

## **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 **Monday 26 June 2023** at **9.30 am**

#### **Present:**

**Councillor P Heaviside (Chair)**

#### **Members of the Committee:**

Councillors J Charlton, V Andrews, D Boyes, M Currah, L Fenwick, C Hampson, P Jopling (substitute for R Potts), C Lines, D McKenna, E Mavin, J Miller, D Nicholls, J Quinn, K Rooney (substitute for A Simpson) and D Sutton-Lloyd

#### **Co-opted Member:**

Mr D Balls

#### **Co-opted Employees/Officers:**

Chief Inspector V Martin (substitute for Superintendent L Gosling)

## **1 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P Atkinson, R Potts, A Simpson and Co-opted Officers Chief Fire Officer S Helps and Superintendent L Gosling.

## **2 Substitute Members**

Councillor P Jopling as substitute Member for Councillor R Potts, Councillor K Rooney as substitute Member for Councillor A Simpson and Chief Inspector V Martin as substitute for Superintendent L Gosling.

## **3 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 April 2023 were confirmed by the Committee as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

#### **4 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations on interest.

#### **5 Any items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties**

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

#### **6 Fire Home Safety Update**

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided background information in advance of a presentation from County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service (CDDFRS) on home fire safety (for copy see file of minutes).

The presentation delivered by Keith Carruthers, Director Community Risk Management, CDDFRS provided members with an overview of community fire safety activity with a focus on home fire safety visits.

Councillor Boyes indicated that the fire service was the most trusted of the blue light services and residents were forthcoming in providing the information as part of the visits, the problem was sharing the information with the right agencies. He commented that now that information was being shared which was a fantastic development, it was pleasing to note that the number of accidental fires was reducing.

Councillor Nicholls referred to smokers and medical equipment and asked what they were doing to keep smokers safe who may or may not have medical equipment at home. He then asked if the fire brigade were at a stage of visiting homes in affluent areas given that they had completed visits in poorer areas.

The Director Community Risk Management responded that they worked closely with oxygen suppliers and received monthly information to show which residents had a supply of oxygen and they would visit the home. This work was about education and if residents did smoke how to do it safely and night-time smoking was the riskiest behaviour. If you live alone and are smoking, there is only the one person to address any behaviours but if more than one person were in the house you could hear a smoke alarm or ensure that the cigarette was distinguished. They relied on occupiers letting them into properties and indicated that vulnerable residents presented the greatest challenge especially properties where hoarding was evident. With regard to affluent areas, less targeting happens to these properties as the risk was greater in more deprived areas. He indicated that you could go onto their website and request a home visit, and they relied on partners to refer them for a visit.

Councillor Quinn commented on the dip during COVID for the number of accidental dwelling fires and Home Fire Safety Visits and indicated that other services had a plateau. This was testament to the Fire Service that you went straight back up to

normal levels and asked how big of a problem was hoarding becoming in the County, if there had been an increase since COVID and commented that Councillors could help identify these properties.

The Director Community Risk Management responded that hoarding had increased and indicated that there had been three fatalities this year which may be coincidental. He stated that hoarding was typically due to mental wellbeing and referred to a recent incident at Darlington and indicated that it was more difficult when people owned their own home but if the home was rented, they could get the landlord involved. He stated that it was difficult to engage if the person did not want to.

Councillor Miller commented that it was good to hear that Durham was one of the best with regard to accidental dwelling fires and that residents had the trust of the Fire Service. He then referred to Durham being one of the worst in the country with regard to deliberate fires and asked by how much and asked why this was the case.

The Director Community Risk Management responded that in terms of the North East the three fire services that had the worst figures for deliberate fires were Cleveland, Tyne & Wear and Durham and Darlington based on the size of the population. It was suggested that there were some societal links and work was being conducted by Northumbria University to understand why people were deliberately starting fires. He commented that some deliberate fires were linked to crime as fire could be used as a weapon, but some fires were younger people who were starting fires as the start of anti-social behaviour and potentially move to crime.

Councillor Nicholls referred to deliberate fires and asked the officer if he could see this changing in terms of getting better.

The Director Community Risk Management indicated that deliberate fires were their biggest challenge and was a demand on resources. Their ethos was taking the education approach and going into schools to provide education and they have employed an education co-ordinator to improve the offer to schools, particular in hot spot areas. They were currently trialling a PCC funded scheme on Developing Resilience but indicated that a number of deliberate fires were due to peer pressure, fires were higher in hot weather. They were hoping that the education journey with young people would reduce deliberate fires.

Councillor Charlton referred to her personal experience with home fire safety visits and could not praise the team highly enough and wished to pass on her thanks to the team. She referred to the fuel crisis and asked if the team had seen an increase with vulnerable people using portable heaters and increase in risk.

The Director Community Risk Management responded that they had seen an increase in the use of portable heaters, but it was not a massive increase. He indicated that the use of oil filled radiators was as safe as radiators in a home the

issues were with a naked flame heater and uncontrollable heat. The advice would be to get the right type of portable heater.

Councillor Charlton asked if they would be extending the training to care companies where carers go into people's homes.

The Director Community Risk Management responded that they would offer training free of charge to anyone who was entering people's homes. He commented that they were in someone's home for 30 minutes, but a carer would be in the home every day and there was more chance of the dangers being put right.

The Chair asked if the impact of emerging technology such as electric vehicles would cause any issues.

The Director Community Risk Management indicated that technology was tried and tested, the issues were buying electronic products from unreputable manufacturers.

**Resolved:** That the information contained in the report and presentation be noted.

*Councillor P Jopling left the meeting at 10.42 am*

## **7 Nuisance Off Road Motor Bikes and Quads**

The Committee were provided with a presentation from Durham Constabulary - Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator which provided information on the following:

- Background
- Partnerships
- What is Anti-Social use
- Definition
- Number of calls received
- Seizures of vehicles
- OP Endurance toolkit
- Next steps
- Motorcycle section
- Reporting methods

Councillor Boyes indicated that this was a big issue, and the problem was that the legislation had not caught up with what was happening. He stated that young people were wearing ski masks on bikes, and they think they are untouchable and commented taking the bikes from them was no power as they were not bothered. He commented that if he were driving a car after drinking or taking drugs you would expect to be arrested and go to court and receive a custodial sentence but that was not the case for young people on bikes. He stated that they needed these powers and provided an example of someone who had to leave the area due to repercussions following an incident with someone on a bike. Until people saw custodial sentences or people being banned public reassurance was limited.

The Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator reassured the Member that a lot of intelligence gathering was going on, but they relied on people reporting incidents so that they could build the evidence. She understood the frustration and people were reluctant to come forward but there were other things they could do such as issuing warnings. She commented that central government made the legislation and their job was to enforce it.

Councillor Quinn referred to E-Scooters that are not illegal, but the issues were city centres where police have given a dispensation for companies to lease them out. He commented that there was no advertising to advise that these were illegal to drive on the public highway and this needed to be enforced and vendors should have to advise of this.

The Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator responded that these companies had set criteria where you had to hold a driving licence and by agreeing to hire you are covered on their insurance and adhere to their rules, the difference was that you were insured. A number of road safety groups were discussing E-Scooters and how to deal with the vendors.

Members discussed the recent incident at Sunderland where someone was killed using a E-Scooter.

Chief Superintendent Martin indicated that government legislation was catching up and her personal opinion was that they would see a tightening up of the legislation.

In response to a question from Councillor Quinn, the Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator indicated that 617 vehicles had been seized, 56 vehicles were seized under Section 59 and commented that some vehicles were taken post incident and a lot was going on in the background.

Councillor Quinn asked if Durham Constabulary had looked into buying their own recovery truck.

The Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator responded that they had a recovery system in place as it was not just about recovery it was also storage that came down to finances and indicated that this conversation had been held previously but was not currently an option.

Councillor Fenwick thanked the Officer for bringing Operation Endurance to Peterlee that had been amazing, they still had issues with some off-road bikes, but the main problem was quad bikes that were damaging the landscape that seemed to have ceased. She then referred to the gathering of information and asked if every police vehicle had a dashboard camera.

The Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator responded that not all vehicles had dash cameras, but all officers had body cameras that they would switch on and that footage would be shared.

Councillor Fenwick asked if dash cameras on all vehicles could be fed back.

Councillor Mavin commented that intelligence did work, and some information resulted in two bikes been crushed. He asked how many times someone could get a bike crushed.

The Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator indicated that they logged all the data, and this was included into the intelligence system which could be accessed by all police forces. The data could be used to look at things such as repeat offenders.

Councillor Miller asked if they had any data on the Section 59 notices issued by street wardens.

The Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator indicated that any notices issued were logged into the system and commented that wardens do not issue notices as often as they could but their increased use by wardens was an option moving forward.

Councillor Miller then referred to calls being higher in May this year, which was good, but people were still contacting local councillors. He commented that rural areas could not compete with bigger towns as they did not have the population to witness what was happening to report it.

The Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator referred to the Section 59 warning notices and indicated that it was not just the town they looked it was also the surrounding areas as it was the neighbourhood policing team's responsibility.

In response to a question from Councillor Miller, the Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator advised that it was the same officers who ride off road bikes and on road bikes. The motorbike section day to day were on road bikes and indicated that off road bikes were not always the most effective to catch these types of vehicles they might go off road but were more around urban areas. The newest operations they were using both types of bikes to cover both aspects to reduce the numbers.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd indicated that it came down to the number of issues been reported and he did not think the numbers reflected what was happening and advised that he had received six calls from residents just this weekend. He commented that they needed to see some enforcement and action on the ground to encourage people to report incidents. Some progress had been seen with the anti-social behaviour teams and the funding was starting to come through and commented that it had taken a year to get the multi action team to work together to resolve a problem in his area and indicated that it came down to education.

The Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator responded that they wanted to know what was happening and advised that they had a road safety package that they were putting into every secondary school and as part of that there was a section on off road bikes and the consequences. They also went into primary schools and gave the same information and shared some images of someone who had come off his bike. She indicated that a lot of enforcement work was going on in the background

and the neighbourhood teams do share information to members of the community. They did share a lot of information on Facebook and reminded members of the email contact.

Councillor Currah indicated that he had used the live chat to report an incident that was very good. He then referred to an incident where he was pursued by a bike for two hours.

The Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator indicated that she understood people's reluctance to report incidents and that was why the other reporting methods were crucial and that crime stoppers were ideal for people who did not want to be identified and asked members to relay this to their constituents.

In response to a question from Councillor Charlton the Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator confirmed that the police used drones and that the bike section was located at Spennymoor but were out and about every day.

Councillor McKenna indicated that if people reported the incidents the number of phone calls would be tripled, but people were scared to report the incidents due to the repercussions and asked if the recent incident in Cardiff had impacted on the mindset of officers.

The Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator indicated that it was a concern, but they all know there is a risk involved and be as professional as they can and do everything right. If things do go wrong, they have to deal with it, their aim was to protect the public and do what they could to uphold the law and ensure that people were safe and deal with those not complying with the law.

Councillor Nicholls indicated that the perception of the public was that the police do not care and were not pursuing people on bikes. He stated that the Police and Crime Panel were working extremely hard on this area of work and in his ward, they had eighteen anti-social behaviour incidents in a month, seventeen related to off road bikes. He continued that the method to report incidents was not available 24/7 and was not used much but the latest figures suggested a 30% increase in the reporting online and was a good method to contact the police. They were heading in the right direction and indicated that it was not just young people it was also older people offending. He asked what was being done regarding those older people and indicated that the bikes needed to be crushed so that they could not be sold on and asked when there would be a change in legislation so that they could crush these bikes.

The Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator responded that they dealt with incidents the same way regardless of age. They would love to crush every bike, but this was out of their hands and was a funding issue.

Councillor Heaviside referred to the Section 59 notices and indicated that the bike can be taken one day but they could get it back the next day but if they used the no

insurance route as it was more likely to get the bike off the road and it being crushed.

The Casualty Reduction Co-ordinator commented that the Section 59 warning signs were perfect if the PCSO Officer could not get a police officer.

The Chair asked if Members could receive an update in six month's time.

**Resolved:** (i) That the contents of the presentation be noted.

(ii) That the Committee receive an update report in six months' time.

## **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 of report, see file of minutes).

The Head of Community Protection Services was in attendance to deliver the report and presented the Durham County ASB Delivery Plan performance update for the period March 2022 – February 2023 that identified the following priorities for action during the coming year:

- Deliberate Fires
- Criminal Damage
- Flytipping
- Noise
- Intimidation / Harassment / Abuse

Members were advised that further work was ongoing to clarify the 'unknown nuisance' reports which were significant in number. The Data and Performance Team would continue to work with strategic partners regarding the quality of data so that the dashboards can present the best available information going forward (for copy of presentation, see file of minutes).

Councillor Charlton asked if the reduction in Anti-Social Behaviour on the whole was due to some items that were in this category now being classed as criminal activity.

The Head of Community Protection Services responded that it was difficult to say as there had been some changes in the reporting standards in the way the police log but there would be an element of Anti-Social Behaviour that was now logged as a crime, similarly they were now receiving information from housing providers on Anti-Social Behaviour so overall they were not seeing a big difference in the numbers although work was continuing around the data analysis. She commented that there was also a significant underreporting of Anti-Social Behaviour, but it gave an idea of where they need to put resources. The more interventions the increased likelihood that incidents were reported.



Councillor Charlton then referred to noise nuisance that appeared to be increasing across the board and asked if there was a pattern such as people more aware of noise due to home working.

The Head of Community Protection Services responded that they did see a spike during COVID lockdown but generally there appeared to be less tolerance in some areas.

Councillor Boyes asked how co-ordinated they were between the police, council and PCC and sought clarification if the 50,000 calls were just for the council or if it was all agencies. He then asked how much weight was attached to these figures and indicated that coming out of lockdown there would be a lot more rubbish so an increase in fly-tipping. He stated that they had a massive increase in deliberate fires over in East Durham. He commented that there were a number of empty properties in his ward and other wards that become targets and there was a number of cars been set a light and asked how much cross over there was between deliberate fires and crime as a fire was a crime, not anti-social behaviour.

The Head of Community Protection Services responded that partnership working was good, in terms of operations they had problem solving groups with a joined-up approach around multi-agency. She commented that the partnership working was healthy and strong in Durham. She continued that the impact of COVID may have impacted on some of the reductions, but she was aware that the fly-tipping group had been proactive over the last twelve months that would impact on the reductions although the trend had to be a continued reduction for it to be meaningful.

Councillor Nicholls referred to the 40% increase in deliberate fires in Durham and asked for the reasons for this and asked if Bowburn Primary School had impacted on these figures as it was set on fire most days and there was no national funding framework to deal with empty properties like Bowburn Primary School or was it more fires occurring across the city.

The Director Community Risk Management indicated that if there was a spike in a particular area the team would look into it and referred to a problem with fires in some woods and discussions held around woodland management as well as generic education.

Councillor Nicholls reiterated his concern around the absence of a national framework to deal with empty buildings and associated ASB/Crime.

The Director Community Risk Management responded that in terms of empty buildings they had a partnership approach where they were identifying all the empty buildings that potentially could cause problems and looking at security. 200 premises were identified and less than 10 were owned by the council.

**Resolved:** That the information contained in the report and presentation be noted.

*Councillor D Boyes left the meeting at 11.51 am*

## **9 Quarter Four Performance Management Report**

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Executive which provided 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. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager delivered the report which covered performance in and to the end of quarter four, 2022/23 January to March 2023 (for copy see file of minutes).

Councillor Charlton referred to page 85 of the report and sought clarification why data was from 2018 for alcohol seizures, 2021 for first-time entrants to the youth justice system aged 10 to 17, 2019/20 for proven re-offending by young people (who offend) in a 12-month period.

The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager responded that there was some natural lag with the data, but he would look into the data with regard to alcohol seizures.

Councillor Quinn asked if they were on track for achieving 100% selective licensing by 2027 and sought clarification when selective licensing ran out.

The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager responded that the current selective licensing scheme expired after 5 years and that the Council would have to re-apply for its continuance and justify the reasons.

Councillor Currah commented that he was a landlord and had to pay £500 per year and had not changed anything in the way he dealt with his tenants and had taken the financial impact himself. Some landlords had passed this fee on to tenants.

The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager responded that the nature of the scheme could change and in 2027 they could still be eligible for a selective licensing scheme, but the area covered by the scheme may change.

Councillor Quinn asked if there had been any convictions or court appearances in relation to selective licensing.

The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager indicated that a briefing note would be provided to Members on selective licensing.

The Chair indicated his view that the selective licensing scheme was failing, and good landlords were targeted to finance the scheme for those for which it was intended.

**Resolved:** That the overall position and direction of travel in relation to quarter four performance, the impact of COVID-19 and the rising cost of living on performance,

and the actions being taken to address areas of underperformance including the significant economic and well-being challenges because of the pandemic be noted.

## **10 Refresh of Work Programme 2023-24 for the Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided the work programme for 2023/2024 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer delivered the report.

Councillor Nicholls asked that consideration of the work programme be deferred until the next meeting of the Committee to allow a full discussion on the work programme.

The Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer responded that the next meeting was scheduled to be held on 7 September 2023 and commented that the work programme was draft and was designed to be flexible. Some of the areas proposed had specific timelines identified that had been agreed in conjunction with the services and partners. To defer consideration of the work programme could potentially delay formal adoption of the work programme but adoption of the draft programme does not preclude Members from raising other areas or issues that they may wish to include or re-prioritise the programme moving forward.

Councillor Miller asked if empty properties and anti-social behaviour could be included onto the work programme rather than an informal briefing session.

The Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer indicated that this issue had been raised in the Environment and Sustainable Communities OSC and Economy and Enterprise OSC and advised members that they were working with the service groupings and had plans for an informal Microsoft Teams session to allow as many members as possible to attend and have a discussion.

**Resolved:** That the Safer and Stronger OSC work programme for 2023/2024 and the flexibility it offers to respond to emerging issues be agreed.