

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

SAFER AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a Meeting of **Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held **remotely via Microsoft Teams** on **Monday 1 March 2021** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor D Boyes (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors B Avery, A Bainbridge, A Batey, J Charlton, R Crute, D Hall, C Hampson, S Iveson, B Kellett, L Kennedy, H Liddle, E Mavin, J Stephenson, D Stoker, K Thompson, J Turnbull and C Wilson

Co-opted Employees/Officers:

Chief Fire Officer S Errington

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Mr A J Cooke.

2 Substitute Members

No notification of Substitute Members had been received.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held 4 January 2021 and were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

Councillors B Avery, A Batey, D Stoker and J Turnbull declared an interest in Item 6 - County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority - Community Risk Management Plan 2021-2024 as Members of the County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority.

5 Any items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

There were no items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties.

6 County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority - Community Risk Management Plan 2021-2024

The Chair asked the Chief Fire Officer, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service (CDDFRS) to provide the Committee with an update presentation in relation to the County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority (CDDFRA) Community Risk Management Plan 2021-2024 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Chief Fire Officer thanked the Chair and Members and referred to the presentation slides included in the agenda pack. He explained the Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP) had been presented to Committee over the last few years for comment, now having changed to be the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP). He encouraged Members to complete an individual response to the consultation, ending 23 March, in addition to providing feedback at the meeting. The Chief Fire Officer noted there were four questions set out within the consultation:

1. Do you have any overall comments about our CRMP and approach to allocating our resources?
2. Should we continue to invest and prioritise Fire Safety activities to ensure the built environment within County Durham and Darlington remains safe for occupants and visitors?
3. Should we continue to trial the use and various crewing arrangements of Tactical Response Vehicles (TRVs)?
4. Should we identify opportunities for collaboration with local Fire and Rescue Services and key partners?

The Chair thanked the Chief Fire Officer and asked Members for their comments on each of the questions.

Councillor R Crute, Chair of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board, thanked the Chief Fire Officer for his report and presentation. He noted Members would be aware of the situation in relation to issues such as COVID-19 and working with reduced funding. He added that the uncertainty was also an issue that impacted the Local Authority and noted the Chief Fire Officer would see the same impact from a Fire and Rescue Service perspective. He commended the work of the CDDFRS and asked as regards Safe and Wellbeing Visits (SWVs). He noted that prevention was better than cure and asked if any reduction in terms of the number of visits due to the pandemic had increased risk. He noted he suspected that the visits would be focussed on the most vulnerable and asked what the current position was and how the Fire and Rescue Service planned to catch up on visits to help mitigate that risk.

The Chief Fire Officer noted that it was difficult in terms of working through the SWVs, adding that the visits were a long-term strategy, with visits having been carried out for the past 10-12 years. He reminded Members that following changes to how resources were used, the number of visits had been increased significantly over the last four to five years, with CDDFRS being one of the highest performing Fire and Rescue Services in the country in relation to number of visits per 1,000 population. He explained that, while frontline Firefighters may not have been able to conduct SWVs in person during the pandemic, in order to both protect against passing COVID-19 to vulnerable people and protect staff, there was a small team of Community Risk Officers that had still continued to visit those that were most vulnerable. It was noted such visits were carried out with the appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and procedures in place to mitigate the impact upon the most vulnerable.

The Chief Fire Officer added that from an early stage CDDFRS had adopted telephone SWVs and while the number of SWVs had not been at previous levels, there had still been a few thousand delivered over the period. He explained that there would be a review of SWVs, noting currently that all areas and people are treated similarly. He noted an example being a property in an affluent area with hardwired smoke alarms would still receive a physical SWV. He added that experience during the COVID-19 period had shown that those types of properties potentially could receive a telephone or online SWV as there would be no need to attend the property to fit smoke alarms and therefore it would allow an increase of both types of visit and allow focus for the physical visits to be for those in high risk areas or with some area of vulnerability. The Chief Fire Officer noted there was a lag period associated with the outcomes from such visits and therefore it may be a few years before information would come through. He added that there would be efforts to catch up in terms of SWVs as soon it was safe to do so from a community and Firefighter safety perspective.

The Chair thanked the Chief Fire Officer and recalled the previous work of the Committee in respect of SWVs and noted the respected and trusted nature of the Fire and Rescue Service meant that they were particularly effective in terms of the SWVs and their ability to gather valuable information from residents. The Chair asked for comments relating to the first question from the CRMP consultation.

Councillor K Thompson asked as regards the budget forecast, which set out best, worst, and mid-case scenarios, and what level of inflation had been built in respect of an increase in precept. The Chief Fire Officer noted that all the scenarios assumed an increase in precept up to the maximum amount of two percent, adding that Fire and Rescue Services were held to tight referendum limits and had not had freedom that Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) had in terms of their precept increases. He reiterated that over the life of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) an increase of two percent had been factored in.

The Chief Fire Officer noted it was a difficult decision and the Fire Authority did not take the matter lightly, however, the alternatives could be some significant cuts to frontline resources, impacting on prevention, business fire safety and in the ability to put the same level of resource to respond. He explained that from an inflation perspective, two percent was also factored in across the four years. The Chief Fire Officer noted that such issues were difficult to predict, with some short-term impacts around Brexit relating to capital funds, refurbishment of stations, there being an increase in terms of the cost of steel and insulation materials coming from Europe. He concluded by reiterating the difficulty in predictions, given the continuing uncertainty in respect of COVID-19 and Brexit.

The Chair asked as regards forecasting for the next few years, given the exceptional year as a result of the pandemic. The Chief Fire Officer explained that there were a series of assumptions that were used, an example being the level of Government grant. He explained that for the best case scenario a two percent increase in Government grant had been assumed, for the medium case no increase which had been the case for the current year, and the worst case had assumed a five percent decrease, as had been experienced year on year through the first four years of austerity. He added there were assumptions in respect of council tax and business rates based upon information from Durham County Council and Darlington Borough Council in terms of their assumptions. He explained there were also assumptions relating to pay awards, noting previous zero increases based upon the Government's position in terms public sector pay freezes, with a two percent increase per year being factored in beyond the current year. He concluded by reiterating that as there was a number of assumptions and uncertainties the three best, medium, and worst case scenarios were as set out within the report.

With no further questions from Members, the Chair reminded Members that they could respond individually in addition to the contributing to the response of the Committee. He asked Members as regards the four questions as set out within the CRMP consultation. The Chair noted that the Committee Members supported the CDDFRA in all four of the areas as set out within the CRMP consultation questions. He thanked the Chief Fire Officer and all CDDFRS staff for their hard work especially in the current situation and funding settlements.

Resolved:

- (i) That the report and presentation be noted.
- (ii) That a response containing views of the Committee on the CRMP consultation be submitted to County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority.

7 Draft Safe Durham Partnership Plan 2021-2025 Consultation

The Chair welcomed the Area Manager, Community Risk Management, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service, Keith Wanley in his capacity as the Chair of the Safe Durham Partnership (SDP) Board who was in attendance to provide the Committee with a presentation in relation to the draft Safe Durham Partnership Plan 2021-2025 Consultation (for copy see file of minutes).

The Chair, SDP thanked the Committee and referred to the presentation set out within the agenda papers. He reminded Members that there had been an update to the SDP Plan last year, however, it had been previously agreed to refresh the plan after one year following County Durham Partnership (CDP) reviews and with a need to align with the new 2035 County Vision. He added that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on County Durham, from early 2020, needed to be taken into account within the Plan noting that the response of the SDP to the pandemic had been the subject of a presentation that he had given to Committee at a previous meeting. The Chair, SDP noted that the refresh provided the opportunity to ensure services continued to be delivered effectively and that there was good use of resources to make County Durham a better place to live, work and visit. He noted the new partnership framework, as agreed by the CDP in September 2020, aided in delivery of the County Durham Vision 2035.

The Chair, SDP referred to slides setting out the SDP led objectives within the County Durham Vision 2035, the impact of COVID-19 on areas under the SDP, and the SDP Plan Priorities for 2021-2025. He explained the priorities were:

- Promote being safe and feeling safe in your community
- Support victims and protect vulnerable people from harm
- Prevent: Counter Terrorism, Radicalisation and Violent Extremism
- Reduce reoffending
- Alcohol and substance misuse reduction
- Tackle and prevent cyber enabled crime

The Chair noted in respect of the first priority, there were issues of anti-social behaviour (ASB), road safety and hate crime, with deliberate fires seeming to sit within ASB as opposed to being a separate priority itself.

The Chair, SDP noted that fires were linked to ASB, with primary fires linked to criminal damage and secondary, more nuisance fires took up a lot of resource. He noted that fires were one form of ASB and were recorded with the Performance Indicators within that area. He added that all sub-groups had been reviewed in December 2020 to see which delivery mechanism in terms of ASB would be best. He noted one potential sub-group was the County Durham Together Partnership which would look at a more place-based approach.

He noted the concerns of the Chair given the statistics relating to ASB and fires and explained that his personal view was that, following the review in December and further discussions at the SDP Board in January, that the issues of fires could be managed under ASB. He added that it was something that would need to be kept under review as new delivery mechanisms were put in place. The Chair noted ASB could encompass a wide range of behaviours from throwing a snowball through to much more serious issues and he felt that fires were an issue that seemed sufficiently serious to warrant its own section, not just being within ASB.

Councillor J Charlton noted the increase in figures in relation to hate crime and asked if this was as a result of it being a new definition or whether it was as more people understood how to report such incidents as hate crime. The Strategic Manager (Partnerships), Andrea Petty agreed with Councillor J Charlton in terms of increasing understanding of how to report such incidents and reminded Members of the work with the Police, Crime and Victims' Commissioner's (PCVC) Office on the "Hate Hurts" campaign. She noted that over the next few months work would be undertaken by the Hate Crime Action Group to see if the increase in reporting was as a result of that campaign.

Councillor C Wilson noted issues of ASB in West Auckland and asked as regards any work in the area of the links between animal abuse to child abuse. The Chair, SDP noted he sat on the Safeguarding Adults Board and that information as regards the connection had been sent out last year. He noted it had been circulated within the Fire Service as those entering properties may notice animals being mistreated and there was some correlation to safeguarding. He noted he would speak to the Chair of the Safeguarding Adults Board and the Chair of the Safeguarding Children Board to ask if they can refresh that information.

Councillor K Thompson noted most Members would have some issues in their areas relating to ASB and asked as regards how involved the Police had been in terms of the Council's Selective Licensing scheme as landlord disputes could be a factor in ASB. The Chair noted that issue was outside of the scope of the Committee, however the issue had been noted.

Councillor B Kellett noted the issue of fly-tipping, with used tyres being a particular issue in his area and asked if recycling or reuse for another purpose could be encouraged. The Chair, SDP noted there had been a lot of work carried out with the County Council and the Fire and Rescue Service in respect of fly-tipping and while it had been reported that fly-tipping had reduced it was still a concern. He noted he would speak to his Arson Reduction Manager, who sat on the Fly-tipping Task Force, as regards the issue.

Councillor R Crute asked as regards any emerging or persistent issues associated with ASB and how they would be mapped, noting the issue of off-road vehicles raised at Police and Communities Together (PACT) meetings. He noted the valid point made by Councillor K Thompson in terms of links to ASB with some tenants in the private rented sector and added he hoped the Secretary of State would give approval for selective licensing.

Councillor R Crute noted he agreed with Councillor J Charlton as regards hate crime, however, there were changes in the form of such crime, noting the rise of far-right and fascism. He asked how that was handled and how it linked nationally and internationally. The Chair, SDP noted that in respect of the recording of ASB it could be either to the Council or to the Police with the figure reported being a combined figure. He added he did not have a breakdown of ASB by type to hand. He explained he agreed with the comments in respect of selective licensing, noting he had worked as part of the group when the bid was initially being developed and he too hoped for approval from the Secretary of State.

The Chair, SDP noted that different areas in respect of selective licensing were designated for different reasons, with some being as a result of ASB and he noted this would need to be monitored in terms of impact, however, he felt there would be a positive impact. The Strategic Manager (Partnerships), noted that off-road vehicles were an issue discussed at LMAPS around the County and therefore partners were looking at how to work together to try and resolve the issue. In respect of selective licensing there had been the discussions around the Vision objectives, and she gave assurance it was an area the SDP would be looking at as part of its agenda.

The Chair noted the issues raised by Members and suggested it was important how those issues were articulated within the priorities. He noted issues such as deliberate fires, seeming more serious than simple ASB, selective licensing and off-road vehicles, including issues of uninsured riders and damage to the environment. He suggested it may be useful if those issues were set out more explicitly within the Plan.

In respect of the second priority, Councillor R Crute noted articles in the press as regards "county lines" and the impact of the pandemic nationally, reducing the number of incidents as fewer people were on the street and with public transport was being used much less. He asked whether there was any similar impact on the issue in County Durham. The Chair, SDP noted he did not have the details, with the Strategic Manager (Partnerships) noting that there had been incidents on the outskirts of the county, and it was an issue she could come back to Members on. The Chair noted that with lockdown those transporting drugs and driving would stand out more and perhaps have more chance of being stopped. Councillor L Kennedy noted the work undertaken in her Division and, through their local Neighbourhood Budget, some activity in relation to numberplate recognition which had been funded. Councillor J Stephenson noted she had recently read that the prevalence of such county lines activity, and children being groomed to undertake the activity, had increased during the pandemic. She noted it had been stated that parents were not aware and with children not currently being in school there was a greater opportunity for them to be drawn into such activity. Councillor J Stephenson noted she felt it would be of interest to Members for further information to come back to the Committee.

In respect of the third priority, the Chair noted that as children had not been in school, then the number of referrals via schools would therefore likely have reduced. He noted the example mentioned was far-right terrorism and agreed that would be a more likely scenario than other types of terrorism in County Durham. Councillor R Crute noted the wording of "Prevent counter terrorism" could be confusing. The Chair, SDP agreed, with the Strategic Manager (Partnerships) noting PREVENT was the national programme, countering terrorism.

In relation to the fourth priority, the Chair noted that the Committee had received varying figures in relation to the reducing reoffending rate for children and young people and asked how it was recorded. He noted, as he understood, some other authorities were recording reported crimes with others recording admissions of guilt and added he felt there should be standardised method of recording. The Chair, SDP noted he would refer the matter to Police colleagues and ask for a response for the Committee. Councillor R Crute noted the recent presentation at Committee as regards the Probation Service where Members had received information as regards the changes to the National Probation Service (NPS) and Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs), to effectively renationalise the service and therefore it may take time for figures to feed through and the information may be available when the NPS next attended Committee. He added it was not simply a probation issue, with there being issues in terms of how the criminal justice system was funded, and further information may come from a future meeting with the NPS.

In respect of the fifth priority, Councillor J Charlton asked if the increase in alcohol and drug use during the pandemic period had links to domestic abuse. The Chair, SDP noted the links between alcohol misuse and domestic violence and added that alcohol misuse was an issue that was cross-cutting with many of the priority areas. He noted he did not have a breakdown to hand, with the Strategic Manager (Partnerships) noting that it would be possible to speak to colleagues within the Police and come back to Members with further information.

Councillor J Turnbull noted the issue of illegal drug use appeared to be increasing, with use of taxis to cross into the county, and with an increase in use drug paraphernalia being left lying around. He noted repeated reporting of properties involved in drugs, adding that when nothing appeared to happen, members of the community would become disillusioned. He added there needed to be a greater clampdown on such drug use as there was a significant impact on young children by those using drugs and leaving needles lying around. The Chair, SDP noted he would take the issue back to the Board to see what actions were being taken in that regard.

The Chair noted the reduction in drug poisoning and misuse deaths and queried if there was a link to any reduction in county lines activity. He added that the reduction in Public Health funding was a concern as they had been instrumental in helping people to successfully complete drug and alcohol treatment. He noted that recent budget reports had reassured Members in terms of allocation to Public Health and drug and alcohol services, an area he felt was vital in both terms of health and crime issues.

In relation to the sixth priority, the Chair noted the Vice-Chair, Councillor H Liddle had chaired a working group looking at the issue of cybercrime. Councillor J Stephenson asked if the current work included combating telephone scams as well as online fraud, with many older vulnerable residents were being targeted via telephone, especially during the pandemic. The Chair, SDP noted he would check if the work included telephone fraud. The Strategic Manager (Partnerships) noted that work undertaken by the SDP and the Safeguarding Adults Board was not specific to telephones, however, she understood some work of the Safeguarding Adults Board had included the issue of fraud, including telephone fraud, in particular those targeting elderly residents.

Councillor K Thompson asked for clarification in terms of “Work with the voluntary and community sector to identify means of communicating digital hygiene...”. The Strategic Manager (Partnerships) noted it may need to be set out clearer, however, it referred to issues such as keeping passwords and PINs safe and secure, and raising awareness of those issues with vulnerable groups.

The Chair noted that Members had commented on the SDP Priorities throughout the presentation and that Officers would have made note of those comments. The Chair, SDP noted that the consultation had taken place and had tried to encompass a wide range of groups, including the Youth Council which had shown a great improvement in the increased number of responses from that age group. He noted the responses from Members along with those from the other groups would be included and the finalised Plan would be considered by the SDP Board on 10 March 2021. He thanked the Chair and Members for the opportunity to bring the draft Plan to Committee and reiterated the comments had been noted.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Jonathan Slee noted he would collate the comments from the Committee and agree the response to the SDP with the Chair, to be circulated to the Committee in due course. The Chair thanked the Overview and Scrutiny Officer and added that the opportunity for Members to provide input into the Plan was one of the highlights of the Committee. He also thanked the Chair, SDP and the Strategic Manager (Partnerships) for their presentation, and Members for their contributions.

Resolved:

That the comments of the Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the draft Safe Durham Partnership Plan 2021-2025 be collated and fed back to the Partnership.

8 Refresh of the Work Programme 2021/22

The Chairman asked the Overview and Scrutiny Officer to speak to Members in relation to the refresh of the Work Programme 2021/22 for the Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee (for copy see file of minutes).

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer explained that the report highlighted work that had been undertaken by the Committee within the past year and also looked forward to the forthcoming year. Members were reminded that the aims and objectives were aligned to those of the Council Plan and associated plans, as well as the Safe Durham Partnership Plan priority areas. It was explained that the report set out the use of remote meetings and the prioritisation of issues as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer noted Members could also suggest possible areas that Committee could consider, with a further report to come back to Committee at its first meeting in the 2021/22 municipal year.

Councillor R Crute noted Members could respond to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer as regards issues, with a further report to come back to the new Committee following the election in May. He added that an issue he felt was important and noted feedback from Councillors from AAP and PACT meetings was that of ASB with off-road vehicles on public open space and footpaths. He noted the issue could be complex, given the differing geography of the county, containing both rural and urban areas, as well countryside and coastal areas. He noted a key issue was public safety, adding that through the pandemic people had been encouraged to go for walks outdoors meaning more chance of coming across such ASB. Councillor R Crute noted the issue involved a number of partners and that any timescales in terms of activity would not be finalised until around June or July. He noted the number of meetings the Committee may have in the next municipal year would have to be taken into account when looking at the work programme, as would the way in which meetings took place, the Committee currently holding remote meetings with the current guidance relating to remote meetings expiring the first week of May.

The Chair noted the topic of ASB linked to off-road vehicles had merited a lot of discussion, adding that if Members had any issues they wished to be included they should get in touch with the Overview and Scrutiny Officer. The Overview and Scrutiny Officer noted he would speak to service and partnership leads to explore the area, further to the briefing note that had been circulated to the Committee on the issue.

Resolved:

- (i) That the Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the information contained in the Altogether Safer priority theme of the Council Plan 2020 -2023.
- (ii) That the Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its June meeting receive a further report detailing the Committee's Work Programme for 2021 -2022.