

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 **Friday 20 May 2022** at **1.30 pm**

Present:

Councillor J Charlton (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors V Andrews, L Fenwick, C Hampson, M McGaun, E Mavin, D Nicholls, J Quinn, M Wilson, C Hood and L Mavin

Co-opted Employees/Officers:

Chief Superintendent A Simpson and Chief Fire Officer S Errington

Also Present:

Councillors J Shuttleworth

Apologies:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D McKenna, C Martin, D Oliver and Mr D Balls

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P Heaviside, D McKenna, C Martin, A Simpson, D Oliver and Co-opted member Mr D Balls.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor C Hood substituted for Councillor P Heaviside and Councillor L Mavin substituted for Councillor A Simpson.

3 Declarations of Interest

The Chief Fire Officer advised that he chaired the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) who played a key role in Storm Arwen.

4 Any items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

No items were raised.

5 Civil contingency planning and Storm Arwen review

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided background information on civil contingency and emergency planning arrangements and a review of the response to Storm Arwen (for copy see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager Executive Support gave a presentation which provided members with an overview of:

- Overview of civil contingency and emergency planning arrangements in the county;
- Overview of Storm Arwen, impacts and response;
- De-briefs and review;
- Initial conclusions from review;
- Suggested improvement plan.

Members of the Committee were asked to note information contained within the report and presentation and were asked for their comments on the six areas of the suggested improvement plan:

- Review and expand the community resilience offering across the county;
- Improve incident planning and preparedness through emergency planning, training, and exercising processes;
- Review emergency response resources and establish qualifying criteria for future incidents;
- Review of communication and information sharing during incident response following the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles (JESIP);
- Develop a protocol for the activation and use of council staff during an incident;
- Review strategic, tactical and operational decision making and governance.

1. Review and expand the community resilience offering across the county.

Councillor Nicholls was pleased to see the level of detail in the report. He believed that there had been abandonment from central government and asked what the national government were going to do to help Local Authorities prepare for the future.

The Strategic Manager Executive Support advised that he was not aware of any additional money that had been provided, however explained the Bellwin Scheme where costs for significant incidents could be reclaimed from central government. He added that there had been a national review of the Civil Contingency Act and pilot funding had been provided through the Local Resilience Forum (LRF).

The Chief Fire Officer advised that a great deal of work had been undertaken in this area. He accepted that there had been benign neglect regarding civil resilience but that the outlook was positive adding that the recent funding that had been provided to the LRF would help create new roles to support this work. He stated that the country was starting from a worse position than other European countries but that the vision from Government was to be the most resilient nation. He informed members that during Storm Arwen his team had approximately four calls with the Secretary of State and with the Prime Minister to identify improvements that could be made.

Councillor E Mavin noted that following Storm Arwen his local Parish Council had introduced a community resilience plan and believed that all town and parish councils should do the same. The Strategic Manager Executive Support noted that 31 enquiries had been responded to following Storm Arwen regarding assistance and support in developing community resilience plans. He confirmed that they were engaging town and parish councils regarding this and that this was important for the response.

Councillor Nicholls emphasised how incredible the response from local groups and parish councils had been to Storm Arwen and stressed the need for these groups to be properly equipped in future. He further explained, the benefits of alternative sources of power and how this had been utilised within community buildings, citing Tow Law Community Centre as an example of good practice.

2. Improve incident planning and preparedness through emergency planning, training and exercising processes.

Councillor Quinn asked whether it was possible for members to receive training to enable them to signpost residents to the correct areas. The Strategic Manager Executive Support confirmed that training would be provided.

Further to the suggestion regarding training, Councillor Charlton asked if officers would deliver training sessions within schools to offer young people information on how they could react and help within their own communities. The Strategic Manager Executive Support agreed this was an area that needed to be increased. He explained that there had been a programme of visits to Primary Schools to provide information on planning and preparing yourself for things that could happen. He confirmed that they had also worked with the air cadets, fire cadets and sea cadets to work towards a credited award to raise young people's awareness of these issues. He also advised that this area needed to be significantly expanded and required a multi-agency approach.

3. Review emergency response resources and establish qualifying criteria for future incidents

Councillor Andrews commented that during Storm Arwen there were some residents who were dependent on electrical equipment for health reasons and were unable to access this due to the power cut. She asked whether it was possible to

collate a list of these people so that support could be given should the situation arise again. The Strategic Manager Executive Support confirmed that a joined-up list of vulnerable people was needed. He explained that different agencies had different lists and that these needed to be combined to allow people to be contacted or visited in the future.

In terms of the community welfare pack, Councillor E Mavin asked what was included. The Strategic Manager Executive Support explained that the packs were set up for Storm Arwen and included a range of items such as hot water bottles, hat, torch, butane powered heaters and camping stoves, hand warmers, rechargeable power packs, basic toiletries, covid tests, hand gel and wipes. In addition, unused self-heating food packs from officers who had attended COP22 were also given to residents following the storm. He noted that not all residents required all items and therefore packs were tailored to their individual needs. The packs were also provided to residents in the subsequent storms.

Councillor Nicholls noted that during Storm Arwen, the army targeted rural areas first to provide help, however he felt those that lived in rural areas were better equipped as most had a source of heat. Those who lived closer to the city were more dependent on electric and as dependency on electric was on the increase, he asked how people would stay warm should this happen again. The Strategic Manager Executive Support agreed that those in rural areas were used to short term power outages and bad weather and naturally had alternative sources of heating. He accepted that it was a real challenge to provide alternative heat sources to all when the scale of a power cut was as big as Storm Arwen. He explained that guidance and advice needed to be given to individuals on how they could prepare themselves and explained that he would also work with utility companies to restore power as soon as possible.

Councillor Charlton commented that there was a need to push solar powered companies to provide more affordable ways for homes to be solar powered.

Councillor McGaun expressed that new housing companies should be targeted as new builds were solely dependent on electric. He suggested that housing regulations be changed to include solar panel on roofs.

4. Review of communication and information sharing during incident response following the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles (JESIP)

In reference to point 4a of the improvement plan, Councillor Quinn advised that he had attempted to contact County Hall on the Saturday of Storm Arwen but to no avail. He stressed the need for staff to be contactable during weekends, particularly at times of emergency. The Strategic Manager Executive Support advised that an additional call number had been established, and that staff were also assigned to help but explained that the severity of the Storm was much greater than anticipated and that staff had been overwhelmed. The Strategic Manager Executive Support

further advised this area was also linked to Theme 5 of the suggested improvement plan.

Councillor McGaun noted that local communities worked incredibly well alongside blue light services but that the response from third party providers such as Northern PowerGrid had been poor. He commented that in times of crisis there is expectation management and noted that residents were given false information regarding timescales of the power cut. The Strategic Manager agreed and noted the need to engage with Northern PowerGrid more effectively and that their advice in future needs to be reliable and realistic. He confirmed that a major incident was declared by the LRF once the power cut had been longer than initially anticipated and some uncertainty on timing of reconnections.

Councillor E Mavin noted that during Storm Arwen, the same issues were reported multiple times. He suggested that in future, residents should report issues through their local councillor. Councillor Charlton agreed but noted that communication at that time was greatly affected.

Councillor Nicholls agreed that communication was a problem particularly from Northern PowerGrid. In terms of the Council receiving multiple calls, he asked whether it was possible to separate telephone calls made from members and council staff from telephone calls made from the public. The Strategic Manager Executive Support confirmed that a specific telephone number and email address had been created for members to report incidents.

Councillor Nicholls raised concerns regarding the methods of communication the Council used to update residents during Storm Arwen. He stated that most of the communication was provided via the internet but stressed that residents who had lost their power did not have access to the internet and therefore the information had not reached them.

The Strategic Manager Executive Support agreed and confirmed that this would be factored into the action plan. He advised that telephone workers had been provided with scripts to help give advice to callers and that information had also been shared with the media and broadcasting. He stated that the Council had done a great deal of work to help residents but that the key issue was with Northern PowerGrid. He advised that they were working through the LRF to address these issues and to improve their communication strategies for future emergencies.

In terms of Northern PowerGrid, Councillor Nicholls asked whether there was any legislation to identify what they legally must do. The Chief Fire Officer explained that stronger legislation was anticipated and will place utility companies into category one responders of the Civil Contingencies Act, rather than category two. The Strategic Manager Executive Support added that he had recently spoke with Northern PowerGrid who confirmed they were expecting the legislation soon.

5. Develop a protocol for the activation and use of council staff during an incident.

6. Review strategic, tactical and operational decision making and governance

No further questions were raised for areas 5 and 6 of the suggested improvement plan.

The Strategic Manager Executive Support commented how helpful it had been to have members comments on the improvement plan and that the final plan would be taken to Cabinet in July 2022.

Councillor Quinn thanked the Police, Fire Service, NHS and all the other officers who helped throughout Storm Arwen. Councillor Charlton echoed this and expressed her thanks to the amazing work done by all in unprecedented times.

The Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change thanked the committee for their comments and positive discussion. He stressed how challenging Storm Arwen had been and how important it was to learn from the incident. He re-assured the Committee that the team were on top of emergency planning and well equipped for any future incidents.

Resolved

The Committee agreed to:

- i note information contained within the report and provide comment on the proposed improvement plan;
- ii Support the proposed improvement plan and associated actions;
- iii Note the identified timelines for the improvement plan actions to be delivered, and
- iv Recommend to Cabinet that the Safer and Stronger Communities OSC receive regular monitoring updates on progress against the improvement plan actions.