

**NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL**

**COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

At a meeting of the **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee** on Wednesday, 12 January 2022 at 2.00 p.m.

**PRESENT**

Councillor J. Reid  
(Chair, in the Chair)

**MEMBERS**

Cartie, E.	Hardy, C.
Castle, G.	Mather, M.
Dodd, R.R.	Morphet, N.
Gallacher, B.	

**CABINET MEMBERS**

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE**

J. Dennitts-Seal	Corporate Complaints Manager
K. Gardner	Interim Senior Service Director – Improvement and Innovation Service
H. Hinds	Business Resilience and Emergency Planning Lead
P. Hunter	Senior Service Director - HR/OD and People Services
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer

Commented [JD1]: Dennitts

**39. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bridgett, Richardson and Wearmouth.

**40. MINUTES**

The Scrutiny Coordinator reported that following the discussion at the previous meeting, reports had been requested on a number of issues, including:

Market Strategy  
Enforcement in 20 mph speed limit areas

Minute 34.1 Active Travel and Road Safety for the Journey to School

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The last sentence at the bottom of page 3 of the minutes be amended to read:

‘Sarah Rowell, Principal Transport Officer informed members that current data showed that 37% of children walked to school with 6% either **cycling** or scooting, with 6% parking away from the school and walking the remainder of the journey.’

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Communities & Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 1 December 2021, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair, subject to the above amendment.

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

The Committee considered the Forward Plan of key decisions (August to November 2021). (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes).

Members agreed that the following item be included within the Committee’s work programme:

Bus Service Improvement Plan/Enhanced Partnership

**RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

#### **42. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORT**

##### **42.1 Complaints Improvement Framework - Update**

The report provided an update on the work being undertaken as part of the Complaints Improvement Framework and subsequent steps for 2022. (A copy of the report is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

Julie Dennitts-Seal, Corporate Complaints Manager and Kelly Gardner, Senior Service Director – Improvement and Innovation Service, presented the report. The Corporate Complaints Manager explained that following a restructure the Complaints section were now included within the Improvement and Innovation Service. This had provided a further opportunity to review the Improvement action plan, the implementation of which had been delayed due to the pandemic and requirement to maintain delivery of frontline services.

She confirmed that policies were in the process of being refreshed. The revised Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Contact Policy had been agreed and would be of benefit both staff and residents whilst consultation was underway on the Corporate Feedback Policy. A new bespoke system was in the process of being procured which would enable comprehensive recording and management of complaints and trend analysis to be able to

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provide more detailed information when requested and enable continuous learning and improvement from the data.

The following issues were discussed:

- The number of complaints recorded had increased during the pandemic but normally increased each year. This was comparable with the national position. The existing system would be able to provide details of numbers. Information was currently being collated on the effect of the pandemic on complaints management and would be included in the next report. The Corporate Complaints Manager was a member of the National Complaints Managers Forum who were working with the Local Ombudsman on trends and the impact of the pandemic. She was also working with the Customer Services team to identify trends and how the Council responded to them.
- There had been a 42% overall increase in the number of complaints. She stressed that reference also need to be made to the number of complaints which were upheld and not upheld and where an individual's expectations had not been met. It was important that the new system was able to provide that analysis and that the Council became proactive, rather than reactive, improving the accessibility of information so that requests for information did not turn into a complaint.
- Social media was an important method of interaction between the Council, Councillors and members of the public. Rules were needed to differentiate between posts on social media and formal requests via email. The Corporate Complaints Manager welcomed free feedback via social media as it was a useful source of information and a tool for the Council to improve what it was doing. Staff needed to be in place to be able to filter that information and analyse trends and how information was shared. The new system would record the method of contact.
- It was noted that it was difficult for elected members who were active on social media to be able to process requests received after the normal business hours. There was also concern regarding the possible impact on an individual's mental health, particularly when things became personal; there should safeguards in place to ensure they were protected.
- A bespoke system was to be acquired for complaints management, but would be linked to customer service case management system for customer contact which would be able to interact, be more secure and provide more detailed information than contact for a service request.
- The Central Feedback Team was separate to the Customer Response Strategy Working Group, which complaints were one element of.
- Actions identified from the Improvement Framework.
- Implications be included under the Equalities section in future reports.
- An annual complaints report was timetabled for September.

**RESOLVED** that the report be received, and the next steps noted.

#### **43. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATOR**

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

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The Committee reviewed its work programme for the 2021/22 council year. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes).

Following the discussion earlier in the meeting regarding inclusion of the Bus Service Improvement Plan/Enhanced Partnership in the work programme, it was noted that some of the items listed for February and March may need to be deferred to April.

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator confirmed that he was liaising with officers for reports on the issues raised at December's meeting.

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

#### **44. URGENT BUSINESS**

The Chair confirmed that he had agreed that a scoping report on the review of the Storm Arwen response be included on the agenda for the meeting as a matter of urgency.

Philp Hunter, Interim Senior Service Director - HR/OD and People Services, introduced the report which set out the suggested scope of the review of the Storm Arwen response; examining the disruption, identifying gaps in policies and plans in the Council, partner organisations and communities to improve resilience to future extreme weather events, should they occur. The report suggested engagement with members of the public, a list of partner organisations and other parties and a proposed a timetable for the review.

Helen Hinds, Business Resilience and Emergency Planning Lead, explained that the role of the Civil Contingencies Team was to ensure that the Council fulfilled its obligations under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. Under the Act, local authorities were defined as Category 1 responders along with the emergency services, Environment Agency and some health organisations and worked with Category 2 responders including utility companies and other bodies.

She provided a brief summary of the meetings that had taken place following receipt of the red weather warning from the Met Office and the meetings of the Local Resilience Forum (LRF), which had included the 6 local authorities within the police force area, Northumbria Police, the Tyne and Wear and Northumberland fire and rescue services, maritime and coast guard agency and voluntary sector agencies. Approximately 30 meetings of the tactical coordinating group had had been held between 26 November and 12 December 2021 as well as 7/8 meetings of the strategic coordinating group.

The following issues were discussed for potential inclusion in the review:

- The timing of the decision to declare a major incident and involvement of the military. It was confirmed that representatives of the military were an

integral part of the Local Resilience Forum and had sat on the tactical coordination meetings.

- Information should be obtained as quickly as possible from the different demographic groups across the county. A dedicated email address be established and use of social media to encourage constructive suggestions of what could have been done better.
- The review should not be construed negatively. A number of Council departments and other organisations needed to be congratulated for their response in difficult circumstances.
- Whether the Council's Emergency Committee should have met.
- Reliance on equipment for connectivity and alternative means of disseminating information to residents who did not have power or access to information on websites, following the storm. This could include use of local radio stations.
- Sharing realistic time frames as residents and communities had been unable to make plans.
- Preparation by communities and residents such as purchasing generators in remote communities for a central location and manual override of equipment.
- A review of trees in terms of safety and planting to provide shelter. It was confirmed that a report on the tree and woodland policy had been requested and would be included within the committee's work programme. It was suggested that this should include Ash die back and the Government's Environmental Land Management Scheme.
- Dissemination of contact names and numbers to elected members of officers on standby as it had been difficult to contact the Council on its main telephone number immediately following the storm.
- Backup systems were needed for care homes, schools and included within planning conditions for new builds.
- Concern regarding the condition of properties following the storm and enforcement or identification of those that could potentially be dangerous.
- Staff provided with training to use equipment in case of emergencies.
- How vulnerable residents were identified, particularly if care was arranged privately.
- What support the County Council could provide to assist town and parish councils with their own emergency response plans.
- Whether feedback should be obtained from care homes, GPs and hospitals and their emergency plan preparation/response.

The Committee considered the list of recommendations:

- The review be concluded in time for a report to be considered by Council in July. Sufficient time was required to collect and review the evidence and the final report should only be brought forward, if this was feasible or perhaps an earlier report on a particular aspect, if thought beneficial.
- A separate email address be established for the review. Residents and communities be encouraged to participate whether it be by written correspondence, by emails sent directly or forwarded on their behalf by elected members. Notification would be sent to county councillors and

town and parish councils of the email address to be used or portal for communication.

- Using the After Disasters Network and researchers at Durham University to work with communities to facilitate conversations and ensure all voices were heard. This could also include questionnaires at community centres or other locations. Members debated whether a survey should be sent to one location. Others felt that if a survey were to be utilised, it should be sent to all homes in Northumberland, or not at all. Consideration be given to an appropriate method to get a representative sample as the difficulties in rural areas were very different to those in urban areas.
- The list of consultees and interviews be finalised when responses were received and categorised, in addition to the partner organisations identified on page 3. It was noted that organisations would be invited but could not be compelled to participate.
- The review committee comprise no more than 8 members. As a task and finish group it did not need to be proportional. It was suggested that it was important to include a Health and Well-Being member and for there to be geographical representation. It was acknowledged that involvement would require a significant commitment by all parties and that any future changes to committee membership would not change the membership of the Review Committee, once established.
- Whether the terms of reference should include other disasters such as flooding or fire. However, it was agreed that focus should remain on the storm as arrangements and procedures were in place for the other issues mentioned and processes could be transferred to other situations. Matters may arise as the evidence was received although it was important that completion of the review not be delayed, and these may need to be considered separately. It was intended that following consideration of the report by Council, the conclusions would be reviewed by the committee at an appropriate point in the future.
- The format of the Review Committee's meetings could be a mixture of remote meetings and in person, depending on what was appropriate for a particular session. There would be added value of some being held face to face.

**RESOLVED** that:

1. The current terms of reference and scope of the review, on pages 2 - 3 of the report, be agreed subject to any changes deemed necessary by the Review Committee.
2. The membership of the Review Committee include:  
Councillors Castle, Dodd, Gallacher, Hardy, Mather, Morphet and Reid.  
Councillor Bridgett be invited to be a member of the Review Committee.
3. The final list of consultees / interviews be agreed when the evidence is reviewed, in addition to those identified on page 3 of the report.
4. Consultation with communities be sought via email, letter, survey via representative sample and use of researchers.
5. The proposed timetable on page 4 of the scoping report, be agreed.
6. The findings of the review be ultimately reported to Full Council.

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

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