

Meeting: Overview, Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee

Date: 13 June 2022

Title: Storm Arwen Task & Finish Group Report

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Service: Democratic Services Officer

Wards affected: All

1. Purpose of Report

A Motion in relation to Storm Arwen was debated at the Council meeting 20 January 2022, where it was raised that there was significant amount of work to be carried out by the Council with many fallen trees still blocking public access and that there was a backlog of existing work that had been delayed.

Council agreed to establish a cross party inquiry into the handling of Storm Arwen by North Tyneside Council, including what work was outstanding and what lessons had been learned.

Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee agreed to establish a Task and Finish Group to look at the Authority's response to Storm Arwen and 5 subsequent storms. This report details the findings of the task & finish group with its observations, recommendations and conclusions.

2. Recommendations

That the recommendations detailed in section 10 of this report be noted and forwarded to Full Council.

3. Membership

The Committee established the Storm Arwen & Winter Storms Task & Finish Group.

Continuing the policy to encourage cross party/committee involvement, an invitation was made to all Non-Executive Members of the Council to be part of the Task & Finish group.

The following members volunteered to serve and took some part:

Councillor Liam Bones
Councillor Brian Burdis
Councillor Cath Davis
Councillor Muriel Green

Councillor Tracy Hallway
Councillor Janet Hunter
Councillor John O'Shea
Councillor Paul Richardson

The Task & Finish group met on 2 occasions.

4. Statutory Duties –Emergency Planning obligations

Statutory responsibilities to ensure that effective arrangements are in place to manage emergencies are set out in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004.

These define a core set of agencies as responsible for emergency planning and response. 'Category 1' responders to civil emergency, who have the greatest number of duties, are the Police, Fire and Rescue Service, Ambulance Service, health boards, local authorities and the Environment Agency.

The list of 'Category 2' responders to civil emergency, who also have a range of legal duties to cooperate and share information, include organisations involved in the energy, telecoms, transport, and water sectors.

Following an emergency, these organisations work together and form a 'resilience partnership', which helps them to coordinate, collaborate and share information.

Local resilience forums (LRFs) covering police force areas are multi-agency partnerships made up of representatives of the local category one and two responders, plus the military. They are responsible for identifying and planning for local civil resilience risks.

A key principle of resilience partnerships is to have the right people in the right place at the right time. Whilst legislation guides statutory representation, the third sector also has an important play a part in the cycle of emergency management and are often part of the resilience partnership structures.

5. Local Response

The operational response to major incidents, such as Storm Arwen, is coordinated at the local level through Strategic Coordinating Groups or Tactical Coordination Groups which are the response mechanisms of Local Resilience Forums in England and Wales in accordance with the Civil Contingencies Act 2004.

Blue light services, Local Authorities, Utilities, welfare partners and other relevant organisations take part in regular meetings at tactical and strategic levels to direct and prioritise resources and identify further risks throughout the response.

Local Resilience Forums and Partnerships are responsible for the civil contingencies' response to any incident in their geographic area. Partnerships and the Local Authority maintain regular engagement with one another throughout the year on contingency plans, which they also exercise regularly in accordance with their duty to prepare for emergencies under the Civil Contingencies Act (2004).

6. National Protocol

In Major Emergency situations the Joint Emergency Service Incident Protocol (JESIP) should be followed;

- Co-locate - Co-locate with other responders as soon as practicably possible at a single, safe and easily identified location.
- Communicate - Communicate using language which is clear and free from technical jargon and abbreviations.
- Co-ordinate.
- Jointly understand risk.
- Shared Situational Awareness.

There is an established reporting framework that provides a common structure for responders and their control rooms to share major incident information, this is called the METHANE model.

7. Emergency Planning – North Tyneside

North Tyneside Council is responsible for areas of Emergency Planning, Business Continuity & responding to the effect of the Weather.

In its Emergency Planning it ensures that those involved are suitably senior, trained, exercised, that it has an Emergency Response Leadership Group and there is a Rota to ensure Gold Command and Emergency Response Officer availability/accessibility.

When an emergency occurs the following all needs consideration:

- Incident
- Scale and geography
- Command structure
- Priorities
- Partners
- Recovery
- All influenced by the nature of the incident or event

With regards to Business Continuity during an incident the affects the organisation (NTC) the following are in place:

- Business Continuity Coordinators
- Business Continuity Plans

8. The Weather: Storm Arwen 2021 – context

There were 7 named storms during the 2021/22 winter season, the first was Storm Arwen which occurred on the 26 – 27 November 2021 and ended with Storm Franklin on 20 February 2022.

Storm Arwen brought significant and widespread severe weather to parts of the UK, including exceptionally high windspeeds, icy conditions, and deep snow.

The Authority conducts its forecasting with regards to monitoring the changes and impact of the weather that include:

- Meteo Group Weather Forecast
- Action Forecast for Winter Maintenance
- Met Office Forecast
- Weather Station

Yellow wind warnings were initially issued by the Met Office, on 23 November and the authority services with response roles monitored the situation. The first amber warnings, indicating a risk to life, damage to trees and buildings, and likely power, transport, and communications disruption, were issued on 25 November, when services and responsible roles began making standby arrangements.

At 10.56 hours on the 26 November 2021 the amber warnings were reinforced by a rare red warning for exceptional wind speeds down the east coast of Scotland and northern England.

Storm Arwen was an exceptionally severe storm, not without precedent in recent decades, but with features that made it more unusual.

A significant feature of Storm Arwen was the direction of the winds it generated. The wind generally comes from a southerly to north westerly direction. Storm Arwen brought very high winds from a north to north-easterly direction into areas of the country that are usually sheltered. A severe gale with a northerly wind direction, as seen in Storm Arwen, occurs roughly one day in every eight years, with Met Office records showing the last storm of comparable magnitude and similarity occurring in January 1953.

The windspeeds in the north-east were exceptional for the area, exceeding 92mph for several hours in exposed locations and peaking at 98mph, the strongest in this area since 1984.

North Tyneside experienced the impact of six of the named storms in 11 weeks during the 2021/22 winter season, Arwen, Barra, Malik, Corrie, Dudley and Eunice.

9. Response to the Storms

The group were provided information on the forecasted extent of the storms and how the authority prepared, communicated and co-ordinated response activity for each storm.

Many Authority service areas receive calls/reports of incidents, these included areas for Environment, Building Control, Highways, Housing and Property Services, Commissioning and Asset Management and Social Care.

It was acknowledged that the primary priority in any emergency event should and will always be to ensure the safety of life.

In respect only to Storm Arwen, the size of the response was significant, with the following results:

- Door-knocked over **1,000 homes** to identify those without power and provide help to our residents where they needed it

- Identified around **70 people** with social care needs who were without power and made direct contact with them
- Made safe over **100** potentially dangerous structures
- Identified over **400** trees that had fallen, quickly assessing their priority for making safe
- Handled over **5,000** customer contacts (mainly calls but emails too) from residents looking to report damage, report vulnerabilities or to seek general advice from us
- Identified over **800** issues relating to roofs and fencing within our council homes
- **Implemented temporary road closures** to keep people safe from fallen trees, masonry, or other debris
- **Kept the borough** updated via our website, social media and direct messaging to elected members
- Involved around **100** of our staff (and those from our partners) over that weekend.

10. Response Activity - Recommendations

Dealing with Trees

Significant reports and incidents in relation to trees were reported over the weekend of Storm Arwen.

The Authority operates two Tree Team each with 4 staff members, and these were supplemented with suitably trained staff from ground maintenance and in response the authority deployed 3 Tree Teams on Friday and Saturday, with 1 team on the Sunday (providing respite for staff undertaking this demanding activity).

Activity was carried out to inspect and used an established a priority system, this was based on a traffic-light (RAG) rating:

- **Red** – council trees fallen onto properties or where there is clear health and safety concern or danger to life.
- **Amber** – trees on road and pavements (where blocking access to right of way)
- **Green** – trees/branches which have fallen and do not fall into the above categories e.g. tree on green space

It was noted and agreed that the use of the traffic light priority system using RAG Rating when dealing with trees was wholly appropriate.

Reporting incidents online/telephone etc

It was recognised that there were a diverse number of ways that incidents were being received throughout all storm events and that there was a need to consider how the management of incoming incident communications could be improved.

Recommendation

To have consideration to undertake to establish a streamlined mechanism to receive and collate information.

Replacement of trees

It was recognised that the authority had redirected teams from Environmental Services and appointed an arboriculture contractor to assist the Tree Team with aid the clearance of trees.

It was also recognised that consultation was being conducted with residents with regards to tree replacement requests.

Recommendation

When replacing storm damaged trees, there should be consideration to ensure if like for like replacement is appropriate. The group believed that any newly planted tree should be appropriate for the location and future environment.

The replacement of roofs/fencing

It was recognised that repairs would be conducted in accordance with the urgency for repair, with each being assessed for risk and managed appropriately.

It was felt that residents and the wider public should be provided with a realistic timescale of when the outstanding works would be completed. This would be dependent on the availability of resources to carry out the works.

Communication with tenants/resident/public

The group heard that communication to all tenants had taken place in relation to their own property concerns.

However, an issue was raised that communication of the progress of recovery was of interest of the whole of the North Tyneside community and to do this would demonstrate the Authority was continually working towards full recovery.

Continued Recovery

There was a clear understanding that the Authority would carry out its statutory duty to carry out all recovery works.

However, there was a required need to ensure there was a clear understanding to elected members and the public that all recovery work would be prioritised and actioned according to risk and resource availability.

Communication

Public communications were a vital element of the response to Storm Arwen and ensured that as many individuals as possible were aware of the warnings and could take appropriate action. Coordination structures were quickly activated, and the Authority used a range of channels to keep responders, members and the public updated.

The group were informed that the Authority operates online forms for residents to report issues. However, it heard there are a diverse range of methods through which the Authority receives issues, many of which come via social media. There was a recognition that monitoring social media platforms would need to be implemented for receiving issues reporting during major events. An additional concern was that customers may report the same incident/issue on different platforms.

Recommendation

That consideration be given to review and promote comprehensively the best ways the Authority can receive the reporting of incident/issues. This should include the

generation of a reference number that would provide the customer reassurance that their concern has been logged and is traceable.

In relation to the communication with elected members during the winter storm period, communication was regarded as good and effective, with members receiving regular updates via email.

There was recognition that the role of the elected member during emergency events is an asset for the community, through their knowledge and community representation. The elected member can provide clear communication and reassurance to their communities.

On reflection the group thought moving forward, that members should have a direct link to an operational officer, which would allow immediate damage reports being logged.

However, it should be noted that when emergency events occur, elected members should always be aware not to independently action activity as there is a need for response continuity through the initiated actions of the Authority services.

Recommendation

Consideration should be given to explore alternative methods to communicate with elected members, with the proposal to look at using one secure channel to disseminate information to Members.

In its communication with the community, it is paramount to ensure that there is a clear narrative that the Authority is progressing the recovery, however it was emphasised that there required a degree of understanding to the expectation of recovery completion. This would require regular updates to the whole community of the progress of the recovery, not just to those directly affected.

The group was informed that the Authority would continue its openness and accessibility in engaging with the national and local media which aided communication during the winter storms.

In relation to how the Authority ensured its communities were kept abreast of the effects of the winter storms, the group commended the Authority for collaborating with local and national media outlets. The group heard that the Authority officers were available for interview by BBC radio and local TV news, which also showed the work being undertaken by staff.

Financial Cost

The financial cost to the authority as a result of the storms was £0.75m which increased to £1m when incorporating the cost of the additional staff required and was financed through the Authority's insurance reserve.

The group was reassured that the Authority had the correct risk and financial management policies in place to enable it to react appropriate to emergency events of this nature.

Future Planning

The group was informed of the number of policies and plans the Authority has that relate to the weather events, these being:

- Winter Maintenance Policy

- Flood Risk Policy
- Cold Weather Plan
- Heatwave Plan

The group considered there was a need to explore how the experience of the winter storms affected communities, with the expectation that events of this nature would increase because of the effects of climate change.

Recommendation

That consideration be given to explore the development of future policies or enhancing existing policies to deal with the projected increase in events of this nature.

11. Conclusion

By its very nature, resilience and emergency planning practice constantly evolves through experience. This report sought to review how the Authority conducted itself during the storms that occurred during the winter of 2021/22. It is hoped that sharing key themes will support the building of resilience in the future.

The group would like to recognise and express its thanks for the significant work that took place during the Storms - by individuals, neighbours, communities, responders, voluntary groups, businesses, and others who came out in very challenging conditions to provide help to those in need.

The Authority was able to rapidly mobilise staff with the necessary specialist technical skillset to support the range of requirements needed to keep residents and property safe.

It was the view of the group that this activation and effective mobilisation reduced possible further impacts to residents/business within the borough and all staff involved throughout all the storm events worked tirelessly and should be commended.

12. Acknowledgments

Paul Hanson – Chief Executive
Jacqueline Laughton – Assistant Chief Executive
Samantha Dand - Director of Environment
Mark Longstaff - Director of Commissioning and Asset Management
Colin MacDonald - Head of Technical and Regulatory Services
Harry Wearing - Communications and Marketing Manager

13. Background Information

The following documents have been used in the compilation of this report and may be inspected at the offices of the author

Briefing documentation and presentations in relation to:

The Authority's Emergency Planning obligations with weather events

Storm Arwen

Storms Barra, Malik and Corrie and Storms Dudley and Eunice

Lessons Learned