

## 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, 8 March 2023 at 2.00 p.m.

#### PRESENT

Councillor N. Oliver  
(Chair, in the Chair)

#### MEMBERS

Cartie, E.	Morphet, N.
Dale, A.	Reid, J.
Mather, M.	

#### CABINET MEMBER

Horncastle, C.	Community Services
Riddle, J.	Local Services

#### OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

D. Laux	Head of Technical Services
R. McCartney	Highways Infrastructure Manager
J. McNeil	Assistant Chief Fire Officer
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer

#### ALSO PRESENT

1 member of the press.

#### 36. Membership

The Chair reported that he had been appointed as Chair of the Communities & Place OSC with Councillor Dodd being removed as a member.

He thanked Councillor Reid for the work that had been undertaken whilst he had been the Chair since November 2021.

Reference was made to the review of scrutiny and changes to the model which included less emphasis on the scrutiny of Cabinet decisions and more focus on the issues which concerned residents. When the Committee felt that it was appropriate to review Cabinet decisions it was proposed that this would generally be a few months after implementation when the effect could be measured. A member commented that across the scrutiny function, there had

been very small number of call-ins and it was hoped that would remain the case in the new system.

Members would have an opportunity to discuss and comment when the matter was discussed by council.

### **37. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Carr, Castle, Gallacher and Lang.

### **38. MINUTES**

Minute No 31.1

7 December 2022

Leisure Review - Findings of the Review of NCC Supported Leisure Provision and Consideration of Future Management and Procurement Arrangements

Councillor Morphet enquired whether 'preventable' should replace 'preventative' in the following sentence in the final paragraph on page 7:

"Marianne Donnelly, Service Director - Wellbeing-Adult Services, explained that some elements of the review had been undertaken in collaboration with Public Health to address inequalities within Northumberland, including *preventable* ill-health."

Minutes No 34.1

11 January 2023

Storm Arwen Review – Adult Care

In answer to a question, the results of scenario testing had not yet been made available but would be requested by the Scrutiny Officer. Future reports would be considered by the Health and Well-Being OSC.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the following meetings of the Communities and Place OSC, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair, subject to the above amendment:

- a) 7 December 2022
- b) 11 January 2023

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

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

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator reported that:

- The Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy for Northumberland 2022 would be considered by the committee at the next meeting on 5 April 2023.
- In line with the new ways of working, reports on issues which had been determined by Cabinet, would typically be reviewed 3 or 4 months after the decision had been made by Cabinet. This would allow identification of any issues which would enable a more informed view. Previously matters had been considered by scrutiny at the meeting immediately following the Cabinet decision. The Forward Plan would continue to be circulated with the agenda papers.
- Transport Asset Management Plan Policy and Strategy related to minor updates regarding technical terminology which enabled maximum funding from the Department for Transport. It was confirmed that the documents were available to all on the Council's website when the Cabinet agenda was published. Decisions were also published within a few days of the meeting.

**RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

## **40. OVERVIEW**

### **40.1 Utility Companies on the Highway**

John Riddle, Portfolio Holder for Local Services, commented that the Street Works Permit Scheme had been introduced in February 2020 and its implementation meant that local authorities were following the same government guidance and standards which made things simpler for utility companies. The scheme enabled the local authority to manage and coordinate essential street and roadworks by statutory undertakers, such as the Council's Highways department and utility companies. It did not include all work and other arrangements were in place for private contractors, developers etc. It was intended that the scheme be cost neutral which required a fine balance between cost of staffing and timely processing of an undetermined number of applications.

Robin McCartney stated that James Richards was Interim Network Manager following departure of Lynne Ryan. He outlined the key objectives of the permit scheme and explained that the administration costs of administering the permits for the Council's highways works was met from existing Technical Services budgets. It was expected that at the end of the current year, there would have been approximately 22,000 applications. He was pleased to report that the new scheme was running well with positive impacts on the number of days saved from disruption and collaborative working and there was also only a small overall surplus in the first 2 years of the scheme. The DfT required submission of an annual report in the first three years, and these were available on the Council's website.

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

- Officers attended North East Coordination meetings with the statutory undertakers and meetings with North East Highways colleagues where issues of fairness were discussed openly, although there was no documentary evidence of this and it was acknowledged that recipients of penalties were perhaps unlikely to agree.
- The Council had to show parity in how it treated its own applications for works in the highway and those of the utility companies. This was the team's ethos. Feedback from the utility companies at the North East meetings was that the Council was dealing with permit applications fairly. One example given was the approval of requests for extensions.
- The position with regard to costs and cost neutrality was being monitored with annual submissions to the DfT for the first three years and three yearly thereafter. At the end of year 3, they would reassess whether the cost of permits needed to be amended. In year 1 there had been difficulties processing all permits in as timely a manner as desired, which had resulted in the appointment of additional staff and explained the difference in the amount of surplus and deficit between years 1 and 2. The cost of permits would be adjusted, if necessary to achieve a cost neutral year end position. The number of applications was also a factor which could not be predicted. There had been an increase in the number of permits for fibre broadband in the last few years and more resource may be needed. Increased collaboration would also have an impact on timescales.
- The scale of charges for permits varied and would be circulated to members after the meeting.
- Generally, applications were dealt with on a 'first come first served' basis unless the proposed work would have an impact on traffic in a community with work planned on the network nearby. One of the purposes of the Coordination meetings was to discuss the future programme of works. The Streetworks team had exceptionally good working relationships with the utility companies. A permit occasionally may need to be cancelled and work rearranged if emergency repairs were required which necessitated variations to permits already issued. Originally the wording on permits had been quite prescriptive but clauses within the new system had enabled the council to be more flexible and encourage collaborative working. The type of road defined what hours could be worked to minimise disruption to residents and road users.
- The Council's role was to coordinate the installation and maintenance of infrastructure located within the highway by statutory undertakers for use by homes and businesses, whilst keeping traffic moving.
- As the installation programme for Electric Vehicle Charging Points matured, it was hoped that the Council would be able to benefit from having a long-term plan which would enable savings from collaborative working with the utility companies if they had a permit for work at the same location.
- Any person was able to monitor work in the highway via the one.network system. It was acknowledged the system could be more widely promoted on the Council's website and other communications.
- There should be signs displayed for all roadworks which state the permit number and who is carrying out the work.

- Engagement with utility companies varied; some were very active attending all coordination meetings whilst others did not participate as much and their standard of work was poorer. There had been a steep learning curve for all parties with the implementation of the new permit scheme. It had been identified that additional resource was required to enable better dialogue with local areas offices which would be implemented within the following year.
- Any concerns regarding repairs to the network following work by utility companies could be emailed to the Streetworks Mailbox for inspection and follow up action as necessary. Inspections and monitoring were carried out daily by the team. Poor repairs were discussed at the Coordination meetings with the imposition of financial penalties for defects. A company had requested a meeting due to the level of defects in order to better improve their work. Poor repairs needed to be identified within a set period of time to ensure that these were rectified at no cost to the Council or taxpayers if not done correctly in the first instance.
- The digging of trenches in the highway network created discontinuity, joints and movement although whilst the highways team would prefer affected areas to be resurfaced over a wider area, this was not required by the national specifications which set out the standard required for repairs. However, this affected the longevity and standard of the road surface.

Members commented on the excellent service they received by officers in the Streetworks team.

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

#### **40.2 Update on Recruitment and retention of On-Call Firefighters**

Councillor Horncastle, Portfolio Holder for Community Services, explained that the fire and rescue service in Northumberland was made up of whole-time firefighters and retained firefighters at many of the rural fire stations in Northumberland. Whilst they were trained to the same standards as the full-time firefighters, they were on-call from their home or workplaces which had to be located within 5 minutes of their local fire station. A significant amount of work had been undertaken by AFCO McNeil recently to make progress with recruitment and the position was vastly improved.

Assistant Chief Fire Officer James McNeil, gave a brief summary of his background and highlighted the following key aspects of the report:

- There was no difference in the level of risk whole-time or on-call firefighters were exposed to which was referenced by the recent fire in Haltwhistle.
- In recent years, the staffing model for Northumberland had a shortage of 45 on-call firefighters. With only 1 or 2 training courses per year, this had not been sufficient to meet the leaving or retirement profile.
- They now ran 3 or 4 training courses per year with an increased number of candidates which meant they hoped to achieve their recruitment target by the end of the summer 2023.

- Consideration of incident data and risk profiles identified stations where Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staffing needs needed to be increased at key locations or for certain periods of time and had been were used to set priorities for recruitment.
- Review of the agreement with Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service in relation to incidents on the boundary between the two areas.
- Introduction of 2 on-call support officers who could be deployed around the county and ensured stations could be manned with additional community risk reduction duties including inspections, visits, safety checks etc.
- Variation to monthly contract hours of on-call firefighters from 90 or 120 hours to 40 or 50 hours to increase availability during daytime hours which would hopefully close the gap between operational activity and appliance availability between 08.00 and 18.00.
- Looking at the staffing needs of individual stations to create bespoke plans to ensure the whole-time staffing equivalent was met at each location. This meant that if they needed to employ more staff with smaller contracts, they would do so.
- Changes to category 1 and 2 calls which required less cross border assistance from the Tyne and Wear fire and rescue authority for incidents on the county's borders.
- Review of e-learning opportunities to improve training for On-Call firefighters who currently had 2 hours of each training per week compared with 42 hours per week for whole-time firefighters.
- There was no differentiation between the bravery and risks experienced between whole time or on-call firefighters; they all risked their lives to save people they did not know.

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

- Increasing the time from 5 to 8 mins for on-call firefighters to get to their local fire station added to the time before a fire truck could depart, this was more viable timewise for rural stations, such as Bellingham, where it would take more than an hour for an appliance to travel on blue lights from the next nearest station. The response time was also likely faster than the other blue light services in rural areas.
- The right people on the right contracts were expected to be in place by the end of summer following training there would be an improved position on staffing availability. Availability was currently:
  - Prudhoe 97.15%
  - Allendale 92.27%
  - Haltwhistle 93.68%
  - Rothbury 93.43%
  - Seahouses 89.56%
  - Alnwick 96.73%
  - Bellingham 93.42%
- Officers had to manage the risk on a day-to-day basis that staffing decisions would not leave an appliance unmanned when an incident occurred and

likely demand in 4-hour blocks. He hoped that availability at all stations would exceed 95 - 97%.

- An appliance normally required a minimum of 4 firefighters to mobilise an appliance with the on-call support officers being used to ensure this figure was achieved. They hoped to increase the number of on-call support officers to ensure that there was one available in each of the four fire station clusters and move between station so appliances could be brought on-line at key times.
- At some stations a phased response could be arranged with a crew of 3 firefighters, depending on the incident type. This was kept under review with the use of the on-call support officer enabled an appliance to respond to a wider range of incident types.
- Individuals who worked full-time during the day may be on-call during evenings and weekends. Nightshift workers could provide availability during daytime hours. As part of the innovation of the service they were now considering individuals who could provide 40/50 hours.
- A trial was being run at Alnwick/Amble/Rothbury fire stations, with the on-call watch management team were coordinating their own availability which had increased to 100%.
- Retained firefighters received 10% of a wholetime firefighters' salary as well as a disturbance payment of approximately £20 plus an hourly rate if mobilised.
- Currently the service was 23 people short of the target operating model. The cost of which was included within current budgets.
- The next recruitment drive would prioritise gaps at Pegswood, Ponteland, Wooler, Berwick and Belford.
- The ability to scale up recruitment and training to replace 40 firefighters annually outweighed the previous staffing shortage issues. Retention was not normally an issue as most on-call firefighters were driven by community spirit and their own pride. They also did not have any recruitment issues with candidates filling places on the next few training courses.
- Some of the whole-time staff based at Berwick, Pegswood, West Hartford and Hexham operated dual contracts when they were not on shift under their primary contract. Dual contracts had been raised as an issue by the HM Inspectors, but they were utilised as stop gap measure and not backfill.
- Whole-time firefighters with the Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service were able to have a dual contract with Northumberland if they lived in close proximity to a Northumberland fire station.
- The profile of individuals who had submitted a notification of interest in becoming an on-call firefighter would be provided to members after the meeting.
- The service used a system called Garstang system which them to manage staffing availability and if dealing with an incident ensure that there was cover in 4-hour blocks, bringing extra staff on duty, if this was required. The operating model should enable the service to respond to 2 simultaneous 5 fire engine fires at any given time.
- On-call firefighters needed to be at least 18 years old. There was no upper age limit as such, but candidates needed to pass a fitness test. A recent

successful candidate was 57 years old. One of the benefits with age came maturity and life experience.

- Large scale fires which involved runoff in nearby water courses were reported to the Environment Agency.

Members thought it had been beneficial for the committee to receive the report to better understand the fire and rescue operation, particularly when decisions were required to be made in respect of budget or investment. Councillor Mather who had previously been an on-call firefighter commented that training needed to be positive and supportive, particularly for on-call firefighters. He also suggested that councillors could provide support to the service and encourage residents to engage and fill vacancies and the stations identified earlier in the meeting to provide the level of cover to enable appliances to turn out. Members were keen to provide support and share campaigns on social media.

ACFO McNeil was pleased to report that:

- There would not be industrial action by firefighters as the pay deal had been supported.
- Firefighters were 7 times more likely to be diagnosed with some cancers due to their working environment. They were therefore looking to increase education, equipment and uniform to enable decontamination of firefighters following major fires etc to reduce the risk. There were potential revenue implications to implement new practices including building alterations within stations to provide separate clean and dirty zones. He hoped to attend another meeting of the committee in the future to share how they hoped this would be addressed.

**RESOLVED** that:

- a) The contents of the report be noted.
- b) The committee supported the efforts being made by the Fire and Rescue Service to improve recruitment.
- c) A report on issues to be implemented to address contamination be added to the work programme.

#### **41. 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).

Issues raised by Members included:

- Public bus services in rural areas. The Scrutiny Co-ordinator reported that officers were waiting for an announcement on funding from the Government and the matter considered when the position and likely



impact on services was known. He agreed to seek information on the likely timescale. The Chair also made reference to the transport element within the Devolution deal. Members requested a copy of the list of current subsidised bus services.

- Clarification be obtained regarding the timescales for the Tree and Management Policy and Tree and Woodland Strategy.

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

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

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