

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

SAFER AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a Meeting of **Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Thursday 4 November 2021** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor J Charlton (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors V Andrews, P Atkinson, J Cairns, S Deinali, L Fenwick, C Hampson, P Heaviside, C Lines, M McGaun, D McKenna, C Martin, E Mavin, D Oliver, J Quinn, A Simpson, D Sutton-Lloyd and M Wilson

Co-opted Members:

Mr D Balls

Co-opted Employees/Officers:

Chief Superintendent A Green

Apologies:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D Nicholls and Mr A J Cooke

Prior to the commencement of the meeting the Chair reported with regret the passing of Councillor Brian Avery, Vice Chair of the Committee. Members gave a moments reflection out of respect to Councillor Avery.

The Chair informed the Committee that she would be leaving during the meeting and it was resolved that Councillor C Lines would chair the meeting in her absence.

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Nicholls.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members in attendance.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held 9 September 2021 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer informed the Committee that information on Safe Durham Partnership Structure, flyposting and substance misuse had been shared with Members. In addition, Members were advised that following the agenda item on the Youth Justice Service, comments from the Committee had been shared with the Service, Durham Constabulary and Safe Durham Partnership and arrangements had also been made for an informal briefing session on anti-social behaviour.

4 Declarations of Interest, if any

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Any items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

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

6 Arson and Deliberate Firesetting

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided supporting information to a presentation to provide an overview on the approach and future actions to tackle arson within County Durham (for copies see file of minutes).

Keith Wanley, Area Manager, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service (CDDFRS) gave a presentation which provided local and national data relating to primary/vehicle/secondary fires which was further broken down into areas of County Durham.

The data showed that County Durham and Darlington had the highest rate of deliberate primary fires in the country and there were more fires the north of the County than in the south. Members were informed that this seemed to be a cultural issue in certain localities where people were more likely to fly tip, set fires and set fires to property, vehicles and buildings. The Safe Durham Partnership agreed to form an arson suppression group, which had six thematic groups to focus on specific areas.

Although Durham had the highest level, this was also a regional issue within the North East of England with high levels of incidence in Cleveland, Northumberland and Tyne and Wear. Members were also advised that Fire and Rescue Services in the areas of Yorkshire and Humberside were also experiencing similar concerns.

With regards to primary fires, they were predominantly vehicle related and more prevalent in east coast with some links to organised crime. Members were informed that known long term issues in Horden were being addressed by a multi-agency group, Horden Together, to understand local concerns and hopefully improve the situation. The Area Manager advised the Committee that, it was found to be

culturally acceptable to start fires in some areas, therefore educating children and young people was crucial.

A multi-agency fly tipping task force had also been set up to combat fly tipping, there was also a Fire Stoppers telephone line that was freephone number for people to report incidents anonymously and extremely valuable to gather intelligence to understand and address the problem. Members were also advised that a research work by Psychologist, Dr Fay Horsley from Newcastle University, had been commissioned to understand the cause of this behaviour.

The Area Manager, CDDFRS asked the Committee to use their platform to promote and assist with the work being undertaken.

Councillor Martin was disappointed that County Durham was the worst in the country, but the data also gave the impression that no progress being made. He asked what was causing the lack of ability to make improvements, whether the Council were doing enough to support CDDFRS and if there was anything more they could do.

The Area Manager, CDDFRS confirmed that the Council were supportive and represented in the multi-agency groups that were working to combat these problems and he understood the pressures that organisations had, especially during times of reduced budgets, but this needed to be a priority. He referred to the figures across the last four years and advised that there had been some reductions locally and nationally, reducing the number of fires, however other areas had also reduced and County Durham remained the highest. Some areas had made better progress so there was a lot more work to do to make significant progress.

Councillor Quinn asked for details on how statistics were recorded and he wondered whether the size of County Durham compared to other areas, would explain some of the data. The Area Manager, CDDFRS advised that the data was broken down into station areas and the west of county, which was predominantly rural had lower rates and risk, which were factored in. With regards to national benchmarking, the data was normalised by calculating the number of fires per hundred thousand of population. This allowed comparisons with Tyne and Wear which was geographically a much smaller area but higher population.

Councillor Quinn asked whether COVID-19 had impacted on the figures and the Area Manager, CDDFRS advised that there had been a slight reduction of outside fires during lockdown but an increase in false alarms. Controlled burning in allotments had increased and moving out of the first lockdown, there had been a spike of reported incidents.

Councillor Fenwick made a statement with regards to the north and south divide and noted that the rate was double in some areas in the North East. The main problem, in her opinion, was inequality and lack of jobs and investment in the east of county. Opportunities and resources had been taken away from younger people and this was reflected in their hopes and ambitions. Councillor Fenwick confirmed that children should be doing productive activities within supervised settings instead

of being exposed to organised crime gangs that used arson as a tactic in disputes between gangs. She added that in the absence of education and positive services, young people would learn from the community and environment around them, which was that arson was an acceptable means of resolving disputes.

Councillor Fenwick advised that the Council, Fire Authority and Police Service, needed to work together to highlight and resolve the underlying problems. She was interested to know what services were being provided in areas with high levels of antisocial behaviour, arson and crime. The Area Manager, CDDFRS, advised that arson was linked to many other areas such as social deprivation and inequalities. The work commissioned by Dr Horsley was trying to address what it was that caused this issue as the North East was higher overall, but the same issue was prevalent in Yorkshire, South Yorkshire and Humberside. The complexity was such that it was linked to longevity of life, health and lifestyles, opportunity, low education and attainment. Significant work was done with school children and had led to some of the positive reduction. He referred to research by Dr Horsley which had confirmed that fire was used all over the world but for different reasons. In the northern hemisphere, it's main use was for entertainment whereas in the southern hemisphere it was used in a more natural state, for cooking on stoves. When children grew up with it in its natural state, they saw it as a part of normal life and did not have the fascination that many children growing up in this part of the world had. Children understood the dangers of fire, however it was essential to get them to grow up and not have the fascination.

Specific work had been done within schools which had pupils who had been linked to fire setting. There was Phoenix Fire Champions and FLAME which was a referral process for individuals.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd noted that figures may be skewed with regards to COVID-19 and there had been lot more fly tipping in the previous year. He was interested in the psychological data that had been commissioned and asked how long it would be until the Committee would receive the data. The Area Manager, CDDFRS advised that an initial report had been received and he would present the findings to Committee if required. Councillor Sutton-Lloyd responded that there needed to be a joint approach and targeting psychological factors was extremely important.

Councillor Mckenna referred to the number of arson attacks in East Durham on vehicles. These acts of revenge sent massive shockwaves through communities and he queried whether assailants were being caught and convicted. He queried the response of the police to deliberate fires and asked whether they were deployed straight away. The Area Manager, CDDFRS advised that vehicle fires were a key issue within the primary fire group, of which some were linked to crime and family feuds, but some malicious. CDDFRS worked closely with police and other agencies to address these incidents. If a vehicle was completely burnt out there was very little forensic investigation that could be gained and therefore vehicles were prioritised and a joint investigation carried out. If a fire crew could stop a fire before the vehicle was completely burnt out, evidence would be gathered in order to prosecute.

Chief Superintendent Adrian Green, advised that Police Officers were deployed if a crime was committed and in non-criminal incidents where roads were blocked and there was a risk to life. The issue of backyards full of rubbish and waste in back allies was an investment issue and a community issue that would be more difficult long term to address.

Councillor McKenna referred to an arson attack on a vehicle had occurred in County Durham and the fire service had arrived at 3am but police had not arrived until 11am. He suggested that if police were deployed at the same time as the fire service they may have found evidence to lead to a prosecution.

The Chair referred to the appeal for Councillors to do their bit and referred to her own division which had suffered a spate of bin fires a number of years prior, around old peoples bungalows. Bin locks had been purchased through funding from Councillors and she asked if asking Councillors to consider funding through Neighbourhood Budgets would be helpful to assist in supporting the fire service.

The Area Manager, CDDFRS advised that it could work in some areas however some residents did not want to use bin locks as they believed it hindered them from putting out their rubbish. There were two types, one which prevented the bin from being moved and one that prevented the bin from being opened. There had been occasions where bins had been dragged towards properties and used to ignite so there were benefits for both but could roll out into areas, worked with collection services, worked to ensure types of locks fitted didn't hinder that.

With regards to changing culture, Councillor Lines referred to the importance of school education and asked whether the campaigns which had been referred to were multi agency and which organisation was leading them. The Area Manager, CDDFRS confirmed that some were delivered by the fire service, some by police, but wherever possible they worked together.

Councillor Lines asked if information was shared with the Council so that they could be promoted and the Area Manager, CDDFRS advised that one of the benefits of the arson suppression group was the sharing of information. The data shared today was fire data but there was a lot of other data shared with regards to antisocial behaviour, bin collections, school education statistics and by considering the data together, they were able to work towards reducing the statistics. He advised that there would be a presentation shared at later date with regards to the work of the arson suppression group.

Councillor Heaviside presented feedback as there had been bin fires in his area the previous weekend and after the bins were emptied, there had been large bonfires every evening. After contacting the wardens, police and housing provider, out of hours patrols had led to young people being returned home. The evening prior to the meeting had resulted in zero 101 calls. The housing provider had also advised that if perpetrators were identified, warnings would be issued on their home tenancies. This concluded that a multi agency approach did work and prevented this type of behaviour.

Councillor Deinali referred to a number of contributing factors listed in the report and asked whether other cross cutting Committees could be notified of this item in order for the County Council to assist where there were specific issues such as social housing and the economy.

Resolved

That the report and presentation be noted.

7 Overview of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and Whole System Approach to Domestic Abuse

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Public Health which provided an overview of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and outlined key implications for the local authority and its partners (for copy see file of minutes).

Jane Sunter, Public Health Strategic Manager, presented the report advising Members of the responsibility of a Tier 1 Local Authority who required the following;

- Domestic Abuse Local Partnership
- Overarching Domestic Abuse Strategy
- System Needs Assessment
- Safe Accommodation Strategy
- Accommodation Needs Assessment
- Co-operation with Tier 2 LA
- Report Annually to government

The Public Health Strategic Manager advised Members of the Councils statutory duties and the Needs Assessment/Draft Strategy would be available for consultation in January 2022 as well as the Safe Accommodation Strategy.

There were several groups and vulnerabilities that were being underreported, such as family abuse, older people and those with disabilities, people in rural areas and the LGBT+ population. Data showed that there was a higher number of female victims but this was an area that tended to be underreported. With regards to the more vulnerable groups, 28% of the population who were registered as Transgender but the Council were not aware of the number in County Durham.

The Public Health Strategic Manager advised there were a significant number of children and young people who had experienced abuse as a child and were likely to go on to be a perpetrator of abuse when they were adults. The budget prioritisation process had led the service to increase investment in children and young people prevention agenda and specialist support, and to increase the workforce development.

With regards to referrals into specialist services, Members were advised that there had been an increase in accessing specialist services but rather than be assumed as rising incidents, it could be due to the work undertaken to encourage victims to access services. An influx had been expected during the pandemic, but this did not

happen, so a campaign with Harbour had encouraged people to use the service and enabled them to make contact discreetly. At one point there were 200 refuge referrals per week. These referrals did not all require specialist services, some were for advice only.

The Chair left meeting 10.30 am and did not return. Councillor Lines Chaired the meeting from this point.

Councillor Quinn commented on a perception that domestic violence only occurred with women and children and asked whether there were any plans to target groups such as men and transgender. The Public Health Strategic Manager advised that the Health Needs Assessment would include further data relating to this area. Funding had been secured for a Domestic Abuse Coordinator and Workforce Development Lead who would work within the wider system workforce and liaise with Police, Social Care, Children and Young People's, and the Drug and Alcohol Service. This role would be responsible for raising awareness and integrating the approach to domestic abuse, which would be based within the strategy going forward. Councillor Lines added that mental abuse was not considered abuse by some people and these were groups that may particularly suffer from this type of abuse.

Councillor Atkinson was concerned by the underreported incidents of domestic abuse, which he noted was common across other areas in the Council. He asked what action was needed to address this. The Public Health Strategic Manager advised that the strategy would include information to expand the knowledge base on what domestic abuse was and include communication on awareness, with victims and perpetrators. Raising awareness within the wider population and the use of alcohol and its impact on domestic abuse would also be a key priority.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd had been shocked that his area suffered from a high amount of domestic violence he believed that many people had changed their outlook post COVID-19 which could have contributed to some people the getting help they needed. As Councillors, the Committee should give as much support towards the strategy.

In response to a question from Councillor Mavin regarding the availability of Safe Accommodation in Durham, the Public Health Strategic Manager advised that at the time of the meeting the demand exceeded availability, however this would be addressed by reconfiguring and reallocating funding. In addition to dispersal properties, the Domestic Abuse Act did not emphasise the victim leaving the home but rather the perpetrator, and there was a sanctuary scheme to protect the victim and enable them to continue to live in their home. The Council needed to ensure they had enough properties for the moving on accommodation, used by woman and children who needed to go into hostel. The assessment would be ready by January and include information relating to safe accommodation.

Councillor Quinn acknowledged that there was a lot of support available for victims however he queried whether there was any support or education for perpetrators. He highlighted that abuse was part of cycle and those who had been abused were

more likely to become a perpetrator, but in some cases a perpetrator may not realise they were being abusive. There were some individuals who would genuinely want to change their behaviour.

Councillor Simpson left the meeting at this point and did not return.

The Public Health Strategic Manager agreed that this behaviour did tend to be embedded due to peoples lived in experiences and advised that funding had been issued to Harbour who offered a perpetrator course to try and change that behaviour.

Resolved

- 1) That the report be noted.
- 2) Acknowledge the statutory requirements placed on the local authority and its partners.

8 Quarter One, 2021/22 Performance Management Report

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which presented an overview of progress towards achieving the key outcomes of the council's corporate performance framework and highlighted key messages to inform strategic priorities and work programmes (for copy see file of minutes).

The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager advised that crime had decreased from the previous year by 6% which was mainly down to a reduction in theft and vehicle crime due to a lack of opportunity during lockdown. Antisocial behaviour had increased and police reported data was due to new categorised incidents, such as illegal gatherings and house gatherings, which did not exist in previous years. The Council reported antisocial behaviour was for noise, litter and burning of waste.

There had been increases in flytipping which had decreased during the pandemic but was back to pre-pandemic levels. Referrals to children social care had increased as most of the referrals came from school. Domestic abuse referrals had increased due to the reopening of pubs and sadly related to alcohol consumption.

The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager advised that the Supporting Families Programme which had started in 2015 had set a target for the year of 761 positive outcomes, of which had been achieved already by 372 families.

The issue of nuisance motorcycles and quadbikes had come up and was being considered by the Safe Durham Partnership – it was on both their work programme and the work programme for this Committee.

The previous Committee had talked about water safety and a petition had been for water safety to be included in school curriculums had been debated in parliament.

Resolved

That the report be noted.