

John McLuckie 0:19

Hello and welcome to this episode of the Argyll and Bute Community Planning Podcast. I'm John McLuckie, Partnerships Lead for Community Planning in Argyll and Bute, and joining me on the podcast today is Rob Taylor, Station Commander for Scottish Fire and Rescue Service across a number of community fire stations in Argyll and Bute and West and East Dunbartonshire. Rob, welcome to the podcast.

Rob Taylor 0:39

Thank you, thank you for the warm welcome.

John McLuckie 0:42

Looking forward to the conversation today. Just to start off, we spoke with your colleague Kevin Rennie a few episodes ago on the podcast. Kevin's Group Commander and we talked about elements like linking to community planning priorities, the prevention agenda, what's going on with wildfires just now, and also some of the work that Scottish Fire and Rescue Service does in communities, but I'd just be interested to start off by finding out a bit about your role in Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

Rob Taylor 1:10

Sure. So, like you said, I'm a Station Commander within the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. I've been working within East and West Dunbartonshire, Argyll and Bute area for approaching 5 years now. As a Station Commander, I have previous experience before that as well and so I manage a group of stations within the area. I've got five stations that I have direct responsibility for and I hold two kind of fairly significant references. One of them is the on-call recruitment and retention, so by on-call, what I'm referring to is we've got 41 stations that we would call on-call stations. So, these are people who firefighting isn't their primary employment, so we have volunteer

duty system stations and retained duty system stations, and alongside that, I also hold the reference for civil contingencies in the area as well, which obviously has a strong impact in community planning and resilience.

John McLuckie 2:08

Of course, yeah. That's quite a breadth of areas of responsibility you've got in there. So, I'm just interested to know a bit more about your background in terms of how it links in with community planning, perhaps how you sort of came to be in your current role, but also maybe a wee bit more about, you know, the on-call element and the civil contingencies element there, obviously, as you say, key in community planning conversations.

Rob Taylor 2:30

Yeah, so I joined the fire service in 1998, worked in sort of an operational frontline role, if you like, for just over 20 years and then I decided it was time for a little change of direction. So, I went into the national planning group for COP26 when it was coming to Glasgow and that was the move that really took me quite strongly towards the civil contingencies elements in community planning.

Whilst we were working on that, as we probably all remember all too well, COVID-19 hit as well, delaying COP 26, but what it also did was it gave me an opportunity to have a really strong involvement in the fire service's involvement in response to that. So, our team were repurposed as the main support group for the Fire and Rescue Service's COVID Tactical Action Group, that's nationwide. So, we helped administer that on behalf of the Assistant Chief Officer at the time, and subsequently I then got asked to become a subject matter expert as much as any of us could be at that time, because it was all very new and emerging, and we developed a team that we called the COVID Advisory Unit and what we did was we worked with partners, particularly across health and sort of supported our local teams right across Scotland with managing what was quite a complicated environment, obviously, in terms of risk and how, if you remember, all the way the different levels and different regions worked and how we could work that, keeping that emphasis on protecting our people and

still providing those statutory services to the public and protecting their communities as a result. And then we went back to COP26 after that, again having that strong background and working with government and local authorities, etc, took me quite naturally into the reference, particularly for the civil contingencies, and actually the on-call reference, looking after them, does very much tie in with it as well.

John McLuckie 4:32

Yeah, yeah, I mean that's taking us up to the present time, if you like, and I guess there's a lot of experience and lessons learned from having been through that level of operation and supporting the COVID response and that element of your work. I'm interested to know maybe a little bit more about the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in terms of some of the recent developments and investments there have perhaps been in Argyll and Bute. I know that comes up in discussion at the Area Community Planning Groups that we have, we have four of those across Argyll and Bute, so I'd just be interested to know a bit more about those if you like.

Rob Taylor 5:06

Yeah, so again, I've been very much involved with those because within Argyll and Bute there has been quite a lot of focus on trying to invest in our on-call stations. I think obviously there's a lot of specific challenges supporting the on-call stations because of the geography of the area, you know, logistical and whatnot and maintaining that feeling of team, making sure that they feel part of the service as a whole, etc. So, these investments have been really important, so probably one of the really big ones that's come in this year is the rollout of, we've managed to bring in 13 and about to be 16 lightweight appliances to our volunteer duty system units right across Argyll and Bute. So, these are brand new machines at a significant cost to the service. We've got three more to arrive soon as well that hopefully arrive within the next couple of months. Again, just really great for us in terms of motivation for the crews, having those new appliances fully kitted out with brand new equipment, right across the appliances, a brand new design. It really is quite a significant investment. On top of that, for some of our smaller stations, we are hoping to take ownership

very soon of ultra lightweight. So, an ultra-lightweight appliance, it's essentially like a pickup, so for some of our stations like Luing, for example, they're not big enough to probably house a large fire appliance. So, these small vehicles give the volunteers an initial response. So, again, three of those coming into the area soon as well, again at great investment. In terms of the immediate future as well, the fire service as a whole is about to roll out a programme of brand new BA sets, so they're just finishing off the tendering process for that. So, next year, 2027, they'll also get that. When I say BA, that's Breathing Apparatus, so they're a really important piece of equipment for our firefighters because it's what essentially allows them to go into a fire environment. So, we're really looking forward to seeing that rolling out. It'll be a big piece of work because it'll entail obviously retraining and whatnot and again, it is a challenge within the area because of the distances, trying to take as much of that training as we can out to our personnel.

There are elements of it where we will have to ask them to come to one of our national training centres, and again, the great thing for Argyll and Bute is that we have Oban as a national training centre as well, so we have that locally, which is really a great facility to have as an area.

John McLuckie 7:34

Excellent. Really interesting as well when you were talking about the ultra-lightweight vehicles and knowing some of the location of the fire stations on some of the islands particularly, and the single-track roads and sometimes there might be farm tracks involved in attending incidents and that sort of thing.

Rob Taylor 7:48

Absolutely, and it's really looking at the vehicles that are most appropriate for the location. So, if we take Seil, for example, you know, you access Seil by bridge and that bridge can't take a full-size fire appliance such as the ones that the whole time and the retained duty system firefighters use. So, really these lightweight ones that I spoke about and ultra-lightweight ones are really much more appropriate vehicles for the areas that they're going to.

The LSO (Local Senior Officer) is really passionate about the area, he has been here for a good few years now, longer than myself, and he does fight really hard for the area, and I think we're working quite hard within my on-call reference in terms of improvements to make it a bit more accessible, because a large part of having an on-call station, I've spoken briefly about recruitment, but there's also the competency because we're potentially asking people, and not as part of their primary employment, to give a substantial commitment and time and effort to protecting our communities. And then on top of that, we're potentially going to ask them to go into a risk environment, whether that be a house fire or a weather event that they're responding to, or an RTC or whatever. So, making sure they've got the right equipment, we spoke about that, but the training as well, and it can be really difficult because the impact of trying to train people on, let's say, Tiree or Coll, where they can have a ferry journey, which is 5 hours each way, to come over to the training centre in Oban and the ferry doesn't go every day, so that can take a few days. So again, we're trying to look at ways of innovating and investing to minimise that impact, but there's always a kind of meeting in the middle somewhere that they do have to give up that significant amount of time to come off periodically to do core training, if you like, to keep that competency, so it's just to keep them safe, so it's a lot of work that goes into it and we're looking to innovate and to improve things for them as we go. We've made a few innovations over the last three or four years that we think have made a bit of a difference, but I think that's the main message. As I said with the community planning thing, we are in a period of time where economically we are short on resource. It's no longer that we're able to just throw money at things, we have to kind of think really with innovation and we have to bring our crew and staff along that journey with us because we don't have all the ideas ourselves, a lot of the time the ideas are coming from them.

John McLuckie 10:23

Yeah, absolutely. I touched on before that community planning has the four Area Community Planning Groups and there's some really interesting data that's shared within these groups on a quarterly basis.

I'm just wondering, is there a way that if people are interested in statistics and data

on your operation, for example in Argyll and Bute, how people could maybe find out a bit more about that?

Rob Taylor 10:46

Yes, so I think the reports you're talking to are from the CPG, the reports that our liaison officers put in. That's our opportunity to share with our partners, in terms of community planning at that local level, snapshots of our operational activity, snapshots of our prevention activity, etc. So, it is really useful information. All of that is available through those groups. Annually, there will be some detail put online. We don't necessarily put all the detail that you would get in your Community Planning Group reports, they feed in through partners and local authorities for sharing if they like, but obviously elements of it aren't really there for open public consumption if you like. But, certainly in terms of activity and stuff, we do our best to promote particularly some of the prevention stuff as best as we can through internal communications and also through the national website for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

John McLuckie 11:41

That's great, thanks very much for clarifying that.

Just if I could go back to the civil contingencies element of your role, and I'm just wondering, does that overlap maybe with some of the challenges that you have in rural communities?

Rob Taylor 12:00

Yes, there certainly is. I also hold vice chair for Argyll and Bute LRP as well. The LRP is the Local Resilience Partnership. Our local area has almost a tradition now, of trying to support the LRP as much as we can and it is quite interesting at the moment, because obviously, I would probably say, traditionally we've been quite focused on site-specific emergency planning and we've got some really interesting and a broad

array of sites and risks within Argyll and Bute as you'll know, but probably the thing that is really coming to the fore now is not so much site-specific, but climate-focused stuff. So, you mentioned when we were speaking earlier about wildfire, but obviously potential flooding events and things that we really have been predicting for a while to see an increase in severity and the number of these events and I think that is really starting to evidence itself now. And obviously we can look at the headlines about the El Nino event at the moment. We're still very unsure, speaking to our Met Office colleagues as to exactly how that will affect UK weather, but what we have seen in the past is that El Nino events seem to have had some element of impact in terms of this coming period, for example, such as named storms, etc., flooding events and stuff. So again, going back to the civil contingencies planning for that, we are working within the LRP, certainly looking at exercising some of our plans for wildfire early next year and hopefully that will be able to reflect some of the lessons learned from the recent Cairngorms fire within that exercise and really test how we are as an area set up for that. And we're also talking obviously about the other side of wildfire if you like, and the opposite is potential wet weather, flooding, storm weather type events as well, and it is, it's a really interesting area and there's a lot of emergency planning groups that we're involved in around Argyll and Bute, particularly in the more remote areas and islands, peninsulas, etc., where we're working with partners to make sure that collectively that we can maintain that community resilience, not just in response and emergency response, but actually to try and get ahead of the curve a little bit and be prepared. Have the resources and the systems, if you like, that we can keep communities resilient.

Your local resilience partnerships are all networked through three regional resilience partnerships, obviously West, North and East. So again, that gives you that and they all link in strategically then to Scottish Government and the whole Ready Scotland idea, and they allow all your category one and two responders to really link in, work together and it gives a really strong network. And it's not just your local authority-led responders, etc, such as fire, police, ambulance, local authority, it brings in a lot of voluntary organisations. It brings in people from the community, so going back down to LRP level, if you like, we had our meeting yesterday for Argyll and Bute.

We had representations there from some climate change partners, Strathclyde 4x4 response who offer four-wheel drive and trailer vehicles, they offer drone services, etc. Again, charitable status, volunteers, but what it's doing is it's creating those networks so that if an event does happen, we've already established those

relationships and that knowledge of what people can bring and starting to think and plan how we work together, because obviously that can be quite complicated as organisations have their own policies, procedures, etc., and just making sure that they integrate really well. So, it's a really exciting area to work in, as I say it's something I'm genuinely really passionate about and I think as an area for Argyll and Bute, I can genuinely say from my experience, it's a really good LRP, very effective, and you know, there's always work to do as was discussed earlier with some of the climate link stuff, for example, these risks are really now emerging. People have called them emerging risks, I've heard the argument that they're not emerging anymore, they're here, and again, it's just as a community trying to get ahead of the curve.

There's an element of thinking outside the box on some of it, because I think we're all aware that we're operating in an economic environment now where resourcing is pretty scarce, so it's coming up with answers that economically kind of make sense as well, that are achievable, and your best asset is your people, isn't it? So, it's really about getting the right people together and making sure we do this planning, we do the exercise and to test it and keep learning the lessons, so it's that continuous lesson cycle as well.

John McLuckie 16:46

Yeah, that's a really good example of community planning in a nutshell. Effectively, you've got public bodies working with community groups, you're embedded in communities, you've got community representation, and you're working in partnership to try and find innovative solutions to things, so that's exactly what community planning is all about.

Rob Taylor 17:08

I can always take it kind of full circle as well, so even within my on-call reference I've changed my approach in that. So, we have some real challenges within some of our areas with recruitment, you know, some stations are down at kind of critical levels in terms of staffing. So, we're trying to change the approach, a bit more like what we've

just talked about for community planning and civil contingencies and actually bring partners in early on when we're planning our recruitment drives, and again, it's trying to link into that network and influence within various community councils, emergency planning groups, etc., because quite often we are part of their plans, you know, having the local fire station there. Some of our stations are on islands, for example, and we are the only service on the island. There is no doctor, no ambulance service based on the island. So again, our stations are really important parts of the community and what's really important to us is that there's a community ownership of it, to a degree, that people feel that it is their community fire station, because the firefighter is no longer just someone who jumps on a red truck in response to fires, they're involved in community work in terms of prevention, etc., trying to reduce the risk before before these things happen. So, yeah, it's really interesting and I wouldn't have maybe thought five years ago that the two would tie in so closely, but they definitely overlap quite a lot.

John McLuckie 18:36

Yeah, community resilience and resilience planning is something that's discussed a lot at Community Planning Partnership Management Committee and in the four Area Community Planning Group levels, so really interesting to know how you're engaging with partners and local communities in terms of that.

Rob, thank you very much for joining me for this episode of the Argyll and Bute Community Planning podcast.

Rob Taylor 19:02

Not at all John, it's been a pleasure and thank you very much for having me.