



Jeremy Chipperfield
H M Senior Coroner
Civic Centre
North Terrace
Crook
DL15 9ES

29 October 2021

Dear Mr Chipperfield,

Re: Response to **REGULATION 28 REPORT TO PREVENT FUTURE DEATHS for Newton Cap Viaduct**

I am writing to you in response to the request made under paragraph 7, [Schedule 5, of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009](#) and Regulations [28](#) and [29](#) of the Coroners (Investigations) Regulations 2013 on the 7th September 2021.

This request relates to the tragic death of Joseph William Dent, aged 18 from Newton Cap Viaduct, which occurred on 20th June 2021 and was investigated by your office from 28th June 2021. The conclusion of the Outcome of Mr Dent's death is registered as an Open Verdict.

The death of Mr Dent has led to you raising Matters of Concern which require Durham County Council to consider action in regard to the following points:

- 1) the bridge's parapet and railing is accessible to pedestrians on the bridge;
- 2) the bridge is frequently discussed on social media as suitable location for suicide by jumping;
- 3) there is absence of monitored CCTV and lighting or other means of detecting those at immediate risk; and
- 4) there is a risk of death to persons falling AND to those near the foot of the bridge at any time when persons fall

Durham County Council take the prevention of suicide very seriously. We host a Suicide Prevention Alliance which brings a range of partners together including primary care, Durham Constabulary, Fire and Rescue, mental health services and VCSE to implement evidence-based plans based on the recommendations made by Public Health England

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Chief Executive

Durham County Council, County Hall, Durham DH1 5UF
Main Telephone (03000) 26 00000

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(PHE) to reduce rates of suicide within local communities. The Alliance meets on a quarterly basis and was maintained throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/939479/PHE_LA_Guidance_25_Nov.pdf

As you are aware, we have developed a Real Time Data Surveillance (RTDS) system which works in partnership with your Office to monitor potential deaths by suicide in County Durham. Any deaths occurring within a particular timeframe (between 6-12-months), within a specific geographical location, or indicating the potential for social connections between deaths initiates a Multi-agency Assurance Review (MAAR) meeting. The MAAR enables partners to consider any community response required to prevent the rippling effect of the death as recommended by PHE.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/839621/PHE_Suicide_Cluster_Guide.pdf

The death of Mr Dent triggered a MAAR on 24th June 2021, which resulted in a community response in the Bishop Auckland area. This comprised of action including:

- the dissemination of information relating to community mental health and wellbeing support services via network channels including local GP's, schools, the Area Action Partnership (AAP) and local workplaces.
- the mobilisation of Educational Psychologists, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Crisis Teams and Emergency Departments to ensure any requirements for early interventions were fast tracked.
- Engagement of If U Care Share (IUCS) as the commissioned service for post-vention referral.
- training provided to local community and voluntary sector organisations on suicide prevention.
- Consideration of the potential to implement lighting and CCTV on the viaduct (subject to a Feasibility Study and Planning Application).
- Actions planned in the area in a lead up to World Mental Health Day (10th October 2021).

In terms of your concerns about the reporting of potential deaths by suicide on social media, this provides a challenge for all local councils. Work is taking place on a regional Integrated Care System (ICS) basis to explore methods for addressing the issue directly with social media companies. However, the County Durham Public Health Department continues to advocate recommendations made within Samaritans Media Guidance and regularly liaises with media outlets to help promote sensitive reporting on suicides. Corporate social media methods are also used to promote positive mental health and wellbeing messages to de-escalate public perceptions. Samaritan signage is present on Newton Cap Viaduct with relevant support phone numbers for those finding themselves in distress.

https://media.samaritans.org/documents/Media_Guidelines_FINAL_v2_TABa8C6.pdf

Floral tributes for those involved in road traffic accidents may exacerbate the perception that suicides from this location are frequent. We have worked with the council's Area Action Partnership and local Elected Members to try and address these perceptions without drawing further attention to the viaduct as a high frequency location.

The Council's RTDS system suggests there have been 3 deaths by suicide since 2014.

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However, there seems to be a small discrepancy in the Regulation 28 Report data suggesting this is over the last 5-years. Data supplied by County Durham Fire Service indicates they have received 10 callouts to the viaduct since 2009 (YTD) relating to suspected suicides/ suicide attempts. Durham Constabulary data suggests they received 37 call outs for the period September 2020 to August 2021 relating to concern, collapse, injury or illness. However, this data cannot be disaggregated to be more specific in relation to suicide attempts. We are trying to rectify this issue by continuing to work with police colleagues to enable their data fields to reflect the number of call outs relating to attempted suicide.

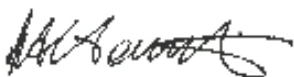
In 2018, the Council's Public Health department produced a High Frequency Location Report for Suicide Prevention, which reviewed a number of high-risk geographical locations across County Durham, including Newton Cap Viaduct. This review initiated a Feasibility Study (2019) which was undertaken to assess options for any suicide prevention measures specifically for Newton Cap Viaduct. After the unprecedented public health protection pressures on the Council during the Covid-19 pandemic subsided, a further options appraisal was developed, and a preferred option (Option 1) was identified. On 15th September 2021, the Council's Corporate Management Team (CMT) requested further detailed work be undertaken on Option 1 to consider the possibility of mounting an additional fence to the face of the concrete parapet upstand of the structure on both east and west elevations. This Option is regarded as the only one that will offer a significantly increased level of suicide prevention.

This more detailed work also includes the requirement for assessments on the impact for road traffic accidents if a barrier was to be installed, Listed Building Consent, Planning Consent and a full design and approval process. The council is currently sourcing an external consultant versed in the speciality of 'designing out suicide' to progress next steps. Any changes made to the viaduct will depend on the ability of the structure's foundations to host any suggested measures whilst also accommodating wind speeds and the needs of local residents, road users, cyclists and conservation. A provisional date for the completion of this assessment work still requires formal confirmation from the provider.

The assessment process will also include any potential for lighting and CCTV to be implemented at an earlier stage (yet to be confirmed), which addresses concerns raised in the Regulation 28 report. A Suicide Prevention Reference Group has been initiated to project manage this work and govern the representation of residents and people using the viaduct and the paths below. This group met for the first time on 11th October 2021. Full updates from this group on progress of this work can be given to your Office on a regular basis.

I hope this information provides you with an overview and assurance of the work undertaken by Durham County Council to reduce deaths from suicide across the county and more specifically in regard to Newton Cap Viaduct. Please do not hesitate to contact us again if you require further information or recommend any further action to that set out.

Yours sincerely,




Chief Executive Officer