

**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, 28 February 2024 at 2.00 p.m.

**PRESENT**

Councillor N. Oliver  
(Chair, in the Chair)

**MEMBERS**

|            |             |
|------------|-------------|
| Carr, D.   | Mather, M.  |
| Cartie, E. | Morphet, N. |
| Castle, G. | Reid, J.    |
| Lang, J.   |             |

**CABINET MEMBERS**

|            |                                  |
|------------|----------------------------------|
| G. Stewart | Looking After Our<br>Communities |
|------------|----------------------------------|

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE**

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| G. Binning   | Chief Fire Officer                                 |
| D. Brown     | Strategic Policy, Risk and<br>Performance Officer  |
| H. Hinds     | Business Resilience and<br>Emergency Planning Lead |
| S Kennedy    | Assistant Chief Fire Officer                       |
| S. Nicholson | Scrutiny Co-Ordinator                              |
| N. Turnbull  | Democratic Services Officer                        |

1 member of the press.

**36. MINUTES**

In response to questions, it was confirmed that:

Minute No 30 Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy for Northumberland 2022-2026 Action Plan Progression

Councillor Morphet stated that he had sought clarification on behalf of another member and therefore it would be more accurate to amend the last sentence to read “She was unsure where the uncertainty arose.”

Minute No. 33.2 Update on delivery of Visit Northumberland and the Northumberland Destination Management Plan 2022-2032 28.1 Planning Service Performance Report

Councillor Castle requested that the penultimate bullet point on page 7 be amended to include a reference to Barter Books. The first sentence should read:

“Whilst Berwick benefitted from a train station in the town, Alnwick had two of the highest visited tourist attractions in the county including Alnwick Garden, Alnwick Castle, as well as Barter Books and the recently opened Lilidorei.”

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Communities and Place OSC, held on 31 January 2024, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair, subject to the above amendments.

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

The Committee considered the schedule of decisions made by Cabinet since the last meeting with the latest Forward Plan of key items (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes).

In answer to a question, the Scrutiny Co-ordinator confirmed that the Housing Regeneration Report – Stock Rationalisation had originally been scheduled for the Cabinet meeting on 12 March 2024 but had then been moved to the meeting on 9 April 2024. The first entry on the Forward Plan should have been deleted.

It was also noted that the Financial Performance – Position at the end of December 2023 was also accidentally included twice.

**RESOLVED** that the schedule of decisions made by Cabinet and the Forward Plan of key items be noted.

### **38. OVERVIEW**

#### **38.1 Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service Inspection Report**

The Committee received an update on the findings of His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) following the publication of the third inspection report into Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service on 29 November 2023. The inspection report had been received by Council on 17 January 2024. (A copy of the report is enclosed with the signed minutes).

The Chief Fire Officer explained the background and scale of the challenge the Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) faced providing a safe and effective service for the communities of Northumberland against efficiencies that had been required for the previous 10 years.

Following the initial ‘Requires Improvement’ inspection result in 2019, a modest investment in the service in 2019/20 had enabled the reinstatement of posts to support continuous improvement, performance management and cultural development. These improvements had been reflected in the

contextual narrative of the more positive 2021 report. He provided a brief explanation of the changes to the inspection regime and highlighted the following:

- No Causes of Concern.
- No Inadequate judgement (or grades).
- No Requires Improvement.
- 7 Adequate judgements.
- 4 Good judgements.
- 12 Areas for Improvement (compared to 25 following the second inspection in 2021).

He was particularly pleased that of the 11 diagnostic areas assessed, Values and Culture had initially been graded as 'Requires Improvement' and had improved to 'Good'. This would drive people to deliver change and enable the provision of an excellent service.

There had been incredible commitment to improve the service across all fire and rescue employees as well as improved integration with the county council, reflected in the management structure and reporting arrangements.

He thanked the former and current Portfolio Holders who had responsibility for the fire and rescue service for their leadership, Councillors Riddle, Horncastle and Stewart as well as Councillor Dunbar. He also acknowledged the support provided by members of the Communities and Place OSC in welcoming the change of approach to the Community Risk Management Plan and supporting additional provision for contamination issues faced by firefighters. He intended to continue to provide updates to the committee on work, challenges and opportunities.

Responses to questions and comments made by members included:

- The third inspection had introduced an additional grading of adequate and the report explained that where a diagnostic had changed from 'good' to 'adequate' it did not signify a reduction in standard, unless the body of the report stated this. The differences between the different gradings for 'preventing fire and risk' and 'understanding fire and risk' were discussed. They were counterintuitive.
- The previous recruitment process had been a challenge for the service as it had not kept up with the leaver profile and had impacted on operational capability. Implementing a continuous recruitment process had enabled nearly 70 on-call firefighters to be recruited in the last 2 years compared to an annual course which had secured 8 firefighters previously.
- 84% availability for the on-call service and 92% for whole-time service were results to be proud of.
- Northumberland fire stations had a footprint of 334km<sup>2</sup> with healthy response targets when compared with other areas such as Devon and Somerset fire and rescue service which had an average footprint of 128 km<sup>2</sup> per station.
- The NFRS were one of 11 local authority fire services in England. Integration allowed an effective response to incidents, particularly with the

reorganisation and inclusion of the Civil Contingencies team within the fire and rescue service.

- The NFRS worked closely with the colleagues at Tyne and Wear FRS and Durham and Darlington FRS as they had similar challenges and priorities albeit with different geographical areas. Officers had attended Senior Leaders sessions chaired by Dr Henry Kippin at the North of Tyne Combined Authority. There had been previous discussions regarding fire reform and potential mayoral or Police and Crime Commission governance models, however, the inspection report proved that the county council governance model was working.
- A glossary of terms would be provided for future discussions of the HMICFRS report.
- A new approach to Equality Impact Assessments had been established following utilisation of examples provided by the National Fire Chief's Council and NCC to find the best fit for NFRS. More progress had been made at the time of the inspection than had been reported.
- An Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) officer had been seconded prior to the inspection to ensure the Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) systems were embedded into the organisation and aligned with the county council. The officer was due to return to their substantive post.
- Further reports be provided to update the committee on the contaminants issue.
- The continuous improvement plan incorporated the 12 areas of improvement identified within the inspection report, to ensure optimum performance was achieved and projects and programmes were being tracked and the recommendations delivered. Progress updates be provided to the committee on a 6 monthly basis on relevant matters that arise as part of the review of the Community Risk Management plan.

Councilor Mather commented as a former on-call firefighter that it was extremely pleasing to see the progress that had been made with availability, staff morale. It was clear the service wanted to improve, be flexible and have better links with the county council and the local community. This was also demonstrated by the willingness of NFRS to respond to major incidents.

It was noted that NFRS were undertaking significantly more than the average number of home fire safety checks and fire safety audits which was to be commended.

The Chair and members thanked the officers and firefighters for the action taken to improve the service over the last few years. The report was positive and informative.

**RESOLVED** that the outcome of the Inspection Report be noted.

### **38.2 Storm Response**

The Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report which provided an update about Northumberland County Council's preparedness and response arrangements for storms. A summary of progress

was also included against the Storm Arwen recommendations made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's task and finish group. (A copy of the report is enclosed with the signed minutes).

Stephen Kennedy, Assistant Chief Fire Officer, confirmed that the Civil Contingencies Team now formed part of the Fire and Rescue Services directorate following a governance review within the council. This would provide added benefits when responding to incidents and provide assurance to the committee going forward.

The progress made with recommendations following the Storm Arwen Review had been realised with improvements when dealing with recent incidents.

Helen Hinds, Business Resilience and Emergency Planning Lead, outlined the report and highlighted:

- With the exception of two recommendations, the majority of the Storm Arwen Task and Finish Group recommendations had been closed, moved to business-as-usual activity or were being dealt with by organisations other than the county council.
- Progress was underway to improve the technological capacity of the West Hartford incident room and a bespoke Incident Management system which was expected to be completed at the end of March with training to be provided for staff that would be using it.
- Arrangements for the provision of water and emergency water supplies had been escalated to the Local Resilience Forum to improve understanding of the risk for all partners.
- The Northumberland Incident Response Plan (NIRP) had been utilised multiple times during recent months with several storms, coastal pollution incidents and a severe premises fire which required use of an evacuation centre. Additional learning and areas for development had been identified with further debriefs arranged following Storm Isha and the Hirst Castle fire.
- Community resilience work had been extremely beneficial with community hubs being stood up with equipment purchased since Storm Arwen. Feedback to the Civil Contingency Team when this occurred was desirable to aid monitoring and provide further support and communication.
- Utility companies were category 2 responders who had a legal duty to work with local authorities. There had been improved response arrangements from partners such as Northern PowerGrid and Scottish Power Energy Networks, proactively providing data on vulnerable residents.
- Community solutions were being sought by teams working jointly within the Council to respond to residents' concerns regarding the removal of analogue and creation of digital telephone lines.

Further information supplied by officers in response to questions included:

- Community resilience work to date had revolved around the identification of assets which were owned and run by the community.

- Communities were able to apply for funds from the Northern PowerGrid Foundation for projects and equipment. 20-25 communities in Northumberland had made successful applications for funds to improve their resilience following Storm Arwen.
- It was intended that community buildings be used as hubs for the delivery of additional resources including information, hot drinks, water supplies etc. This followed international, national and Ready Scotland best practice and enabled statutory services to be prioritised and directed at households who were unable to access facilities at community hubs.
- Copies of the existing Town and Parish Plan template checklist be provided to members of the committee. It was intended that a further hub guide be produced in due course.
- Discussions were ongoing regarding the suitability of the '.gov Notify' push notification service used by fire control to allow mass communication with councillors. The technology and infrastructure were available but further work was required on how mass notifications were managed and controlled to ensure councillors received the right information at the right time. Ideally the messages should allow self-activation or provision of further points of reference in a timely manner before councillors were contacted by residents. Systems also needed to be in place to allow feedback of information, such as blocked roads etc.
- During Storm Arwen, door knocking had initially been carried out by staff from NCC, NFRS, Mountain Rescue and the British Red Cross for vulnerable residents. Due to the length of time some communities were without power, the military undertook blanket door knocks from day 7 as those still without power were all vulnerable in the middle of winter.
- The question of vulnerable residents and the digital switchover was understood to have been discussed in Parliament and standard recommendations had been passed to the communications companies by the Minister in charge. Providers were required to find out if households had a special service connected to their phone line, such as a pendant alarm, to ensure provision was put in place. It was believed that the commercial operators were providing different levels of help and advice to customers and also different levels of notification.
- Technological improvements in the incident room included acquisition of hardware, such as an owl camera to improve visual representation. The Incident Management System was a portal or software which could be accessed via a laptop. It was hoped that the Incident Management System could be utilised by NFRS if suitable, although fire control room had its own system.
- The Northumberland Incident Response Plan (NIRP) had been reviewed by the responsible portfolio holder. That post also held the position of the County Emergency Committee Chair. The NIRP was due to be updated in the summer of 2024 with a similar approval process.
- A training exercise involving members of the County Emergency Committee had not been held in recent months although they had been involved in the real incidents.
- Reorganisation by the BBC of local radio stations had halted work to improve communications during incidents via local radio. This action would be investigated further with the Communications Lead officer.

- It was understood that vulnerable customers had to contact their own communications provider for inclusion on priority customer schemes, such as BT, Virgin, Sky, Alncom etc. Openreach did not hold customer information.
- Checks would be made with utility providers whether registration on customer priority registers had to be renewed on a regular basis. If so, this be included on winter preparedness information.

Members made the following comments:

- The flood warning system used by the Environment Agency was excellent, with simultaneous texts, telephone calls and emails.
- The reference in paragraph 6.2 should refer to PSTN digital switchover.
- Older and rural residents were particularly vulnerable if the traditional copper wire analogue telephone lines were removed and there was a loss of power. There was concern regarding the notification process.
- The digital switchover issue had been discussed by the Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC earlier in the week. Whilst Openreach provided the infrastructure, it was not a consumer facing company and other commercial operators were involved. The Chair suggested that the Members of Parliament in Northumberland be contacted to request that they make representation to the Government to obtain clarity on the PSTN digital switchover to obtain further information regarding the solution to ensure consistent minimum standards across the county if not the country.
- The Director of Digital and IT was arranging for the distribution of awareness raising leaflets which could be given to residents and promoted through the council's various communication channels.
- The Council's role was to raise awareness whilst the Government's role to set standards and resolve the problem.
- The typographical error on page 93 of the agenda papers in the third column, under Contingency Plans be amended to read "Update provided to OSC on 11 January **by** Adult Social Care colleague".
- County councillors could be used to disseminate information to community response hubs in their wards.
- The Town and Parish Conferences be attended by representatives of the Civil Contingencies Team to share good practice on winter preparedness.
- The community in Glendale had obtained funding to employ a rural advocate to consider issues in the rural area. The digital switchover had been repeatedly raised. An event was planned with the Civil Contingencies Team and Glendale Gateway Trust to educate and discuss issues with town and parish councils, community groups and others.
- The Council needed to help raise the profile of community response hubs to raise awareness with residents and also the support available from the council.
- Battery packs were not necessarily the best solution during events as they only lasted a few hours. It was queried whether it would be beneficial for the Council to purchase Starlink wifi/calling equipment to demonstrate the benefits of the system to communities to aid their community led response. It was estimated that Starlink equipment cost approximately £400-500.

Funds could perhaps be sourced from the Northern PowerGrid Foundation.

- The Local Democracy Reporter be utilised as an additional method of disseminating information to improve communication across the county.

Members thanked the Business Resilience and Emergency Planning Lead for her participation in the Storm Arwen Task and Finish Group and for the progress made with the recommendations. The review had been an excellent demonstration of how the scrutiny process worked with all members of the different political groups working well together.

Councillor Gordon Stewart, Portfolio Holder for Looking After Our Communities, expressed his pride in the Civil Contingencies and Fire and Rescue Service officers. He added that Stephen Kennedy had been appointed as Acting Assistant Chief Fire Officer and it was anticipated that this would become his substantive post if approved by Full Council in March.

**RESOLVED** that:

1. The Committee receive the report and agree the closure of 26 actions from the OSC Storm Arwen report.
2. The Committee continue to support the concept of community resilience within Northumberland.
3. The Members of Parliament in Northumberland be contacted to request that they make representation to the Government to obtain clarity on the PSTN digital switchover to ensure a minimum solution and standards.
4. The Council be recommended to purchase Starlink equipment to enable demonstration to local communities and the value of the equipment for a community led emergency response.

### **39. Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee Monitoring Report**

The Committee reviewed its work programme for the 2023/24 council year. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes).

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator confirmed that he regularly contacted portfolio holders and senior officers to ensure that reports were scheduled in a timely matter within the programme.

Arrangements were being made to invite the new leisure provider to a future meeting of the Communities and Place OSC. As the new provider would only be taking over on 1 April 2024, it was unknown at this time whether they would be in a position to attend the committee meeting on 24 April 2024.

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



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

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