

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 **Committee Room 1A/1B, County Hall, Durham** on **Thursday 7 September 2023** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor P Heaviside (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Charlton, V Andrews, D Boyes, R Crute, M Currah, L Fenwick, D McKenna, E Mavin, J Miller, R Potts, J Quinn, D Sutton-Lloyd, O Gunn (substitute for C Hampson) and L Brown (substitute for A Simpson)

Co-opted Members:

Mr D Balls

Co-opted Employees/Officers:

Chief Fire Officer S Helps

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P Atkinson, C Hampson, C Lines, L Maddison, D Nicholls and A Simpson.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor L Brown as substitute Member for Councillor A Simpson and Councillor O Gunn as substitute for Councillor C Hampson.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 June 2023 were confirmed but the Committee as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

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 Civil Contingency Planning and Storm Arwen Review

The Committee considered a report of the Report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided an update on the progress with the Storm Arwen improvement plan (for copy see file of minutes).

The Head of Partnerships and Community Engagement and the Civil Contingencies Officer gave a presentation to the committee on the significant work that had been carried out following Storm Arwen that had left 15,000 properties without power. They gave a summary as to the key actions that had been identified, what progress had been made to date and how the community resilience plans had been developed to create community preparedness to manage a crisis in the future. The Civil Contingencies Officer advised that there were contingency grants available from NPG (National Powergrid) and Durham County Council (DCC) for communities to buy items for an emergency.

Councillor Boyes expressed concern at how the Council had fallen short during Storm Arwen. His division had been severely affected and had experienced little to no communications from either NPG or DCC to offer advice and support. The community had set up resources and support from the Welfare Hall but many elderly vulnerable residents had been left without power for nearly two weeks and were too scared to leave their homes for fear they would be burgled. He was interested to know how vulnerable residents were identified to allocate resources.

The Head of Partnerships and Community Engagement responded that improvements had been made to increase the amount of information available to organisations about vulnerable people. DCC were looking to be involved in a government pilot project called VIPER set up in Cumbria in 2022. Viper was a digital tool that searched multi-partner data sources to allow the rapid identification of vulnerable households during a crisis. Cumbria County Council had recently secured funding to roll the project out to more local authorities. Reflection was essential on how to get information and how to disseminate it to team leaders to act up. There was a reliance on the media and the BBC to relay information for communities but if they were without power there was a current initiative to provide wind up radios to community centres who completed a community support training session. Other ways would be to publicise information on notice boards in community centres and encourage residents to support vulnerable people in the area.

Councillor Boyes wanted to know if the Fire Service had been consulted with regarding vulnerable people and if they collected data when they visited people's homes.

Chief Fire Officer S Helps stated that it had been a joint effort in collating information with several services involved including DCC, NPG, Police, Fire Service and Army. There was a need to strengthen communications with datasets being held jointly as there had been issues with sharing information in the past. It was unfortunate that there would be occasions when individuals not known to any organisation would be missed. Every effort was being made to reduce this. The Local Resilience Forum was a good point of contact for information and the Cumbria VIPER Project would be very beneficial both locally and regionally.

Councillor Mavin mentioned that as a Parish Councillor his Parish Council had completed the community resilience plan exercise that explained what to do in an emergency. As a Parish Councillor he felt that it would be good if all Parish Councils completed the community resilience plans and worked together. He felt he could offer advice to other Parish Councils on the process. He requested information on other groups within the area that had completed plans and queried who the main contact was for the emergency grants available from the Council.

The Civil Contingencies Officer agreed to send Councillor Mavin the relevant information on the groups and informed the committee that she was the contact for the grants available from the Council. She advised that details of the grant from NPG was available on their website.

Councillor Gunn told the committee that her division was affected by Storm Malik. She was unsure if the Town and Parish Councils in her area had produced community resilience plans as they were not shown on the list presented by Officers. She agreed to promote this work in her area and asked how best to go about encouraging groups to be involved. She questioned whether the Youth Council had been engaged to involve young people as they always wanted to be involved in any community led work and what was being done in the Council.

The Civil Contingencies Officer offered her services to help Town and Parish Councils in Councillor Gunn's division to complete a community resilience plan. She explained that she had not specifically liaised with the Youth Council as involving them in this work would be difficult due to liability and insurance issues. She confirmed that she had been in contact with young people through the Scout and Girl Guide groups offering advice and support. She supported the suggestion and would investigate engaging with the Young Council in the future as young people were an important part of the community.

The Head of Partnerships and Community Engagement declared going forward that analysis would be carried out to establish if there were significant geographic gaps in community plan coverage. There were some parts of the County that did not have Town and Parish Councils so community groups would be encouraged to complete community resilience plans. Locations would be analysed to ensure the broad County was covered as it appeared that there was engagement in the West of the County but very little engagement in the East. He felt the best advocates were those who had completed the community resilience plans to champion the process to encourage those who hadn't completed one to participate.

Councillor Miller was happy that communication was to be reviewed as he considered that a major failure during Storm Arwen. His division had suffered during the storm and he had received no communication from the council on where to get help. Although not a criticism he as a Councillor could not get any information internally so it would have been twice as hard for anyone external to the council to get any information.

The Head of Partnerships and Community Engagement responded to Councillor Miller that he would provide a list of what the emergency packs contained and how much they cost so the Parish Councils could potentially replicate them.

Councillor Charlton suggested that it would not be a mammoth task to involve Officers from each AAP within the Council to be included in disseminating vital information in an emergency to local Councillors to keep them updated. She had also experienced the lack of information given to her as a Councillor and she had struggled to know where to go for help. She also wanted to know if there were any perishable items in the emergency packs and what happened to these items when they were near their sell by dates. She queried whether these items could be given to food banks if not used in time.

The Civil Contingencies Officer stated that the emergency packs contained tinned food and the sell by dates were checked on a regular basis. The Head of Partnerships and Community Engagement was unsure what the process was when items ran out of date as all items purchased so far were still in date. He agreed to consider the proposal to allocate goods approaching their use by date to food banks.

Councillor McKenna queried if the Council deployed generators as he had found there had been a slow response to generators being delivered to care homes without power.

The Head of Partnerships and Community Engagement advised that telephone lines had been improved to allow people to contact NPG who had increased the number of generators they had. NPG did target vulnerable people on their data base as a priority and as a rule tried to get power on in these areas as a matter of urgency.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd felt that it was terrible when there was an emergency that hit the whole of the County but as a local Councillor communication was vital as they were the links with the community. He also thought that AAP Officers should be used as a communication tool to get information out to local Councillors. Local Councillors were best placed to find out what was going on in their areas through talking to local groups or talking to people whilst out walking. At present the structure was not joined up and robust communications was key with one main person acting as the point of contact to coordinate responses to the relevant services for action. He suggested that regular updates should be brought to this committee, AAP meetings and full council.

Councillor Andrews remarked that post Storm Arwen the Community Centre in her area had accessed grants to install solar panels following advice from DCC Officers. This had not only made them more resilient in a crisis but had saved them money on their energy bills that had then been used to finance a disability ramp.

Councillor Potts expressed his experience of difficulties in contacting officers during Storm Arwen. He recognised that Councillors should be provided with training and emergency packs along with a list of contacts to call in a crisis. He commented that he had been reduced to driving to Barnard Castle to buy food for residents. He had requested a credit card to make the process easier but received no response. He had been disappointed with contradictory information circulated by NPG and DCC stating when power would be restored to areas when he knew this to be impossible as he had witnessed power lines down that would take time to repair.

The Head of Partnerships and Community Engagement informed the committee that emergency training had been arranged for all Councillors last year. He stated that these could be re-run if required. He declared that there was a council grant programme for communities to create emergency plans to utilise to buy emergency items to support their community plans. He responded that Officers providing information on when power would be restored were reliant on data on NPG's website. NPG had now improved their system and they generally tried to provide more accurate restoration information.

Councillor Mavin reiterated that the community resilience plans contained all relevant information including key contact numbers and identified one main key person to collate information to ring into emergency services.

Councillor Boyes requested a written response to members relating to the questions discussed within the meeting. He asked for this to be circulated in good time due to the seriousness of the topic.

Councillor Gunn suggested that briefings and training sessions should be held for members with regular updates. She recognised that not all members could attend training but acknowledged that communication with members was required on a consistent basis.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer advised that responses to questions would be covered in the minutes but any remaining questions requiring a response or clarification would be circulated to members.

Resolved:

- i) That the contents of the report be noted.
- ii) That the Committee receive a written response to any outstanding queries from the meeting.

Councillor Crute left the meeting at 10.27am

7 Open Water Safety

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth that provided information on action taken by DCC and its partners in relation to open water safety (for copy see file of minutes).

The Corporate Health & Safety Compliance Manager gave a presentation as an update to Members on Open Water Safety that provided national statistics relating to groups that were at risk of getting into trouble in open water.

Councillor Fenwick commented that the statistics were worrying that showed nationally that children from deprived backgrounds and children from black ethnic backgrounds were more likely to get into trouble in the water. She asked the Committee if work could be carried out to reach out to these families to offer support to try to prevent these accidents from happening. She was unsure if this was down to a lack of swimming lessons available to vulnerable families.

The Corporate Health and Safety Compliance Manager responded that an education programme had been developed and was delivered in schools that helped to target vulnerable groups and educate children on water safety. He did feel that further work was required around groups that were at risk and he would look to see how he could influence it. He added looking at the national statistics compiled by the University of Bristol not all applied to Durham.

Upon analysing the tables within the report Mr D Balls observed that it appeared that initiatives rolled out in Durham City had worked well but those initiatives rolled out elsewhere in the County had not. He queried whether the Durham City initiatives could be replicated across the County to reduce fatalities and whether the placement of resources had an impact.

The Corporate Health and Safety Compliance Manager explained that the circumstances in Durham City were unique. The two safety groups ran programmes in schools that helped to target groups at risk. The main challenge in rural areas was how to manage mental health when it led to suicide attempts. He explained that social factors such as the cost of living crisis and post pandemic factors may have had a negative impact on public mental health and increased the risk of suicide related incidents across the county, which is supported by statistics nationally. He noted that the Council, via public health had a recent peer reviewed suicide prevention policy and a multi-agency suicide prevention alliance which aimed to identify and target suicide related risks.

He provided an example of infrastructure works that were being undertaken at Newton Cap viaduct to prevent suicide related incidents. He did not feel the distribution of resources was a factor in initiatives being less successful in rural areas as it was the situations that could not be controlled being the issue.

Mr D Balls suggested that further detail could be included alongside the figures in the report to gain a better understanding of what they reflected.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd stressed that caution should be exercised when looking at statistics as they were not clear cut and potentially the wrong conclusion could be deduced.

Councillor Currah emphasised that water safety was crucial as his neighbour's child had died in open water. He had seen that young people posted pictures on social media swimming in places they shouldn't and jumping into cold water in quarries putting themselves into dangerous situations. He mentioned that a business had set up at Stanhope quarry that provided water sports. He queried whether other sites could be opened for wild swimming days perhaps on the first weekend of the month for supervised swims in a controlled way.

The Corporate Health and Safety Compliance Manager suggested that this would be a challenge as although the Council worked with Northumbrian Water their approach was that there should be no swimming. The National Open Water Swimming Associations had stated people should be allowed to swim but do it as an informed choice that used safe behaviours and actions. It was difficult to get the balance right.

Councillor Gunn seconded Councillor Fenwick's comments that the statistics were shocking that young people from minority backgrounds were twice as likely to get into trouble in the water. She suggested that the subject of open water safety should be considered in other scrutiny committees to promote as young people did not choose their heritage that could potentially put them in danger.

There was a need to look at national statistics and see how they impacted on communities in Durham. She commented that she had worked with Fiona Gosling who had lost her son Cameron in open water. Fiona did brilliant work in schools to educate children on the dangers of open water. She felt that education was the key and suggested inviting the Director of Public Health to attend a meeting to discuss further.

The Corporate Health and Safety Compliance Manager recognised that the research did try to pinpoint at risk groups demographically that included children from certain backgrounds and males who were more at risk. There was a necessity to make smarter channels for information available to educate and raise awareness within these groups and identify clear steps to go forward.

Councillor Charlton expressed concern on the timing of open water safety education in schools as climate change had altered seasons with warmer weather sometimes coming early or later in the year than anticipated. She queried when education was delivered in schools and if there were plans to show the video that had been created.

The Corporate Health and Safety Compliance Manager acknowledged that the climate was changing and that created challenges. He confirmed that education programmes were delivered in schools normally through June and July with some planned delivery in April and May if there was warmer weather forecast. Statistically it was best to deliver in May and June every year or show the video several times but some schools found it difficult to carry out these programmes more than once in their assemblies. He responded to Councillor Charlton that the education programme hit all schools including primary and secondary and the 'dying to be cool' campaign was only shown to secondary schools with a softer message given to primary school children.

Councillor Boyes explained that the safety group in Durham City was established in 2014 after a fourth fatality (three students and one suicide). A site visit had taken place with Members to pinpoint dangerous areas and arrangements were quickly made to erect barriers where required. This had successfully reduced the numbers of fatalities however even when barriers were erected it was difficult to prevent a suicide if someone was determined to kill themselves.

Councillor Miller queried if the initiatives in Durham City could be replicated across the County. He enquired whether just one safety group was adequate for the County and if there were localised hotspots given the numbers.

The Corporate Health and Safety Compliance Manager verified that it was difficult to replicate what was initiated in Durham City across the County as different risks were present and different types of education awareness was required in each area. Within Durham City the Council liaised with licence holders, retailers, door staff and the university that could not be replicated elsewhere.

There were differences in types of fatalities, circumstances and backgrounds between Durham City and other areas in County Durham. He gave an example of a male being found in the River Wear who was from Ashington but it was unclear as to where he had entered the river. People intent on suicide tended to jump from structures into open water where no initiative could predict or resolve.

The Corporate Health and Safety Compliance Manager also emphasised that there were new challenges being faced by Public Health around Mental Health that focused on prevention plans. There were no hot spots identified as areas where people got into trouble were sporadic. He emphasised that one safety group was sufficient but if hot spots and trends were identified a group would be convened to address the issues but this was not required at present.

Chief Fire Officer S Helps put into context that someone was twice as likely to drown than die in a house fire. There were three main categories of deaths by drowning i) young children playing in open water, ii) young adult males drinking alcohol near open water and iii) suicides. The Fire and Rescue Service did assess situations but they have no statutory duty to respond to floods even though all staff were highly trained. He recognised that work had gone into cleaning up rivers and water ways that encouraged people to go swimming and paddle boarding in open water but education facilities were needed in or near these places.

Resolved:

That the contents of the report be noted.

8 Safe Durham Partnership ASB Strategic Group Update

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change that provided an update on the ongoing work of the ASB Strategic Group (for copy see file of minutes).

The Head of Community Protection Services gave a presentation as part of a regular update to the committee. This included an update on the ASB Trailblazer pilots, the ASB delivery plan, ASB Case Review and the Safer Streets Fund Round 5. She apologised that some of the information supplied was not up to date but she would provide revised data at the next meeting.

Councillor Potts thought the ASB delivery plan needed a more consolidated realistic explanation as to what it was about for residents, to get a clearer picture to what was going on. He deemed that it was difficult for residents to report ASB incidents to the Police either due to fear of reprisal or that they could not get in touch on the '101' telephone number. Residents wanted to see action and information relating to the number of arrests and detentions following reports made to the police.

The Head of Community Protection Services proposed that this could be considered as part of the development of the performance dashboard to include more outcome focussed data and provide greater feedback and confidence to victims of ASB.

Councillor Potts had no trust in the incident report figures as statistics made the service look good but did not give a true reflection as many incidents went unreported. Residents needed to be encouraged to report incidents and information available on the outcome of an incident may help. He referred to how complaints were dealt with about Police Officers and how the process was scrutinised.

The Head of Community Protection Services explained that each organisation had their own separate internal process that would be followed. The project focused on ASB incidents and not the performance of individual officers.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd was frustrated with the new approach as his area suffered with ASB and had seen no impact so far. He felt that it was not joined up and when requesting updates on cases that had been identified that included evidence the Police responded that there had been no issues reported.

The Head of Community Protection Services could not comment on any specific ASB cases in Councillor Sutton-Lloyd's area but agreed to speak to him separately. She reiterated that there was more joined up working with regular communication between organisations.

Councillor Charlton echoed Councillor Sutton-Lloyd's comments that there was no feeling of a joint approach. She also had ASB in her area that was not being addressed. She mentioned that incidents had been reported to the local PCSO who had replied that it was not their job. She felt that the Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee was multi agency led but there was not always a representative from the Police.

Councillor Boyes seconded the suggestion that there should be more representatives from the Police to attend the meeting. He confirmed that the Council did try to tackle ASB but found it difficult to allocate resources and manpower to issues raised.

The Head of Community Protection Services responded that if an incident came in that was thought to be the responsibility of the Council then the incident would be passed over to the relevant team. Requests for service were being responded to but these requests did not always reflect those areas where ASB incidents were at their highest.

Councillor Quinn noted that there was a Fire Representative at every meeting but no Police. He requested that the Police and Crime Commissioner should be invited to the committee.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer responded that it was not appropriate for the PCC to attend the Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee as her role was to hold the police to account, followed by Councillor Boyes suggesting the ASB champion from the PCC's officer could be invited instead. The Overview and Scrutiny Officer agreed to look into it.

Councillor Mavin had found that residents in his area found reporting incidents to the '101' number difficult and resorted to reporting incidents to him as the local councillor. Young people in his area had resorted to burning bus shelters during the day.

Councillor Heaviside informed Members that he had recently conducted a joint door to door knock in his area with the Police, Neighbourhood Wardens and the Fire Service. He had collected data and had spoken to several people who had told him about incidents that needed to be addressed. He had received good feedback from this exercise which had been a positive experience.

Councillor Gunn agreed that there was a break down in the '101' system that made it difficult to make contact which she had experience of. It meant that incidents went unreported. She had also found residents reporting incidents to her instead of to the Police. She felt that this was not how it should work. She thought that the causes of ASB by young people should be addressed as these acts may start small but could lead on to higher levels of crime if not dealt with. She thought that mental health issues may be linked to ASB and data could be collected, analysed and solutions found.

Councillor Boyes left the meeting at 11.45am

The Head of Community Protection Services advised that the place based team in Horden were trying to address local ASB issues that included organised crime in that area which was not reflected in the data owing to under reporting. The multi-agency team looked at the wider determinants of health including family issues, unemployment, poverty and other drivers that may encourage young people to carry out ASB. The team knocked on doors, spoke to people in the community to gain their intelligence as different ways were required to gain the data to develop a better way of working to address these issues. She agreed to give an update at a future committee meeting.

Resolved:

- i) That the contents of the report be noted.
- ii) That an updated version of the report be brought to the next meeting.