

## **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, 11 January 2023 at 2.00 p.m.

#### **PRESENT**

Councillor J. Reid  
(Chair, in the Chair)

#### **MEMBERS**

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

#### **CABINET MEMBER**

Riddle, J.	Local Services
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#### **OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE**

A. Curry	Senior Manager – Commissioning
G. Gavin	Head of Neighbourhood Services
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer

#### **ALSO PRESENT**

1 member of the press.

### **32. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Lang.

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

The Committee considered the Forward Plan of key decisions (January to April 2023). (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes).

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator reported that:

- The 'Produced in Northumberland Scheme' did not require a decision by Cabinet.

- Leisure Programme Update - Cabinet received updates of a technical nature which were not considered necessary for this committee.

Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy for Northumberland 2022 – Councillor Gallacher asked if the report could include information on the position during the Covid 19 pandemic and how policies had changed since.

**RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

## **34. OVERVIEW**

### **34.1 Storm Arwen Review – Adult Care**

Alan Curry, Senior Manager – Commissioning was in attendance to provide an update on the implementation of the Storm Arwen review’s recommendations on Adult Care.

He confirmed that Adults and Children’s Social Care teams had been working on data sets to ensure that records were up to date to enable identification of the most vulnerable residents. Protocols had also been put in place to store relevant data sets in a secure environment, identify those who need access in an emergency situation and how information would be shared with external partners.

They had been working with older persons care home providers to review business contingency plans for emergency situations and power outages. Some had plans to access their own generators or had alternative steps if there was a power outage including evacuation, transport and medication management. Plans for most of the older persons care homes in Northumberland were satisfactory and officers were continuing to work with the final provider to ensure that the outstanding issues were addressed.

He added that domiciliary care providers in rural areas experienced adverse weather conditions more frequently with plans that had been tested. This would include identification of individuals whose visits were essential and non-essential and contact with individuals in the immediate vicinity who could provide assistance.

Several members expressed concern that not all providers had made provision for a power outage or to access a generator. They discussed whether this should be a compulsory minimum requirement, as evacuation would be difficult if there was adverse weather, such as heavy snowfall, particularly in rural areas.

It was confirmed that the Council had not previously specified provision of a generator as a requirement and implementation could have cost implications via fees for those under contracts with the Council. Some business continuity plans referred to evacuation and in those circumstances were required to provide detail on transport arrangements and medication management.

The following issues were raised by Members:

- The funding provided by Northern Powergrid for community organisations was thought unlikely to be available to care homes who operated as a business. Some members had purchased generators for their own homes/business or had helped community organisations source equipment and did not think they were very expensive.
- Whether any grant funding was available to help care homes purchase generators in the different sectors, charitable organisations, private care homes or statutory sector.
- The importance of business contingency plans for the safety of care home residents.
- All parties needed to pay heed adverse weather warnings and consideration be given to the trigger point at which residents were evacuated.
- Alternative power solutions could include battery storage for solar panels and whether the Council could provide financial assistance or a loan to purchase equipment.
- Communication with vulnerable residents was particularly difficult in many areas when there was no power and this needed further consideration.

In answer to questions and comments raised by members the Senior Manager – Commissioning confirmed that:

- All care homes were inspected at least annually, with some being visited more frequently. Business continuity plans were reviewed as part of monitoring visits.
- Due to the frail nature of care home occupants, evacuation would only be carried out in extreme circumstances.
- Evacuation plans were required for a number of scenarios, not just adverse weather or power outage, for example, if there was a fire.
- Officers would continue to work with care home providers whose plans did not make reference to generators.
- New data sets had been formed from existing adult social care users with a need under the Care Act to identify those who were particularly vulnerable, to improve the accuracy of the data and to ensure that it was kept up to date.
- Adult Social Care required providers to have contingency plans regarding their own data but did not manage data for other departments.
- Cryptshare software was used to share information securely with external parties. Internally data could be shared via email or protected documents.
- The results of the scenario testing were not yet available but would be shared with Members in due course.
- Officers were liaising with care home providers regarding the risk of power outages, although the risk was minimal.

The Chair thanked the Senior Manager – Commissioning for the update. He was reassured with:

- The progress on data sets and information sharing.

- The confirmation that business contingency plans were reviewed annually and were appropriate for different scenarios.
- Exploration of alternative sources of power.

**RESOLVED** that that the update be received.

### **34.2 Tree and Woodland Strategy**

John Riddle, Portfolio Holder for Local Services, commented that the strategy required updating to incorporate changes such as new diseases as Ash die-back, initiatives such as the Great North Forest and Climate Change and carbon footprint to be taken into consideration.

Greg Gavin, Head of Neighbourhood Services was in attendance to discuss the updating of the Tree and Woodland Strategy. Due to the scale of the work involved in updating the strategy which would take longer than previous versions and involve internal stakeholders across the Council, Neighbourhood Services felt that it would be appropriate to focus on reviewing some key elements that they were responsible for within a Tree Management Policy, which would be referenced in the strategy when finalised.

He explained that three key aspects of the work of the Tree and Woodland Teams included:

1. Response to enquiries about trees including requests to undertake work.
2. Proactive tree inspections and proactive tree maintenance.
3. Tree planting (replacement of two trees planted for every tree felled).

The process undertaken to achieve the above was summarised as follows:

- Review current policy approach.
- Review current resource base.
- Review current performance in relation to tree management.
- Research regional policy approaches in other Councils.
- Review proactive tree inspection process.
- Develop new policy approach to maximise the use of resources, clearly articulate to the public how requests for work would be responded to and proportionately manages the risk of injury to the public or damage to property from trees.

Current key considerations included:

- Identification of areas where they were performing well.
- Any areas of performance that required improvement.
- Was the current policy, responding to enquiries and requests, clear and easy to understand?
- Was the current policy on responding to enquiries and requests an efficient use of our available resource?

- Was the current policy on proactive tree inspections effectively managing risk?
- How was the potential impact of Ash Dieback and other diseases on our Highway Network and in our Open Spaces identified?
- The approach taken to replanting in relation to felling works.
- The approach to ensure planting in urban areas was appropriate and would continue to be appropriate in the future.
- Replanting was suggested at New Hartley where a number of trees had fallen and been cleared after Storm Arwen.
- The policy should include reference to removal of trees if obstructing the highway following a collision.

The following concerns were raised by members:

- Trees suffering from Ash die back were difficult to identify until felled with the trunks crumbling to sawdust in the middle. It was estimated that 50% of roadside trees were Ash. The size of the problem could not be underestimated as there were likely millions of Ash trees in the county. They were also located in close proximity to power lines and telephone cables.
- Northern PowerGrid, BT, landowners and farmers needed to be included in discussions / consultations.
- Significant manpower would be required to fell large trees which were several hundred years old.
- Whether felled trees had any commercial value to offset the cost of removal or given to log banks. Felled trees contributed to biodiversity if left in situ.
- Whether replacement trees should be planted adjacent to roads.
- Trees on the roadside protected vehicles from strong winds.
- Material should be removed and disposed of in the safest and most environmentally friendly manner.
- Advice and information be given by appropriately qualified and proficient officers.
- Policies needed to be supported by resources.
- The importance of regular inspections and maintenance of trees along school and pedestrian routes in urban areas to avoid a repeat of the tragic death in a neighbouring authority.
- Landowners should be made aware of their responsibilities regarding trees with clear policies for all parties including farmers, landowners and the local authority.
- The effectiveness of new streetlights was diminished by nearby trees which required regular maintenance.
- Observation of bird nesting season and harvesting limited the periods when work could be carried out, unless a tree was identified as dangerous then it could be removed at any time.
- The Council should work in partnership with river authorities and landowners to remove trees from rivers, particularly those with significant silt issues.

- Tree roots were causing significant problems in some areas with uneven pavements and should be taken into consideration by planning when landscaping on new estates was considered.
- Reference was made to the National Park policy of the right tree in the right place.
- There should be reference to the findings of scientific research to determine the best approach with regard to diseased trees and whether they should be removed and used or left in situ.

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

- Tree Preservation Orders would form part of the wider strategy with involvement from Planning.
- A significant number of the trees at risk had been brought down during Storm Arwen.
- Nearly every Ash tree was likely to be affected and could be identified by bare branches at the crown when the rest of the tree was in leaf. They were common on the roadside as they self-seeded and weren't removed from the verge.
- The Woodland Trust estimated that 80% of Ash trees would be affected. Affected trees were categorised in 4 stages according to the amount of canopy that was intact. A tree is typically in stage 4 when it has less than 25% of its canopy.
- The approach in response to trees dying from Ash dieback had to be considered against the Council's other priorities, risks and budget.
- Most the trees which had come down during Storm Arwen had a canopy of leaves which had acted like a sail. Trees affected by Ash dieback had a limited canopy in leaf.
- Since Storm Arwen, records had started to be kept of the species of trees which had failed or been felled, to assess the proportion which were Ash, which would help inform the risk and the amount of resource that could potentially be required.
- A programme of inspections was being carried out to assess the scale of the problem. During 2022, inspections had been carried out by Highways along the A69 with support from an external company. In 2023 they intended to carry out further inspections along the A189, key points along the A68 (north of the A69), A689, B6524 between Belsay and Morpeth to assess the extent of Ash trees along those roads and the stage of Ash dieback disease. This would assist officers make an informed assessment of the scale of the issue across the road network. Other work would be carried out for play areas, country parks and open spaces where there was high footfall. In addition, they would explore the use of the AI inspections (artificial intelligence) by Highways to limit the cost of inspections.
- The percentage of Ash trees would vary in different places.
- Trees were not necessarily planted in the same place that they were felled as the suitability of the location would be assessed against the current policy. Totals of trees felled were kept and trees replanted in appropriate

locations on a ratio which exceeded 2:1. Planting had to be appropriate, diverse and maintainable.

- Clearance work from Storm Arwen was still ongoing to ensure areas were safe. Consideration was being given to planting schemes at the Queen Elizabeth Memorial sites and also at Bolam Lake Country Park.
- Issues of biodiversity and carbon sequestration would be included within the wider Tree and Woodland Strategy.
- The cost implications of Ash dieback would be assessed following the investigation work explained earlier in the meeting with a bid for additional funding through the budget process, if this was required.
- It was not thought appropriate that a separate policy should be written solely for Ash dieback as there were other diseases affecting other species, such as oak and chestnut trees. The policy needed to be universal to ensure that nothing was missed.
- Timber which was easy to extract would have a value, otherwise removal could be cost prohibitive and the default would be to leave it in situ, subject to consideration of safety issues.
- National Powergrid were able to fell trees next to power lines.
- The remains of felled trees were often removed by others.
- Fallen trees from motor vehicle accidents should be removed if obstructing any part of the highway. These should be reported to the Highways team in the first instance, otherwise it was expected that hazards would be identified as part of the regular inspection regime. Officers would liaise with colleagues in Highways to check that trees were included as part of the inspection of the highways infrastructure following a collision to verify stability or if a contributing factor.
- Trees were being planted in specialist containers in urban areas to eliminate problems with roots and uneven paths in the future.
- A list of criteria be developed for officers on site for preferred disposal methods for a range of different circumstances.
- Homeowners who believed their property had been damaged from trees or roots from trees on Council land should provide information to their home insurance provider to contact the Council's insurer to claim for the cost of repairs.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services commented that the draft Tree Management Policy, incorporating some of the issues raised at the meeting, would be considered at a meeting in May/June. The Tree and Woodland Strategy would take longer as it would involve multiple departments.

The Chair thanked the officer and portfolio holder for their attendance. He enquired if a case for extra funding from the Government would be possible once the research on Ash dieback was obtained and analysed and the scale of the problem known. He also requested that consideration be given to the management of the new trees being planted so that the problems being experienced now were not repeated in the future. He welcomed opportunities for further consultation on aspects of the draft policy by email, if helpful.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted and consideration be given to inclusion of the issues raised in the Tree Management Policy.

**35. 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 confirmed with the Head of Neighbourhood Services that the work programme would be revised to defer consideration of the Tree Management Policy from March to June.

Issues raised by Members included:

- Improving understanding of the Section 106 process, particularly the applications considered by the Strategic Planning Committee. The Chair and Scrutiny Co-ordinator agreed to raise the issue of training with the officers outside of the meeting as it was not believed to be an issue for the committee.
- Whether there had been any changes to school infrastructure funding. This could be asked at the meeting on 8 February when the Infrastructure Funding Statement was scheduled to be considered.

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

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

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