



Northumberland County Council

Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 28 February 2024

Storm Response

Report of Councillor(s) Gordon Stewart, Cabinet Member for Looking After our Communities

Responsible Officer(s): Graeme Binning, Chief Fire Officer

1. Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan

Emergency Preparedness, Response and Recovery links to all three of the Corporate Priorities:

- Putting people at the heart of our planning helps ensure they are empowered and continue to receive equitable support during an emergency.
- Having a well-prepared County, can help reduce the economic impact of shocks.
- Working with communities, helps to deliver best value and meet their expectations.

2. Purpose of report

This report is to provide an update about Northumberland County Council's preparedness and response arrangements for storms. Included is a summary of progress against the Storm Arwen recommendations made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's task and finish group.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That the Committee receive the report and agree the closure of 26 actions from the OSC Storm Arwen report.
- 3.2 That the Committee continue to support the concept of community resilience within Northumberland.

4. Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable

- 4.1 First added to the forward plan on 6 February following a request for an update at the 31 January 2024 Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting.

5. Background

- 5.1 After the disruption caused by Storm Arwen across the County in 2021, Northumberland County Council agreed to conduct a review of the implications of the Storm. A task and finish group of the Communities and Place OSC was convened. This group met on five occasions to hear evidence from colleagues and partners. They also received and considered 87 written submissions from residents, businesses, town and parish councils, county councillors, an MP, the military, voluntary sector, and BT Openreach.
- 5.2 At the end of the evidence gathering a report was produced with 28 recommendations. The report was presented to the Council meeting on 6 July 2022 where it was received positively and accepted unanimously. Since then, the Communities and Place OSC have received progress reports on selected recommendations. The table at Appendix A provides a summary of progress against all the recommendations.
- 5.3 26 recommendations have been closed, with several of them now being part of business-as-usual activity. The two that remain in progress are:
- 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.
 - b) Northumbrian Water Ltd (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.
- 5.4 The technology in the incident support room has been upgraded. There is a working group looking at the use of West Hartford more widely during a response. This group is also considering feedback from a training event and the lessons identified from the response to Storm Babet. Lesson from Storm Isha will be shared with this group where relevant.
- 5.5 The Civil Contingencies Team (CCT) have been working with ICT colleagues on the development of a Northumberland specific, Incident Management System. This is coming to the end of its development phase and is almost ready to be handed over to the CCT for integration into NCC's response arrangements. At the time of writing the date for this handover had not been confirmed.
- 5.6 The issue with well-planned emergency distribution of water continues to be an area for development. It was identified again as learning from Exercise Mighty Oak in March 2023. Due to the number of partners who have an interest in this risk it has been raised with the LRF risk assessment working group via the LRF Assurance Board.
- 5.7 In previous updates to the OSC the committee have discussed communication with all councillors during an incident. There was a specific ask that Councillors be asked what the best method/telephone number to be used to contact them in an emergency. Currently this kind of bespoke communication arrangement is not in place, and it appears that it would be difficult to implement and maintain. It may be possible to put a 'push notification' process in place using the existing .gov notify service that NCC have access to. This allows for a common message to be shared via email or SMS text service. However, this would require further investigation to

determine its suitability likely followed by some frontloaded work that would have to be resourced.

- 5.8 Since the original OSC report was produced the Emergency Community Assistance Plan (ECAP) has been replaced by the Northumberland Incident Response (NIRP). This set out clear response structures and clarified the previous on call arrangements by following nationally recognised good practice. These arrangements now include on-call rotas at both the strategic (Executive Director) and tactical (Director) levels along with the Duty Civil Contingencies Officer (officers from the Civil Contingencies Team) working alongside fire service colleagues and existing operational on-call teams.
- 5.9 These new arrangements have been thoroughly tested in recent months with responses to several Storms, localised flooding, coastal pollution and, a premises fire leading to the evacuation of residents and the opening of a rest centre.
- 5.10 These activations have helped to identify further areas for improvement and development. Including:
- a) Continuous and standardised training for all strategic and tactical officers, building on the training already provided.
 - b) Meeting templates and briefing procedures to be included in the NIRP for use in response.
 - c) Review of agreed on-call expectations at all levels to ensure a resilience response is in place for local incidents.
 - d) Strengthen arrangements for other response specific roles, including loggists, communications officer and, rest centre volunteers.
- 5.11 At the time of writing debriefs for Storm Isha and the concurrent fire at Hirst Castle were being arranged. However, it is worth noting that due to the timing of these two incidents the NCC response was stretched. The individuals that needed overnight accommodation were supported and the Rest Centre plan, although in need of review, did work. However, if the second incident had been larger further support from across the organisation would have been needed. Resilient staffing for longer and/or concurrent incidents is likely to be discussed at part of the planned debriefs.
- 5.12 The response to Storm Isha also provided insight into how well Community Resilience activity has been embedded in some of our communities. It was encouraging to hear about communities that had proactively chosen to open their Community Response Hubs to support the local areas. It would also be helpful for responding agencies to know which areas have opened their Community Response Hubs so we can develop two-way communication and support them if necessary. This will also be an area for discussion in the planned debrief.

6. Options open to the Council and reasons for the recommendations

- 6.1 The report demonstrates that progress has been made against all the original 28 recommendations in the OSC Storm Arwen report. However, planning for and responding to emergencies is an iterative process that requires a learning culture. Therefore, the recommendations are:
- a) That the Incident Management System be completed and rolled out for use in response.

- b) That learning from Storm Babet be incorporated into the Northumberland Incident Response Plan and other arrangements as necessary (see also para 5.10)
- c) That debriefs be carried out for both Storm Isha and the Hirst Castle fire with the intention of applying the learning to relevant arrangements.
- d) That the community resilience work continues and ways to encourage two-way communications be considered.

6.2 In addition to the above increasing numbers of residents and communities are starting to raise concerns with NCC about the PTSN digital switchover. This was raised in submissions about Storm Arwen and continues to be a concern. While it is not directly addressed in this report several teams across the Council have come together to work jointly on the issue. This work needs to continue and can be linked to the community resilience activity mentioned above.

7. Implications

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| Policy | Work to develop the community response hubs overlaps with the warm spaces network. |
| Finance and value for money | There are no direct financial implications associated with this report. Using existing community assets when responding to emergencies provides a pragmatic and value for money operational response. Much of the upfront investment in community response hubs has been met through grant outside of the Council. Other work is being delivered via current resources. |
| Legal | Statutory provision via the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. |
| Procurement | None |
| Human resources | Delivered through existing resources in the Civil Contingencies Team, Northumberland Communities Together and other NCC departments. |
| Property | Use of existing community buildings. |
| The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached? | No Providing a framework for community/local response improves access to support for everyone in the community in a time of crisis, including the more vulnerable, less mobile residents of Northumberland. |
| Risk assessment | This work supports a wider Council response and helps to develop an appropriate community response is in place if needed. |

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| Crime and disorder | None |
| Customer considerations | The aim of this work is to provide a consistent framework so residents and visitors to Northumberland receive a safe and robust response to emergencies. |
| Carbon reduction | None |
| Health and wellbeing | Empowering individuals and the community to respond quickly and appropriately to incidents when needed is shown to reduce the impact on individuals' physical and mental wellbeing. |
| Wards | (All Wards); |

8. Background papers

Not applicable

9. Links to other key reports already published

[ASC Storm Arwen Actions update.pdf \(modern.gov.co.uk\)](#)

Storm Arwen, community resilience update [report](#) 5 Oct 2022 -

Winter emergencies communications [plan](#)

Communities and Plan OSC, report of the Storm Arwen Task and Finish Group, 6 July 2022

[06.1 Report of the Storm Arwen Task and Finish Group.pdf \(modern.gov.co.uk\)](#)

10. Author and Contact Details

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