

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 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Monday 12 December 2022** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor

Members of the Committee:

Councillors P Heaviside, V Andrews, J Cairns, L Fenwick, C Hampson, M McGaun, C Martin, J Miller, D Nicholls, D Oliver, J Quinn, A Simpson, D Sutton-Lloyd and M Wilson

Co-opted Members:

Co-opted Employees/Officers:

Deputy Chief Fire Officer S Helps and Superintendent L Gosling

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for Absence were received from Councillor Joyce Charlton, Councillor Peter Atkinson, Councillor David McKenna, Councillor Eric Mavin, Councillor Anne Reed and Chief Fire Officer Stuart Errington.

The Chair thanked Chief Fire Officer Stuart Errington for his contribution and work to the Committee over many years and wished him the best in his retirement. The Chair congratulated Deputy Chief Fire Officer Steve Helps who would be taking over as Chief Fire Officer following Stuart Errington's retirement.

The Chair thanked The Strategic Manager (Partnerships) Andrea Petty, who was leaving the Council to join the Police and Crime Commissioners Office as Chief of Staff for her contribution to the Committee.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members in attendance.

3 Minutes of the Meeting held 11 October and 03 November 2022

The minutes were agreed as a correct and accurate record and signed by the chair.

Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Clare Luery noted at the 11 October special meeting, Members raised issues around empty properties. Members had been invited to an informal session on Empty Homes on 9 November which answered some of the points raised. A further session is to be arranged for early in the next year looking at empty commercial and non-residential properties.

Comments raised on the Anti-Social Behaviour Strategy considered at the 11 October 2022 meeting were forwarded to the Safer Durham Partnership.

Overview and Scrutiny Officer informed the Committee that following questions raised at Committee on 3 November on the effect of Covid on domestic abuse referrals, trends and profiles of domestic abuse victims and details of White Ribbon Day, further information had been circulated on 24 November 2022.

4 Declarations of Interest, if any

No declarations of interest were made.

5 Any items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

No items were raised.

6 Exploitation - Children and Adults

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources, which provided the Committee with background information in advance of a presentation from Durham Constabulary on child and adult exploitation (for copy see file of Minutes).

Detective Chief Inspector Lee Blakelock and Detective Superintendent Nicola Lawrence gave a detailed presentation which provided Members with an overview of child and adult exploitation with a focus on:

- Contextual Safeguarding
- Child Exploitation Vulnerability Tracker (CEVT)
- Multi Agency Approach
- Governance
- Analysis

Members were informed that there was a dedicated team who had access to both Durham County Council and Police records, who were able to provide updates every 48-72 hours into one central system. It was noted that some individuals had

taken advantage of children due to the cost of living crisis which had led to an increase in child exploitation.

Councillor Craig Martin joined the Meeting at 9.38 am.

It was brought to Members attention that an increase in the trend of cuckooing had been noticed, with organised crime involved in preying on the vulnerable and elderly in these difficult times. It was added that Neighbourhood Police officers were very aware of this activity. Members were made aware that a lot of crime was linked with County Lines activity trying to expand the reach of their operations.

Members were informed that heightened awareness around harm occurring to children away from the home after 3pm was important with a need to know where children were. Training on contextual safeguarding and the vulnerability of isolated children had been provided by Professor Carlene Firmin MBE.

Members were informed that the CEVT was a system that used indicators from multiple agencies which included:

- Police
- Youth Offending Services
- Barnardos
- Children's Services
- Drugs and Alcohol Services
- Education

The CEVT could provide cases with a score to indicate what action was required using a traffic light system. Members were informed of the Operational Child Exploitation Group (CEG), which had a focus on the highest risk cases across Durham and Darlington.

Members were presented with a breakdown of sexual offences against children for April and May 2022 and the child exploitation vulnerability tracker.

It was noted that the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) had now been completed and the final report published. The key points raised from this report was the noted exploitation of children from gangs in southern parts of the Country, and the required education around victim blaming language. The aim for Durham was to continue the work of the action plan using Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) principles to provide the effective help that vulnerable people needed.

It was noted that following the pandemic there had been an increase in the number of empty buildings throughout the County which were now being used by gangs for criminal activity.

Councillor Jake Miller agreed that there were a lot of buildings throughout the County that were empty and attracted anti-social behaviour as well as other activities. Councillor Miller drew the Committees attention to page 27 and raised concerns over the particular high figure for both the south and east areas and enquired what was being done to tackle these areas.

The Detective Superintendent informed the Committee that both areas were large areas within the County so would always have higher numbers in comparison, and added that the figures could include interfamilial abuse noting a rise in abuse between parents and siblings, but confirmed that action would always be taken to try and prevent abuse.

The Detective Chief Inspector advised that assault was more prominent in the south and the east of the County and informed Members that abuse was often repetitive and reported historically. It was commented that COVID had not impacted on the figures.

Councillor Mike McGaun thanked both officers for their presentation and enquired what the threshold was for intervention on cuckooing, and what methods of communication were available to communities to report activity around empty buildings.

In response to questions from Councillor McGaun, the Detective Superintendent informed the Committee that the Crime Stoppers phone line was an effective method, with action taken against any reports the phone line receives, adding that Police Community Support Officers (PCSO) were another source. The Detective Superintendent confirmed that any report of potential cuckooing would be actioned immediately and would need to be investigated to make sure it was genuine.

Councillor Joe Quinn enquired about modern day slavery and what methods were used to check if someone was a victim or just purporting to be one.

The Detective Superintendent noted it was the job of the investigation to determine if people were there of free will with stringent questioning, by checking things such as phone records, access to papers and records and how freely they were moving in and out of the empty buildings.

Detective Chief Inspector added that it was a challenge with a continually moving landscape noting that the Police were alive to the fact people lie.

Councillor Veronica Andrews noted how difficult it could be to notice illicit behaviour citing an incident in her area which had gone undetected.

The Detective Superintendent informed the Committee that these types of incidents highlighted a need for enforcement checks. He explained that the natural curiosity of people would sometimes lead to acts being detected and that in some cases landlords would be contacted if there was a suspicion of activity.

Resolved

The content of the report and presentation be noted.

7 Community Protection Update

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, which provided the Committee with Background information on enforcement and intervention activity by the Council's Public Protection Service (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Public Protection Manager, Owen Cleugh gave a detailed presentation which provided Members with an Overview for Comment on activities of the Licensing Neighbourhood Interventions, Trading Standards and Safer Communities teams within the Public Protection Service with a focus on:

- Business Compliance
- The Special Investigations Team
- Licensing
- Nuisance Action Team
- Community Action Team
- Anti-Social Interventions Team
- Safer Communities

The Public Protection Manager gave a detailed breakdown and outlined the issues faced by each team, highlighting the work being done around illicit tobacco, counterfeit clothing, footwear and sports memorabilia for the Special Investigations Team. He advised that Taxi Licensing was still the biggest issue facing the Licensing Team and informed Members that there had been 300 vehicle suspensions. The Public Protection Manager praised the work of the Community Action Team and noted the rise in complaints being handled by the team. He gave an example where the team had recently discovered a cannabis farm in a household with 22 dogs demonstrating the benefits of team walkabouts. He further advised that the Anti-Social Interventions Team had doubled enforcement over the past seven months to deal with a range of nuisances.

Councillor Jake Miller questioned the connective thinking between departments citing a recent incident in his ward of Wheatley Hill, where a business was proposing to apply shutters to its windows which was recommended by one team but was refused planning permission. Councillor Miller also questioned the inclusion of planning in walkabouts.

In response to questions from Councillor Miller, the Public Protection Manager informed the Committee that the team liaised with other internal departments but explained that they were limited in regard to decision making. He agreed to speak with the planning department on this issue.

Resolved

The content of the report and presentation be noted.

8 Quarter Two 2022/23 Performance Management Report

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

The Corporate Scrutiny & Strategy Manager, Tom Gorman, informed that the crime rate was now back to pre-Covid levels which was higher than the national average but lower than the regional, with a noted increase in theft. It was noted that overall there was a decrease in ASB adding that with the breakdown into three categories of Environmental, Nuisance and Personal there had been a noticeable increase in the latter two.

The Corporate Scrutiny & Strategy Manager informed the Committee that the successful completion of rehabilitation for drug and alcohol abuse, was doing well against targets but was slightly short in regard to opiate use. Members attention was drawn to the road safety figures which were favourable in comparison to the prior year's noting fatalities were down to four from last year's eight and serious injury was down to 33 in comparison to 49 last year.

Councillor Dan Nicholls queried the relevant figures for suicide noting that the figures did not look good.

The Corporate Scrutiny & Strategy Manager noted that this area came under the remit of Adults, Wellbeing and Health but informed the Committee they were not favourable compared to other quarters, adding that there was a delay in obtaining the figures as there was always a wait for the coroners final verdict.

The Chair queried how Landlords were approached in regards to signing up to the Selective Licensing Agreement.

Corporate Scrutiny & Strategy Manager informed the Committee that a number of sources were used listing the examples of council tax, sale of properties and tenants applying for benefits.

Resolved

The content of the report be noted.

9 Anti-Social Behaviour Strategic Group

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, which provided an update on the ongoing work of the Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Strategic Group (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Public Protection Manager gave a detailed presentation which provided the Committee with an update on the strategic group and thanked the Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager for the work of his team in providing statistics for the ASB Dashboard. The Public Protection Manager also thanked Members for their response to the consultation.

Councillor David Sutton-Lloyd commented on the positive progress that had already been made.

Resolved

The content of the report and presentation be noted.