



The Northumberland Fire Group – Tackling Wildfire Issues

The Northumberland Fire Group (NFG) is a partnership between public agencies, land owners, land managers and others in the private sector. The Fire Group delivers a range of activities to protect rural communities, the rural economy and the natural environment in Northumberland from the potentially devastating impact of wildfires.

The NFG was formed in 2005 and was one of the first multi-agency partnerships to be established in the UK to deal with wildfire issues. The group is now considered a model of good practice.

Membership of the NFG is open to any individual or organisation in Northumberland with an interest in wildfire. Members currently include landowners, land agents, land managers, farmers, emergency services, environmental bodies and other public sector bodies.



Management of the Northumberland Fire Group

The NFG is currently chaired by Angus Collingwood-Cameron of the Northern Farmers and Landowners Group. Angus represents the landowner and land management sector and has significant experience of rural issues and partnership working. The NFG secretariat role is currently provided by Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) and the current secretary is Robert Stacey. Robert is a project officer working within the NFRS wildfire team.

The NFG now receives very limited funding from both the private and public sectors. It thrives due to the in-kind contributions of staff time and premises by all involved in the partnership. Although the initial decline in public sector funding was a challenge, the current method of working has resulted in a greater sense of ownership and hence a stronger partnership. The group meets at least two times per year to review recent wildfire incidents and discuss ongoing and future projects and activities. Additional meetings are also held throughout the year to discuss issues specific to local areas within the County.

Preparing and Responding to Wildfires in Northumberland

The NFG delivers a number of activities that help prepare the County of Northumberland for wildfire incidents and which help to improve and enhance the multiagency response to wildfires that occur. Some of these activities are described overleaf:

- **Wildfire Fire Plans** – Wildfire Fire Plans (WFPs) are an important tool used for planning, preparing and responding to wildfires within the County. WFPs contain key information about an area of land (usually an estate or farm) which can be used to assist wildfire suppression plans and operations. The NFG promotes the importance of the WFPs and requests that all landowners in Northumberland voluntarily complete a plan for the land that they own. Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) currently coordinates the development and maintenance of the WFPs.
- **Wildfire Exercises** - The Fire Group holds an annual multiagency wildfire exercise. These exercises provide an excellent opportunity for Fire Group members to train together and practise their procedures.
- **Heather Burning Guidelines and Workshops** - The Northumberland Fire Group fully supports the national guidelines for England and Wales which are presented within the Heather and Grass Burning Code 2007. The Northumberland Fire Group also supports the delivery of Heather and Grass Burning Workshops that have been developed by Rural Development Initiatives in collaboration with the National Gamekeepers Organisation. For further information about forthcoming workshops, please contact us.
- **Equipment Sharing** - The fire group encourages its members to share equipment that may be used at wildfire incidents. The fire group also encourages its members to make equipment available for use at wildfires that occur outside of their own holdings. Equipment sharing has already been proven to be extremely effective for helping to improve wildfire training and response to wildfire incidents within Northumberland. For example, the land agent company Landmarc, together with the Ministry of Defence, purchased an Argocat specifically for use by NFRS and the NFG. The Argocat is currently used by Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service for wildfire training and at wildfire incidents throughout Northumberland.



The training can be tailored to those working in the Fire and Rescue and land management sectors. Two standard types of wildfire training courses are currently offered to land management and Fire and Rescue personnel:

- 2 day wildfire suppression operations course
- 5 day advanced wildfire suppression and wildfire incident management course

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service also develops bespoke wildfire training courses to meet specific needs and objectives. Click here to find out more about wildfire training.

Raising Awareness of Wildfire Issues

The Northumberland Fire Group aims to protect local communities, the economy, natural environment and cultural heritage of Northumberland by reducing the risk of wildfire occurrence. The key risk reduction activities that are implemented by the group include:

- **Extreme Fire Risk Warning Signs** - The risk of wildfires varies throughout the year. During some periods of the year, wildfire risk may be particularly high – particularly during periods of warm and/or dry weather – and vegetation will be more likely to burn and allow wildfire spread. To help raise awareness of when wildfire risk is high, the NFG provides copies of the signs to all members. NFG members place the signs on areas of their land (often along public footpaths) to raise awareness of the high risk among members of the public using the land. The signs warn members of the public to exercise extreme caution and maintain vigilance. Once the wildfire risk reduces, the signs are removed to ensure they achieve maximum impact and recognition when they are used.
- **Press releases** - The NFG writes and circulates press releases to the local media to raise public awareness of periods of high wildfire risk and other important wildfire issues.
- **Public Awareness DVD** - The NFG created a DVD to raise awareness of the potential damage and disruption that can be caused by wildfires within Northumberland. The DVD also provides information about the simple steps that members of the public can take to reduce the risk of wildfires occurring. The DVD is shown in visitor and community centres across Northumberland and is also available on YouTube at <http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=UjvRhDFRAk>



Northumberland Collaborative Burning Project

The Northumberland Fire Group is currently supporting an innovative collaborative burning project that has been running since 2013. The project has been co-financed by Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service, Northumberland National Park Authority's sustainable development fund and the Cheviot Futures Programme.

This innovative project involves the organisation of prescribed burns which bring together a number of stakeholders to share knowledge, expertise and experience while helping to reduce the potential risks associated with wildfires. Each collaborative burn involves individuals from multiple agencies attending sites



in remote rural locations to plan and implement controlled prescribed burns. The burns are completed to remove vegetation, to ultimately reduce the risk of fire spread, but they are also being used to simulate wildfires in order to provide the opportunity for training with live fire.

Each collaborative burn is meticulously planned and the sites of the burns are specifically identified to ensure that high risk locations are targeted. The high risk areas that have been identified are those that are hard to burn for fuel management, areas that could represent a significant risk to wildfire spread if a wildfire were to occur, and those areas of land where there is a need for additional trained personnel to help support safe and effective controlled burning. The site identification process exemplifies the significant level of partnership working required to make the project a success, with NFRS liaising closely with NNPA, Natural England and land owners/managers to identify sites where burning will have significant positive impacts. For example, some of the burns are being planned to create fire breaks or buffer zones that could help to provide better protection to designated sensitive habitats (for instance Sites of Special Scientific Interest or SSSIs) from wildfires.

All of the collaborative burns have been completed by wildfire trainers and wildfire support officers from Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service, retained fire firefighters who work from the community fire stations in/near the National Park, and local landowners and managers. There are significant benefits of involving multiple agencies in the burns. Firstly, firefighters and land managers get to know one another and can develop a good working relationship, which may be of significant importance if they need to work together in the future during a wildfire incident. Secondly, firefighters and land managers have the opportunity to exchange knowledge and good practice on burning and suppression techniques.



To assist with the burns and associated training, and to further support NFRS's response to wildfire incidents within the Northumberland National Park, the project has also financed the purchase of additional equipment at three fire stations, including: long-handled beaters, pulaskis, backpack sprayers and bespoke maps of the National Park area.

The experience of all the organisations and individuals involved in the Northumberland Collaborative Burning Project has so far been extremely positive. The project has provided an effective mechanism through which NFRS and NNPA can work very closely with local landowners and managers to identify, assess and manage wildfire risk. One of the important successes of the project so far is that the various activities that have been organised to date have helped a range of local stakeholders to better understand each other's' knowledge, skills, experience and priorities with regards to prescribed burning and wildfire.

Following the successes of this initial three year project, NFRS, NNPA and the NFG are now designing and planning for a second phase project. This second phase will include the delivery of further specialist wildfire



training to the three stations targeted in phase one, but will also include purchase of equipment and delivery of additional training to at least one other fire station situated toward the southern end of the Northumberland National Park. Phase two will also look to identify a number of new burning sites that represent a high risk and which could benefit from collaborative burning.

If you would like any further information¹ about the Northumberland Collaborative Burning Project, please visit the website <http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Default.aspx?page=4604> or contact robert.stacey@northumberland.gov.uk

Why should I join the Fire Group?

The Northumberland Fire Group exists to save money and protect life, property, rural livelihoods and the environment. At the core of everything the Northumberland Fire Group does is the desire to preserve Northumberland's unique environmental surroundings.

If you or your organisation could be affected by wildfires, then you could benefit from joining the Northumberland Fire Group. The benefits include:

- On-site support to complete your fire plan
- Access to training courses related to wildfire and land management burning
- Invitations to attend and contribute to annual wildfire training exercises
- Invitations to attend fire group meetings

Further information

If you would like any further information please visit the website at <http://firegroup.northumberland.gov.uk> or please contact us:

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¹ Further information about the Northumberland National Park Authority Sustainable Development Fund can be found online at:

<http://www.northumberlandnationalpark.org.uk/livingin/grantsandsupport/sustainabledevelopmentfund>