it was important for all residents to get prepared for the winter as well as any emergency events.

The following points were made by Members:

- Reference to the recommendation that a checklist of useful items leaflet be produced to help residents prepare for winter and / or any other emergency with a reminder to test equipment, such as generators.
- The Council needed to work with local radio as an alternative source of information for residents in the event of a power outage.
- The importance of checking that contact details for villages / community buildings were up to date.
- Councillors should be asked what the best method/telephone number to be used to contact them in an emergency.
- More winter preparedness events in the south east were welcomed as the urban areas had experienced different problems to those in the rural areas.
- A desire to see improved working arrangements and communication between utility companies and the Highways section as well as Civil Contingencies.
- Disappointment that BT were unwilling to engage with the Council.
- All residents in Northumberland needed to be prepared as well as Town and Parish Councils.

The following information was provided in response to questions from Members:

- The 30 days 30 ways campaign would have incorporated a checklist for residents. Officers would prepare something that could be circulated electronically or produce a paper version.
- A winter preparedness session had been held at Newbiggin by the Sea.
- Some NPg grants had been awarded for the acquisition of back up generators for community buildings. It was suggested that as it was unknown what NPg's criteria would be for distribution and prioritisation of generators, organisations should make an application for funding. It was noted that, if successful, organisations would then become responsible for the maintenance of the equipment.
- No date had been set as yet for the Emergency Planning Committee to test the Community Resilience Plan. It was to be arranged as soon as possible.
- The 28 recommendations of the Storm Arwen Task & Finish Group were being regularly monitored via Microsoft Planner with tasks assigned to responsible officers within the organisation, including the Civil Contingencies Team, the Director of Public Health etc. Officers were liaising closely, particularly around data and inequalities. Reports on the remaining recommendations would be brought to future meetings, when appropriate.
- The Civil Contingencies Team had contact details for approximately 90 community buildings. It was agreed that the list be shared with all Members to review and so they could provide details for any community buildings that should be included. Organisations needed to be willing to volunteer as a hub for the community if there were an extreme event.
- The Council was unable to assist residents with compensation claims for interruption to utility supplies.
- Officers were able to pre-nominate buildings for the distribution of water or other supplies, so they became a more useful hub.

Several members expressed their gratitude for the update in the report and also the assistance that the officers had provided in local areas.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The report be received.
- b) The Communities and Place OSC continues to support the concept of community resilience within Northumberland.

19.2 Winter Emergencies Communications Plan

The purpose of the report was to consider the Winter Emergencies Communications Plan, a key recommendation of the Storm Arwen Review. (A copy of the briefing note is enclosed with the signed minutes).

Andrew Ward, Communications Manager, highlighted the following key points:

- The plan could be used for an emergency of any description, despite its title of 'Winter Emergency Communications Plan'.
- There had been a lot of excellent communication work carried out in November and December 2021, when the county had been at the centre of regional and national focus.
- There had been a number of tactics that had worked well, including:
 - The distribution of flyers for residents without power. The information was being reviewed should it be needed again in the future.
 - Use of local members as media spokespersons, where appropriate.
 - Daily briefings for members to be reviewed to ensure that all members were able to receive the information.
- People expected information in the way that best suited them, this was more challenging if residents did not have power.
- 3 areas for improvement included:
 - Working more closely with local radio to enable communication in a crisis to warn and inform communities. The first meeting had been postponed and would be rearranged. The relationship with the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) had developed over the previous 12 months with regular meetings. It was a useful channel for messages.
 - Build better relationships and dialogue with key communications contacts within the utility companies. The preparedness communications campaign would recommence during October. Additionally, messages would be shared about winter preparedness, gritters etc.

The following information was provided in response to questions from Members:

- Media links would be shared with members to encourage residents to sign up to the weekly e-newsletter which was currently received by 10,000 residents.
- They wanted to ensure there was 2-way communication between the county council and town and parish councils in an emergency through working with the Civil Contingencies Team.
- Methods of distributing emergency flyers would be reviewed to ensure that organisations received it via the most appropriate method, electronic sharing of PDFs was desirable, but consideration be given to the distribution of paper versions, if this was required. Reference was made to the leaflet drop to the worst affected households following Storm Arwen which had been undertaken by county Council staff and military personnel. Delivery of bulk copies for distribution by parish or town councils would be of assistance. The action taken would depend on the circumstances at the time.
- Leaflets could not be finalised in advance as information from utility companies, such as booking hotel accommodation or other assistance available, would be determined at the time of an incident.
- Other agencies referred to in news releases would be provided with copies but would not require their approval to avoid slowing the process down for the timely release of information.

The Chair confirmed that the discussion had referred to production of 2 leaflets, one for winter preparedness which had been suggested by members. The other was a leaflet circulated when responding to an emergency. It was agreed that the 'be prepared' message could be included as an article within the next edition of Northumberland News which was circulated in early December.

Members commented on the following:

- Whether magnetised signs with useful contact numbers could be attached to the sides of refuse vehicles in advance of adverse weather.
- Other methods of distributing leaflets were also suggested, such as delivery by personnel on refuse collections.
- The ability of town and parish councils to disseminate information varied across the county and it would therefore be useful to liaise with elected members regarding the best methods in their wards.
- Any leaflets/articles would need to be carefully worded regarding the suggestion of household items needed for winter. Residents be as asked to think about what might be needed and referring them to relevant guidance. Some councillors were concerned regarding the inclusion of candles which could be dangerous if left unattended.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The information be received
- b) An article on winter preparedness be included within the December edition of Northumberland News with input from members of the Storm Arwen Task and Finish Group.

20. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATOR

Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee Monitoring Report

The Committee reviewed its work programme for the 2022/23 council year. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes).

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator reported that he was hoping that the Woodland Strategy would be ready for the meeting on 11 January 2023. He confirmed that the concerns raised by members at the previous meeting regarding Ash Die Back had been relayed to the Service Director - Regeneration, Commercial and Economy who was responsible for the aforementioned strategy.

Following the discussion earlier in the meeting, he would add an item to the work programme on the relationship between highway repairs and utility companies. He had also noted a previous suggestion regarding recruitment of retained firefighters.

Members sought clarity regarding the presentation of scrutiny minutes to Full Council. They were frustrated that they were unable to discuss matters as only the accuracy of the minutes could be challenged.

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator explained that the minutes of OSC meetings were presented to Council to receive and consider. The respective Chairs would present the minutes highlighting the work of the Committee and members could ask questions or seek clarification on the issues contained therein.

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____