



Northumberland County Council

Your ref:

Our ref:

Enquiries to: Karon Hadfield

Email: karon.hadfield@northumberland.gov.uk

Tel direct:

Date: 12 March 2024

Dear Sir or Madam,

Your attendance is requested at a meeting of the **COUNTY COUNCIL** to be held in **COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNTY HALL** on **WEDNESDAY, 20 MARCH 2024** at **2.00 PM**.

Yours faithfully

Dr Helen Paterson
Chief Executive

To County Council members as follows:-

C Ball, D Bawn, J Beynon, L Bowman, S Bridgett, D Carr, E Cartie, G Castle, T Cessford, E Chicken, T Clark, A Dale, W Daley, L Darwin, S Dickinson, R Dodd, C Dunbar, L Dunn, P Ezhilchelvan, S Fairless-Aitken, D Ferguson, B Flux (Chair), J Foster, B Gallacher, L Grimshaw, C Hardy, G Hill, C Horncastle, C Humphrey, I Hunter, JI Hutchinson, P Jackson, V Jones, D Kennedy, J Lang, S Lee, M Mather, N Morphet, M Murphy, K Nisbet, N Oliver, K Parry, W Pattison, W Ploszaj, M Purvis, J Reid, G Renner-Thompson, M Richardson, J Riddle, M Robinson, G Sanderson, A Scott, C Seymour, A Sharp, E Simpson, G Stewart, M Swinbank, M Swinburn, C Taylor, T Thorne, D Towns, H Waddell, A Wallace, A Watson, J Watson, R Wearmouth and R Wilczek

Council meetings are streamed live on the Council's Youtube channel, Northumberland TV at

[NorthumberlandTV - YouTube](#)



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AGENDA

PART I

It is expected that the matters included in this part of the agenda will be dealt with in public.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

2. MINUTES

(Pages 1
- 22)

Minutes of the meeting of County Council held on Wednesday 21 February 2024, as circulated, to be confirmed as a true record.

3. DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Unless already entered in the Council's Register of Members' interests, members are required where a matter arises at a meeting;

- a. Which **directly relates to** Disclosable Pecuniary Interest ('DPI') as set out in Appendix B, Table 1 of the Code of Conduct, to disclose the interest, not participate in any discussion or vote and not to remain in room. Where members have a DPI or if the matter concerns an executive function and is being considered by a Cabinet Member with a DPI they must notify the Monitoring Officer and arrange for somebody else to deal with the matter.
- b. Which **directly relates to** the financial interest or well being of a Other Registrable Interest as set out in Appendix B, Table 2 of the Code of Conduct to disclose the interest and only speak on the matter if members of the public are also allowed to speak at the meeting but otherwise must not take part in any discussion or vote on the matter and must not remain the room.
- c. Which **directly relates to** their financial interest or well-being (and is not DPI) or the financial well being of a relative or close associate, to declare the interest and members may only speak on the matter if members of the public are also allowed to speak. Otherwise, the member must not take part in discussion or vote on the matter and must leave the room.
- d. Which **affects** the financial well-being of the member, a relative or close associate or a body included under the Other Registrable Interests column in Table 2, to disclose the interest and apply the test set out at paragraph 9 of Appendix B before deciding whether they may remain in the meeting.
- e. Where Members have or a Cabinet Member has an Other Registerable Interest or Non Registerable Interest in a matter being considered in exercise of their executive function, they must notify the Monitoring Officer and arrange for somebody else

to deal with it.

NB Any member needing clarification must contact monitoringofficer@northumberland.gov.uk. Members are referred to the Code of Conduct which contains the matters above in full. Please refer to the guidance on disclosures at the rear of this agenda letter.

4. ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE CHAIR, LEADER, MEMBERS OF THE CABINET, CHAIR OF AN OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE OR HEAD OF PAID SERVICE

5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

To receive questions provided on notice from and to provide answers to the public in accordance with the Council's Procedure Rules.

6. MEMBER QUESTIONS

To receive questions provided on notice from and to provide answers to Members of the Council in accordance with the Council's Procedure Rules.

7. REPORT OF THE DEPUTY LEADER AND CABINET MEMBER FOR CORPORATE SERVICES (Pages 23 - 32)

Annual Portfolio Report – Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Corporate Services

This is the Annual Report from the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Corporate Services. The report contains issues that set the context for delivery of the Portfolio. It highlights achievements over the past year and, outlines the areas of focus for the coming year.

8. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR CARING FOR ADULTS (Pages 33 - 42)

Annual Portfolio Report – Caring for Adults

This is the Annual Report from the Cabinet Member for Caring for Adults. The report contains issues that set the context for delivery of the Portfolio. It highlights achievements over the past year and, outlines the areas of focus for the coming year

9. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR SUPPORTING BUSINESS AND OPPORTUNITIES (Pages 43 - 74)

Annual Portfolio Report – Supporting Business and Opportunities

This is the Annual Report from the Cabinet Member for Supporting Business and Opportunities. The report contains issues that set the context for delivery of the Portfolio. It highlights achievements over the past year and, outlines the areas of focus for the coming year.

- 10. REPORT OF THE LEADER** (Pages 75 - 98)
Annual Achievements Report 2023-24
To highlight key achievements of the Council in the year 2023-24.
- 11. REPORT OF THE LEADER** (Pages 99 - 134)
Corporate Peer Review Report
This report summarises the process of the Council's recent Corporate Peer Review, shares the Report of the Peer Review Team, and proposes further actions including ongoing activities, which respond positively to the Peer Review Team's recommendations
- 12. REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF LAW AND CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AND MONITORING OFFICER** (Pages 135 - 138)
The purpose of this report is to assure Council that all appropriate steps have been taken such that future decisions will be in full compliance with the law and guidance. There is no ongoing issue, all steps to remedy the flawed process have been taken and adopted.
- 13. REPORT OF THE CHAIR OF THE STAFF AND APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE** (Pages 139 - 142)
Proposed reconfiguration of role of Director of Integrated Commissioning and Performance – Adults, Ageing and Wellbeing
The purpose of this report is to consider the recommendation of the Staff and Appointments Committee held on 22 February 2024 that confirmed staffing budget be utilised to increase the establishment from 0.5 FTE by a further 0.5 FTE to create a 1.0 FTE role.
- 14. REPORT OF THE CHAIR OF THE STAFF AND APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE** (Pages 143 - 152)
Appointment of the Preferred Candidate for the Position of Assistant Chief Fire Officer
In accordance with the Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) Regulations 2001, matters relating to the appointment of an Assistant Chief Fire Officer are reserved to the Full Council. The purpose of this report is to consider the recommendation of the Staff and Appointments Committee held on 22nd February 2024 to appoint Stephen Kennedy to the role of Assistant Chief Fire Officer (published report attached at Appendix A).
- 15. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**
The Council is invited to consider passing the following resolution:

(a) That under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following items on the agenda as they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Part I of Schedule 12A of the 1972 Act, and

(b) That the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure for the following reasons:-

Agenda Item 16

Paragraph of Part I of Schedule 12A

Paragraphs 1 and 2 - Information relating to an individual and information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual .

AND

The public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the interest in disclosure because disclosure could adversely affect the Authority's interests.

16. REPORT OF THE CHAIR OF THE STAFF AND APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE

(Pages
153 -
160)

Appointment of the Preferred Candidate for the Position of Assistant Chief Fire Officer

To consider a confidential appendix in relation to item 14 on this agenda.

IF YOU HAVE AN INTEREST AT THIS MEETING, PLEASE:

- Declare it and give details of its nature before the matter is discussed or as soon as it becomes apparent to you.
- Complete this sheet and pass it to the Democratic Services Officer.

Name:		Date of meeting:	
Meeting:			
Item to which your interest relates:			
Nature of Interest i.e. either disclosable pecuniary interest (as defined by Table 1 of Appendix B to the Code of Conduct, Other Registerable Interest or Non-Registerable Interest (as defined by Appendix B to Code of Conduct) (please give details):			
Are you intending to withdraw from the meeting?		Yes - <input type="checkbox"/>	No - <input type="checkbox"/>

Registering Interests

Within 28 days of becoming a member or your re-election or re-appointment to office you must register with the Monitoring Officer the interests which fall within the categories set out in **Table 1 (Disclosable Pecuniary Interests)** which are as described in "The Relevant Authorities (Disclosable Pecuniary Interests) Regulations 2012". You should also register details of your other personal interests which fall within the categories set out in **Table 2 (Other Registerable Interests)**.

"Disclosable Pecuniary Interest" means an interest of yourself, or of your partner if you are aware of your partner's interest, within the descriptions set out in Table 1 below.

"Partner" means a spouse or civil partner, or a person with whom you are living as husband or wife, or a person with whom you are living as if you are civil partners.

1. You must ensure that your register of interests is kept up-to-date and within 28 days of becoming aware of any new interest, or of any change to a registered interest, notify the Monitoring Officer.
2. A 'sensitive interest' is as an interest which, if disclosed, could lead to the councillor, or a person connected with the councillor, being subject to violence or intimidation.
3. Where you have a 'sensitive interest' you must notify the Monitoring Officer with the reasons why you believe it is a sensitive interest. If the Monitoring Officer agrees they will withhold the interest from the public register.

Non participation in case of disclosable pecuniary interest

4. Where a matter arises at a meeting which directly relates to one of your Disclosable Pecuniary Interests as set out in **Table 1**, you must disclose the interest, not participate in any discussion or vote on the matter and must not remain in the room unless you have been granted a dispensation. If it is a 'sensitive interest', you do not have to disclose the nature of the interest, just that you have an interest.

Dispensation may be granted in limited circumstances, to enable you to participate and vote on a matter in which you have a disclosable pecuniary interest.

5. Where you have a disclosable pecuniary interest on a matter to be considered or is being considered by you as a Cabinet member in exercise of your executive function, you must notify the Monitoring Officer of the interest and must not take any steps or further steps in the matter apart from arranging for someone else to deal with it.

Disclosure of Other Registerable Interests

6. Where a matter arises at a meeting which **directly relates** to the financial interest or wellbeing of one of your Other Registerable Interests (as set out in **Table 2**), you must disclose the interest. You may speak on the matter only if members of the public are also allowed to speak at the meeting but otherwise must not take part in any discussion or vote on the matter and must not remain in the room unless you have been granted a dispensation. If it is a 'sensitive interest', you do not have to disclose the nature of the interest.

Disclosure of Non-Registerable Interests

7. Where a matter arises at a meeting which **directly relates** to your financial interest or well-being (and is not a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest set out in **Table 1**) or a financial interest or well-being of a relative or close associate, you must disclose the interest. You may speak on the matter only if members of the public are also allowed to speak at the meeting. Otherwise you must not take part in any discussion or vote on the matter and must not remain in the room unless you have been granted a dispensation. If it is a 'sensitive interest', you do not have to disclose the nature of the interest.
8. Where a matter arises at a meeting which **affects** –
- a. your own financial interest or well-being;
 - b. a financial interest or well-being of a relative or close associate; or
 - c. a financial interest or wellbeing of a body included under Other Registrable Interests as set out in **Table 2** you must disclose the interest. In order to determine whether you can remain in the meeting after disclosing your interest the following test should be applied
9. Where a matter (referred to in paragraph 8 above) **affects** the financial interest or well- being:
- a. to a greater extent than it affects the financial interests of the majority of inhabitants of the ward affected by the decision and;
 - b. a reasonable member of the public knowing all the facts would believe that it would affect your view of the wider public interest

You may speak on the matter only if members of the public are also allowed to speak at the meeting. Otherwise, you must not take part in any discussion or vote on the matter and must not remain in the room unless you have been granted a dispensation.

If it is a 'sensitive interest', you do not have to disclose the nature of the interest.

Where you have an Other Registerable Interest or Non-Registerable Interest on a matter to be considered or is being considered by you as a Cabinet member in exercise of your executive function, you must notify the Monitoring Officer of the interest and must not take any steps or further steps in the matter apart from arranging for someone else to deal with it.

Agenda Item 2

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Northumberland County Council** held on Wednesday 21 February 2024 at County Hall, Morpeth at 2.00 pm.

PRESENT

Councillor B. Flux (Chairman in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Bawn, D.	Nisbet, K.
Beynon, J.	Oliver, N.
Bowman, L.	Parry, K.
Carr, D.	Pattison, W.
Cartie, E.	Ploszaj, W.F.
Castle, G.	Purvis, M.
Cessford, T.	Reid, J.
Chicken, E.	Renner-Thompson, G.
Clark, T.	Richardson, M.
Dale, A.	Riddle, J.R.
Daley, W.	Robinson, M.
Darwin, L.	Sanderson, H.G.H.
Dickinson, S.	Scott, A.
Dodd, R.	Seymour, C.
Dunn, E.	Sharp, A.
Fairless-Aitken, S.	Simpson, E.
Ferguson, D.	Stewart, G.
Hardy, C.R.	Swinbank, M.
Horncastle, C.	Swinburn, M.
Hunter, I.E.	Taylor, C.A.
Hutchinson, J.I.	Thorne, T.N.
Jackson, P.A.	Towns, D.
Jones, V.	Waddell, H.
Kennedy, D.	Wallace, A.
Lang, J.A.	Watson, J.
Lee, S.	Wearmouth, R.W.
Mather, M.	Wilczek, R.
Morphet, N.	

OFFICERS

Binning, G.	Chief Fire Officer
Bradley, N.	Executive Director – Adults, Ageing and Wellbeing
Elsdon, A.	Director of Finance and Procurement
Gerrard, S.	Director of Law and Corporate Governance (MO)
Hadfield, K.	Democratic Services Manager
Hunter, P.	Assistant Chief Executive

Kingham, A.	Executive Director – Children and Young People
Masson, N.	Deputy Monitoring Officer
Neilson, S.	Executive Director of Place and Regeneration
O'Neill, G.	Executive Director - Public Health, Inequalities, and Stronger Communities
Paterson, Dr H.	Chief Executive
Willis, J.	Executive Director for Resources & Transformation (S151)

Four members of the press and public were present

60. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Bridgett, Foster, Hill, Grimshaw and Murphy.

61. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of County Council held on Wednesday, 17 January 2024, be confirmed as a true record.

62. DISCLOSURES OF MEMBERS INTERESTS

The Chair reminded members that they did not need to declare a disclosable pecuniary interest in the council tax or precept so they were entitled to vote on the matter.

63. THE BUDGET

The Chair advised that he intended to take all of the budget related matters (i.e. 7.1 to .7 on the agenda) under one debate. He made some further introductory remarks, and reminded members that the recommendations in relation to items 7.4 and 75 on the agenda had been consolidated into one document which had been circulated to members. He then invited the Leader to present the budget.

The Leader advised that the proposed budget had been based on extensive consultation and he was grateful to everyone who had responded to it. It was a budget for everyone, which again had been based on the three key priorities. In terms of value for money, residents would benefit because front line services were being protected, more was being invested in roads, schools, leisure services, libraries, the climate and environment policy, major projects across the County and many other areas of investment.

Regarding tackling inequalities, he referred to the council tax support scheme and the compact with key partners in the inequalities field. Some great work

was being done by the Health and Wellbeing Board and in communities across the County, and in encouraging the development of new skills.

Regarding investment in business, he referred to the Northumberland Line, investment in Blyth and Ashington, investment in rural development, the benefits of the new mayoral combined authority and the maintenance of free town centre parking. Finally he paid tribute to the Chief Executive and the S151 Officer for the changes they had effected in the Council and in producing the budget. He moved the recommendations, which was seconded by Councillor Wearmouth. Some questions were asked as follows:-

- Councillor Reid queried whether Parish Councils could double their precept, as was being proposed for the council tax on second homes. Councillor Wearmouth confirmed that a parish council could set its own precept at whatever level it wished but could not levy its own second home taxation. Councillor Reid then asked whether any of this funding would be passed onto parish councils and the Leader responded that this would be considered.
- Councillor Morphet asked whether the empty homes premium would be applied retrospectively . Councillor Wearmouth confirmed that it would not.
- Councillor Robinson asked how many responses there had been to the consultation. The Leader replied that 388 had been received but there had also been a lot of other consultation activity.

The Chair then opened the meeting up for debate.

- Councillor Dickinson commented that the budget contained a large rent increase for the second year running, amounting to £30 a month extra which was a lot to find for those on low incomes. £0.5m was being lost from family hubs and £400,000 from adolescent services, which was a vital support post covid. £0.5m was proposed to be cut from the community plan which did not support the aim of empowering communities. Residents responding to the consultation had indicated that they were supportive of the elderly but the budget contained £3.8m of cuts to adult social care and cuts to young people's services. He did not support a consultation where outside organisations were involved in discussions before the Council's own members. The report also identified £3.77m worth of BEST savings which were being evaluated by external consultants. Members didn't know the detail of these but were expected to vote on them, and the Peer Review team had recently indicated that members should have more information about the BEST programme. He acknowledged that there were some good things in the budget but felt that open dialogue between members was needed in order to ensure residents got the services they needed.
- Councillor Morphet felt that the Administration and the S151 Officer had done a good job out of a bad situation but Cabinet had chosen to support the Government's line of the erosion of local government services. Members were being pushed to approve a 4.59% increase in council tax as a result, to eat even further into reserves and to make savings of £10.8m which would disproportionately affect women. His group would not be supporting the budget.

- Councillor Horncastle reminded members that the Housing Revenue Account was a ring fenced account which was financed purely by rents. These funded the repairs and maintenance programme, affordable housing and contributed to meeting the Government's energy efficiency targets and the Housing Regulation Bill. All other authorities and social landlords were having to do the same thing. 70% of Council tenants did not pay rent. Of the 30% that did, they were supported by the Council's hardship fund which had been under utilised last year.
- Councillor Bawn commented that setting a budget and being in opposition were both difficult jobs at budget time. He felt a weak argument against the budget had been made by the opposition for what was a balanced and sensible budget. The proposed Council Tax increase was dwarfed by the rise proposed by the Police and Crime Commissioner for the police precept. No alternative to the budget was being offered by the opposition and he urged all members to support it.
- Councillor Reid commented that of the 388 responses, 16 of those were councillors indicating that these respondents were so detached from the consultation with members, they felt the only way to get their voice heard was to complete the public consultation document. He referred to a number of elements in the consultation that the Administration wasn't taking heed of and could not therefore understand why so much effort was taken on the consultation, when the results seemingly did not determine where money was spent or cuts made. Policy conferences were not how members wanted to be engaged with. This should be done by small groups of members talking to chief officers where choices could be made. He suggested that a task and finish group representing all groups be formed for next year so they could report back in an informed way to their groups. All the effort should be put into engaging with the decision makers which would then provide the Administration with a proper steer. He also referred to the judgement of the external auditor that the Council was not providing value for money.
- Councillor Castle commented that the Council should always be looking at value for money and this was being achieved wherever possible. This year had seen the most comprehensive consultation process, and whilst 388 responses wasn't a large response rate, everyone had been given the opportunity to have their say and it was not a referendum. He had completed the form as a member, adding that all members had access to officers for advice.
- Councillor Pattison referred to the comments on the savings to the adult social care budget which had not been accurate. It was hoped to make £3m of efficiencies, which were not the same as cuts, and individual cases were being looked at with case managers to see what would meet their assessed needs in an efficient way.
- Councillor Oliver felt it was important to see the context in which the budget had been put together on the back of a pandemic, rising costs and the war in Ukraine. He felt that the years of careful budget management allowed the Council to continue investing in communities and business opportunities. The budget was also good for the west of the County which hadn't always been the case, and he urged members to commend it.
- Councillor Ball commented that she understood consultation meant listening to what came back from those being consulted. She had asked in the Scrutiny meeting what changes had been made as a result of what had come out of the

consultation and she was still waiting for an answer. She didn't think residents had been listened to on the budget, nor was all the budget information available at the Scrutiny meeting, so she questioned how members could make an informed decision. More funding was needed for the voluntary and community sector as more services were pushed their way. The claims the Administration made about what was happening on the ground could not be borne out.

- Councillor Dale commented that all Councils were struggling to set their budget because the Government had not completed its fair funding review. She felt there was a need to go back to base budgeting taking into account the Council's key performance indicators. She felt that an assessment needed to be made of the value of the consultation exercise. In the west of the County, the major issue for residents was the state of the roads.
- Councillor Hunter welcomed the investment planned for Berwick and hoped that it would all be delivered in the next few years of the MTFP. She also hoped that as much external funding for The Maltings as possible could be found. She did have some concerns about using reserves to balance the budget as this was not sustainable.
- Councillor Dodd commented that it had been the case in previous years that some alternative budget proposals had been put forward by the opposition.
- Councillor Ezhilchelvan commented that members should be focussing on what the budget said, what it aimed to deliver and how it was defined. He felt it was the most balanced and multi objective budget that could be achieved in the current economic climate. Baseline services were being protected whilst at the same time, investments were being made in the future. Good achievements were also being made in tackling inequalities.
- Councillor Mather thanked the Administration and officers for producing this budget, adding that he would have liked to have seen an opposition budget. He referred to a meeting of the inequalities working group which had taken place in his area recently and which had highlighted the great work being done. A significant amount of funding was allocated in the budget over the next two years to tackle potholes and U and C roads, and he thanked the Leader and Cabinet for listening to what people wanted.
- Councillor Robinson commented the report had more information and explanation of budget matters than ever before, which was to be welcomed. However, he was concerned about the number of assumptions which it contained. He was one of the members who had complete the questionnaire, and he felt that the questions had been very leading. His own residents wanted the Council to deliver the basics better and forget about vanity projects.
- Councillor Kennedy commented that every year the current Administration had been in power they had increased the Council Tax by the maximum, making a Band D property now £2,076 per year. However, the plan was also to use reserves to balance the budget in the amount of £16.5m. This was not sustainable given the current level of reserves. He also remarked that households had already received their bills for garden waste collection, at the higher rate proposed in the budget, on the authority of an officer. This did not make members feel engaged with the budget and took decision making away from members. He then referred to an allocation of £5m mentioned in a Conservative election leaflet for the last by election, which had been ringfenced for Hexham, and which had now been removed and put into a

- general fund. He also asked why the masterplan for the Hexham Middle School site had taken three years to produce.
- Councillor Renner Thompson commended a budget which was based on the Children's Services capital programme with new schools across the County, new SEN provision and new sports facilities,. The Council's family hubs set up had been recognised by the Government and renowned Labour MPs as one of the best in the country. Funding had not been taken away from them, in fact they would receive a further £0.5m grant from the Government to replace funding coming out of the central budget. He thanked the Administration for listening to his concerns about public toilets with provision in the budget for keeping them open during the winter, and welcomed the additional funding for U and C roads.
 - Councillor Riddle defended the Council's work on potholes, which included dedicated gangs, and reminded members about the additional funding in the budget over and above the LTP programme. There were five gully cleansers in the County, not one as had been commented, and area managers had the authority to hire in additional resource as needed. The Administration had listened, as one of the things which had come out of the town and parish council forum had been to keep public toilets open during the winter, and those who currently paid for this would not be paying in future.
 - Councillor Waddell felt members needed to remember that they were there in the chamber to represent the public, and not to repeat what they had been briefed to say. She asked what Councillor Pattison believed the difference to be between an efficiency and a cut. As a social worker, she understood how these efficiencies affected the people she worked with as it was her role to explain the changes to them. She urged members to think from residents' point of view and consider what they were voting for today.
 - Councillor Wilczek commented that some members had not received their agenda papers until Saturday. She welcomed the EIA for the budget but felt one should be done for the budget setting process itself because as a working parent, she did not feel she had had sufficient time to read through a lot of documentation. Regarding the budget itself, Bedlington was mentioned once and it related to funds from last year, phase 1 and phase 2. She queried what the plan was for the town centre.

Councillor Wearmouth felt the budget was an excellent one for the Council and the people of Northumberland. The signs could already be seen across Northumberland of the progress which had been made in areas such as the unemployment rate and average wage rates. There were always ways to do things more efficiently and this was what would be delivered by the BEST programme. The Administration was spending £40m to deliver an ambitious affordable housing programme and major capital projects were planned for Blyth, Ashington and Bedlington through various funding mechanisms. Residents had been listened to and £36m put into the budget to fix roads and pavements. He urged members to support the budget.

The Leader then summed up and reminded members of some of the key proposals contained within it.

The Chair then led members through the recommendations for each report.

63.1 Budget 2024-25 – Report under Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003

The report provided Members with information on the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of reserves in the Cabinet’s budget proposals for 2024-25. Provision of this information was a legal requirement and ensured that all Members had regard to the professional authoritative advice provided by the Council’s Chief Financial Officer when final budget decisions were being made at the meeting.

RESOLVED that members note the report and the opinions contained and set out in the report regarding the Budget and the level of Council Tax for 2024-25.

63.2 Budget Engagement Report

The report provided a summary of engagement on the Council’s Budget which commenced in July 2023 and included a Budget Survey which closed on 26th January 2024. This engagement helped to inform the Council’s Budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan.

RESOLVED that the Budget engagement activities and the summary results of the Budget Consultation Survey undertaken between December and January 2024 be noted.

63.3 Budget 2024-25, Medium Term Financial Plan 2024-28 and 30 Year Business Plan for the Housing Revenue Account

The report sought Council approval for the updated Budget 2024-25, Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2024-28 and 30-year Business plan for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

On the recommendations being put to the vote there voted FOR: 37; AGAINST: 22; ABSTENTIONS: 3.

RESOLVED that:-

(a) Council approve the Housing Revenue Account 2024-25 budget as detailed within Appendix 1, which will reduce the balance on the HRA reserve from £28.175 million at 31 March 2024, to £19.193 million at 31 March 2025; and note the indicative budgets to 2027-28 which will reduce the balance of the HRA reserve to £13.708 million;

(b) Council note that from 1 April 2024, social housing rent will be increased by Consumer Price Index (CPI) plus 1.00% as per the previously agreed Rent Standard. The budget detailed in Appendix 1 assumes that rents will rise by CPI 6.70% plus 1.00% with recoverable service charges also rising by CPI plus 1.00% for the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025;

(c) Council approve the increase of 7.70% for housing rents from 1 April 2024 in line with the Government rent standard;

- (d) Council approve the increase of 7.70% for housing service charges from 1 April 2024;
- (e) Council approve the Non-Recurrent Growth Item Hardship Fund of £0.350 million for 2024-25 to support NCC tenants who may, due to their income, not be eligible to receive any financial assistance through existing benefits (Housing Benefit/Universal Credit/Discretionary Housing Payment) (detailed in points 6.5 & 6.11);
- (f) Council approve that any unspent balance in relation to the Hardship Fund for 2023-24, can be carried forward as an earmarked reserve into 2024-25 (detailed in point 6.5) and added to the 2024-25 in-year budget allocation;
- (g) Council note the indicative 30-year Housing Revenue Account business plan as detailed within Appendix 1’;
- (h) Council approve the estimated pay inflationary increase for 2024-25 of 4.00% totalling £0.447 million (detailed in point 6.10);
- (l) Council approve the Non-Pay Inflation Schedule for 2024-25 totalling £0.280 million (detailed in point 6.10);
- (j) Council approve the Recurrent Growth as follows:
- a) Housing Disrepair of £0.275 million from 2024-25 to cover the costs of housing disrepair mitigation and resolution; and note that the budget will be reduced by £0.150 million after 5 years (detailed in point 6.11).
 - b) Additional staffing budget of £0.367 million from 2024-25 (detailed in point 6.11).
 - c) Additional budget for consumable materials for void properties of £0.159 million from 2024-25 (detailed in point 6.11).
- (k) Council note the Recurrent Saving in relation to the Introduction of phased Service Charges for Sheltered Housing tenants, with estimated additional income of £0.120 million in 2024-25 (50.00%), £0.180 million in 2025-26 (75.00%) and £0.240 million 2026-27 (100.00%) as agreed within the budget and MTFP 2023-24 (detailed in point 6.12);
- (l) Council note and approve the expenditure plan relating to £41.434 million which has been set aside over the 4-year period 2024-25 to 2027-28 in the HRA Capital programme to invest in Affordable Housing. Details are set out in Appendix 1; and
- (m) Council approve an amendment to the Housing Rent policy, to enable re-let of HRA properties at Formula Rent from April 2025 (detailed in point 6.29).

The Chair reminded members that they would be voting on the consolidated recommendations for agenda item 7.4 and 7.5 together. A named vote would be taken.

63.4 Budget 2024-25 and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2024-28 and Update to the Budget 2024-25 and Medium Term Financial Plan 2024-28

The report provided the Revenue Budget for 2024-25 and Revenue MTFP 2024-28 and the Capital Budget for 2024-25 and Capital MTFP 2024-28, following the Government's Autumn Statement on 22 November 2023, and the publication of the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement on 18 December 2023. The Update report updated Members with matters relating to the Budget 2024-25 which had arisen following the publication of the final Local Government Finance Settlement and publication of the Budget reports, one of which was presented to the all OSC Member Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 29 January 2024 and the second to Cabinet on 13 February 2024.

On the consolidated recommendations being put to the vote, the votes were cast as follows:-

FOR: 36 as follows:

Bawn, D.	Jackson, P.A.
Beynon, J.	Jones, V.
Carr, D.	Mather, M.
Castle, G.	Oliver, N.
Cessford, T.	Pattison, W.
Chicken, E.	Ploszaj, W.
Dale, P.A.M.	Renner Thompson, G.
Daley, W.	Riddle, J.R.
Darwin. L.R.	Robinson, M.
Dodd, R.R.	Sanderson, H.G.H.
Dunbar, C.	Seymour, C.
Ezhilchelvan, P.	Sharp, A.
Ferguson, D.	Stewart, G.
Flux, B.	Swinburn, M.
Hardy, C.	Thorne, T.N.
Horncastle, C.W.	Towns, D.
Humphrey, C.	Watson, J.
Hutchinson, J.I.	Wearmouth, R.

AGAINST: 21 as follows:

Ball, C.	Parry, K.
Bowman, L.	Purvis, M.
Cartie, E.	Richardson, M.
Clark, T.	Scott, A.
Dickinson, S.	Simpson, E.

Dunn, L.	Taylor, C.
Gallacher, B.	Waddell, H.
Kennedy, D.	Wallace, A.
Lang, J.A.	Watson, A.
Lee, S.	Wilczek, R.
Nisbet, K	

ABSTENTIONS: 5 as follows:

Fairless Aitken, S.	Reid, J.
Hunter, E.I.	Swinbank, M.
Morphet, N.	

Council therefore **RESOLVED** to:-

1. Note that the figures contained within the Budget 2024-25 within Appendix 1 are based on the final Local Government Finance Settlement of 5 February 2024.
2. Approve:
 - a) the Revenue Budget for 2024-25 including the efficiencies totalling £10.834 million for 2024-25 contained within Appendix 1 (detailed in Appendix 10); and,
 - b) the Schedule of Efficiencies totalling £14.939 million for 2025-26 contained within Appendix 1 (detailed in Appendix 10) noting that the efficiencies identified may be progressed during 2024-25 in order to realise the efficiencies early.
3. Note the Revenue MTFP covering the period 2024-28 detailed within Appendix 1 and the requirement to deliver budget balancing measures of £15.920 million in 2026-27 and £14.238 million in 2027-28.
4. Note the estimated receipt of Revenue Support Grant of £14.020 million for 2024- 25 contained within Appendix 1.
5. Note the estimated retained Business Rates and the Top-Up Grant funding to be received by the Council for 2024-25 of £104.445 million and £326.550 million over the remaining period of the MTFP contained within Appendix 1.
6. Note the estimated surplus from prior years on Collection Fund Business Rates balance of £3.471 million in 2024-25 contained within Appendix 1.
7. Note the estimated receipt of Rural Services Delivery Grant of £3.178 million for 2024-25 contained within Appendix 1.
8. Note the estimated receipt of the New Homes Bonus of £1.682 million (excluding service element of £0.028 million) for 2024-25 contained within Appendix 1.
9. Note the estimated receipt of Improved Better Care Funding Grant of £12.496

million for 2024-25 contained within Appendix 1.

10. Note the estimated receipt of Social Care Grant funding of £28.990 million for 2024- 25 contained within Appendix 1.
11. Note the estimated receipt of Adult Social Care Discharge Grant funding of £2.920 million in 2024-25 contained within Appendix 1.
12. Note the estimated receipt of Adult Social Care Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund Grant of £6.656 million in 2024-25 contained within Appendix 1.
13. Note the estimated receipt of the Services Grant of £0.481 million in 2024-25 contained within Appendix 1.
14. Approve a 2.99% increase in Council Tax for 2024-25, noting that this is in line with the Government's assumptions regarding the Council's Core Spending Power; and, within the Government's referendum limit of 3.00%.
15. Note that the MTFP 2024-28 includes a 2.99% annual increase in Council Tax for 2025-26 and then 1.99% thereafter for the remaining years of the MTFP and, that an estimate of annual tax base growth has been included.
16. Note the non-collection rate for Council Tax purposes remains at 1.00% for 2024- 25 (1.00% in 2023-24).
17. Note the estimated surplus of £4.149 million from prior years on the Collection Fund Council Tax balance for 2024-25 contained within Appendix 1.
18. Approve the Council Tax Support Hardship Scheme 2024-25; a reduction of up to £100.00 to council tax bills for all working age Council Tax Support claimants; and those pensionable age Council Tax Support claimants that do not receive 100.00% Council Tax Support, once all other discounts have been applied.
19. Approve a 2.00% increase in Council Tax for 2024-25 for use on Adult Social Care services; raising an additional £4.993 million to support the Budget 2024-25 and note that the assumed increase included in the MTFP is 2.00% for 2025-26 and zero thereafter.
20. Approve the Reserves Policy 2024-25 detailed in Appendix 2.
21. Note the Schedule of Reserves and Provisions contained within Appendix 3.
22. Approve:

The net contributions from the Strategic Management Reserve of £16.504 million in 2024-25 and note the proposed net contributions from reserves of £6.503 million in 2025-26 and £0.027 million in 2026-27, and the proposed net contribution to the reserves of £0.997 million in 2027-28, contained within Appendix 1, comprising:

 - a) non-recurrent pressures of £7.147 million for 2024-25, and note the non-recurrent pressures totalling £2.084 million in 2025-26, £0.027 million in

- 2026- 27, and £0.028 million in 2027-28, (as detailed within Appendix 9; excluding the Adult Social Care Discharge Fund, Locality Coordinators, Hirst Welfare Centre – transitional support, Council Tax Support Hardship Scheme, and BEST Initiative);
- b) delayed investment interest due from the airport as a result of Covid-19 will be repaid to the Strategic Management Reserve. It is anticipated that the airport will start to repay the delayed interest over a three-year period, commencing in April 2027 at £1.025 million per annum;
 - c) revenue contribution to capital (RCCO) of £13.171 million in 2024-25; comprising of £8.171 million for investment in the Schools’ Development Programme, and £5.000 million for investment in the enabling works at strategic employment sites within Northumberland; and £6.591 million in 2025- 26 for investment in the Schools’ Development Programme; and,
 - d) contribution to the reserve of £3.814 million in 2024-25 and note the subsequent proposed contribution to the reserve of £2.172 million in 2025-26.
23. Approve the use of the Public Health Revenue Grant Reserve of £0.428 million in 2024-25, and note the proposed contribution from this reserve of £0.180 million in 2025-26 and £0.100 million in 2026-27 contained within Appendix 1, comprising:
- a) four fixed term Locality Coordinators totalling £0.178 million in 2024-25; and,
 - b) Hirst Welfare Centre – transitional support at £0.250 million in 2024-25, £0.180 million in 2025-26, and £0.100 million in 2026-27.
24. Approve the use of the Council Transformation Fund Reserve of £3.000 million to fund BEST programme delivery costs in 2024-25 contained within Appendix 1.
25. Approve the use of the Council Tax Hardship and Discount Scheme Fund Reserve of £1.726 million in 2024-25 contained within Appendix 1 to fund the Council Tax Support Hardship Scheme for 2024-25.
26. Note the Schedule of Service Specific Grants of £263.870 million contained within Appendix 4, and that some are still indicative pending final confirmation.
27. Note the Schedule of Fees and Charges 2024-25 contained within Appendix 5.
28. Approve the Inflation Schedule for 2024-25 totalling £28.559 million detailed in Appendix 6.
29. Approve the Recurrent Growth and Pressures Schedules of £14.823 million and the additional revenue costs associated with the Capital Programme of £19.100 million for 2024-25; and note the Growth and Pressures of £2.265 million in 2025-26; £3.130 million in 2026-27; and, £0.875 million in 2027-28 and the additional

revenue costs associated with the Capital Programme of £12.609 million in 2025-26; £6.000 million in 2026-27; and £6.000 million in 2027-28 included within Appendices 1, 7 and 8.

30. Approve the Non-Recurrent Pressures of £15.221 million for 2024-25 and note the Non-Recurrent Pressures of £2.264 million for 2025-26, £0.127 million for 2026-27, and £0.028 million in 2027-28 included within Appendix 9.
31. Approve the Non-Recurrent Income of £5.475 million for 2024-25 and note the Non- Recurrent Income of £0.314 million for 2025-26; £0.283 million for 2026-27, and £0.269 million for 2027-28 included within Appendix 9.
32. Approve the identified budget balancing measures contained within Appendix 10 of £10.834 million for 2024-25 and £14.939 million for 2025-26; and note those budget balancing measures totalling £6.002 million already identified for 2026-27 to 2027- 28.
33. Note the Corporate Equality Impact Assessment at Appendix 11.
34. Note the Budget by Service Area 2024-25 detailed in Appendix 12.
35. Note the receipt of Dedicated Schools Grant of £175.086 million in 2024-25; and note the revised allocation of £158.046 million for 2023-24. This is following the conversion of four schools to academy status during 2023-24.
36. Approve the Capital Strategy 2024-25 to 2027-28 contained within Appendix 13.
37. Approve the revised Capital Programme as detailed within Appendix 14 and note the increase in the Capital Programme 2024-28 of £277.560 million detailed in Appendix 15.
38. Approve the delegation of the detail of the final Local Transport Programme and any subsequent in-year amendments to the Executive Director Place and Regeneration in consultation with the Cabinet Member responsible for improving our roads and highways.
39. Approve the delegation of the detail of the capital allocation for Highways Maintenance Investment in U and C Roads and Footpaths, and the Highway Maintenance and Pothole Repair Fund to the Executive Director Place and Regeneration in consultation with the Cabinet Member responsible for improving our roads and highways.
40. Approve the Capital Prudential Indicators 2024-25 to 2027-28 based on the proposed Capital Programme detailed within Appendix 16.
41. Approve the Annual Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Policy detailed in Appendix 17.
42. Approve the Treasury Management Strategy Statement 2024-25 detailed in

Appendix 18.

43. Approve a delegation whereby the Executive Director for Transformation and Resources (the Council's Section 151 Officer) to draw down a total of £2.000 million from the Council's Transformation Fund Reserve and £0.800 million from the Estates Rationalisation Reserve in order to expedite work required with regard to the BEST initiative. Also, to note that Cabinet will receive updates of any drawdowns in the quarterly financial monitoring reports.

63.6 Revenues and Benefits Policies for 2024-25

The report updated Members on the policies governing the administration of Revenues and Benefits and sought approval for the updates and amendments highlighted.

On the report's recommendations being put to the vote there voted FOR: 41; AGAINST: 20; ABSTENTIONS; 1.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Council approve the Revenues and Benefits Policies attached as Appendix 1 to Appendix 6.
- (b) Council approve implementing the 100% Empty Homes Premium after one year from 1 April 2024; and
- (c) Council agree to implement a 100% premium for second homes to increase the council tax charge to 200% from 1 April 2025.

63.7 Council Tax 2024-25

The report provided Council Members with the financial information to enable the Council to calculate and set the Council Tax for 2024-25.

On the recommendations being put to the vote, the votes were cast as follows:-

FOR: 36 as follows:

Bawn, D.	Jackson, P.A.
Beynon, J.	Jones, V.
Carr, D.	Mather, M.
Castle, G.	Oliver, N.
Cessford, T.	Pattison, W.
Chicken, E.	Ploszaj, W.
Dale, P.A.M.	Renner Thompson, G.
Daley, W.	Riddle, J.R.
Darwin, L.R.	Robinson, M.
Dodd, R.R.	Sanderson, H.G.H.
Dunbar, C.	Seymour, C.
Ezhilchelvan, P.	Sharp, A.

Ferguson, D.	Stewart, G.
Flux, B.	Swinburn, M.
Hardy, C.	Thorne, T.N.
Horncastle, C.W.	Towns, D.
Humphrey, C.	Watson, J.
Hutchinson, J.I.	Wearmouth, R.

AGAINST: 22 as follows:

Ball, C.	Nisbet, K.
Bowman, L.	Parry, K.
Cartie, E.	Purvis, M.
Clark, T.	Richardson, M.
Dickinson, S.	Scott, A.
Dunn, L.	Simpson, E.
Fairless Aitken, S.	Taylor, C.
Gallacher, B.	Waddell, H.
Kennedy, D.	Wallace, A.
Lang, J.A.	Watson, A.
Lee, S.	Wilczek, R.

ABSTENTIONS: 4 as follows:

Hunter, E.I.	Reid, J.
Morphet, N.	Swinbank, M.

1. Council **RESOLVED:-**

- a) That the Council Tax Requirement for the Council's own purposes for 2024-25 (excluding Parish Precepts) is £232,953,108.
- b) That the following amounts be calculated for 2024-25 in accordance with Sections 31 to 36 of the Act:
 - i. Being the aggregate amount of gross expenditure which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31 A (2) of the Act taking into account all precepts issued to it by Parish Councils: £929,205,900.
 - ii. Being the aggregate of the gross income which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31 A (3) of the Act: £685,374,250.
 - iii. Being the amount by which the aggregate at (b) i) above exceeds the aggregate at (b) ii) above, calculated by the Council in accordance with Section 31 A (4) of the Act as its Council Tax requirement for the year. (Item R in the formula in Section 31B of the Act) (including Parish Precepts): £243,831,650.
 - iv. Being the amount at (b) iii) above (Item R), all divided by Item T, above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31B of the Act as the basic amount of its Council Tax at Band D for the year (including Parish Precepts): £2,173.47.

- v. Being the aggregate amount of all special items referred to in Section 34 (1) of the Act (total all Parish Precepts): £10,882,376.
 - vi. Being the amount at (b) iv) above less the result given by dividing the amount at (b) v) above by Item T, above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 34 (2) of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax at Band D for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which no Parish Precept relates: £2,076.47.
- c) That the Council Tax for 2024-25, excluding the Police Precept, will be increased by 4.99% (including the Adult Social Care Precept of 2.00%), equating to a charge per Band D household of £2,076.47 (excluding Special Expenses). For other bands different proportions will apply. For example, Band A properties will be charged 6/9 (two thirds) of a Band D property and Band H properties will be charged 18/9 (double) of a Band D property.

The relevant valuation bands are as follows:

Valuation Band	Northumberland County Council	Adult Social Care Precept	Total
	£ : p	£ : p	£ : p
A	1,181.64	202.67	1,384.31
B	1,378.58	236.45	1,615.03
C	1,575.52	270.23	1,845.75
D	1,772.46	304.01	2,076.47
E	2,166.34	371.57	2,537.91
F	2,560.22	439.13	2,999.35
G	2,954.10	506.68	3,460.78
H	3,544.92	608.02	4,152.94

- d) Under Section 52ZB of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 that the Council's basic amount of Council Tax for 2024-25 is not excessive in accordance with principles approved under Section 52ZC(1) of the Act.

(i.e. the proposed Council Tax increase for 2024-25 means that the Council does not need to hold a referendum on its proposed Council Tax. The regulations set out in Section 52ZC of the Act requires all billing authorities (Council and precept authorities (i.e. Fire and Police authorities)) to hold a referendum on their proposed level of basic Council Tax each year if they exceed government guidelines which are set out annually. For 2024-25 the guideline increase for Northumberland is 5.00% (including the Adult Social Care Precept).

As the Council is proposing a Council Tax increase of 4.99% (including Adult Social Care Precept and Special Expenses) for 2024-25 then the above regulations have no impact for 2024-25.

2. Council APPROVED:

- a) That the matters listed in section 3 (c) of this report are identified as Special Expenses and that all other matters which might otherwise be considered to be Special Expenses under the prevailing legislation are deemed to be General Expenses.
- b) That the Council Tax Leaflet continues to be made available via the Council's website, rather than enclosed with Council Tax bills, and that the final document is delegated to and finalised by the Section 151 Officer.

3. Council NOTED:

- a) The Police and Crime Commissioner has agreed the recommended level of precept of £20,399,804 for 2024-25. This represents an increase of 7.70%, equating to an additional £13.00 on a Band D property; the resulting valuation bands will be as follows:

Valuation Band	Northumbria Police Authority
	£: p
A	121.23
B	141.43
C	161.64
D	181.84
E	222.25
F	262.66
G	303.07
H	363.68

- b) The Aggregate of Council Tax requirements, including that of Northumbria Police Authority, the Council's own requirement and that for Adult Social Care purposes (excluding Parish Precepts), are as follows:

Valuation Band	Northumberland County Council	Adult Social Care Precept	Northumbria Police Authority	Total
	£ : p	£ : p	£ : p	£ : p
A	1,181.64	202.67	121.23	1,505.54
B	1,378.58	236.45	141.43	1,756.46
C	1,575.52	270.23	161.64	2,007.39
D	1,772.46	304.01	181.84	2,258.31
E	2,166.34	371.57	222.25	2,760.16
F	2,560.22	439.13	262.66	3,262.01
G	2,954.10	506.68	303.07	3,763.85

H	3,544.92	608.02	363.68	4,516.62
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- c) The total amount of Parish Precepts requested is £10,878,542 and is detailed in Appendix 1. This represents an increase of £584,683 when compared to 2023-24.
- d) Branxton Parish Council has not submitted a precept. The Council is inquorate. No precept has been assumed for the purpose of the calculations contained within this report.
- e) Hartleyburn Parish Council has not submitted a precept. The Council is inquorate. No precept has been assumed for the purpose of the calculations contained within this report.
- f) Special expenses of £3,834 are applied to North Sunderland Parish only in relation to play area inspection and maintenance. This has increased from £3,662 in 2023-24.

4. Council NOTED:

- a) The basic Council Tax valuation bands are shown in paragraph 3 (b).

The detailed Council Tax calculations are set out in Appendices 2 and 3. Analysis of the Council Tax by parish is provided at Appendix 2 excluding Northumbria Police Precept. Appendix 3 shows the total Council Tax charge by parish (including the Council only element and Adult Social Care Precept, Northumbria Police Precept, Special Expenses and Parish Precepts).

The Chair adjourned the meeting at 3.55 pm for a comfort break. The meeting reconvened at 4.10 pm.

64. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR SUPPORTING BUSINESS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Strategic Acquisition Fund

The report sought the approval of Council to make a £15.000 million provision in the Capital Programme, for the current year, 2023-24, for the acquisition of strategic land and/or property in support of economic growth and job creation in the County.

The Chair advised that he had agreed to take this matter as urgent business in order to safeguard the Council's ability to take advantage of a unique commercial opportunity which had recently arisen. He had exercised his powers to include this as an extraordinary urgent item. He invited the Leader to present the report.

The Leader advised that he had discussed this report with the Group Leaders and this would continue as matters moved forward. He proposed the recommendations, which was seconded by Councillor Reid. Councillor Ferguson proposed that Council move to the vote on this, which was supported by a substantial majority.

On the report's recommendations being put to the vote there voted FOR: a substantial majority; AGAINST: 2; ABSTENTIONS: 1.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** that:-

- (a) Council approve the creation of a £15.000 million Strategic Acquisition Fund, to be added to the Council's 2023-24 Capital Programme;
- (b) Council agree that an allocation of £15.000 million is made from the Strategic Management Reserve to fund the Strategic Acquisition Fund;
- (c) Council note that the money from the Strategic Management Reserve will be transferred to the revenue budget and there will be a contribution made from revenue to fund the expenditure incurred from the Strategic Acquisition Fund at the appropriate time;
- (d) Council note that there may be the requirement to reprofile all or some of the £15.000 million allocation and funding into financial year 2024-25 from 2023-24. Members will be advised if this is necessary through the financial monitoring reports produced by the Executive Director of Transformation and Resources;
- (e) Council agree that in order to replenish the Strategic Management Reserve, £15.000 million of the money set aside during 2022-23 for the early repayment of debt as voluntary minimum revenue provision (MRP) is reversed in 2023-24 as part of the close down of the Council's accounts. This creates the headroom in the revenue budget to make a contribution of £15.000 million to the Strategic Management Reserve; and
- (f) Council approve a contribution of £15.000 million to the Strategic Management Reserve from the revenue budget in 2023-24.

65. REPORT OF THE DEPUTY LEADER AND CABINET MEMBER FOR CORPORATE SERVICES

Corporate Fraud Policies 2024-25

The report provided an update on the County Council's policies in relation to Corporate Fraud activity and sought approval for updated policies.

The report was introduced by Councillor Wearmouth and he proposed the recommendations, which was seconded by Councillor Reid.

RESOLVED that Council approve the updated Anti-Money Laundering Policy and Anti-Fraud, Bribery and Corruption Policy, attached as Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 to the report.

66. REPORT OF THE LEADER, CHAIR OF THE STAFF AND APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE

Pay Policy Statement of Northumberland County Council 2024/2025

The report asked Council to receive and consider the report and the recommendation of the Staff and Appointments Committee that met on 8 February 2024, in respect of the proposal that the amended pay policy statement for 2024/25 is approved for adoption.

The report was presented by Councillor Wearmouth, and he moved the report's recommendations, which was seconded by Councillor J. Watson.

RESOLVED that Council approve the recommendations from the Staff and Appointments Committee held on 8 February 2024 to adopt the amended Pay Policy Statement 2024-25 (Appendix 1).

67. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Annual Portfolio Report – Public Health and Wellbeing

This was the Annual Report from the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Wellbeing. The report contained issues that set the context for delivery of the Portfolio. It highlighted achievements over the past year and, outlined the areas of focus for the coming year.

The report was presented by Councillor Jones. The report highlighted the many achievements which had taken place in the past year and she thanked Councillors Pattison and Ferguson who had been part of that work. She detailed some of the key points in the report and encouraged members to contact her direct if they had any detailed questions.

Councillor Dickinson referred to dentistry and oral health and all of the conditions which could stem from that. He asked whether the oral health strategy could be considered by a wider group of members as the issue affected so many members and their communities. Councillor Jones agreed this could be done. Oral health had previously been discussed at Health and Wellbeing OSC and related to many other health conditions

Councillor Ball expressed her concerns about the Council as a point of contact for those in crisis. Services were working hard but there were not enough people available to deal with everything, and she felt more should be done and more funding invested to get ahead of the problem through cross party working. Councillor Jones replied that there was cross party working on the issues Councillor Ball had highlighted and there were forums where these issues were discussed and members could input. She agreed working together "in house" was very important.

Councillor Dodd referred to a really useful meeting about defibrillators which had taken place under the Health and Wellbeing OSC working group. This had

highlighted a lot of further work which could be explored. Councillor Jones agreed this could be taken forward with officers.

Councillor Hunter welcomed the report and the work which Northumberland Communities together did but felt there was still work to do to reach those people who really needed this support, but were reluctant to reach out for help. The economic situation was only likely to get worse and more effort was needed to signpost people to the help which was available. Councillor Jones responded that the Council had put more money in to the CAB to help with that. Thriving Together supported the voluntary sector and she also mentioned Mobilise, an organisation which helped to identify and support carers. There was also a web based directory of support services which provided a link to all of the organisations available to provide support.

Councillor Dale referred to the responses from the public consultation on the budget which contained some useful information on public health and she suggested that Health and Wellbeing OSC look at this. Councillor Jones agreed this could be done.

Councillor Ezhilchelvan echoed previous comments about the value of cross party working and if any member was interested in a particular issue, they should let him know so he could raise it for Health and Wellbeing Board and the member be involved when it was discussed.

Councillor Bowman commented that dentistry services were being privatised by the back door. The Committee had looked at this and he urged all members to raise this as an issue with Government because communities were suffering and having to pay for private services. Dentists were being forced into this position because they weren't receiving proper funding from the Government and there were areas in Northumberland now where you could not access an NHS dentist. Councillor Jones responded that this was an issue for the Government rather than the Council, though the Committee was doing the work as best it could

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

68. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR PROMOTING HEALTHY LIVES

Annual Portfolio Report – Promoting Healthy Lives

This was the Annual Report from the Cabinet Member for Promoting Healthy Lives. The report contained issues that set the context for delivery of the Portfolio. It highlighted achievements over the past year and, outlined the areas of focus for the coming year.

The report was presented by Councillor Jeff Watson. The report was a comprehensive one, but he drew members' attention to his ongoing commitment to the development of the Library Service, and the Archives Service, which had delivered 3000 exhibitions, attended by 9,000 visitors. The Leisure Service had undergone some major changes in the last year and he thanked Active Northumberland for their work in the past nine years, which

was demonstrated by the usage figures. Northumberland had the highest rate of physically active adults in the North East.

Councillor Robinson asked if he could have a written response on the detail for the innovative solutions for Bedlington Library. This had been mentioned previously and had caused some local concern.

Councillor Hunter referred to the closure of Barclays Bank in Berwick recently. This caused problems for Parish Councils trying to bank cash if they did not have a debit card. She asked if this could be raised with Barclays. Councillor Watson replied that banking was available in some leisure centres and would be rolled out further. He would follow up Councillor Hunter's point.

Councillor Wilczek commented that Bedlington was not mentioned once in the report and she asked when the town would be considered for an appropriate leisure facility. Councillor Watson responded that Bedlington was on the Administration's radar and pledges had been made. However, he would look at this further and come back to her.

Councillor Ball expressed her thanks to staff in the Library Service who were now delivering a whole range of services to the public. However, they were a small team and she stressed that they should not be stretched too far to the point that subject specialists were lost. She asked for a commitment that these staff be protected as they were doing fantastic work to deliver a high performing service. Councillor Watson agreed, and acknowledged that there had been some pressure points due to sickness. There was always the need to find value for money, but he would continue to fight to maintain current levels of service and take on board the Councillor's points.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

.....
Chair of the County Council

.....
Duly Authorised Officer



Northumberland County Council

County Council

Wednesday, 20 March 2024

Annual Portfolio Report - Deputy Leader and Corporate Services

Report of Councillor(s) Councillor Richard Wearmouth, Deputy Leader

Responsible Officer(s): Jan Willis, Executive Director for Transformation and Resources, S151 Officer

1. **Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan**

Achieving Value for Money – the Portfolio contributes to Value for Money by ensuring the Council sets and delivers a balanced budget with robust systems for managing assets, enabling services and ensuring staff are equipped to deliver high-quality services.

Tackling Inequalities – by ensuring the Council has robust and sustainable finances to deliver its priorities and has strong enabling services, this portfolio contributes to tackling inequalities.

Driving Economic Growth – the Portfolio develops and manages an ambitious and sustainable Capital Programme which enables the Council to invest in infrastructure, regeneration and economic growth across Northumberland.

2. **Purpose of report**

This is the Annual Portfolio Report from the Deputy Leader of Council. The Report contains issues that set the context for delivery of finance, assets, governance, strategic change, digital and human resources within Northumberland. It highlights achievements over the past year and outlines the areas of focus for the coming year.

3. **Recommendations**

Council is recommended to note the Deputy Leader's annual Portfolio Report.

4. **Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable**

Not applicable

5. Background

- 5.1 The Annual Portfolio reports from each of the Council's Cabinet Members provide a valuable opportunity for Council to consider and comment on the work of each Portfolio. This strengthens the important link and accountability between key decisions taken by the Cabinet and achievement of the three priorities of the Council as set out in the Corporate Plan.
- 5.2 The Council adopted the Corporate Plan at its Annual General Meeting on 17 May 2023. The Plan establishes three priorities for the Council, underpinned by our approach to tackling Climate Change. The Annual Council Achievements Report (reported to Council in March each year) sets out overall progress against the three priorities whilst this Portfolio report provides an opportunity for Members to drill down further into the work of the Deputy Leader's Portfolio.

6. Achievements

Finance

- 6.1 The financial outlook for our Council and indeed all local authorities continues to be challenging. National finances are uncertain due to global events which have resulted in spikes in energy costs, significant inflation, higher interest rates, volatile financial markets and the cost-of-living pressures. Despite the challenging context, I am delighted we are on track to deliver a balanced outturn for 2023-24 and have agreed and will deliver a balanced budget for 2024-25. The budget will sustain good-quality day-to-day services whilst continuing to invest in new or refurbished schools, leisure centres, regeneration and infrastructure.
- 6.2 I am pleased we listened to Members with regard to budget engagement. In response we built 'policy conferences' into our budget-setting process, and our Budget engagement for 2024-25 with all Members started in July 2023, followed by another budget policy conference in October. The Cabinet's budget proposals were scrutinised ahead of Cabinet in December 2023. This year also produced a comprehensive 'Budget Engagement Document' which set out the Council's financial position, the options for achieving a balanced budget and our proposals. We used this to encourage deeper, better-informed engagement with Members, residents and stakeholders. Our S151 Officer briefed all group leaders and their groups on the budget proposals, answering their questions and listening to their ideas. Overall, I believe our engagement on the Budget was extensive though we will continue to listen to all Members on how we can enhance this in future years.

Capital Programme

- 6.3 I am delighted the value of the projects being taken forward across the County stands at over £460m, including a range of economic development, regeneration and strategic transport projects. This includes Council match-funding of around £134m, private sector contributions of £74m and external funding of approximately £252m. We reviewed our Capital Programme to take account of the rising cost of borrowing. This will ensure that our Capital Programme is affordable and sustainable and will allow us to continue to invest in infrastructure, facilities, regeneration and growth.

Best Value, BEST and Strategic Change

- 6.4 BEST is the Council's new way of working. It enables the Council to give residents the best experiences through its services. It opens up opportunities and broadens experience for staff. It is the Council becoming more financially efficient and ensuring VFM is achieved. We have recognised the Council can no longer do all the things it does in the way it currently does them, nor would we wish to where there are better ways of working. BEST will transform services so that they are delivered in a more cost-effective way. This includes the way the Council is run, how we utilise our resources, technology, assets and people and how we deliver our service to customers. Financial constraints are not the only reasons for change. BEST supports the Council to deliver its three corporate priorities.
- 6.5 In Summer 2023, we re-focused on what it means to be a Best Value authority. Executive Directors undertook an initial Best Value corporate 'baselining' exercise, based on the latest Best Value guidance. Building on this through our BEST ways of working, we have developed a programme of reviews which will incorporate Value for Money reviews.
- 6.6 All seven workstreams in BEST have commenced delivery. Some key achievements to date across workstreams have been:
- Implementation of Fix My Street, iCasework and Modern.gov;
 - A Planning, Performance and Accountability Framework has been developed, establishing one corporate approach with a clear thread from corporate plan to service planning to individual appraisal;
 - The continued roll out of the living Leader Programme to staff as part of the Leadership Framework developing our people and establishing a common language for change;
 - A depot review completed in November 2023, with a number of recommendations to improve and streamline depots.
- 6.7 We continue to work with services to identify opportunities for continuous improvement and improved value for money. The majority of the work this year has been supporting BEST Workstreams. There have also been a number of 'stand alone' reviews carried out with individual services which have resulted in efficiencies. The work in this area is now focused on carrying out a 'Rapid Improvement Review' in each service of the Council.

Information Services, Digital, Data and Business Intelligence

- 6.8 Digital, data and intelligence are critical to delivering modern, efficient and fit-for-purpose services to residents. It is also important that we are supporting residents and communities, so they have access to digital services. Key examples of progress we have made on this in the past year include:
- Mobile and future connectivity - we commissioned an innovative solution, so we can better understand mobile coverage in the county. Working with Streetwave, we have installed devices to local services vehicles, that scan for connectivity strength. This data will enable us to see where the 'not-spots' are, and work with mobile operators to address them. In addition, we have worked with the Combined Authority on a Government-funded programme (Digital Connectivity

Infrastructure Accelerator). This will simplify the process for connectivity providers to find and use public assets, such as lampposts and Council buildings and help accelerate the rollout of improved and innovative connectivity across the region.

- Broadband Vouchers – We are working with communities and network providers to drawdown government funded Gigabit vouchers to connect our rural communities. Cabinet agreed a Northumberland Top-Up scheme, with £1.15m from gainshare income set aside for re-investment in county connectivity. The top-up scheme will provide a voucher of up to £2,500 for eligible properties to provide a “top-up” to the government funded Gigabit Vouchers of £4,500, to provide up to £7,000 per property to suppliers to connect some of our more remote communities.
- ‘5GIR’ - we were partners in two bids for the 5G Innovation Regions funding, and both bids were successful. The first bid backed by the LA7 includes 5G to support Agritech in Northumberland working with Newcastle University and exploring 5G and Future connectivity in the Port of Blyth. The Borderlands backed bid, includes a proposal to install future connectivity solutions in Kielder and The Sill.
- WAN (Wide Area Network) – some 138 Council sites are now migrated to our new provider, Commsworld. The sites are operating on upgraded infrastructure, providing faster more reliable connectivity. The procurement won an MJ award to recognise the innovative social value elements and featured in the Guardian newspaper earlier in the year. The contract provides £114m of private investment in the county, with 260km of new fibre being installed, helping to better connect our county for residents and businesses.
- To ensure the Council can recover from a major failure of IT systems, such as after a cyber-attack, a service has been established that allows data to be copied to a secure secondary online site that can be brought into operation should our IT Disaster Recovery Plan be needed. This site allows staff to continue to access systems and provide services to residents and business while IT staff rebuild the primary systems.
- Digital Services - we have successfully launched our garden waste application and received 89% take up and an overall high success rate of the digital application with 18.7k transactions to date.
- ‘Labman’ - we worked closely with a delivery partner to develop a digital solution for our Highways Service to support further income generation for the Service through further digitisation of their processes.
- ‘FixMyStreet’ – in May last year, we launched this new online service for people to report problems on the County’s streets. Using ‘FixMyStreet’, people can now photograph, locate and highlight an issue all by using their mobile phone. Issues can be reported simply by going to nland.cc/fix on a mobile phone, computer, tablet or the council’s website. All reports go straight into the Council’s digital systems where they can be assessed, allocated for any necessary actions and if the user sets up an account they can be informed of progress and completion. This is significantly improving communication with residents, reducing duplication and speeding up responses.

- Data and business intelligence - our new 'Data & BI Strategy' is being continually developed to support better decision-making and improve service provision. The 'Data Leaders Group' is well established. We are investing in our workforce following the launch of our Data Academy in November 2023. The Academy will give staff the opportunity to enhance their data and analytical skills through an apprenticeship. We think making the best use of data will empower our staff, inform decision-making, and ensure we are using our resources effectively.
- 'Craster Mast' - we have secured a commitment from a mast provider (Atlas) to install a mobile mast at Craster to help address poor connectivity in the community. This will help support the large numbers of visitors as well as residents.

Managing Risk

- 6.9 The management of risk is key to achieving what is set out in the Corporate Plan and to ensuring we meet all our responsibilities. Our Risk Management Policy is fundamental to the system of internal control and forms part of a sound business operating model. It involves an ongoing process to identify risks and to prioritise them according to likelihood and impact. The Council has a process to manage risks and assist the achievement of its objectives, alongside national and local performance targets. The process is reviewed and updated on a regular basis with reference to available good practice and to ensure it reflects the rapidly changing environment in local government.

Performance reporting and improvement

- 6.10 In November this year, I was pleased to present the Quarter 4, Performance Outturn Report (2022-23) to Full Council. That report, alongside Quarters 1 and 2 Performance Reports for 2023-24 show positive trends of improvement across many of our key corporate performance indicators. Naturally, these reports also highlight areas for improvement which we continue to focus on.

Staffing, Engagement and Culture Change

- 6.11 This year we have continued to listen to and engage with the Council's biggest asset, our staff. The Council has eight staff network groups, which consult on matters affecting individuals and teams and we run regular surveys to help us understand the employee experience. Every 18 months we run a full comprehensive staff survey and we follow up with 'pulse surveys' every 6 months. We use the results of the survey to inform our approach to improving practices and to increase involvement and engagement with our staff. Our last full survey took place in September / October 2022 and we have since held topical pulse surveys in May 2023 and December 2023. The headline results of that latest 'pulse survey' tell us we are on the right track as an employer as well as highlighting areas where we can continue to respond to our staff and make improvements.
- 6.12 I am pleased we have maintained positive and constructive relationships with the trade unions. With the Leader, I met regularly with trade union representatives in the past year ensuring good communications, building trust and allowing for greater collaboration on important issues. We are grateful to all trade union representatives for their ongoing engagement and input.
- 6.13 Our staff are at the heart of everything we do. For them to carry out their work efficiently and effectively, we ensure they have access to information that keeps

them up-to-date with Council business and ongoing projects. We have also provided information on policies and procedures, how the Council can support staff development, and support and advice to look after their wellbeing too. In the past year, we have provided a range of channels across the organisation for staff to access this information, including:

- Staff intranet, 'The Beat', which is home to all information from HR & OD, Payroll, service information to health and wellbeing updates.
- Two e-newsletters, sent weekly; The Business (Corporate Updates) and The Buzz (Wellbeing and staff stories). Both feature regular updates from the Chief Executive.
- Social media channels; Viva Engage and Staff Facebook - where staff have been able to ask questions and share their own stories.
- Printed information shared with sites across the organisation, including seasonal leaflets and posters.
- Members' Briefing; a bi-monthly e-news update to elected Members linking to a Member Portal which is home to information on Member training, latest news and committee meetings.
- Engagement opportunities through a number of 'Ambassador' networks including BEST as well as events across the year.
- 'Corporate Briefing'; a monthly briefing session for all senior managers, led by the Chief Executive and Executive Directors.

6.14 Governance arrangements for the appointment of senior Officers have been strengthened in the past 12 months. As a result, we have real confidence in the transparency of the staffing decisions that have been made and Members are informed and actively engaged in the process.

Customer

6.15 Customer Service is the 'front door' for most Council services and as such we work closely with services to continually improve the customer experience and highlight issues. We have been able to effect positive change, for residents and have also been able to provide valuable training, so staff are more adept at having meaningful conversations with residents. Key customer services highlights include:

- **Lindisfarne Centre-** Following the opening of the Lindisfarne Centre in January 2023, the Customer Information Centre team have continued to work with partners on site (Citizens Advice, Town Council, Food Bank) to provide a more holistic service to residents and also promote the centre and encourage its use by the wider community.
- **Town Hall, Ashington.** The Customer Information Centre relocated in March 2023 into the Town Hall, and over the last 12 months the team have worked closely with the Community Bank and Registrars' team in that location to provide a more joined up service to residents.
- **The Hub@Cramlington-** to meet increased demand we have amended the opening hours of the Information Centre based in the Hub at Cramlington. The team are now present daily.

- **Contact Centre** - we have maintained performance on our key indicators, ensuring customer / call wait times are kept to a minimum utilising data from the amazon platform to understand business pressures and to maximise the use of staff recourse to meet customer demands at times during the day/ week.
 - **Amazon Connect Development** - we worked with Adult Social Care to carry out an options appraisal of telephony and have successfully onboarded both teams onto the Amazon Connect Platform. Building of the platform was carried out in-house, within timescale and without the need for expensive third-party support.
 - **iCasework** – we have implemented a new case management system for complaints, FOIs and corporate feedback.
 - **‘Front Of House’** – we have continued to work with the Library Service in adopting a ‘blended working’ approach to service delivery as a new way of working across both Customer and Library Services. This is providing greater opportunities for better service delivery to customers and best use of resources.
- 6.16 These initiatives, particularly work on the Amazon System and ‘Fix My Street’ are making systems and processes much more efficient and this frees up capacity and resources, enabling staff to focus on the priorities. Our Customer Services are continuing an overall trend of improvement. We receive around 30,000 calls per month and have delivered impressive performance with the ‘% of calls answered’, achieving an average of 95.6%, and for ‘average time to answer calls’, the team achieved 73 seconds for the quarter. This compares to 292 for the June 2022, an improvement of 219 seconds.

Assets

- 6.17 Integrated Services manage and maintain responsibility for our facilities, ensuring staff and service users can use property assets of the Council in a safe, efficient and effective manner. This has included:
- Delivery of KPI's across the estate, all within performance target (repairs & maintenance, statutory testing and corporate landlord compliance);
 - Successful reopening of refurbished sites, including County Hall and the Lindisfarne Centre;
 - Supporting the Leisure, Culture and Depot Review processes to improve service delivery;
 - Closure of buildings to support estate rationalisation, resulting in maximising efficiency of estates portfolio;
 - Working with services to provide Integrated Services for new facilities and buildings eg, Port of Blyth;
 - Working alongside other services to launch and manage the pioneering solar car port at County Hall, which is estimated to produce 50% of County Hall's energy needs.
- 6.18 One of the key projects under the BEST Use of Assets workstream is the property review and estates plan. This will give us an in-depth understanding of estate, enabling us to identify and plan where our investment is best targeted, how our estate can better be leveraged and where there are more opportunities for community interaction and partnership.

Governance

- 6.19 Our rewritten constitution, agreed by Full Council in May last year, brings greater clarity and regularisation to our decision-making and Council proceedings. I am confident we now have a fit-for-purpose Constitution that underpins delivery of our vision and priorities. Thank you to all Members who input into the review of the Constitution. At monthly Group Leaders' meetings, we continue to listen to feedback on how the Constitution is working.
- 6.20 As part of our work to update and strengthen governance we have also developed a clear rationale for the Council's arms-length companies. For 'Advance Northumberland', we established a new, Shareholder Cabinet Committee. Advance are reviewing their articles of association and scheme of delegation as well as corporate structure and financial model.
- 6.21 We also reviewed and refreshed the Council's Scrutiny Function and will continue to develop and strengthen Scrutiny arrangements in ways that work for Scrutiny Chairs and Members.

Key Areas of Focus for The Coming Year

- 6.22 In the coming year, my Portfolio's number one focus will be to deliver our balanced budget, ensuring the Council continues to deliver high-quality services, whilst investing in communities and local economies. Delivering our budget throughout the year, underpins all three of our Corporate Priorities.
- 6.23 In a challenging financial context, where external factors such as price inflation continue to impact on all services, our focus on regular financial performance reporting is critical. Cabinet considers a detailed Financial Performance Report prepared by the S151 Officer on a quarterly basis. These reports provide key information and analysis on the Council's financial performance and use of resources in each quarter and a projected year-end position at the date of the report. In previous years, these have enabled Cabinet to take swift action, with senior Officers to ensure we deliver our financial targets. The coming year will be to continue and build on this approach.
- 6.24 Having recently agreed the Council's Budget and MTFP, Members will be aware of the significant savings which will be delivered through the BEST workstreams. This will involve important work to deliver our BEST service reviews and reviews of contracts, active management of vacancies and other key actions. With the Leader and Cabinet Colleagues alongside the Council's Executive Management Team, I will ensure our BEST reviews remain on track to deliver more efficient services which better meet the needs of residents. I am sure Scrutiny will take a keen interest in this work and welcome their input.
- 6.25 Through the work of this Portfolio, we will also continue to engage extensively with our staff, responding to their key messages and supporting and equipping them to do what they do best for our residents and businesses. On that note, I take this opportunity to thank all staff for the excellent work they do every day and feel sure all Members will join me in expressing our collective gratitude to colleagues across all services.
- 6.26 We will also ensure we continue to bring further investment to the County from Government, the Combined Authority and private business.
- 6.27 We will also continue to drive performance, maintaining the standards in our best performing services whilst focusing on those areas that have room to improve.

- 6.28 I very much look forward to the coming year and believe, working together, Members and Officers will more than meet the challenges, whilst maximising the opportunities before us.
- 6.29 We will continue to work hard to maximise the potential of our website as our digital ‘front door’. We aim to make the user experience as simple as possible online, and that starts with how our customers navigate our website to find what they need. We’ve carried out extensive user research with members of our ‘people’s panel’ asking them about how they use the website today. We are learning from this feedback to improve the experience.
- 6.30 We are redesigning our Council Tax digital service and in 2024 we will be launching a new online service to help residents and businesses view their Council Tax bill, as well as making changes to their Council Tax account.
- 6.31 We are also engaging with staff to understand how we can provide the right technology they need to work smarter.

7. Options open to the Council and reasons for the recommendations

This report provides a valuable opportunity for Council to consider and comment on the work of each Portfolio. The recommendation to Council is to note the Deputy Leader’s Annual Portfolio Report.

8. Implications

Policy	This report supports delivery of all three priorities of the Corporate Plan.
Finance and value for money	Value for money is a priority for the Council. This report contains no direct financial implications. The ongoing delivery of the individual actions within the Deputy Leader’s portfolio may have financial implications which would form separate reports as these arise.
Legal	Whilst this report contains no immediate legal implications, the delivery of the individual actions within the Deputy Leader’s portfolio may have legal implications, which would form separate reports as these arise.
Procurement	N/A
Human resources	N/A
Property	N/A
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment	No - no equalities issues identified N/A

required and attached?	
Risk assessment	None at this stage.
Crime and disorder	N/A
Customer considerations	N/A
Carbon reduction	N/A
Health and wellbeing	Our ongoing engagement with staff is important to understand the health and wellbeing of staff groups across the organisation as well as communicating the many ways the Council can support staff health and wellbeing
Wards	(All Wards);

9. Background papers

Not applicable.

10. Links to other key reports already published

Corporate Plan 2023-26

Corporate Plan Achievements Report March 2023

11. Author and Contact Details

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Annual Portfolio Report - Caring for Adults

Report of Councillor(s) Councillor Wendy Pattison, Cabinet Member for Caring for Adults

Responsible Officer(s): Neil Bradley, Executive Director for Adults, Ageing & Wellbeing

1. **Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan**

Achieving Value for Money – The Portfolio contributes to Value for Money by securing best value in contracting and commissioning. The portfolio also ensures value for money through continuous service improvement and transformation plans.

Tackling Inequalities – The portfolio plays a key role in tackling inequalities by maintaining safe and equitable service provision for all adults, regardless of age, background, illness, or disability.

Driving Economic Growth – The portfolio contributes to driving economic growth by implementing key initiatives to support the care sector in Northumberland.

2. **Purpose of report**

This is the Annual Portfolio Report from the Portfolio Holder for Caring for Adults. The Report contains issues that set the context for delivery of Adult Services within Northumberland. It highlights achievements over the past year and outlines the areas of focus for the coming year.

3. **Recommendations**

Council is recommended to: Note the Caring for Adults annual Portfolio Report.

4. **Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable**

Not applicable

5. Background

- 5.1 The Annual Portfolio reports from each of the Council's Cabinet Members provide a valuable opportunity for Council to consider and comment on the work of each Portfolio. This strengthens the important link and accountability between key decisions taken by the Cabinet and achievement of the three priorities of the Council as set out in the Corporate Plan.
- 5.2 The Council adopted the Corporate Plan at its Annual General Meeting on 17 May 2023. The Plan establishes three priorities for the Council, underpinned by our approach to tackling Climate Change. The Annual Council Achievements Report (reported to Council in March 2023) sets out overall progress against the three priorities whilst this Portfolio report provides an opportunity for Members to drill down further into the work of the Caring for Adults Portfolio.

Achievements

Integration and partnership working

- 5.3 Northumberland has a long history of innovative integration and partnership working with the NHS.
- 5.4 One such current example is the Homesafe Team who are a service made up of front-line social workers based in Northumbria Hospital sites across the county. The team support safe and timely discharge from hospital for those patients who have care and support needs, or who need information, advice, or guidance. The Homesafe team currently receive around 600 referrals per month. Over the past 12 months, the team have consistently been amongst the highest performers in the region on hospital discharge and delayed transfers of care. This is achieved through excellent integrated working with our health colleagues on the hospital sites.
- 5.5 Another example is our partnership working with CNTW, the regional Mental Health Trust. We have aligned service areas such as the Mental Health Inpatient Team and Social Work Approved Mental Health Professionals team in order to promote a collaborative seamless discharge process for those leaving acute mental health inpatient units. Northumberland has the lowest levels of delayed transfers of care from inpatient units in the North East. Similarly, we have co-located our staff within the CNTW Crisis Team, and the CNTW Learning Disability service operate within several of our adult social care sites to improve the links between professionals and provide a better holistic service for clients.
- 5.6 We continue to manage all Continuing Health Care (CHC), Free Nursing Care (FNC) and Section 117 mental health aftercare arrangements on behalf of the Integrated Care Board (ICB) through a partnership arrangement. This creates efficiency across both organisations and a much more seamless interaction for clients and providers irrespective of whether someone is Local Authority or Health funded for their care in Northumberland. We currently undertake this service for around 650 CHC clients and manage NHS funds in excess of £60m per year on their behalf.

Workforce pressures - domiciliary care

- 5.7 Since the summer of 2021 there have been challenges in supplying the volume of homecare services that our service users have needed as due to workforce shortages for our homecare providers. Attracting and retaining care staff is a national issue. For the period up to April 2023 there were typically around 200

people for whom we could not source homecare and at its most serious point that number was 270.

- 5.8 Adult Services introduced a range of measures to try to address this challenge. These include financial incentives and practical support. The first financial measures were introduced across all commissioned adult care services and started in April 2022 with an offer to increase care fees for those providers that agreed to link care workers pay to the Real Living Wage. In July 2023 further investment was made to the homecare sector rather than the wider social care market which enhanced rates to those providers who agreed to pay staff £12.00 per hour for delivered care and travel between calls. The Council also supported providers financially to improve mileage reimbursement rates to carers.
- 5.9 These measures were followed later in the year with the introduction of the homecare guarantee which offered employees of those participating organisations further increased rates and guaranteed terms and conditions including employment contracts, training and induction.
- 5.10 Since April 2023 there has been a gradual improvement in the numbers of people who do not have their full homecare packages supplied immediately and since December 2023 the number has been around 50. There is more work required here to reduce further and stabilise these numbers, but the achievements are significant against the backdrop of a challenging workforce environment generally in Northumberland.

Reablement offer

- 5.11 We provide high quality and responsive care and reablement services to enable people to return to their optimal independence. This is an integrated health and social care service receiving around 11,500 referrals per year. National performance data for 2022/23 ranks us 17th out of 151 local authorities for the proportion of people receiving a short-term service where the outcome was either no ongoing support or support at a lower level. We show a result of 93.5% of cases in this category compared with 81.7% for the North East region and 77.5% for England as a whole. Our January 2023 Annual Conversation with an external peer identified that “it is clear that ASC’s reablement offer is highly effective for the people who receive it”.

Joint Equipment Loans (JELs)

- 5.12 JELs on average deliver 1,000 pieces of equipment every week to residents of Northumberland. This supports individuals to remain safer and independent in their home environment improving quality of life. Some larger items are issued to support professionals, care staff and family members to look after the individual in their own homes or care homes keeping all involved safe. Equipment is also issued to prevent hospital admissions as well as speed up hospital discharges.
- 5.13 Since the installation of the Aquaphase industrial washing machine approximately 12 months ago, which was funded by the ICB and supported by the Council, the service has been able to clean, service and recycle on average 90% of returned stock. The introduction of Aquaphase has not only sped up the turnaround of stock so it can be issued to other clients who need it, but it has also helped to manage how much new stock needs to be purchased.

- 5.14 In 2022 we delivered 56,045 items; the number of items returned in the same period was 35,737 with 88% of these items reused.

Home Improvement Service (HIS)

- 5.15 The HIS team have developed a fast-track process to support those individuals who sadly have a terminal prognosis. This means that the first £6,500 is awarded under the discretionary grant to enable essential adaptations to be installed quickly to support the individual with the difficulties they are experiencing and enable them to stay in their own homes.

Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

- 5.16 Our Safeguarding partnership demonstrates best practice and leads on regional and national initiatives, and our innovative Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) provides an integrated children and adults services response. All decisions on referrals must be made within a maximum of 8 hours via a dedicated multi agency team which includes staff from Adult and Children services; Police (including police civilian staff); Education; CNTW; safeguarding health nurses; and a domestic abuse worker. There are also links with other stakeholders who can be contacted when required from Northumberland Fire and Rescue, Probation, Housing and DWP. The co-location of MASH partners and their safeguarding expertise enables and ensures robust decision making and safety planning.
- 5.17 Cases referred to MASH meet a significant or critical harm threshold for both adults and children services and are rag rated in relation to response time required according to the level of risk and protective factors as below:

Red - 2 hour response; Amber - 4 hour response; Green - 8 hour response.

- 5.18 To give an idea of scale, in November 2023 there were 45 MASH referrals completed and 23 progressed to a formal Section 42 enquiry; in December 2023 there were 34 MASH referrals and 23 progressed to a formal Section 42 enquiry and in January 2024 there were 56 MASH referrals and 42 progressed to a formal Section 42 enquiry.

Mental Health Services, Safe Haven Café

- 5.19 CNTW, in partnership with the voluntary sector and Adult Services, are developing a 'Safe Haven' in Ashington; a non-clinical environment to support people who are experiencing psychological distress. The project involves multi agency partnership working to ensure inclusivity and accessibility across the county. The new hub will be offering out-of-hours care and in-person support to those in need and is expected to open in April 2024.

Social Work Academy

- 5.20 We established a social work academy within Adult Services approximately 18 months ago. This provides dedicated and consistent support for all newly qualified social workers and social work apprentices. In March 2023 we received an independent external quality assurance visit from Skills for Care who, via a series of interviews, assessed the quality and implementation of our ASYE programme (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment) in Northumberland. The feedback was extremely positive and demonstrated that Northumberland is a national exemplar of best practice, with plans to share our approach more widely. One of the assessors stated, 'It was the most positive visit that I have ever had'. Each year

there are two intakes of Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWS) in September and March - in 2023 there was a total intake of 12 NQSWS. They are supported by three team managers, whose role is to nurture them through the transition from academic study to social work practice. The NQSWS spend the first six months working together as a newly qualified team where they can share learning and benefit from tailored support. In the second six months they move into community teams where they continue to receive support and supervision from their academy team managers.

Social Work Awards

- 5.21 Three of our social workers were shortlisted for the Social Worker of the Year Awards 2023, and one of the social workers went on to win the top award in her category. Hannah Dawson, who works in the North Mental Health Team, won the Mental Health Social Worker of the Year award. The award recognises qualified social workers who have made a positive impact through their outstanding work with adults or children. Louise Gray, who works in Central Northumberland Care and Support Team, was shortlisted for the Adult Social Worker of the Year award. The award recognises qualified social workers who have made a positive impact through their outstanding work with adults. Katie Anderson, who works in the countywide Emergency Duty Team, was shortlisted for the Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP) of the Year award. This is a new award category which recognises AMHPs who excel in delivering positive outcomes for the people they support in the context of mental health act assessments.
- 5.22 Our Northumberland social work academy was a finalist for the Local Government Chronicle award for the best next generation employer.

Recruitment, In-house Provider Services

- 5.23 A key challenge for in-house services since the Covid 19 crisis has been recruitment and retention of staff. Through the last 12 months the position has steadily improved as we have worked closely with our colleagues in the Recruitment Team. We maximise our promotions through both electronic advertisement and word of mouth through our current workforce who are best able to promote social care and working for the council than those who work for us.

Internal Services - CQC inspection ratings

- 5.24 Four of our CQC registered services have recently been inspected. Short Term Support Service (STSS) Berwick, STSS West and STSS Central have all retained their Outstanding rating from CQC. Our Shared Lives service was inspected in October/November 2023 and received a good rating overall, with Outstanding in the Caring Domain. Lessons learnt from the inspections are shared with all other services.

Inspection readiness

- 5.25 Preparation work has continued over the past year for the introduction of CQC Inspections of Adult Social Care and a full governance framework has been developed to support this work. This included beginning a continuous programme of assurance visits taking place throughout the county which aims to replicate parts of the inspection process and provide an action plan to support services in areas which require improvement; and plans will be developed for a follow up inspection review process.

- 5.26 The first version of our LASAIR documentation was completed in late 2023. This is our self-assessment as a local authority on how we are delivering our Adult Social Care functions. A library of documentation to support the self-assessment was also collated. There have been and continue to be further reviews taking place with external support from the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) and peers to further assess adult social care in Northumberland and our readiness for inspection.

Market position statement

- 5.27 Our Market Position Statement was published in May 2023. It sets out our vision for commissioning adult care services to support adults with social care needs in Northumberland. It highlights our priorities, gives a sense of direction for care and support in Northumberland, and highlights potential business opportunities during a time of uncertainty and significant change. In response to the care and support needs of our communities, tender opportunities are presented to providers to shape and develop a resilient market in order to introduce new and varied services that are required, an example being the current Dementia Service Tender initiated due to the identified need for dementia nursing beds in Northumberland.

Commissioning quality assurance process

- 5.28 We have further developed our commissioning quality assurance process, which sets out our approach to assuring the standards of commissioned adult social care services in Northumberland including out of area services. Support to providers is critical to our social care market to continually develop the quality of services. Some examples of this include contracted social care providers and their staff are offered access to the council's training courses to improve the quality of the services that they deliver. This includes training on Safeguarding, Mental Capacity Act, and an Excellence Course to enhance the skills and knowledge of care service managers.
- 5.29 We also provide programmes and events to facilitate the sharing of good practice of care providers rated as "outstanding" and supporting providers with their most difficult structural challenges such as recruitment and retention. In January 2024, 78 care homes (82.1%) in Northumberland were rated as good or outstanding (an increase from 77.3% in December 2022), 84.5% of beds in care homes in Northumberland were rated as good or outstanding (an increase from 74.7% in December 2022). We are benchmarking nationally with all Northumberland Care Homes and are performing above average for community-based locations rated as outstanding or good across the 5 CQC domains.

Information systems and digital technology

- 5.30 The procurement of a replacement system for Swift, our main Adult Social Care recording system, continued throughout 2022-23 (this was completed in May 2023). The next step, which is currently underway, is the implementation project to ensure a safe transfer to the new system, which is expected to take approximately 20 months in total.
- 5.31 The One Call telephony service (single point of access) have recently completed a project to move to the corporate system which will give us better business continuity and detailed reporting functions.

Key areas of focus

Prevention

- 5.32 We have a range of well-established services in Northumberland focused on helping people to stay healthy and independent. Over the next period we will be working to strengthen our focus on the benefits of prevention and early intervention. This will include further development of our relationship with NCT under the Communities First model which will help to stimulate service development in the community and voluntary sector whilst maintaining a flexible and responsive service that acknowledges the unique challenges of a large and diverse county.

Strength based approach

- 5.33 We are working towards a strengths-based approach to the assessment of client needs. Our Quality of Practice Framework has recently been reviewed in collaboration with our workforce and there has been a renewed commitment to adopting strength-based approaches within Adult Services.

Unpaid Carers

- 5.34 As part of our commitment to supporting carers, we have co-produced with the Carers Partnership Board a comprehensive Carers Strategy: Northumberland's Commitment to Carers Strategy 2022-24 to support the health and wellbeing of all carers living in Northumberland. We are working with our stakeholders/partners in delivering this strategy.
- 5.35 Following positive feedback from colleagues in other local authorities, we have recently commissioned a new online platform, Mobilise, initially for one year. The purpose of Mobilise is to further support our carers, including those harder to reach carer groups, whilst complementing the work currently undertaken by Carers Northumberland.

Direct Payments

- 5.36 We have recently undertaken a comprehensive review of our approach to Direct Payments via our Adult Services Transformation Board. Direct payments have always been available as a solution to enable clients and their families to take more control over their lives, but we recognise that comparatively our take up of direct payments in Northumberland is lower than many other Councils. This BEST project has identified key actions which are aimed at increasing the take up of direct payments over the coming period.

Feedback from Service Users

- 5.37 Feedback from service users is a vital measure of how we are meeting the needs of our residents. We have recently implemented a new 'People's Advisory Group', in collaboration with Healthwatch Northumberland; the first meeting of which took place on 14 November 2023. The purpose of this group is for adults who draw on care and support and adult services staff to work together in equal partnership to advise upon the development and embedding of a culture of co-production and to identify areas for improvement.
- 5.38 In addition, our Shared Lives service are setting up carer and user forums to achieve co-production of processes, training and how we engage with our stakeholders. We aim to continue to build on and develop new methods of engaging with our service users as well as improving information, guidance, and recruitment of carers. This is currently progressing through the Best-in-Class Commissioning project within the council.

Extra care and supported living

- 5.39 Our extra care and supported living strategy has recently been updated. It sets out the background that housing pressures for vulnerable individuals is presenting to the Council and what we aim to do to enable people to live the best lives they can. It reflects our commitment to ensuring that high quality accommodation with care and support is available for older and vulnerable people; both to meet current needs and to support the next generation of people who will need care and support where they choose to live.

Information provision

- 5.40 We recognise the importance of keeping our residents informed and providing effective information. We are working with IT to update our pages on the corporate website to a more user-friendly platform. This will include signposting to other services or organisations where appropriate. We will also be exploring the potential to provide more self-service functionality so people can plan for their future. This will include interactive transactions such as online assessments and referrals to maximise efficiency and provide better value for money.

Digital technology

- 5.41 We continually scan the digital marketplace for advancing technology which will support with service provision. As such, we are about to start a digital pilot using Amazon Show. It is anticipated that the pilot will focus on several distinct areas. To support hospital discharge for those patients nervous about coming home; for some STSS care calls which could be facilitated remotely; for some proactive outbound calls/messages for those Telecare clients who are frequent callers e.g. those who continually ring to ask the time, where the system could be pre-programmed to respond to the question; for welfare checks to clients. Feedback from the pilot will inform strategic decisions on where similar/additional technology can support services.

Development of social enterprises

- 5.42 Work is due to commence to develop one of our existing social enterprises - Centre of Recycling and Enterprise (CORE) based in our Tynedale Centre day centre in Hexham. The aim of the project is to reinvest income that will create employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Operational performance (national and local benchmarking)

- 5.43 The Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework (ASCOF) measures how well care and support services achieve the outcomes that matter most to people. There are 22 indicators, seven of the indicators are calculated from the Adult Social Care Survey (the user survey), five are from the biennial Survey of Adult Carers in England (SACE) and the other ten are from other published data including the year-end Short and Long-Term Services (SALT) return.
- 5.44 For the period 2022-23 Northumberland ranked above the North East and England averages in 10 out of the 17 indicators that were reviewed in that year (note, the 5 indicators linked to the Carers survey are biennial). Only 1 indicator was below the North East and England averages. 8 out of the 17 ranked in the top 25% of the 151 local authorities with adult social care responsibilities.
- 5.45 Within the User survey the following two indicators ranked particularly highly:

- a) 4A – “Proportion of people who use services who feel safe” is ranked 4th in England. Note: the lower the ranking number the better
- b) 1A – “Social care-related quality of life” is ranked 7th in England. Note: the lower the ranking number the better.

5.46 In 2021-22 all 5 indicators from the Biennial Carers Survey were ranked within the top 8 out of the 151 local authorities with adult social care responsibilities:

- a) Carer-reported quality of life – 2nd
- b) Proportion of carers who reported that they had as much social contact as they would like – 3rd
- c) Proportion of carers who report that they have been included or consulted in discussion about the person they care for – 4th
- d) Proportion of carers who find it easy to find information about services – 6th
- e) Proportion of people who use services who feel safe – 8th.

6. Options open to the Council and reasons for the recommendations

This report provides a valuable opportunity for Council to consider and comment on the work of each Portfolio. The recommendation to Council is to note the Cabinet Member for Caring for Adults Annual Portfolio Report.

7. Implications

Policy	This report supports delivery of all three priorities of the Corporate Plan.
Finance and value for money	Value for money is a priority for the Council. This report contains no direct financial implications. The ongoing delivery of the individual actions within the Leader of Council’s portfolio may have financial implications which would form separate reports as these arise.
Legal	No implications to note.
Procurement	N/A
Human resources	N/A
Property	N/A
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?	No - no equalities issues identified N/A

Risk assessment	None at this stage.
Crime and disorder	N/A
Customer considerations	N/A
Carbon reduction	N/A
Health and wellbeing	The achievements and areas of focus outlined in the report are all essential for the health and wellbeing of our residents.
Wards	(All Wards);

8. Background papers

Not applicable.

9. Links to other key reports already published

Corporate Plan 2023-26

Corporate Plan Achievements Report March 2023

10. Author and Contact Details

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Northumberland County Council

COUNCIL

DATE: 20 MARCH 2024

Annual Portfolio Report – Supporting Business and Opportunities

Report of: Councillor Wojciech Ploszaj Portfolio Holder for Supporting Business and Opportunities

Responsible Officer: Simon Neilson, Executive Director, Place and Regeneration

1. Purpose of report

1.1 This is the Annual Portfolio Report from the Portfolio Holder for Supporting Business and Opportunities. The Report contains issues that set the context for delivery of the Portfolio. It highlights achievements over the past year and, outlines some of the areas of focus for the coming year.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Council is recommended to:

- (i) Note the update from the Portfolio Holder for Supporting Business and Opportunities.

Link to Corporate Plan

- **Driving Economic Growth** - The Portfolio is key in contributing to driving inclusive economic growth by supporting the delivery of the Northumberland Economic Strategy; delivering regeneration activity in towns and villages across the County making them places people want to live and visit and businesses invest in; and activity to support business and people, identifying and growing key growth sectors, providing support for businesses to grow and delivering activity which helps those furthest from the labour market move closer to securing work.
- **Achieving Value for Money** – The Portfolio contributes to Value for Money by seeking to maximise external funding and investment into the county, to support regeneration and business and job growth.
- **Tackling Inequalities** – The Portfolio plays a key role in driving delivery of the Council's Inequalities Plan through addressing the underlying causes of inequality via its support to inclusive growth and ensuring the jobs created are accessible to the County's communities.

3. Key issues

3.1 The Annual Portfolio reports from each of the Council's Cabinet Members provide an opportunity for Council to consider an overview of, and comment on the work of each Portfolio. This strengthens the important link and accountability between key decisions

taken by the Cabinet and achievement of the three priorities of the Council as set out in the Corporate Plan.

4. **Background**

4.1 The County Council adopted the Corporate Plan at its AGM on 17th May 2023. The Plan establishes three priorities for the Council, underpinned by our approach to tackling Climate Change. The Annual Council Achievements Report (reported to Council in March 2023) sets out overall progress against the three priorities whilst this Portfolio report provides an opportunity for Members to drill down further into the work of the Supporting Business and Opportunities Portfolio.

5. **Northumberland Economic Strategy Framework**

5.1 The Northumberland Economic Strategy covers the period of 2019-24 and was approved by Cabinet in December 2018. The Economic Strategy established priorities for inclusive industrial growth in the context of the new North of Tyne Combined Authority, the developing Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal and the national Industrial Strategy.

5.2 Set out as a positive statement of the potential of the Northumberland economy, the strategy builds on the statements in the Council's Corporate Plan to develop and grow whilst acknowledging the issues within the county that need to be addressed. Key themes include the importance of focusing on industrial led growth and key national challenges such as ageing and clean growth; the importance of inclusive growth; and the potential of local, regional and national partnerships.

5.3 The Economic Strategy sets out a vision to be a prosperous, inclusive and connected community. The objectives to deliver this vision are:

- To **grow the business base**, with a focus on six major sector opportunities where we can contribute to the national Industrial Strategy and ensure we deliver services to enable business to have the best possible enterprise, innovation, development, finance and advisory assistance to operate here in Northumberland.
- To **support inclusive employment**, our highly skilled workforce is a major strength, but we must ensure that the employment available is inclusive and accessible to all parts of our community.
- To **ensure our towns and communities are productive places** economically. It is vital that we are sensitive to each place's characteristics and the unique opportunities within them, our task is to develop effective support from the Council working with our partners to make things happen.

5.4 The strategic framework and the priorities set out in the Northumberland Economic Strategy are still relevant and reflect the priorities in the Council's Corporate Plan. However a light touch refresh of the strategy for 2024-26 has been undertaken to ensure Northumberland County Council can successfully respond to the County's priorities in developing partnerships and investment plans which will reflect on:

- successful delivery since 2019;
- the key trends in the evidence regarding key opportunities and challenges; and

- key regional and national policy changes.

5.5 The refreshed strategy will be finalised and published in April 2024. Key components which have been considered in relation to the refresh include:

- **Responding to economic, financial and political changes**
 - Macro Economic changes
 - New national economic policy
 - New and existing sub-national arrangements
- **Updated evidence and policy framework**
 - Development of the regional and local evidence base
 - Updates to the wider family of related NCC strategies including the Northumberland Employment and Skills Partnership Strategic Priorities, the Northumberland Cultural Strategy, and the Northumberland Destination Management Plan.
- **Enabling Delivery and Partnership Working**
 - Confirming the role of partners working together to deliver the strategy.
 - Providing the basis for an updated strategic delivery framework
 - Highlight the links to the Northumberland County Partnership and provide a platform for strengthening our engagement with business

Partnership Working

5.6 Northumberland's economy works at multiple scales and much of the work to deliver this strategy will be undertaken in partnership. Over the last 5 year the North of Tyne devolution deal and the Borderlands Growth Deal have presented unique opportunities to deliver growth and change focused on our leading industries and our places. We have worked at multiple levels with neighbouring local authorities, the North of Tyne Combined Authority, the Borderland Partnership, the North East Local Enterprise Partnership (NELEP) and the North East Joint Transport Committee in support of our common objectives.

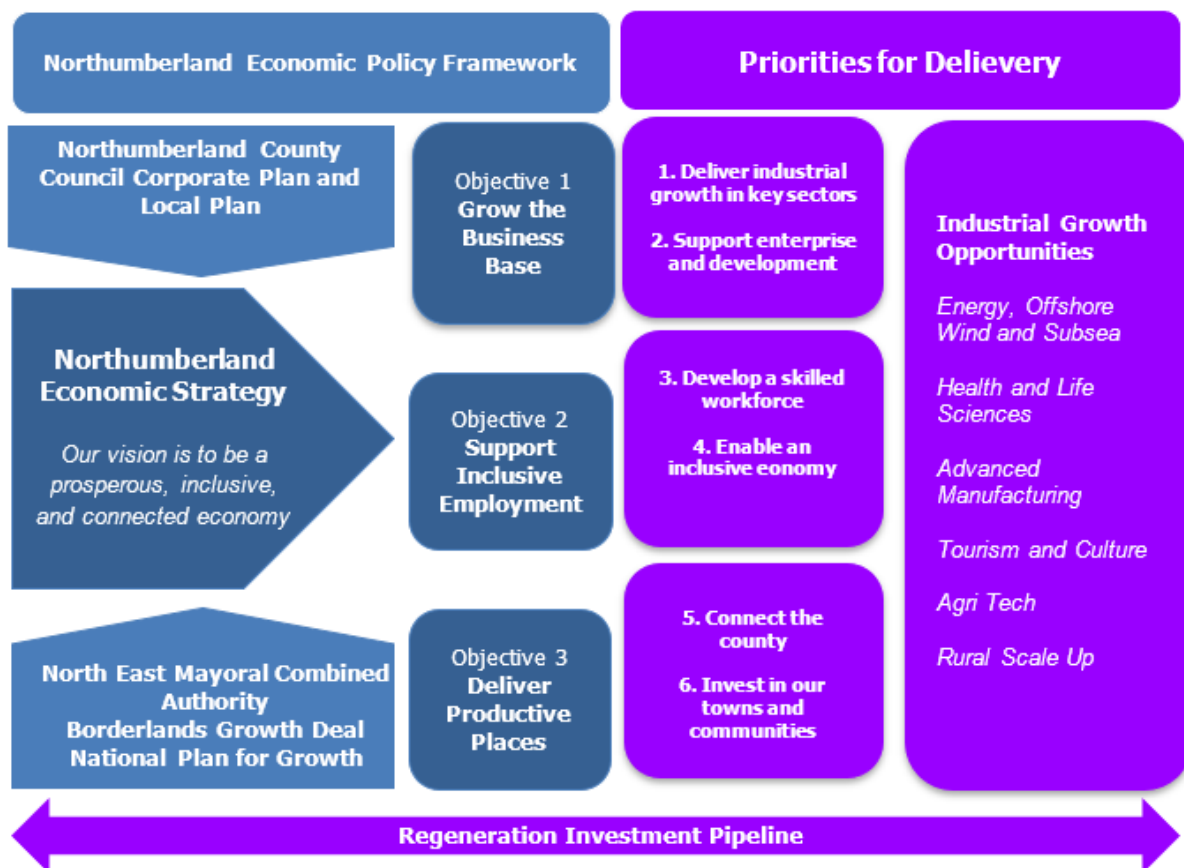
5.7 The **Borderlands**, bringing five Local Authority areas together represents an economy of over 1 million people, there is a growing base of small and medium sized businesses, a range of international companies and national scale strategic investment/employment sites. The opportunity is to boost connectivity to take advantage of the areas position, access to markets, and natural assets.

5.8 Of particular importance moving forward is the **North East Mayoral Combined Authority**. The North East Devolution Deal for the region means unlocking £4.2 billion of investment, over 30 years, and seeing additional powers transferred from Whitehall to local people with better knowledge and experience of our communities. It is expected to create 24,000 extra jobs, create 70,000 courses to give people the skills to get good jobs and leverage £5.0 billion of private sector investment. This deal and the North East Mayoral Combined Authority which will be established in May 2024 following the Mayoral Elections represents a significant opportunity to make a difference to people who live and work in the North East.

- 5.9 Across the seven local authorities of County Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, Northumberland, North Tyneside, South Tyneside and Sunderland we represent a functional and interdependent economy with a population of 2 million with 68,850 businesses, providing 887,000 jobs and a GVA of over £32,300 per head (Policy paper North East devolution deal, 2022).
- 5.10 In March 2024, Government also announced a trailblazer deal for the North East. This new deal deepens the devolution settlement of the North East Mayoral Combined Authority. It contains provisions from Level 4 of the Devolution Framework, as well as new, bespoke measures to drive economic growth in the North East and establish the Combined Authority as a place-leader in the region. This deal is subject to ratification by all partners and relevant statutory process to follow in 2024.
- 5.11 The county council has and continues to play a leading role working in partnership to ensure we strengthen Northumberland's position as a place to do business and invest in, a place where our residents are our greatest asset and international visitor destination based on our exceptional culture, arts, heritage and environmental offer. Collaboration with partners continues to be important part of what we do as an authority, working regionally to grow the economy.
- 5.12 As part of the Transition to the new Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) NCC has been engaged in:
- 5.12.1 Operational transition – ensuring the new organisation of the Mayoral Combined Authority will be in a position to be up and running in May 2024, including the transition of legal, HR and financial arrangements from the predecessor bodies;
- 5.12.2 Early priorities, including supporting the development of early Capital Investment , announced by Government at the time of the Deal announcement, through which a key Northumberland project will benefit, the development of policies and programmes such as the Investment Zone and the Investment Plan for the new MCA;
- 5.12.3 Transition Portfolios – working through the transition Governance arrangements with Leadership from the seven Leaders, NCC officers have been supporting the development of transition portfolio plans, including: transport; finance and investment; economic; housing and land; culture, creative, tourism & sport; education, skills & inclusion, and rural, coastal & environment, the latter of which is led by the Leader of NCC.
- 5.12.4 NCC established the **Major Employer Forum (MEF)** in summer 2022, as a means of strengthening its relationship with some of the most significant employers in the County; since then the MEF, which has membership from businesses across a range of sectors and geographies, has met regularly and provided a key route by which the Council can consult and engage with the business community. Importantly it has also proved to be a valuable forum for senior members of NCC to hear from businesses about their successes, opportunities and the challenges they face, which in turn informs the activities and investments NCC and partners make to support businesses and the economy. We will continue to strengthen the relationship with business and will look to build on the MEF and ensure it is in the best form to support growth across the County, including extending its membership and ensuring it can effectively support the Northumberland County Partnership.

Enabling Delivery of the Economic Strategy

- 5.13 The Council has been successful in attracting high levels of external funding to support its economic regeneration and growth ambitions, delivered through a wide range of initiatives which grow, renew and connect the county's towns and communities and capitalise on natural assets. Activities include major town regeneration across a range of settlements to the ongoing success of the community chest, where relatively small scale investments make a big impact on places.
- 5.14 The delivery of the NCC Regeneration Investment Group (RIG) pipeline is supported and enabled by teams developing and delivering projects in the service and in a range of departments across the council. The Regeneration Programmes Investment Team secure investment and manage the assurance and governance processes, the Regeneration Finance and Performance Team support the finance and audit that underpin externally funded activities working closely with the council legal, procurement and finance departments. Activities include:
- Advising the Council and local organisations on external funding opportunities where appropriate; and
 - Supporting the council and partners with information, advice and guidance on project development, delivery and monitoring.
- 5.15 In summary the value of the projects in development and delivery across the County stands at over **£460m**, which includes a range of economic development, regeneration and strategic transport projects. This includes Council match of **c£134m**, private sector contributions of **£74m** and external funding of **c£252m**. The following sections of the report highlight the activity being delivered against the three priorities of the Economic Strategy.



6. OBJECTIVE 1 - GROW THE BUSINESS BASE

- 6.1. Our ambition is for Northumberland to be nationally recognised as the place to be if you are a large company or small business owner who wants to both prosper and be located in or close to a high-quality rural setting.
- 6.2. Northumberland is home to leading global industries and we are committed to ensuring that our businesses are successful, creating the right conditions for growth. The county has businesses operating in globally competitive supply chains, and unique assets for large scale investment, particularly in relation to clean growth.
- 6.3. Key to this is securing the resilience and expansion of our existing companies. This means working with the larger international brands to maximise the success of their operations based within the county. It also involves supporting the extensive range of our smaller and medium sized enterprises to maximise their competitiveness whether through scaling up, extending their reach, diversification, or through innovation.
- 6.4. Given our diverse geographical area, the key to delivering business growth is to ensure the right ecosystem is in place to support companies' growth ambitions. This means finding the appropriate mix of infrastructure that is attractive to business, as well as support to develop effectively within a rural geography.
- 6.5. Whilst market conditions present challenges in achieving this, of particular importance to Northumberland will be ensuring the best possible employment sites and facilities

are available. In particular supporting businesses wishing to capitalise on our transformational opportunities in key sectors is a focus whilst also ensuring there is a supply of good quality business space for a variety of needs.

- 6.6. There is a wide range of business support and finance tools available both nationally and regionally, and we want to ensure that this support is helping Northumberland businesses to generate ideas, innovate and grow. Advance Northumberland, NCC's development company provides a core service in helping businesses of all sizes find their way to the right support and we will seek to continue and build on this approach.
- 6.7. The following section includes updates on key projects and activity which support our ambition to grow the Northumberland Business Base.

6.8. **Enterprise Zones**

- 6.8.1. The seven local authorities in the North East and the North East LEP established ten Enterprise Zone sites across three locations (Blyth Estuary, North Bank of the Tyne and the A19 Corridor) during the first wave; focusing specifically on supporting significant sectors across energy, offshore and subsea engineering and automotive and low carbon vehicles respectively.
- 6.8.2. In 2017/18 these were joined by a further ten sites across, Northumberland (including Ashwood Business Park and Ramparts Business Park), Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, South Tyneside and Sunderland with the International Advanced Manufacturing Park.
- 6.8.3. Enterprise Zone Site development funding provides the main route to developing out the Enterprise Zone sites, bringing up-front capital investment to the sites to complement and unlock development of the sites through development or land owner investment.
- 6.8.4. The following sites are part of Energy Central, a unique partnership between Advance Northumberland, the Port of Blyth, Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE) Catapult and Northumberland County Council. This partnership is underpinned by access to a readymade skills base, a highly connected location and an established offshore energy and fabrication cluster to support operations at Energy Central.
 - Northumberland Energy Park Phase 1 consists of the strategic riverside site with associated dock. The area is the subject of the current £35m public investment enabling works covering the former Stations A and B Blyth Power Station and the Ash Barge Dock. These enabling works will provide an extended and deep-water berth at the Ash Dock.
 - Dun Cow Quay is a 0.38 HA site is a North East Enterprise Zone and is well situated for businesses operating in the operations and maintenance segment of the offshore wind sector as it is located close to the Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE) Catapult. ORE Catapult offers world class R&D expertise and assets including open access shallow water testing facilities.
 - Bates Clean Energy Terminal offers a unique opportunity for investors who operate in the marine, offshore and renewable energy sector. The site has

recently undergone an extensive **£10m+** redevelopment programme and has green, clean energy at its core. Located on site is Port Training Services' Wind Turbine Training Facility offering real-world training opportunities to businesses in the offshore renewables sector.

- Commissioners Quay site is home to a four storey, state of the art Blyth Workspace building providing high quality, contemporary services office space, which is suitable for a range of businesses – from start-ups to larger and more established companies. These facilities offered at the workspace include: offices ranging from 20 m2 to 100 m2, high speed broadband, virtual offices, training room for hire, meeting/conference room amenities and free parking. The site also hosts The Commissioners Quay Inn.

6.8.5. Ashwood Business Park is strategically located in South East Northumberland with excellent connectivity including direct access to A1(M) and A19 through the A189 arterial road. It offers good access to Newcastle International Airport and the Port of Blyth. The park was developed in 2003 and is currently home to: Bernicia Homes – headquarters for one of the UK's leading housing association AkzoNobel – Europe's most advanced paint and coatings production plant and Eurogarages – petrol station with drive thru Starbucks and Contec a new 60,000sqft advanced manufacturing facility.

6.8.6. Ramparts Business Park is prime development land available in Berwick, Northumberland. The Business Park offers a large scale investment opportunity for investors seeking a highly connected location with direct access to markets in England and Scotland.

6.9. Investment Zones

6.9.1. Investment Zones (IZs) are being introduced by Government to accelerate economic growth through clustering and agglomeration in specific sectors with significant growth potential. This includes supporting R&D and Innovation and maximising their contribution to sector growth. The seven constituent North East Local Authorities of the North East Mayor Combined Authority were invited to bring forward a proposition when the policy was announced in March 2023, alongside 7 other English areas. In November, Government announced that the programme would be extended from 5 to 10 years, with the total amount of funding available to each Investment Zone increased from **£80m to £160m**.

6.9.2. The North East Investment Zone (NEIZ) will support growth in Advanced Manufacturing and Green Industries. This builds on the 'Arc of Innovation' set out in the Devolution Deal and the world class strength of the region's Offshore, Engineering and Green Manufacturing industries. The IZ will be fully signed off by Central Government in March 2024, with implementation starting April 2024.

6.9.3. Following consultation and modelling, the region is bringing forward four Intervention Sites, each identified as either an 'IZ Tax Site' or 'IZ Growth Site'. This reflects the differing nature of the sites in terms of the economic opportunities and the constraints which need to be addressed to unlock private sector investment.

- 6.9.4. As an IZ Intervention Site new and expanding businesses within Blyth Energy Central designated areas will have access to tax benefits, including tax relief in relation to National Insurance, Business Rates, Stamp Duty and enhanced capital allowances.
- 6.9.5. Modelling to date has highlighted the potential for the creation of around 10,000 skilled jobs over the life-time of the initiative, with additional jobs created in construction and across supply chains. The region's universities have been actively involved in the development of the Investment Zone proposal, and will play a key role in aligning investment, expertise and academic programmes with the IZ sectors to help maximise growth opportunities.
- 6.9.6. Blyth Energy Central is the Northumberland Tax site. The energy cluster across the Blyth estuary and wider hinterland currently supports around 2,700 jobs, with key businesses including the Port of Blyth, Royal IHC and TFKables/JDR Cable Systems. Blyth is also home to the R&D and testing facilities of the Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult. There are significant further employment opportunities associated with offshore renewables, electrification and wider infrastructure. Key objectives moving forward include confirmation of next steps on the NEP3 site. There is recognition at national levels of the importance of the site and as such the County Council is in dialogue with Government and the administrators over the best way forward for the former 'BritishVolt' site to meet regional and national priorities. IZ tax benefits would provide a clear incentive for investment at scale – alongside wider IZ benefits around skills and innovation.
- 6.9.7. The NE Investment Zone will have **£70m** of flexible funding over the ten years of the IZ, with a £7m allocation per year. This funding is available on a 60:40 capital:revenue basis, and Government has published a menu of pre-approved interventions aligned with the themes of skills, infrastructure, innovation, planning, and business support. The NEIZ will also receive additional flexible funding, as a result of taking up less than the maximum allocation of tax sites. The precise level of additional funding is still to be confirmed with Government, with the intention being that this funding will be prioritised for co-investment with the private sector in infrastructure and innovation interventions.
- 6.9.8. The NEIZ proposition includes Business Rates Retention sites. These sites will enable the region to benefit from the retention of all growth in business rates over the next 25 years. Business Rates retention therefore provides the potential for a significant additional revenue source. To maximise its impact, and embed the principle of no detriment to individual Local Authorities, an IZ Business Rates Reinvestment Strategy has been agreed with Government through the co-development process. A report to Cabinet in February 2023 confirmed Blyth Energy Central as a Business Rate Retention Site.

6.10 Advance Northumberland

- 6.10.1** Advance Northumberland, launched in November 2018, is a Northumberland County Council owned company and is tasked with helping to drive economic development and prosperity across Northumberland. Advance Northumberland help Northumberland Council with ambitious regeneration plans and play a critical role in delivering a step change in the local economy.

- 6.10.2** Key activities include management of a Commercial Estate; Economic Growth & Investments; Project Management Services; management of a Residential Portfolio; and through Ascent homes delivery of homes for sale.
- 6.10.3 Following Cabinet's approval of the Advance Business Strategy Review in November 2022, officials have been working closely with Advance Northumberland to implement the recommendations; this has resulted in strengthened Governance, with the creation of the Cabinet Shareholder Committee, and strengthened commissioning arrangements between the Council and the company.
- 6.10.4 Key components of Advance Northumberland delivery which contribute to growing the business base include
- Managing the Company's Commercial portfolio, valued at **c.£149m** generating rental income of c. **£13.5m pa**. This estate provides good quality, statutory compliant space for businesses to operate in Northumberland.
 - Delivery of a proactive Inward Investment service linked to Northumberland's key growth sectors
 - Working with existing large companies and growing strategic businesses across Northumberland through the Strategic Account Management programme
 - Managing the delivery of the new Northumberland Small Business Service programme
 - Managing the delivery of the Accelerate Ashington Business support programme on behalf of Northumberland County Council.
 - Exploring other possible funding options to deliver further business support or economic growth activity within Northumberland.

6.11 Business Support

- 6.11.1** The **£4.8m Northumberland Small Business Service (NSBS) Programme** is delivering a range of direct local support services and investment until March 2026, to drive growth and resilience across rural businesses and communities within Northumberland. The programme is funded through combination of the North of Tyne Combined Authority Investment Fund, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Rural England Prosperity Fund which the North of Tyne Combined Authority administers on behalf of the UK Government.
- 6.11.2 NSBS offers an integrated business support and grant programme including:
- Enterprise and Start Up Support, Growth & Resilience Support and a Farming Advisory Service
 - NSBS Grant Investment fund to support business growth with capital grants of £10,000 up to a maximum of £300,000. The grant is available to all rural micro and small businesses/enterprises in Northumberland with turnover of less than £10m and less than 50 employees. The grants awarded will increase economic growth and business resilience through the creation of new jobs as well as safeguarding jobs across rural Northumberland.

- 6.11.3 To date **140 businesses** have accessed specialist support and different workshops and networking events. In addition, four grants have been approved by investment panel so far, committing **£333,533** of funding and **leveraging £500,301** of private sector funding with delivery already progressing on the ground.
- 6.11.4 The Northumberland Business Service is a successor to the **Rural Business Growth Service (RBGS) project** was successfully delivered by Advance Northumberland and had two linked components:
- Business Advice and Support Services to support the development of growth plans and guide businesses towards appropriate sources of finance.
 - A Capital Grant Investment Fund to support investment in projects that enable rural businesses to expand productive capacity and / or diversify into new markets or products.
- The programme supported **24 businesses** with capital grant funding of **£1.536m**, which **levered in £2.48m** of private sector match funding. Overall the programme provided **support to 556 businesses** leading to the creation of 182.14 FTE jobs.
- 6.11.5 The **Rural Design Centre Innovation Programme** was completed in 2023 and was a collaboration between Advance Northumberland, Innovation Super Network and Northumbria University, which utilises the expertise of each entity to help organisations deliver real tangible change in rural communities in the North East of England. Part-funded by Government and the North of Tyne Combined Authority the programme invested in a wide and varied range of businesses to identify and investigate opportunities develop solutions to challenges, big and small.
- 6.11.6 The project has successfully supported 25 organisations to diversify through providing **£85,000** of grant funding for a range of projects from copyright and patenting facilitation to the creation of an augmented reality for the promotion of our cultural heritage. As part of the Rural Catalyst partnership with the NICRE, two large-scale annual hybrid events took place, with nearly 300 people attending.

6.12 ***Stewardship and Rural Growth***

- 6.12.1 Northumberland County Council is facilitating a place-based approach to investing in Northumberland's unique natural, economic, and cultural assets that will simultaneously enhance the environment, grow the rural economy, and improve opportunity and prosperity in communities. These assets offer huge potential to enhance the environment in Northumberland and to contribute to climate change goals, at the same time as boosting growth and prosperity in the local economy and communities by capitalising on these natural assets.
- 6.12.2 The approach aligns and balances investment in:
- Stewardship: looking after and enhancing our precious natural assets in a way that provides environmental, social, and economic benefits.
 - Rural growth: developing the rural economy, and growing businesses, jobs and wealth in a way that simultaneously delivers environmental and social benefits

- 6.12.3 Northumberland County Council and the North of Tyne Combined Authority, working with a range of rural stakeholders developed a North of Tyne Stewardship and Rural Growth Investment approach supported by **£9m** of investment until 2028. The investment is a combination of the North of Tyne Combined Authority Investment Fund, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Rural England Prosperity Fund which the North of Tyne Combined Authority administers on behalf of the UK Government.
- 6.12.4 Two flagship programmes are enabled through this investment and include that Rural Asset Multiplier Pilot Programme and the Northumberland Small Business Service mentioned above.
- 6.12.5 The **£3.5m Rural Asset Multiplier Pilot (RAMP) Programme** will prioritise investment in strategic activities which will bring lasting, positive change to identified rural areas, piloted primarily in two areas – the Northumberland Coast National Landscape and the Northumberland National Park. Activity will be driven by local need, demonstrating a bottom-up approach targeted directly at tackling local, rural issues. Following a successful call, 11 projects have been shortlisted and progressing through assessment and delivery. Two grants have been approved so far totalling £290,870.
- 6.12.6** In addition funding has been secured to develop a **Natural Capital Accounting Pilot** and a **Northumberland Food Strategy** and pilot programme, work on both is underway with updates to be provided later in the year.
- 6.12.7 **Local Nature Recovery Strategies** are new spatial strategies introduced under the Environment Act 2021, which will identify priorities for nature recovery and propose actions that will make particular contributions to achieving those priorities. DEFRA has appointed 48 Responsible Authorities to lead on the production of LNRS which together cover the whole of England. The North of Tyne Combined Authority was appointed to lead the production of a LNRS covering Northumberland, Newcastle and North Tyneside the lead role for which has been delegated to Northumberland County Council, with Newcastle City Council, North Tyneside Council and Northumberland National Park Authority acting as Supporting Authorities.
- 6.12.8 The manner in which LNRS are to be produced is set out in regulations and statutory guidance, which define a five-step process and a series of consultation requirements. For the North of Tyne LNRS a steering group has been established, comprising representatives of the responsible and supporting authorities, the DEFRA bodies, protected landscapes, Environmental Records Centre and Northumberland Wildlife Trust. A map has been produced of designated sites and irreplaceable habitats and a document describing the strategy area and its ecological resources, which together meet steps 1 and 2 of the process. The next step will take us into the heart of the process, which is to identify a longlist of nature recovery priorities, which will be prioritised to form a shortlist to be taken forward in the strategy. This process requires wide consultation, and to do this we are preparing to undertake a series of place-based conversations based in six sub-areas defined by their geographical and ecological characteristics. This consultation will take place in summer and autumn 2024 and will enable farmers, landowners and others with an interest in land management to contribute to the process
- 6.12.9 **Local Investment in Natural Capital (LINC) Programme**

- 6.12.10 The LINC Programme is aimed at building the capacity and capability of leading local authorities to take a natural capital approach to economic growth. It will support local areas to develop local investment vehicles, facilitate co-operation and shared learning between organisations and sectors, direct investment to cost-effective solutions, and generate nature-related revenue flows.
- 6.12.11 The LINC programme focuses on how investors and those that deploy capital and deliver change (local authorities, landowners etc.) can come together to build a common understanding of investment in natural capital (and eventually a plan). Critical to this is how local areas can demonstrate “investment readiness”.
- 6.12.12 The area of the Borderlands in England (Cumberland, Northumberland and Westmorland and Furness) is one of four pilots awarded funding of up to £1million to be invested by March 2025 to become trailblazers in natural capital investment, with Northumberland being the lead authority. It is proposed that the programme explores three project themes:
- 6.12.13 Project 1: Developing a place-based Natural Capital Investment Brokerage
- 6.12.14 Project 2: Incentivising the transition to healthier grasslands
- 6.12.15 Project 3: Supporting demonstration Landscape-scale Case Studies
- 6.12.16 A partnership steering group has been established, including partners from across the geography. It will report into the Borderlands Natural Capital Programme Board once established, providing opportunities to share learning and best practice across border, and provides the opportunity shape how the £5m Deal funding for Natural Capital in England could be taken forward.

6.13 Cultural Programme – Supporting Economic Growth

- 6.13.1 The Council recognises the role of Culture and the positive benefits in relation to regeneration, economic growth, skills development, employability, health, and wellbeing. An update was included in the Healthy Lives portfolio update in March. The following projects have a particular impact on Economic Growth and Regeneration.
- 6.13.2 Northumberland County Council has secured **£1.8m** funding for a **Culture and Creative Zone (CCZ)** - Create Berwick - funded through the North of Tyne Combined Authority Investment Fund and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund which the North of Tyne Combined Authority administers on behalf of the UK Government. Create Berwick focuses on the town centre of Berwick upon Tweed and is investing in creative led regeneration of Berwick, helping creative, cultural and community led organisations to innovate and strengthen the local economy. Taking inspiration from Berwick’s rich coastal and borderlands heritage, traditions, and landscapes the CCZ will help create new contemporary cultural experiences and support thriving creative businesses. It provides business support and skills development, working with the National Art Fundraising School, analysis of spaces for production and growth, bringing together the sector to raise its profile and be attractive to visitors. Launched in October it announced the Creative Action Fund before Christmas 2023 to support artists with studio time, project delivery and R&D. The project continues until 2027 providing a positive amount of time to ensure culture and creativity is embedded in the town to benefit local people in projects such as a youth training, community radio, and opportunities to commission artists.

6.13.3 Create Berwick is bookended by two strategic capital projects. The new **Maltings** supported through the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal to transform the existing theatre and cinema into an expanded arts and entertainment centre of national significance. The **Living Barracks** partnership which includes English Heritage, the Maltings, Kings Own Scottish Borders and the Council is working together to provide a high quality and cohesive visitor experience showcasing a number of collections. In May 2023 Cabinet took a decision that the Berwick collections should be retained within the Barracks complex as part of the Living Barracks initiative. Plans for the Living Barracks also include a series of artist studios and temporary public art installations.

6.13.4 Hadrian's Wall

6.13.5 **HW 1900 Festival** - The Wall partners collaborated on Hadrian's Wall 1900, a year-long festival to explore what 1900 years of history means to the communities along the World Heritage Site (WHS). This award-winning festival included over 1,500 events and secured close to a million pounds in funding from multiple bodies. Led by a small project team the festival highlights the Wall in the minds of communities as a resource for them to use and celebrate as their own and not simply a tourist attraction for others. A key strand of interpretation on the Wall is a focus on the people who lived here. Showcasing this multicultural history, and engaging meaningfully with diverse communities, was a key strand of the Hadrian's Wall 1900 Festival.

6.13.6 **Hadrian Wall Capacity Funding** – A North of Tyne funded (£100k) project focused on unlocking the huge and under resourced potential of Hadrian's Wall for the visiting public. The Capacity Funding will support two part time posts: a Communications Officer to be hosted by Northumberland Tourism to work on behalf of the Partnership and a Programme Coordinator role to support the WHS in the development of engagement activities. Posts will be in place for the 2024 season.

6.13.7 **Illuminated Sheep by Deepa Mann-Kler** is inspired by the Gospels' themes of light, sheep and pilgrimage, and saw a flock of life-sized sheep lit up in bright colours at some of the region's most iconic locations including Bamburgh Castle, Vindolanda and Woodhorn Museum. The event was funded by North of Tyne Combined Authority and commissioned by Northumberland County Council as part of the Cultural Programme of Hexham High Street Heritage Action Zone. Illuminated Sheep was developed and managed by Queen's Hall Arts and the Hexham Culture Network. The event captured the imagination of local communities, the region and the nation and a successor project was also brought forward in 2023/24.

6.14 Northumberland's Visitor Economy

6.14.1 The Visitor Economy is a vibrant and important sector in our economy and has the potential, with careful management, to attract more visitors to stay longer, at all times of the year, and spend more in our County. As outlined in the Northumberland Corporate Plan and Economic Strategy, we are committed to create an environment for tourism and the visitor economy to develop and flourish sustainably for the benefit of local communities, businesses, visitors and the natural environment. An

update was provided to Council as part of the Healthy Lives portfolio update in February and some information is provided here in recognition of the contribution to Northumberland's economy.

- 6.14.2 Headline indicators are measured annually via a tourism economic impact modelling process which enables the measurement of the volume and value of tourism using local data, tourism performance and visitor survey data. In 2022:
- The Northumberland visitor economy recorded the highest ever gross value contribution to the Northumberland economy of **£1.169billion**.
 - Northumberland welcomed **9.97million visitors**, an increase of 28% over the previous year.
 - The recovery in spend is being driven by growth in overnight stays which are now just 0.2% off pre-covid levels, and growing at a faster rate than day visitors. Staying visitors account for 19% of visits and 67% of spend.
 - There has been a significant shift in the contribution of food and drink to the visitor economy, which is now the biggest contributor to direct economic impact (48.3%) and direct employment (39.9%).
 - 14,683 jobs are supported by the visitor economy, 12,004 directly employed in the sector.
- 6.14.3 Visit Northumberland is the official Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) for Northumberland and plays a key role in the long-term development of Northumberland as a visitor destination. It provides the leadership, influence and strategic drive essential to realise the vision of putting Northumberland firmly on the map as a premier visitor destination proactively leading the business community in the county. Activity is concentrated on three main areas - marketing delivery, business engagement and strategy development. In addition Visit Northumberland is also responsible for the development and updating of the Northumberland Destination Management Plan (DMP). Destination Management is a process of leading, influencing and coordinating the management of all the aspects of a destination that contribute to a visitor's experience. A Destination Management Plan is a shared statement of intent to manage a destination over a stated period, articulating the roles of the different stakeholders and identifying clear actions that they will take. The Northumberland Destination Management Plan is now into its first full year of delivery and structures are well established.
- 6.14.4 Visit Northumberland was one of the first partnerships to achieve LVEP accreditation from Visit England in February 2023, alongside 14 other destinations across the country, including Newcastle Gateshead Initiative and Visit County Durham from the north east region.
- 6.14.5 At the same time, the North East of England was selected to operate a new Destination Development Partnership (DDP) pilot, under the leadership of NewcastleGateshead Initiative, the only in the Country. Visit Northumberland became a primary LVEP partner in the North East Destination Development Partnership pilot alongside Visit County Durham. The role of the DDP is to develop and oversee the delivery of region wide activity and lead on advocacy, partnership working, funding bids, major events, data, and business support. The immediate impact of the DDP has been the strengthening of the regional dialogue about the importance of the

visitor economy, including a commitment in the North East devolution deal to develop a ten-year strategy for the Northeast allowing for projects to be delivered at scale beyond the lifespan of the initial pilot.

6.14.6 Dark Skies. Through a successful application to the North of Tyne Combined Authority tourism and events investment programme, the Visit Northumberland operation has been actively supporting Northumberland visitor economy businesses with product and experience development to augment the Dark Skies visitor offer and awareness of bookable experiences available in Northumberland. Examples of new product developed include daytime planetarium experiences, 'stay and gaze' event experiences and new evening tour experiences (<https://newcastletourcompany.com/northumberland-dark-skies-tour/>). A targeted consumer marketing campaign launched in Autumn 2023 and has led to over 10,600 visits to the <https://www.visitnorthumberland.com/endlessexperiences> campaign page.

6.14.7 Step into Alnwick. Funded through a UKSPF grant through North of Tyne Combined Authority, The Step into Alnwick programme's aim is to engage Alnwick's retail and visitor economy business community to attract visitors during the winter season, maximising the opportunity of visitors attending The Alnwick Garden's Winter Lights event and Lilidorie attraction through the development of bookable products. Delivered through an app-based platform to showcase offers and experiences for the town's retail and visitor economy businesses, the programme has also seen the development of a self-guided visitor trail of Alnwick town centre, engagement of over 100 businesses and a marketing and promotion campaign via Visit Northumberland channels. To date, 2,696 downloads of the app have been achieved from the <https://www.visitnorthumberland.com/stepintoalnwick> campaign page

7. OBJECTIVE 2 - SUPPORT INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT

7.1. Our highly skilled workforce is a major strength of the County and hugely significant in supporting the growth of our economy, but we must ensure that the employment available is inclusive and accessible to all parts of our community.

7.2. Northumberland's workforce is an asset and includes highly skilled employees, however the county has significant concentrations of both deprivation and affluence. This includes multiple, persistent and long-term deprivation for many individuals, concentrated in some communities particularly along the former coalfield areas of south east Northumberland - with smaller pockets in our rural market towns.

7.3. Too many of our residents have barriers to work that have prevented them from benefiting from jobs growth and disconnect them from the industrial growth occurring in their communities. Developing an inclusive economy means we must go further to connect those furthest away from opportunity with new industrial development.

- 7.4. Our focus is therefore to increase access to opportunity for all, removing the barriers which make it difficult for people to take up employment and training opportunities. We want to empower our people with the skills and resources they need to take ownership of their futures and secure good jobs.
- 7.5. As we develop links between education and industry in the county we will focus on bringing about fundamental change to the whole lifelong learning system from early years, school age qualification attainment, progression to Further/Higher Education and work, through to employability, in-work learning and retraining.
- 7.6. The following section of the report provides an update on key projects and activity.

7.7. *Employability & Inclusion*

- 7.7.1. The Northumberland County Council Employability and Inclusion team leads the Council's strategic approach to employability and inclusion. It works with other Council services, including Northumberland Skills and Advance Northumberland, and external partner organisations and funders to develop and deliver a range of employment and skills programmes. These may be for those who are moving into work, looking to retain a job or progress in work, changing jobs, looking to improve skills, or are returning to the labour market. Key initiatives include the following.
- 7.7.2. The **Northumberland Employment and Skills Partnership** was established to take a cross-sector approach to providing strategic direction and leadership for employment and skills priorities in Northumberland. The cross-sector partnership is made up of a core membership of representatives with strategic roles delivering employment and skills services in Northumberland across the public, private and voluntary sectors. All have an interest in delivering Inclusive Economy ambitions to benefit Northumberland businesses, residents and communities and have jointly agreed a set of Employment and Skills strategic priorities for 2024-25. The partnership reports to the North of Tyne Inclusive Economy strategic management group with a link to the North of Tyne Inclusive Economy Board to raise issues relating to employment and skills policy and practice.
- 7.7.3. The Northumberland Employment and Skills Partnership oversees a dedicated **Employment Partnership project**, funded by the North of Tyne Combined Authority. Working with Newcastle and North Tyneside Councils, it brings together organisations to support residents and local employers to upskill the workforce and for residents to move into good quality work. Coordinating this work is helping to maximise efforts and deliver benefits for our residents and employers, and the Employment Partnership Coordinator actively brings organisations together to promote partnership working. Working with businesses is critical to promote the benefits of employing local people into good work and helping to deliver a more inclusive economy. An Employer Engagement Coordinator employed by Advance Northumberland works directly with local employers to help them access the right learning and employment support to meet their recruitment and business growth needs.

- 7.7.4.** The **Northumberland Employability Network**, part funded by the North of Tyne Combined Authority and managed by the Employment Partnership Coordinator provides a forum for all providers of employability, skills and inclusion services to work together and share information and good practice, and to identify gaps in provision or new opportunities to be raised with the strategic Employment and Skills Partnership.
- 7.7.5.** The **Northumberland Inclusive Economy Community Partnership** project is funded by the UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) with the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) as the lead authority. With **£1.5m** of grant funding to support community-led activities in the most deprived areas of SE Northumberland, the project is supporting
- impactful volunteering and social action projects to develop social and human capital in local places and
 - investment in capacity building and infrastructure support for local civil society and community groups.
- 7.7.6.** Northumberland County Council acted as Lead Accountable Body for the **North of Tyne Working Homes** on behalf of the North of Tyne Combined Authority. The project trialed a model of integrating employment support with tenancy support delivered by social housing providers as social housing tenants are more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive and need additional support to move into the labour market. A partnership of seven housing providers (private and local authority) delivered the project, totalling **£5.2m** over 2018-23. Over 2,000 tenants were supported and almost 60% achieved a positive job or training outcome. The NEMCA Deeper Devolution Deal recognises the project as innovative and makes provision for a potential NEMCA wide employment support pilot building on the North of Tyne Working Homes model.
- 7.7.7.** Northumberland County Council also acted as Lead Accountable Body for **Building Better Opportunities: Bridge Northumberland**. This was a National Lottery Community Fund / ESF project supporting residents who are unemployed or economically inactive to raise their skill levels, overcome barriers to work and move towards the labour market, delivered entirely through a partnership of six Northumberland VCS organisations. The project totalled **£7.5m** over 2016-23. Over 2,000 residents received intensive and holistic support and around 350 moved into work. A legacy of the project is that the VCS partnership has been maintained as is currently receiving UKSPF to deliver a similar model.

7.8. Develop a Skilled Workforce

- 7.8.1.** Spring 2023 was marked by the opening of Northumberland Skills Welding & Fabrication Training Centre. Education SEND & Skills officers secured £1.3m funding to deliver this ambitious project which was designed to directly solve workforce challenges and resultant productivity barriers reported by manufacturing, engineering, construction and energy sectors alike including port-based industries and supply chains. The facility is also a key example of the transformation of the Council's approach to delivering education and training. The centre has trained 30+ young people, 30+ apprentices, 30+ jobseekers some of whom have been supported through interview and into related employment, and an increasing adult education

audience on sector related short courses. A variety of manufacturing/engineering organisations have also been supported with commercial bespoke training.

7.8.2. Progress is being made on the delivery and development of the innovative Energy Central Learning Hub, the first phase of the Energy Central Campus, led by a partnership between the Council, Port of Blyth and the Offshore and Renewable Energy Catapult. With the focus on being employer-led the facility, being delivered by the Energising Blyth Programme, will provide vital learning and skills provision for local businesses, especially in the energy and renewable sectors, responding to the business need. Alongside the first tenant, Bede Academy, agreement was reached in November 2023 for Northumberland Skills to secure training space within Energy Central Learning Hub from August 2024. Accessing the flagship training facility enables another significant step forward in Northumberland Skills delivering on the strategy set out to support workforce growth in sectors which are a priority for Northumberland. New staff members have been recruited for this subject specialism and curriculum will focus upon electrical and mechanical engineering and fluid power systems which are highly relevant to the clean energy and advanced manufacturing sectors. It is intended to commence September 2024 with a cohort of 32 young people on full time programmes.

7.8.3. Education SEND & Skills officers commenced Northumberland SEND Employment Forum during summer 2023. The forum has met three times during 2023/24 with excellent attendance at each event from private sector organisations, VCS, SEND education providers and wider diverse stakeholder group. The primary objective is to increase the number of Supported Internships and progression to employment available for young people with EHC Plans in the county. Supported Internships are full time, one year study programme for young people with SEND that has a significant work placement element, a number of our employers and the business network Connect Northumberland are working with us to enable growth in this area. Northumberland County Council has also committed via Executive Directors to contribute to work placement opportunities. The work in this area is now beginning to yield demonstrable results in Supported Internship growth.

8. OBJECTIVE 3 - DELIVERING PRODUCTIVE PLACES

8.1. Our town centres are fundamentally important, they act as economic, social and community hubs and are central to the health and wellbeing of our communities. As places with ongoing demand from consumers, the council has consistently encouraged and directly delivered development facilitating strong private sector investment into Northumberland.

8.2. Ensuring there are ample social experiences to drive dwell time and the generation and retention of spend on the High Street is vital. This means working together to promote vitality and intervening where it makes sense to do so to support the provision of the right mix of uses including leisure, services, and retail in an increasingly complex and competitive place environment.

8.3. Our task is to continue working together with our partners to ensure each place uses its strengths to be successful in a rapidly changing environment. The following section includes updates on our key projects in 23/24.

8.4. Energising Blyth

8.4.1. The Energising Blyth Programme is a **£90m** regeneration programme to grow, renew and connect the town delivered by Northumberland County Council (NCC) and supported by funding including UK Government, NCC, and North of Tyne Combined Authority. In 2023-24 the Programme includes a number of transformative projects delivering major change in the town including:

8.4.2. Two projects have already been completed as follows:

- **Bowes St, Church St and Wanley Street improvements** have now been completed beginning the process of revitalising the town centre with visible public realm and connectivity improvements;
- Intervention on **Northumberland Energy Park** has now been completed to improve infrastructure installing a new capping beam on the deep dock supporting the area to be investment ready in addition to infrastructure works on the site to date.

8.4.3. Major flagship schemes are in delivery and due to complete in 2024-25 including:

- As noted above, the construction of the new **Energy Central Campus Learning Hub Phase 1** is underway and set to open in Autumn 2024 creating a major new facility for training and skills connecting local people to jobs in future industry. The first two education partners have been announced: Bede Academy will bring new industry focused 'T Levels' to the town for the first time; and Northumberland Skills will focus upon electrical and mechanical engineering and fluid power systems which are highly relevant to the clean energy and advanced manufacturing sectors .
- The **Technology Development Centre (TDC)** – a major new project from the Offshore Renewable Catapult bolstering the innovation capacity in the town.
- Works on the first flagship project in the town centre began in September 2023 with the development of a new **Culture Hub featuring a new 3 screen cinema led attraction and improvements to Market Place** to stimulate renewed confidence in the area are set to open in Spring 2025. This is complimented by a **Culture and Placemaking Programme** delivering events, branding and enhanced public art and public realm in the town.
- Further improvements to public realm and connectivity are underway on **Bridge St** completing in Autumn 2024 connecting the town centre to the quayside.

8.5. Ashington Regeneration Programme

8.5.1 In Summer 2023 NCC approved the establishment of the **£30m** Ashington Regeneration Programme which to boost the town's economy and contribute to the delivery of the Ashington Town Investment Plan. This investment programme is a key component of the Northumberland Line Economic Corridor linked to the reopening of the line in 2024.

8.5.2 The creation of the Ashington Regeneration Programme adds to the significant investments already planned in the town. This includes the reopening of passenger rail services to the Northumberland Line and the development of a state-of-the-art 'Gen Zero' Northumberland College campus at Wansbeck Business Park, being funded by the Department for Education.

8.5.3 The Ashington Regeneration programme brings together significant funding from the council, the North of Tyne Combined Authority and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund with the recently announced award from the Government of **£16.4m for transformational investments at the Wansbeck Square and Portland Park sites.**

8.5.4 These capital projects are a key part of the long-term vision for the town centre, improving pedestrian movements from the new Ashington Station through the high street and includes creating an attractive link from Woodhorn Road to Portland Park, at '**Grand Corner**'. The investments are designed to create new facilities at either end of the high street that will attract the community and visitors, increasing vibrancy, footfall and spending.

6.5.1 Alongside the flagship capital projects, the **North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) Towns and High Streets Investment Programme is funding Animating Ashington**, a full programme of distinctive cultural events and activities in and around the town centre. This will be designed and delivered by a Creative Team who will be appointed early next year with events and activities organised from April 2024 to March 2025. **NTCA are also funding digital business support for Ashington traders** and potential entrepreneurs, which is being delivered by Advance Northumberland.

6.6 Hexham Regeneration Initiatives

Improvements to Hexham include the Hexham High Streets Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ), Masterplanning of the Hexham Middle School Site and approval for planned improvements to the Hexham Shambles in the town centre.

6.6.1 Hexham HSHAZ The **£3.4m** Hexham HSHAZ programme funded by NCC and Historic England will end in March 2024, with the evaluation currently underway. Key achievements to support heritage led regeneration of the town centre with a focus on Priestpople, Battle Hill and Cattle Market include:

- 9 buildings improved through the Building Grants Scheme, including two that were long term vacant, bringing commercial floorspace back into use and creating new employment opportunities
- Heritage training and skills opportunities throughout, many oversubscribed including fantastic engagement with local schools and community organisations
- Support for town heritage tour guides and launch of a heritage trail app
- Development of a Conservation Area Management Plan to guide change in the town centre
- Significant investment in around 500m² of public realm improvements to be completed in Spring funded by NCC

- Combined works to streetscape and buildings will aim to see removal of the 'at risk' status of the Conservation Area

6.6.2 Former Hexham Middle School - The Council has prepared ambitious plans to bring the former Hexham Middle School site back into use through the development of a Master Plan for the land:

- NCC owns the 16 1/2 acre site on Wanless Lane and has outlined the timelines it is currently working to and how it will involve the local community in the decision-making process.
- A master planning exercise is currently being developed by IDP Architects to look at options for utilising this key vacant site, including assessing the site, its challenges, looking at building layout and density, and developing costings and valuations.
- Initial proposals incorporate exploring options for housing, including affordable housing, an extra care scheme and independent supported living bungalows, along with seeking to retain green space. A priority for the council is to continue to provide community garden facilities on the site.
- These proposals represent a starting point and no firm decisions have been made at this stage, with the masterplan now subject to consultation. Feedback from the consultation will help to shape the final plans.

6.6.3 Hexham Shambles – In 2023 NCC approved plans to safeguard, refurbish and enhance the prominent Hexham Shambles a grade II* listed building in the heart of Hexham which currently stands in a poor state of repair and has been repeatedly damaged by vehicles in recent years. The **£300,000** repair and refurbishment scheme of the Shambles will enhance the Market Place in the centre of the Hexham Conservation Area where the building is located. The works are currently being planned to take place at an optimum time to mitigate any impact on the town centre during the works.

6.7 Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal

6.7.1 The Borderlands Partnership and Inclusive Growth Deal, working across Northumberland, the newly created Cumberland and Westmorland and Furness Council areas, Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders Councils, exists to unlock the potential for sustainable and inclusive economic growth across the South of Scotland and North of England. It is a platform for growth, allowing people and places to prosper with an increasingly skilled workforce and well connected infrastructure. Representing economic opportunities and inclusive growth, the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal involves an extensive programme of investment to deliver significant economic benefit for our communities and businesses.

6.7.2 Over the programme's lifetime, and a further 10 years to capture the benefits, it is estimated that the Deal will benefit over a million residents, deliver thousands of job opportunities, improve mobile and digital connectivity as well as unlocking investment in towns across the area, generating around £1.1 billion in additional GVA to the UK economy.

6.7.3 Northumberland County Council has the role of accountable body for the UK Government funding which relates to Growth Deal projects physically located in England. The accountable bodies will enter into the financial legal agreements with the UK and Scottish Government in respect of the Growth Deal.

6.7.4 Borderlands have a number of projects already in delivery, those in Northumberland include:

- **Ad Gefrin** Visitor Experience and Distillery in Wooler, Ad Gefrin is an Anglo-Saxon Museum and Whisky Distillery, which aims to bring 35,000 visitors annually to Wooler. It is supporting 60 fulltime jobs, the majority of which have been filled by residents of north Northumberland
- **Lilidorei** at The Alnwick Garden A magical children's play park, the largest of its kind in the world, has opened at the Alnwick Garden. Lilidorei was conceived by the Duchess of Northumberland and has received funding from the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal. The £15million project has created 50 new jobs and will be an all year round destination for the region
- The **Borderlands Energy Programme** sits within the Encouraging Green Growth theme of the Deal and aims to capitalise on the green credentials of the Borderlands region and to facilitate decarbonisation and the creation of new high value jobs supporting low carbon energy generation and carbon reduction schemes. To inform the Borderlands Energy Programme an overarching Borderlands Strategic Low Carbon Energy Masterplan (the Masterplan) has been developed. From this an Investment Strategy has been developed which sets out the next steps for the programme. The first is to create a Borderlands Energy Prospectus which will set out the ambition and opportunities for investment in energy related projects across the Borderlands regions. The second and main activity is to deliver the Borderlands Energy Investment Programme. This will draw upon funding within the deal to invest in local pilot projects which can be replicated across the Borderlands area. Areas for investment have been prioritised and will be the basis for a call for projects to be launched in April 2024.
- **Place Programme** - The Programme is a central part of the Deal and will support towns' growth through Place and Town Investment Plans. Developed at local level, each Place Plan will set out the community's vision for the future of their area and enable them to apply for investment through a range of matched funding beyond the Deal's investment. The Place Programme includes seven towns in Northumberland in scope for support from this programme of investment to improve and grow places across the county. Bedlington, Alnwick and Newbiggin have all developed Place Plans, the first step in securing Borderlands support and will be developing priority projects in preparation to apply in 2024 for support moving towards delivery. Prudhoe, Rothbury, Haltwhistle and Bellingham are developing Place Plans and pipelines of new projects from Spring 2024 onwards. Prudhoe and Rothbury Place Plans are set to be developed by Autumn/Winter 2024 and Haltwhistle and Bellingham by Winter 2024/Spring 2025 with a view to all Place Plans being approved in financial year 2024-25

supported by a developing pipeline of projects to benefit from this funding.

Borderlands Place Plan Towns	Tranche	Activity and milestones in 2024/25
Bedlington	Tranche 1	Via the Place Partnership Group build on Place Plans, identifying priority projects to move toward delivery.
Alnwick	Tranche 1	Via the Place Partnership Group build on Place Plans, identifying priority projects to move toward delivery.
Newbiggin	Tranche 1	Via the Place Partnership Group build on Place Plans, identifying priority projects to move toward delivery.
Prudhoe	Tranche 2	Spring 2024 – meetings of Place Partnership Groups Autumn / Winter 2024 - Place Plan to be developed
Rothbury	Tranche 2	Spring 2024 – meetings of Place Partnership Groups Autumn / Winter 2024 - Place Plan to be developed
Haltwhistle	Tranche 2	Spring 2024 – meetings of Place Partnership Groups Winter 2024 / Spring 2025 - Place Plan to be developed
Bellingham	Tranche 2	Spring 2024 – meetings of Place Partnership Groups Winter 2024 / Spring 2025 - Place Plan to be developed

- **The Maltings** is a **£21m** redevelopment of The Maltings Theatre in Berwick to create a flagship cultural centre, able to provide a full-time year-round cinema programme alongside an expanded range of daytime and evening performances, event broadcasts, community activities, workshops, and events for children and young people. Design work is currently underway to deliver the project within budget and deliver the required impacts for the town and local economy.
- **Hadrian's Wall** - investment to broaden the appeal of Hadrian's Wall to open up new markets which will increase visitor numbers and spread activity along the Wall, with better connectivity to the towns and villages along the Wall. The activity in Northumberland has been split into two business cases. The first is to provide new and improved visitor attractions along Hadrian's Wall. The second is to provide improved active travel routes from the towns/railway stations to the Wall and assist people to move and orientate themselves better along the whole Hadrian's Wall corridor, by provision of signage, information and digital content to be delivered utilising traditional communication and innovative use of technology.
- **Digital Borderlands** - investment in transformational digital infrastructure to tackle barriers to long term inclusive growth. Advances in technology and changes to the national funding landscape led to a pause and reset for the programme. A new Digital Investment Strategy is being developed to update the programme, before submission to Government in 2024 for approval.

6.8 Cramlington Regeneration Programme

6.8.1 NCC working with Cramlington Town Council and other partners in the town through the Cramlington Town Forum launched the Cramlington Conversation in 2023. The Conversation was designed to identify what the community think is great about the town and how it could be improved further. A new action plan is in development to tackle the issues identified. NCC has backed this with a new allocation of **£3.5m** to support interventions which tackle issues that are holding the town back from further success. A new Regeneration Programme will be launched in 2024 to address a range of issues to support the town to grow and be better connected in future.

6.9 Prudhoe Regeneration initiatives

6.9.1 The former East Centre site in the town is proposed to be a new youth and community facility and the Prudhoe Community Partnership are developing the project with feasibility funding awarded to develop this priority project from NCC and Prudhoe Town Council. The town has also benefitted by being prioritised by NCC to receive support from the national High Streets Task Force who have developed a plan with local partners on action to improve the High Street in the town via a range of measures. This comes on the back of wider investment in the town by NCC including the **£1.5m** investment in leisure facilities at Waterworld.

6.10 Bedlington Town Centre

6.10.1 Advance Northumberland is leading in the delivery of the scheme that aims to comprehensively redevelop a high profile, brownfield site located in the heart of Bedlington Town Centre. The scheme includes the new supermarket Aldi. Progress was halted in early 2023 when the contractor Tolent Construction entered administration. Advance Northumberland then took over as principal contractor to successfully complete Phase 1 which saw Greggs relocate to a larger store in September 2023. The second phase, which includes three more retail units, and six apartments started in November 2023. Demolition of the former Greggs unit was completed in December 2023 and the foundations are currently being laid – the development is due to complete early 2025.

6.11 Community Chest

6.8.1 The Community Chest is **100% allocated this year** supporting a wide range of small scale community initiatives in each of the five Local Area Council (LAC) areas.

- **150 grants** of up to £5,000 have been awarded which is an historically high number of awards.
- The total allocation this year was £343,149.72.
- The fund is guided by Local County Councillors to provide support making a real difference across communities in the county.
- The aim of the Community Chest Scheme is to support community groups and organisations to deliver activities which contribute to achieving the Council's

ambition for Northumberland. It includes Help For You which aims to help young people under 18 to achieve an ambition.

6.12 Strategic Estates

6.12.1 The Strategic Estates Team have continued to manage the NCC property estate to support key Council priorities. This includes:

- Acquiring sites for key regeneration projects in Ashington and Blyth,
- Acquiring a site for the new school development in Seaton Valley.
- Working with Housing, Children's services and Adult Services to bring forward sites for development and additional service provision,
- Supporting the Leisure, Culture and Depot Review processes to improve service delivery
- Acquiring land and sites to delivery major infrastructure projects, including Northumberland Line and Blyth Relief Road
- Selling surplus assets (achieving capital receipts of around £1.5m this year)

6.13 Great Northumberland Forest

6.13.1 The Great Northumberland Forest is a plan backed by the County Council in partnership with the Northumberland Woodland Creation Partnership and funded by DEFRA to establish millions of trees, creating more wooded landscapes across the county by 2030. This will help tackle some of the big challenges facing society, such as climate change, biodiversity decline, while promoting health and wellbeing, and supporting a thriving local economy. Over the last year the project has:

- Secured **£1.5million** capital from DEFRA for Storm Arwen Restoration to be delivered of 23/24 and 24/25 - estimated 30ha of delivery this FY with a strong pipeline for 24/25 (currently 100ha committed and will grow over 24/25)
- Secured **£2.2million** capital from DEFRA to deliver a 148ha tenant-led woodland creation scheme, to be planted in 24/25 and managed/established over the next 10 years - (operations have started)
- Supported 15 landowners to access national grants for woodland creation (covering 50ha)
- Planted 13.3ha to date and due to deliver an additional 20ha by the end of March with an approx. spend of **£500,000** across 69 projects. Strong pipeline forming for 24/25.
- Secured additional revenue and capital funding to fund the GNF team and programme for an additional year (25/26) - currently being finalised and agreed with NCC.

6.14 A Connected County

8.14.1 Public Transport

NCC has drawn on funding released through the region's Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) which outlines region-wide ambitions to make buses more attractive by making them an affordable and practical alternative to using private cars for more people and helping existing bus users to travel more frequently.

Numerous measures have been implemented through the BSIP of specific benefits to the residents of Northumberland including:

- if you're 21 or under, you can buy a single bus ticket for just £1. Or, you can buy a £3 unlimited day ticket to get round County Durham, Northumberland and Tyne & Wear.
- For those aged 22 and over, day tickets for unlimited bus travel in Northumberland are just £5.
- The introduction of new bus services including:
 - the 777 which links Morpeth to Newcastle International Airport and Kingston Park
 - the 434 service acting as the Northumberland Line connection which provides an hourly link on Mondays to Saturdays between Bedlington Station, North Blyth, Cambois, Stakeford, Ashington, Linton and Widdrington Station

8.14.2 Cycling & Walking Strategy

The council has developed an ambitious suite of Local Cycling and Walking Improvement Plans (LCWIPs) for the 12 main towns across the county. Active Travel corridors set out within these plans are now moving towards delivery with the council having been successful in a number of funding asks including:

- Levelling Up Fund to deliver corridors between Hexham and Corbridge, and Bedlington
- Active Travel Fund to deliver corridors in Ashington and Blyth
- Transforming Cities Fund to deliver the Ponteland to Callerton cycle corridor
- Energising Blyth funds have been set aside to deliver the Bebside to Blyth cycle corridor which aligns closely with the new train station at Bebside on the Northumberland Line

Further active travel schemes are under development in order to take advantage of the funding opportunities presented by the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) linked to the emerging North East Mayoral Combined Authority.

8.14.3 Northumberland Line

Progressing throughout the year has been the delivery of the Northumberland Line, a transformational project which will bring passenger trains back into service between Ashington and Newcastle. It is a priority of both Northumberland County Council and is supported by a number of key project partners, including the Department for Transport (DfT), Network Rail, Transport for the North (TfN), Nexus and Northern Trains Limited, North Tyneside Council, North of Tyne Combined Authority and Newcastle City Council.

The Northumberland Line aims to stimulate and support economic growth, regeneration and community development in Northumberland and the surrounding region by providing new and improved transport links for local people and businesses.

By doing so, the scheme will:

- improve access from towns such as Ashington and Blyth to employment hubs like Newcastle, as well as opening up new opportunities for education and travel;
- provide a real incentive for potential employers to relocate to and invest in the area;
- provide vital infrastructure to help deliver the region's aspirations for population and economic growth;
- help to attract visitors and improve local tourism;

- enhance public transport connectivity within and beyond the region;
- help to reduce congestion and improve air quality on key corridors by moving people away from car travel and onto public transport; and
- support the delivery of significant growth in sectors such as renewable energy, offshore oil and gas and engineering.

Construction is continuing at pace, with Ashington Station almost complete, a new level crossing installed at Bedlington, updating the signals along the line and a 160 tonne crawler crane installed at Northumberland Park ahead of the next stage of station construction works. To allow for services to start at the earliest possible opportunity, a phased approach for opening is taking place – with Ashington, Newsham and Seaton Delaval open from summer 2024.

Work will continue at the three remaining stations (Blyth Bebside, Bedlington and Northumberland Park) to get these stations opened as quickly as possible.

The opportunities created by this transformational project and the economic corridor that results from the investment are being maximised by wider activities and investments highlighted in this report, supporting the communities and businesses up and down the line.

Further updates will be included in the Leader’s Portfolio Report.

8.14.3. Blyth Relief Road

The council continues to develop the Blyth Relief Road project which will provide additional radial highway capacity for Blyth to relieve congestion and facilitate economic growth within the town. Work continues in preparation for the planning application to be submitted in April 2024. This will incorporate feedback from the well attended stakeholder engagement sessions which were held in Autumn 2023.

Discussion continues with the Department for Transport with a view to final sign-off of the Outline Business Case. As part of the Network North announcement in Autumn 2023 the government contribution to the project will rise from 85% to 100% subject to business case approval. Further detail is awaited although this will offset the current local contribution of ~£7m.

The spring of 2026 remains the target date for scheme opening.

8.14.4. Digital Connectivity - A Northumberland Council top-up voucher scheme was approved by Cabinet and **£1.15m** set aside to provide up to £2,500 per premises, to “top-up” the government’s Gigabit Voucher of £4,500. This will help us attract suppliers to connect more challenging rural communities.

Mobile and future connectivity - NCC commissioned an innovative solution, so we can better understand mobile coverage in the county. Working with Streetwave, we have installed devices to local services vehicles, that scan for connectivity strength. This data will enable us to see where the ‘not-spots’ are, and work with mobile operators to address them. In addition, NCC has worked with the Combined Authority on a Government-funded programme (Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator). This will simplify the process for connectivity providers to find and use public assets, such as lampposts and Council buildings. This will help accelerate the rollout of improved and innovative connectivity

across the region.

5GIR - NCC were partners in two bids for the 5G Innovation Regions funding, and both bids were successful. The first bid backed by the 7 NE Local Authorities includes 5G to support Agritech in Northumberland working with Newcastle University and exploring 5G and Future connectivity in the Port of Blyth. The Borderlands backed bid, includes a proposal to install future connectivity solutions in Kielder and The Sill.

WAN (Wide Area Network) – some 138 Council sites are now migrated to NCC's new provider, Commsworld. The sites are operating on upgraded infrastructure, providing faster more reliable connectivity. The procurement won an MJ award to recognise the innovative social value elements and featured in the Guardian newspaper earlier in the year. The contract provides **£114m of private investment** in the county, with 260km of new fibre being installed, helping to better connect our county for residents and businesses.

The developments reported within a Connected County, have been reported in other Annual Portfolio Updates, but have been included here, due to the clear contribution to the Economic Strategy of the County.

9. DELIVERY PRIORITIES FOR 2024/25

9.1. Grow the Business Base

- Refresh the Northumberland Economic Strategy and make preparations for the full revision of an Economic Strategy to be in place from 2025
- Implementation and mobilisation of the Blyth Energy Central Investment Zone
- Delivery of a proactive Inward Investment service linked to Northumberland's key growth sectors
- Working with existing large companies and growing strategic businesses across Northumberland through the Strategic Account Management programme
- Supporting the balanced growth of our Visitor Economy
- Delivery of the Northumberland Small Business Service and the Accelerate Ashington programme
- Delivery of the Rural Asset Multiplier Pilot Programme
- Delivery of Berwick Culture and Creative Zone and key cultural investment programmes which support to growth of the sector

9.2. Support Inclusive Employment

- Northumberland Skills development of curriculum at Energy Central Learning Hub increasing specialisms in Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, High Voltage Power, and Global Wind Organisation Basic Technical Training enabling Northumberland Residents to gain entry to high value careers in local growth sectors, and
- Development of related Apprenticeship programmes as a progression route from ECLH curriculum into employment and training in related sectors.
- Continuation of Northumberland Skills education and training developments related to the construction sector and emerging technologies important to growth in the construction sector.

- Increase the capacity of Northumberland Skills to support young people with Special Educational Needs (SEND) into vocational education & training, work focussed programmes of study, and sustainable employment outcomes.
- Education, SEND & Skills officers will continue work to increase capacity in Supported Internship programmes year-on-year across Northumberland Skills and all other Northumberland SI education providers.
- Design employment support programmes for those under-represented in the labour market and work with providers to ensure provision is coordinated and meets identified need
- Develop community-led and place-based approaches to engaging with people who are unemployed or economically inactive to move them closer to the labour market
- Take integrated Work and Health approaches (with the ICB, NHS Trust and other health services) to support more residents with disabilities and long-term health conditions to find and retain work, and to progress in the labour market
- Work with employers to promote the concept of Good Work and support their recruitment, skills, and retention needs to offer inclusive employment and progression opportunities.

9.3. Deliver productive places

- Delivery of the significant regeneration programme including:
- The next stage of Energising Blyth includes a range of major projects including the newly awarded **£20.7m Levelling Up Deep Dive secured in 2023 which includes major housing renewal and town centre living projects, welcoming and safe and skills initiatives**. The Keel Row Shopping Centre was acquired by the Council in 2023 and has now closed making way for the next stage of major redevelopment in the town centre including the new Energy Central Institute.
- In September 2023 Government announced a new wave of support with a further **£20m through the Long Term Plan for Towns** – this new programme will be developed in 2024 and will see the Energising Blyth Programme increase in value to £110m.
- Progress Cramlington Town Regeneration Programme, delivery of the Bedlington town centre and progress the development of the seven town Place Plans and Town Investment Plans within the Borderland's Place Programme.
- Key activities in the future to deliver the **Ashington Regeneration Programme** include:
- The Council anticipate that the demolition of the existing buildings at Wansbeck Square and potential construction of a new community facility could start in Winter 2024 with completion currently forecast as March 2026.
- Creation of the proposed Grand Corner Gateway in the north east of the town centre, on Woodhorn Road adjacent to Lintonville Terrace, will see demolition of an existing end building later this year and the public realm works starting in January 2025 through to summer 2025.
- Advance Northumberland currently forecast that construction work on the proposed new cinema facility could commence on the Portland Park site in late Autumn 2024, with a projected opening in early summer 2026.
- These dates are indicative only, with developments subject to planning consent.

Policy	This report supports delivery of all three priorities of the Corporate Plan.
Finance and value for money	Value for money is a priority for the Council. This Report contains no direct financial implications, but summarises the activity underway and significant levels of external funding secured. The ongoing delivery of the individual actions within the Portfolio may have financial implications which would form separate reports as these arise.
Legal	Whilst this report contains no immediate legal implications, the delivery of the individual actions within the Portfolio may have legal implications, which would form separate reports as these arise.
Procurement	Whilst this report contains no immediate procurement implications, the delivery of the individual actions within the Portfolio may have procurement implications, which would form separate reports as these arise
Human Resources	N/A
Property	Whilst this report contains no immediate property implications, the delivery of the individual actions within the Portfolio may have property implications, which would form separate reports as these arise
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A
Risk Assessment	Risks across this portfolio are managed at Corporate, Directorate and service level, as well as at project level.
Crime & Disorder	N/A
Customer Consideration	Consultation is taken forward during the development and delivery of many of the activities included in this report to ensure projects are informed by residents and businesses and key developments are communicated to communities as they progress.
Carbon reduction	Each of our three Priorities have an important a part to play in responding to the Climate Change Emergency.
Health and Wellbeing	An attractive, clean and safe environment and access to high quality green spaces are key determinants of a health and wellbeing for our residents.
Wards	All

Background papers:

N/a

Linked documents

- Corporate Plan 2023-26
- Corporate Plan Achievements Report March 2023

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

	Full Name of Officer
Chief Executive	Dr Helen Paterson
Monitoring Officer/Legal	Stephen Gerrard
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Jan Willis
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Northumberland County Council

County Council

Wednesday, 20 March 2024

Annual Achievements Report 2023-24

Report of Councillor(s) Councillor Glen Sanderson, Leader of Council

Responsible Officer(s): Dr Helen Paterson, Chief Executive

1. Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan

This report sets out the achievements against all three priorities of the Corporate Plan.

2. Purpose of report

To highlight key achievements of the Council in the year 2023-24

3. Recommendations

1. It is recommended that Council note the achievements of the Council in year 2023-24

4. Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable

Not applicable

5. Background

The County Council adopted the Corporate Plan at its AGM on 17th May 2023. The Plan establishes three priorities for the Council, underpinned by our approach to tackling Climate Change. The Annual Council Achievements Report sets out overall progress against the three priorities.

The Council's Corporate Plan sets the overall strategic direction for the Council, setting the context for service planning, appraisal, and capital investment. Therefore, it's important for Members and Officers to understand Council delivery and performance in the context of the three Corporate Plan priorities. This helps Members to track progress against the Council's priorities and informs debate on resources, action-planning and policy development.

Appendix 1 of this Report outlines the key achievements. These are set out against the Council's three priorities of Tackling Inequalities; Delivering Economic Growth; and Achieving Value for Money. The document is set out framed around the four objectives under each priority.

6. Summary of Achievements 2023-24

Since the approval of our Corporate Plan in May 2023, the teams at Northumberland County Council have a strong sense of focus on delivering the Council's vision and priorities, and we've delivered a lot. We've enjoyed a huge amount of staff celebrations from our youth justice service being recognised as good by Ofsted, social workers being recognised for their commitments, the team behind the Union Chain Bridge being celebrated for the investment and dedication to our very own BEST staff awards in November. This year has cemented the pride and passion all our staff have for Northumberland and that culture is setting us up strong for the future.

A key enabler for the organisation was the launch of BEST to support with some of that work – ensuring that we would, and could be, a fit-for-purpose, modern organisation, meeting the needs of our residents.

More recently we welcomed the LGA as part of our own Peer Review – something that was important to do following the last year to ensure we are heading in the right direction – and the good news is we are, so we should be proud of that. In its report the Review Team states: ***“Northumberland has made improvements it can be proud of and should focus on further embedding these...it should celebrate and be proud of the significant progress made.***

Some key achievements under each of our three priorities:

Value for Money

- We set a balanced budget for 2023-24 that sustains good-quality day-to services whilst continuing to invest in new or refurbished schools, leisure centres, regeneration and infrastructure. All this at a time when, sadly, neighbouring councils are having to close key facilities.
- Procurement savings of £1.63m have been achieved in Q1/Q2 of 2023-24 and it is anticipated that final savings will exceed £2m by the end of 31 March 2024. These comprise recurrent and non-recurrent efficiencies arising from a range of initiatives.
- We know residents value being able to contact the Council quickly and conveniently to pay bills, ask questions, access services and resolve issues. Our Customer Services are continuing an overall trend of improvement.
- We implemented Fix My Street, a platform that allows residents to report public realm issues and get updates on progress. This system has improved the online offer for customers and has allowed better understanding and visibility of issues leading to more efficient service delivery.

Tackling Inequalities

- We are proud to have led the way in convening a countywide and partnership approach to tackling entrenched social, economic and health inequalities. Following adoption of the Tackling Inequalities Plan by County Council in September 2022, the Inequalities Plan has now been signed by key partners across the County and beyond, demonstrating the commitment by all partners. Our Plan outlines key goals that can be delivered at scale over the coming years to level off and start to reduce the gap in healthy life expectancy.
- We have continued to ensure our young people have access across the County to the best education facilities and are educated in high-performing schools. Following completion of new schools in Hexham and Ponteland, the Council has approved a multi-million investment in the Coquet Partnership of schools and, following extensive consultation, a £50.427m project will see Astley Community High School and Whytrig Middle School rebuilt on a new, shared campus to create a state-of-the-art learning environment for over 1,000 students. The Council has also pledged substantial investment for schools in Berwick.
- We are delighted to see more children and young people attending good or outstanding primary schools. This continues the improving trend over the last 2 years. The figure of 95.5% is 5.5% better than the national average. For 'pupils in good / outstanding secondary schools' - we have seen very impressive performance over the last 2 years and at early March 2024, the figure is 83.6%. Inspection outcomes are approximately 2% above the national average.

Delivering Economic Growth

- In November 2023 the County Council welcomed millions in extra funding to improve the condition of the county's road network. An extra £2.768m is confirmed for the county for 2024-25 and it is expected this will continue thereafter, with a total uplift of over £184.836m over the next ten years. The Council's main funding for highway maintenance comes from Department for Transport and is around £21.780m per year. In addition to this since 2020-21 the Council has put in a further £17.225m in its own capital to improve road maintenance over the last three years.
- We have maximised the benefits from devolution and powered regional growth. The County Council has been a constituent authority of the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA), alongside Newcastle City Council and North Tyneside Council, since its inception in 2018. The County has seen significant investment, supporting its priorities as a result of the devolution deal, including infrastructure investment, for example in Northumberland line stations and the road bridge, investment in key sectors such as digital, green and clean manufacturing and health.
- We have continued to invest in 'flagship' infrastructure. Construction is now well underway on the Northumberland Line, with six new stations granted planning approval. Bringing passenger services back between the Southeast of the county and central Newcastle has made significant progress this year and will be open from Summer 2024.

The appendix details all our achievements for each of our priorities and it demonstrates the scale of delivery from right across the council, all for the benefit of our residents.

7. Options open to the Council and reasons for the recommendations

7.1 The recommendation to Council is to note the Annual Achievements Report 2023-24.

8. Implications

Policy	This report supports delivery of all three priorities of the Corporate Plan.
Finance and value for money	Value for money is a priority for the Council. This report contains no direct financial implications. The ongoing delivery of the individual actions within the Corporate Plan may have financial implications which would form separate reports as these arise
Legal	Whilst this report contains no immediate legal implications, the delivery of the individual actions may have legal implications, which would form separate reports as these arise.
Procurement	N/A
Human resources	N/A
Property	N/A
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?	No No equalities issues
Risk assessment	N/A
Crime and disorder	N/A
Customer considerations	Progress and achievements against the Corporate Plan benefit the residents of Northumberland by working towards positive outcomes.
Carbon reduction	N/A
Health and wellbeing	n/A
Wards	(All Wards);

9. Background papers

Appendix 1 – Annual Achievements Report 2023-24

10. Links to other key reports already published

Corporate Plan 2023-26

11. Author and Contact Details

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Annual Achievements Report 2023-24 – Appendix 1

The following document describes the level of activity, progress and achievements made against the Corporate Plan 2023 – 2026.

1. Value for money

Our BEST ways of working is driving the change to ensure we are delivering Best Value through efficient, effective and accessible services that respond to and meet the needs and expectations of our residents.

- **To ensure our residents receive the best customer experience**

We have redesigned the way our customers access our services to provide a coordinated, consistent and equitable offer of services that makes better use of the data we gather, delivers more pro-active services and makes the best use of digital services.

Achievements in 2023-24 to support our Value for Money priority include:

- OneCall, Enquiry Referral Coordinators (ERC's) and Revenues & Benefits now all use the same telephony platform (Amazon Connect). Integrating more services into the corporate contact centre will create capacity for service teams to deliver more complex work. It is enabling a more joined up experience for customers that can have multiple queries across the organisation dealt with in the one place and create the data to support “a single view” of the customer.
- Fix My Street implemented. A platform that allows residents to report public realm issues and get updates on progress. This system has improved the online offer for customers and has allowed better understanding and visibility of issues leading to more efficient service delivery.
- iCasework implemented, a case management platform for corporate feedback and information governance request. This system allows more efficient case handling as all correspondence and documents are within one system and allows better insight into customer needs through the capture and analysis of feedback and use of this insight to provide a better customer experience.

We know residents value being able to contact the Council quickly and conveniently to pay bills, ask questions, access services and resolve issues. Our Customer Services are continuing an overall trend of improvement. We have delivered impressive performance with the ‘% of calls answered’, achieving an average of 95.6%, and for ‘average time to answer calls’, the team achieved 73 seconds for the quarter. This compares to 292 for the June 2022, an improvement of 219 seconds.

We have refreshed and revitalised our approach to Best Value. We put this at the heart of our new Planning, Performance and Accountability Framework, showing how we can demonstrate impact (Value for Money) as a result of the activities. The Framework has established one corporate approach with a clear thread from corporate plan to service planning to individual appraisal.

- **Make the best spending decisions,**

Budget

We set a balanced budget for 2023-24 that sustains good-quality day-to services whilst continuing to invest in new or refurbished schools, leisure centres, regeneration and infrastructure.

We involved our residents, communities and partners in how we design and deliver equitable services to ensure they meet their needs by delivering a Budget Engagement consultation.

Commissioning and Procurement

We have commenced Commissioning Framework Co-Production Workshops with the aim to agree the key principles of our new commissioning framework, this will provide a robust and commercially minded focus on delivering good outcomes, value for money and social value in our spending decisions.

Procurement savings of £1.63m have been achieved in Q1/Q2 of 2023-24 and it is anticipated that final savings will exceed £2m by the end of 31 March 2024. These comprise recurrent and non-recurrent efficiencies arising from a range of initiatives.

Fire & Rescue finance

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service has been described by His Majesty's Inspector as having 'a sound understanding of its future financial challenges and plans, using their assessment of risk within the county to guide them. The Service actively seeks efficiencies using technology to further enhance performance' (HMICRFS, 2023).

In addition, the most recent inspection confirmed that the Service's collaborative work aligns to its Community Risk Management Plan, including the sharing of its estate with other organisations that service the community. Inspectors recognised that Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service has 'put in place the capacity and capability it needs to achieve sustainable transformation, and it routinely seeks opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness' (HMICRFS, 2023).

Data

Progress on improving how we use data and performance monitoring to inform and plan our services has been made with the development of a new Data and Business Intelligence Strategy. This will work alongside the refreshed Performance Monitoring framework to ensure services are making data driven decisions to ensure we are delivering improved outcomes and ensuring we focus on continuous improvement.

- **To work better, more efficiently**

Workforce culture

To achieve Best Value it is essential we have the right structures in place to enable both our people and other assets to have the greatest impact. We have supported our staff throughout the year to succeed by embedding a workplace culture that

focuses on learning and continuous improvement underpinned by our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion and achieving best value.

Learning & Development

We have agreed a new Data Academy and launched the data skills offer with first cohort of 50 staff commencing study in November 2023. This apprenticeship will equip staff across the organisation with the skills to support faster data-informed decisions.

- **Making a difference with digital**

Resident digital offers

- We launched a new digital offer for carers which aims to reach carers who are not currently supported or known by the council or local carer support organisations. The service is free and led by carers themselves. It runs alongside services provided by local carer support organisations, offering a range of online support, from website guides, regular contact through emails, a guide to caring e-course, 'virtual cuppas' and even individual support calls - seven days a week.
- In Jan 2024 we launched a new app to support parents during the challenges of separation has launched in Northumberland. It is the latest in a series of free relationship support packages now available for residents through the council's trailblazing Family Hub programme. This app will be the latest addition to our digital offer and is a valuable resource that offers both practical and emotional support for parents, whilst focusing on the needs of the children."
- We have successfully launched our garden waste application and received 89% take up and an overall high success rate of the digital application with 18.7k transactions to date.
- We worked closely with a local delivery partner to develop a digital solution for our Highways Service to support further income generation for the Service through further digitisation of their processes.

2. Tackling Inequalities

Our residents are our greatest assets and our communities are full of potential. By tackling inequalities, we want to reduce the gap in experiences our residents have across health, education, employment and social outcomes.

- **Empowered and resilient communities**

County Partnership

We are proud to have led the way in convening a countywide and partnership approach to tackling entrenched social, economic and health inequalities. Following adoption of the Tackling Inequalities Plan by County Council in September 2022, the Inequalities Plan has now been signed by key partners across the County and beyond, demonstrating the commitment by all partners.

In July 2023, we hosted a Partnership event which focussed on bringing people, place and policy together - 100 delegates with representatives from NHS (ICB, primary and secondary care), Local Authority (all departments), Housing providers, VCSE, faith, private sector, Fire, Police, Academia.

At this event we showcased our work on 'Asset Based Community Development' and how we are moving from 'What is wrong to what is strong'. There was a clear commitment from partners and it was agreed to establish a County Partnership and an overarching plan that sits above all current partnership boards, we also agreed to adopt the Marmot policy objectives which will create an inclusive framework.

Integrated Impact Assessment

During 2023-24 we have worked on bringing together our equalities and climate impact assessments into one Integrated Impact Assessment and this is due to launch early 2024. This assessment tool will help us better understand the potential impact of our activity and help us think about what actions we can take to mitigate any negative impacts or risks we identify, whilst ensuring all decisions the council takes on policy and how we spend money is considered through an "inequalities lens".

Northumberland Communities Together

In November 2023 NCT launched an exciting new series of events designed to connect residents across Northumberland with services and community groups to support them through the winter months. The dedicated spaces have been carefully curated into a new interactive online map, available via the Northumberland County Council website, so residents can search for warm spaces in their area, applying filters against key factors like accessibility. Teaming up with partners including Age UK, Citizens Advice, Green Doctors, Health Trainers and many more, the event series covers locations across the county, making the events accessible to all.

- **Children and young people having the best start in life and grow up well.**

Schools

We have continued to ensure our young people have access across the County to the best education facilities and are educated in high-performing schools. Following completion of new schools in Hexham and Ponteland, the Council has approved a multi-million investment in the Coquet Partnership of schools and, following extensive consultation, a £50.427m project will see Astley Community High School and Whytrig Middle School rebuilt on a new, shared campus to create a state-of-the-art learning environment for over 1,000 students. The Council has also pledged substantial investment for schools in Berwick.

We have continued to maintain our high performance in terms of choices made for school places with 98.2% of first choice for primary places successful (+6% points above Nat Av) and 95.5% of first choice for secondary places successful (+13% points above Nat Av)

We are delighted to see more children and young people attending good or outstanding primary schools. This continues the improving trend over the last 2 years. The figure of 95.5% is 5.5% better than the national average. For 'pupils in good / outstanding secondary schools' - we have seen very impressive performance over the last 2 years and at early March 2024, the figure is 83.6%. Inspection outcomes are approximately 2% above the national average.

Skills

We have brought together education and industry with a county wide Skills Strategy linking schools with businesses, expanding apprenticeship awareness and raising the profile of jobs available in Northumberland.

We are the first Local Authority to engage and commit to GlobalBridge, a digital connectivity platform where Universities, and businesses can share their offers and needs and our young people create their own profile for work experience and employment opportunities.

We have reshaped the post 16 skill offer for our young people in Northumberland leaving school. Particularly an offer for those who may be a little more vulnerable and less confident to join a large college campus. Our skills training that is focused on meeting the needs of local employers, developing apprenticeship models and extending the young people offer into adult learning provision for career changers and retraining chances.

SEND

We have responded to the rapidly growing need for more Special Educational Needs and Disabilities facilities, services and school places from residents. Demand is high. Services have been reshaped to support the demand as well as capacity building within the educational infrastructure to provide additional sites and facilities. Some 150 out of 167 schools are engaged in a Whole School Education project whereby schools standardise their approach and systems to meet the demand of SEND.

Family Hubs

We have led the way in developing new ways of working with children and families. Northumberland are one of 75 local authorities leading the implementation of Family Hubs and one of 14 Trailblazers selected to develop this further and faster. The services were visited by Dame Andrea Leadsom in May 2023 who commended our work.

Childrens Services

We have maintained our high standards of practice in Children's Services. Northumberland was also one of six local authorities nationally to participate in a Thematic Review of the Best Start in Life undertaken by Ofsted and CQC and similarly very positive feedback received from inspectors about our staff, the inclusive and child focused services, and the partnership work.

The Ofsted Focused visit last year made positive findings about how effectively we achieve permanence for our cared for children. In addition, Northumberland Youth Justice service was subject to an HMIP inspection in April 2023 and the overall judgement was Good with three areas being judged Outstanding.

Corporate Parenting

We have refined and further strengthened our approach to Corporate Parenting. This continues to be a key area of focus and has been further enhanced with the Leader of Council taking on the role of chair of the Corporate Parenting Group (CPG). Council services, partner agencies including the ICB, and the private sector have

been well engaged in developing and providing opportunities for support, education, training, and employment for cared for children and young people and care leavers.

Residential

We have maintained the quality of our in-house residential provision and committed funding to further enhance this, including the development of multi-site homes as a key element of our response to the significant sufficiency and cost challenges of placements for cared for children and young people.

Virtual School

Our Virtual School has been praised by DfE as a model of good practice and has effectively led the implementation of the duty to promote the education of children with a social worker.

- **All adults living well, regardless of age, background, illness or disability.**

Annual Adult Social Care Survey

We have continued to deliver high-quality Adults' Services. Our latest 'Annual Adult Social Care Survey' results and the Biennial Carers Survey results show excellent ASC survey results compared to North-East and England.

- All 12 'ASCOF' indicators from our 2 surveys report outturns better than the North-East regional and England average scores.
- All 5 indicators from the last ASC Carers Survey were ranked within the upper quartile, with 4 indicators ranked 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 6th in England.
- 6 out of 7 indicators from the ASC User survey were ranked in the upper quartile.

Adult Social Care Academy

We have invested in Adult Social Care practice and developed an Adult Social Care Academy for new Social Workers. This was reviewed by 'Skills for Care' in March and was described by the reviewer at the time as being 'the most positive visit I have ever made'.

Partnerships

We have maintained high standards in our Adults' partnership working. The Police consistently describe our MASH (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub) as the most developed model in the region and we have shared this good practice with other local authorities.

Smoking

In 2023/24 the Trading Standards team seized and removed from the market over 3,000 illegal vapes and tobacco products. Illegal vapes are a national problem so work in this area, particularly stopping children access these, is very much at the forefront of Trading Standards who are supported by the Public Health Team in this area.

Inspections

We have invested in good practice and now have a comprehensive workforce strategy, central to which our Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) Academy for social workers continues to be successful and was evaluated positively by The Skills for Care Council. Our Quality of Practice Framework is well respected, supports reviews routinely and contributes to our continuous improvement journey

Our Short-Term Support Services (STSS) were inspected by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) to ensure they are safe and well-led. The services provide a short period of support to help people regain their independence after a serious accident or illness. Each service retained its Outstanding rating.

Shared Lives Northumberland provides support in a family home for adults who are unable to live alone because of their age or disability. The service was inspected in October 2023 to check whether it is safe, caring and well-led. In a report published in January 2024, inspectors rated the service as Good overall, with individual ratings of Good for both safe and well-led, and Outstanding for caring. Inspectors described Shared Lives Northumberland as an 'exceptional service' where people were truly respected and valued as individuals.

Awards

In Jan 2024, we maintained our Gold Standard Award for the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme. The scheme rewards and recognises UK employers and organisations that show outstanding support to the armed forces community. In 2018, the Council was one of just nine local authorities across the whole of the UK to receive the coveted Gold Award, which must be revalidated every five years.

In July 2023 Council's adult social work academy was a finalist in the Local Government Chronicle award for the best next generation employer. The adult social work academy was launched in 2022 to provide a high-quality learning environment for Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) which promotes excellent practice. Each year there are two intakes of NQSWs, in September and March. They are supported by three team managers, whose role is to nurture them through the transition from academic study to social work practice.

Leisure

In April 2023, Morpeth's new flagship sports & leisure centre opened its doors to the public. The fantastic £21 million facility, funded by Northumberland County Council provides state-of-the-art facilities and a whole new customer experience for all ages of the local community.

- **Residents have the building blocks of a good life.**

Employability

In Dec 2023, the latest meeting of the Northumberland Employability Network, co-chaired by the County Council and Northumberland Community and Voluntary Action (CVA) was held at Newbiggin Community Hub. The network is convened as part of

the Employment Partnerships Project, this project is funded by North of Tyne Combined Authority.

Contributing to the council's commitment to tackling inequalities, over 40 members from employability and skills support services and organisations came together to share information, identify collaboration opportunities, and to discuss and progress solutions to employment barriers which Northumberland residents and employers face. Members deliberated a broad range of issues from engaging with employers to find innovative ways to work together to reduce the skills gap and increase recruitment opportunities, to reviewing training and skills needs from both employer and employee perspectives. They also considered how to progress inclusivity and advance support for individuals with special educational needs and disabilities.

Safeguarding

We have strengthened partnership working through our Northumberland Children and Adult Safeguarding Partnership (NCASP). We have successfully integrated the children's and adults safeguarding partnerships in Northumberland with streamlined and revised structures and processes in place, including specific development of independent scrutiny and enhanced business support. The DfE have seen and are using our work, particularly around independent scrutiny, to inform national approaches

Fire & Rescue Inspection

In its most recent His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Service (HMICRFS) Report, Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is described as 'good at preventing fires and other risk' (HMICRFS, 2023). This shows an improvement from a judgement of requires improvement in 2021. Inspectors have recognised that the Service uses a broad range of data to identify vulnerable people in the community, and that the service uses a risk-based approach to clearly prioritise its prevention activity at those most at risk from fires and other emergencies.

3. Driving Economic Growth

- **Thriving places and culture**

Blyth

Energising Blyth – represents a significant regeneration scheme in the County, with £110m being invested via a number of Government programmes, including Future High Streets Fund, Town Deal, a Levelling-Up Deep Dive and more recently through the Government's Long-Term Deal for Towns fund, as well as investments from the County Council and the Combined Authority. The programme has been led by the Town Deal Board, Chaired by a local business leader and with representatives from local councillors, community representatives and education and skills providers.

The programme of delivery is underway, with early schemes focusing on the improvement of public spaces and enhancements to industrial sites completed, with key flagship buildings under construction.

The ambition and drive of the Town Board and the people of Blyth have been key to getting the programme to this point. As have important partnerships in the town, including the Energy Central Partnership, made up of the Council, Advance Northumberland, Port of Blyth and the national Offshore and Renewable Energy Catapult.

Investments include Enterprise Zone status and associated investments into Bates Clean Energy Terminal, as well as completion of the new dock at Cambois which facilitated the arrival of JDR Cables into the region, creating new jobs and adding to the weight to the industrial cluster in the area.

Ashington

The Ashington Regeneration Programme, building on the Town Investment Plan led by the Town Investment Board, is a £30m portfolio for the transformation of Ashington town centre, and consists to two main components:

- Ashington High Street Innovation Programme (HSIP), with funding secured from the NTCA and Government to help targeted town centres to recover from the Covid pandemic period of lockdowns.
- Town Centre Renewal of Strategic Sites Programme, with funding secured from the Government as part of its overall approach to levelling up across the country. The Ashington Regeneration Programme builds on recent investment in the town to deliver a new leisure centre and is running alongside two major projects underway that will fundamentally alter the town's purpose, movement strategy, vitality and investment potential. These include the reopening of passenger rail services to the Northumberland Line, including Ashington station, and the development of Northumberland College's Gen Zero campus at Wansbeck Business Park.

Housing and Planning

The County Council has successfully been part of a national pilot on Social Housing Regulation and continue to monitor the new regulations and prepare for the introduction of inspections.

We have continued to maintain the standard of our own housing stock, by delivering over £10m of investment works to council homes, including upgrades to kitchens, bathrooms, heating, electrical and roofing works, as well as delivering over £500k worth of aids and adaptations to support customer to continue living independently in their homes.

We have secured almost £20m of external funding through Department of levelling up for Blyth Town Centre Housing Improvements, including the provision of new homes, energy improvements to existing homes, and approximately £4.5m of Brownfield Housing funding to support development of new housing on sites previously deemed not viable.

We have been managing a steady increase (+27%) of social housing applications via the "Homefinder" system. A large portion of these is due to increasing rents in the private sector, the cost-of-living crisis and private landlords choosing to leave the market. Although there is a high demand on the service, the Homefinder staff have remained focused and prioritised any urgent cases. All of the Homefinder staff have

safeguarding training and know how to make referrals, we also have a robust appeals process that allows our customers to ask for a review of a decision on their housing application by producing supporting evidence and information to the Senior Officer.

Our Vulnerable Persons Officers work closely with other departments and external partners to ensure our most vulnerable customers are supported, they have built good working relationships with partners i.e. Karbon Homes, along with Occupational Therapists, Social Workers and medical professionals to ensure the housing needs of our customers are fully understood

Despite national concerns about the supply of new homes, the County is exceeding our share of government target. We are achieving 270% of our Housing Delivery Target.

We have launched new Neighbourhood Planning support to help communities shape their areas and identify potential community led housing schemes. 19 Parish Councils are now involved in pilot work.

This year we reviewed and re-launched our pre-application service. The service now offers prospective applicants and developers a bespoke service, tailored to their needs. This can be from an individual householder looking for advice on making adjustments or improvements to their home to accommodate changing needs throughout their lifetimes, all the way up to large strategic scale housing developments and everything in-between. Our aim is to offer early advice and help identify opportunities and constraints and how to improve a scheme.

The Planning Team have been working with Homes England and the NEMCA Housing and Land Group to develop a "Strategic Place Partnership" to help us deliver support on affordable housing schemes and maximise the amount of government support for new affordable rent houses, flats and bungalows

The council purchased new affordable housing in Longframlington (2) and Alnwick (8 properties). Work is now starting on site to build 13 dementia friendly bungalows on Lyndon Walk, Blyth. Nine affordable bungalows are also to be built at New Hartley with work due to commence on site imminently.

We are working with architects on a Master planning exercise for the 16-acre old Hexham Middle School site. There is a wish for the land to provide something for all generations of the community, based on the current needs of local residents. Initial proposals incorporate a mixture of good quality housing, including affordable housing, bungalows, family homes and an extra care supported living scheme. We are consulting with the public in March.

Local environments

We have maintained high standards in our local environments, providing attractive, clean and safe places for people to do business. Our key performance indicators on cleanliness and attractiveness of places show good performance and we now have 12 parks with Green Flag status.

Council teams worked round the clock in October 2023 to ensure residents were kept safe during Storm Babet. The storm, which brought heavy rainfall and strong

winds caused significant impacts in Rothbury, while high river levels were also seen in Morpeth and other parts of the county.

Roads

In November 2023 the County Council welcomed millions in extra funding to improve the condition of the county's road network. An extra £2.768m is confirmed for the county for 2024-25 and it is expected this will continue thereafter, with a total uplift of over £184.836m over the next ten years. The Council's main funding for highway maintenance comes from Department for Transport and is around £21.780m per year. In addition to this since 2020-21 the Council has put in a further £17.225m in its own capital to improve road maintenance over the last three years.

Safer communities

The Safer Northumberland Partnership (SNP) has made significant progress toward a greater contribution to communities including developing a 'road map to steer this work. This includes:

- Investment and new resource into the Strategic Community Safety function with dedicated SNP support, including strategic leadership for the SNP with the Executive Director of Public Health, Inequalities and Stronger Communities. Partnership cohesion has been an achievement in the last year and continues to develop.
- Greater understanding of demand with a community safety Strategic Needs Assessment (SNA), and development of a dashboard platform for the SNP, has been achieved through partnership working, both internally within NCC and with several partners.
- Several successful grant funding bids have been made which in the last year have contributed to SNP objectives and positive outcomes for communities.
- A significant achievement came with the successful award of £170k, that aims to tackle Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) in a place-based hotspot initiative and across the wider county transport network, under the banner of 'Operation Alliance', with focus also on the safety of women in public places.
- The SNP led on and delivered positive operational activities to protect communities such as the Night Time Economy (NTE) wintertime serious violence initiative, with specific focus on the festive period, and Operation Disband tackling ASB in response to community concerns.
- Additionally, establishing strong partnership links and support to the Northumberland Partnership Against Rural Crime (NPARC) are positive examples.
- In Dec 2023 A new team of Community Safety Officers started work in Cramlington – working with police and partners to cut down anti-social behaviour (ASB). It comes after the council secured grant funding for ASB hotspot and transport initiatives run by Police and Crime Commissioner Kim McGuinness' office as part of the Home Office's Safer Streets programme
- The Environmental Enforcement Team was successful in being awarded a £33,000 grant for its fly tipping intervention programme. This purchased 16 new CCTVs that are currently deployed at 'hot spot' areas and are resulting in additional successful investigations. Fly tipping is an area of high priority

for the Council and this funding will help the service target areas to ensure we use our resources as effectively as possible.

- **Diverse and resilient economy.**

North of Tyne Combined Authority

We have maximised the benefits from devolution and powered regional growth. The County Council has been a constituent authority of the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA), alongside Newcastle City Council and North Tyneside Council, since its inception in 2018. The County has seen significant investment, supporting its priorities as a result of the devolution deal, including infrastructure investment, for example in Northumberland line stations and the road bridge, investment in key sectors such as digital, green and clean manufacturing and health.

The new Devolution Deal was agreed with Government in December 2022 and the process for establishing the new Mayoral Combined Authority has been underway throughout 2023 and is due to finalise with the establishment of the North East Mayoral Combined Authority and Mayoral election in May 2024. Through the Leader of the Council Northumberland is leading the development of the rural, environment and coastal Transition Portfolio, building on the Rural Investment and Stewardship Strategy developed by NTCA and incorporating the assets and priorities of all 7 authorities to make NEMCA a 'rural exemplar'.

Tourism

We agreed a Destination Management Plan in 2022 which sets out the ways in which the sector can be supported to develop and thrive. This is overseen by Visit Northumberland, one of the first Local Visitor Economy Partnerships (LVEPs) nationally, created by Visit England as a portfolio of nationally supported, strategic and high-performing Partnerships, providing strong local leadership and governance in tourism destinations all over the country.

Northumberland is also part of the first regional tourism pilot receiving £2.25 million from national government covering a period to March 2025.

Growth

The Borderlands Partnership, made up of the five local authorities along the English-Scottish border working together to achieve inclusive and sustainable growth, has been working together since 2016. The full £350m Inclusive Growth Deal was agreed between the Partnership and the UK and Scottish Governments in March 2021, to be delivered over a 10 year period. The programme is made up of a series of interlinked investment programmes and specific projects, including improvements to infrastructure and places, business, innovation and skills and encouraging Green Growth.

Two of the early projects are in Northumberland, which has seen the completion of the Ad Gefrin Distillery and visitor centre in Wooler, which is already attracting visitors and providing good-quality local jobs. In addition, Lilidorei, children's play park, the largest of its kind in the world, opened at the Alnwick Garden in May 2023.

A key part of the programme is the development of Place Plans across the Borderlands area, which includes 7 towns in Northumberland. Led by the community, via local Place Plan Boards, the Plans articulate the long-term vision for the regeneration, resilience and growth of the towns.

Culture and heritage

Culture and heritage led regeneration is being delivered in Berwick and Hexham, respectively, with the Culture and Creative Zone being delivered in Berwick, recognising the town as a focal point for many in the sector, as well as its unique assets such as the Barracks, owned by English Heritage and being revitalised as part of a significant programme of investment and the Borderlands investment into the Maltings Theatre.

Working with Historic England, Hexham attracted funding through the Heritage Action Zone, which has seen work to revitalise the historic town centre making it a more attractive, engaging and vibrant place for people to live, work, invest and visit. The Hexham High Street Heritage Action Zone is a £3.5m partnership between Historic England and Northumberland County Council which has brought vacant historic premises back into use and has restored traditional frontages along Priestpople, Cattle Market and Battle Hill. Ten buildings in Hexham have benefitted from heritage grants aimed at restoring and regenerating the town centre. A major public realm scheme is due for completion in May 2024 which has revitalised the streetscape in the centre of the town.

The award-winning approach taken on the refurbishment of the historic Union Chain Bridge involved close partnership working, securing external funding, whilst using the project as a catalyst to support a STEM education programme.

Business Support

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service recognises that nearly 60% of businesses never recover after a fire. As such it delivers a risk-based inspection programme, using societal life risk, likelihood of a fire occurring and the likelihood of a non-compliance to target fire safety audits of commercial premises across Northumberland. This approach allows the Service to focus its resources on premises that are less likely to be compliant with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order and therefore reduces risk. Recognised during its most recent HMICRFS inspection, The Service consistently uses its full range of enforcement powers and, when appropriate, it prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. Using Grant funds, the Service has increased its capacity and the competence of operational staff to be able to conduct audits at lower risk commercial premises.

- **Skilled and aspirational people**

Energy Central

Work officially began during the spring of 2023 on the £13.6m Energy Central Learning Hub situated in the clean energy cluster at Port of Blyth, an official ground-breaking ceremony took place during July. The campus will create a high-quality

talent pool, supporting the clean energy sector in meeting its ambitious growth aspirations, whilst inspiring, training and providing pathways to employment for the local community and wider region.

The strategic partnership formed between Northumberland County Council, Port of Blyth and the Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult to lead the development has focussed upon the construction phase of the project. However, during summer 2023, with construction underway, the focus has shifted and now officers from Education SEND & Skills are front and centre of developments to refine the vision and business model as well as engaging education delivery and industrial partners.

Northumberland Skills Welding & Fabrication training facility

The capital investment of £1.4m to deliver Northumberland Skills Welding & Fabrication training facility within the clean energy cluster at Port of Blyth reached completion and was handed over to the Skills team April 2023. The facility welcomed its first small pilot cohort of 9 young people for the remainder of the 2022-23 academic year, 2 of which have moved into apprenticeship and employment, while the remainder have returned for training to the next level on their journey to entering the engineering sector.

FUSE campus

During the summer of 2023 plans have been drawn up and costings developed to explore the expansion of learning space within the FUSE campus for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. It is concluded that in the region of 60 additional places can be created providing an additional vocational education option for more young people with SEND and providing greater reach of provision into the south and the Tyne Valley. Next steps will be to secure funding to allow works to be taken forward based upon the plans.

Northumberland Skills

Northumberland Skills continues to provide training models through apprenticeships in various vocational sectors and have availability in various roles across the county to work directly with internal and external employers. Apprenticeship recruitment continues to increase in 2023, headline achievement was 67.1%, 7.1% points above the current national rate and increased by 9.0% from 2021-22.

In 2023 The Employability Service successfully completed 2 programmes - The DWP JETS programme (Job entry targeted support) and The Refugee Employability Support Programme. The Employability Service continues to be well positioned to respond particularly to North of Tyne Inclusive Growth projects where the prime aims are to support residents into gaps, reduce inequality and disadvantage gaps and to support progression into employment as well as in work progression through training.

- **A connected county**

Northumberland Line

We have continued to invest in 'flagship' infrastructure. Construction is now well underway on the Northumberland Line, with six new stations granted planning

approval. Bringing passenger services back between the South East of the county and central Newcastle has made significant progress this year and will be open from Summer 2024. This is a hugely complex project with major station construction works being undertaken at six separate sites, signalling and track improvements along the line and changes to numerous level crossing points all of which must be co-ordinated and undertaken to minimise disruption to local communities, rail freight services and road users. With a journey time between Ashington and central Newcastle of around 35 minutes, the line will improve accessibility to employment, training and leisure for residents in southeast Northumberland, as well as opening up new opportunities for education and travel.

To maximise the economic impacts of the line we have developed a Northumberland Line Economic Corridor Strategy, which will support skills and training, business growth, housing and the wider cultural and visitor offer. Working with our partners in the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) £10m has already been agreed as the initial investment into key aspects of the strategy, focusing on early infrastructure investment and stations, including in Blyth and Ashington.

Mobile connectivity

In November 2023, the Council started using advanced monitoring technology to enhance mobile connectivity throughout the county, bridging the digital divide across communities. Council refuse vehicles have been equipped with mobile monitoring units which can assess real-time signal strength and quality across Northumberland during their regular routes. The initiative aims to collect comprehensive data on coverage, speed, and phone signal quality which will be used to create coverage maps, enabling major mobile operators like EE, O2, Three, and Vodafone to effectively address connectivity challenges. The initiative is being spearheaded by the iNorthumberland and Local Services teams at the Council with the technology being provided by mobile network analysts, Streetwave.

We have secured a commitment from a mast provider (Atlas) to install a mobile mast at Craster to help address the ongoing issue of poor connectivity in the community. Helping to support the huge numbers of visitors and tourists as well as residents.

We were partners in two bids for the 5G Innovation Regions funding, and both bids were successful. The first bid backed by the LA7 includes 5G to support Agritech in Northumberland working with Newcastle University and exploring 5G and Future connectivity in the Port of Blyth. The Borderlands backed bid, includes a proposal to install future connectivity solutions in Kielder and The Sill.

4. Environment

Environment Policy

In October 2023 we agreed to an ambitious new environmental policy which strengthens its commitment to a healthier environment and more sustainable future. The Environmental Policy Statement agreed at Cabinet highlights the diverse range of activities being undertaken by the Council to maintain, protect and enhance the environment and the key role that nature recovery can play in helping to tackle climate change.

Solar Carport

This year saw the Council install a £3.8 million state-of-the-art solar carport array, the third largest of its kind in the UK. It features photovoltaic panels which will provide 40% of County Hall's energy requirements with an overall goal of 50% when combined with the roof-based solar PV. Anticipated annual savings of £0.165m will be realised, contributing to a 50% reduction in carbon emissions by 2025. The carport will also power electric vehicle charge points and include rapid charge and overnight charging options for the Council's fleet vehicles. The project has been partially funded by the European Regional Development Fund and constructed by UK Power Network Services.

Climate Change Action Plan

The Policy Statement reaffirms the Council's on-going development of a new Climate Change Action Plan which will set out its climate and environmental targets for 2024 to 2026. It highlights the Council's responsibility in preserving the natural land to benefit the communities it serves and its strong commitment to front line services, whether it's dealing with littering and fly tipping or extra roadside litter clearing, creating more green spaces, woodlands and new nature trails, improving water quality, encouraging more active and sustainable transport, to tackling major societal issues such as climate change and the loss of biodiversity.

Northumberland Youth Voice

In December 2023 Northumberland County Council hosted a unique event at its Morpeth headquarters for pupils from several schools in the county to address environmental and climate change issues. High school and sixth form pupils from The Duchess's Community High School in Alnwick, The Blyth Academy, Queen Elizabeth High School in Hexham, King Edward VI School in Morpeth and Prudhoe Community High School came together for a day filled with presentations, talks, and workshops.

The student-led 'Northumberland Youth Voice on Climate Change' conference provided a platform for insightful discussions on critical topics such as transport, energy provision, heating solutions, and environmental challenges. Participants collaborated in workshops and engaged in a Dragon's Den style scenario, where they created and pitched tangible climate-related projects which they can begin to implement within their schools; fostering a sense of responsibility and ownership among the students for the well-being of their local environment.

Northumberland Schools Sustainability Network (NSSN)

The Council has already set up the Northumberland Schools Sustainability Network (NSSN) in partnership with the UK Schools Sustainability Network (UKSSN) to provide staff and students across the county with a virtual platform for sharing ideas and resources, facilitating collaboration and participation in local and national climate action initiatives. This has further been strengthened by the Council's 'Climate Change and Sustainability in Northumberland: Schools Resource Pack' which is a tool to help school staff inspire students, alleviate climate anxiety and empower them to take action locally.

Environment and Climate Fund

In January 2024, after a thorough evaluation process by the Climate Change Team at the Council, 17 projects have been selected from 35 applications for their innovative approaches. This has resulted in £55,000 being awarded for environmentally conscious projects collectively. Successful community groups will benefit from financial support from Northumberland County Council's Environment and Climate Fund to support environmental and climate change initiatives in the county.

5. Fire & Rescue Service

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service has produced its first ever Annual Performance Report reflecting on the performance of 2023/24 and looking forward to the priorities for 2023/24.

The Annual Performance report was presented to Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 27 September 2023 and a refreshed report will be presented annually. In addition to reporting on our core measures, the report captures additional achievements for 2022/23.

The Fire & Rescue Service has:

- Introduced a Fire and Rescue Assurance and Challenge Panel.
- Embedded a Strategic Performance Board and refined our core and service measures.
- Introduced a Fire Standards and Assurance Steering Group to oversee our holistic approach to national fire standards.
- Implemented Annual Operating Plans to monitor progress across all departments.
- Introduced development portfolios for crew, watch and station manager roles.
- Developed a talent management strategy to support career pathways.
- Introduced improved quality assurance arrangements for Site Specific Risk Information (SSRI).
- Implemented quality assurance and evaluation for all prevention programmes.
- Increased the use of social media platforms to promote key messages.
- Increased the number of National Inter-Agency Liaison Officers (NILO).
- Invested in technology by submitting business cases for Learn-Pro and a Dynamic Mobilising Tool which will help to improve our response to risk.
- Improved our partnership and collaboration including membership on boards such as the Health and Wellbeing and Youth Justice Boards.
- Piloted a Level 2 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion programme with comprehensive evaluation.
- Strengthened our Equality Impact Assessment process to support policy development.

- Reintroduced Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) and National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health (NEBOSH) qualifications across the organisation.
- Introduced a Community Risk and Response Strategy to improve appliance availability, including the implementation of rolling recruitment, staffing clusters and support officers.
- Introduced an Aerial Ladder Platform (ALP) to the operational fleet.
- Collaborated with Northumbria Police and Mountain Rescue on the purchase of a 6x6 off-road vehicle funded through Northumberland Partnership Against Rural Crime.
- Introduced a drone capability into Community Risk and Response.
- Increased the cadre of station-based Level 3 Fire Safety Inspection Officers to deliver a greater number of Fire Safety Audits in commercial premises.
- Developed a robust approach to firefighter safety when considering contaminants and toxins.

END



Northumberland County Council

County Council

Wednesday, 20 March 2024

Corporate Peer Review Report

Report of Councillor(s) Cllr Glen Sanderson, Leader of Council

Responsible Officer(s): Dr Helen Paterson, Chief Executive

1. **Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan**

Achieving Value for Money – The Corporate Peer Review helps to inform the Council's approach to Value for Money by focusing on: local priorities and outcomes; organisational and place leadership; governance and culture; financial planning and management; and, capacity for improvement.

Tackling Inequalities – We asked the Peer Review Team to reflect on the Council's three priorities, including tackling inequalities. The Report of the Peer Review Team highlights the progress we are making as well as offering recommendations on how we can continue to develop our work on tackling inequalities.

Driving Economic Growth – We also asked the Peer Review Team to focus on our priority to drive economic growth. The Report underlines the impressive progress we have and continue to make on regeneration and investment across the County.

2. **Purpose of report**

This report summarises the process of the Council's recent Corporate Peer Review, shares the Report of the Peer Review Team, and proposes further actions including ongoing activities, which respond positively to the Peer Review Team's recommendations.

3. **Recommendations**

3.1 Council is recommended to:

- Thank the members of the Local Government Association's Peer Review Team for their time and hard work on the Council's Corporate Peer Review.
- Note the recommendations set out in the Peer Review's Report.

- Note the proposed actions, including ongoing activities and initiatives, which respond positively to the Peer Review Team's recommendations.

4. **Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable**

Not applicable

5. **Background**

- 5.1 Corporate Peer Review (also known as Corporate Peer Challenge) is a peer-led method of improvement, led by the Local Government Association. It provides councils with a robust and effective improvement and assurance tool. It is owned and delivered by the sector, for the sector. Peers remain at the heart of the peer review process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.
- 5.2 Though voluntary, councils are expected to have a Peer Review every 5 years. These are delivered at no additional cost to the council. Peer Review, as the name suggests, is **not an** inspection. It is part of being a well-run, best value council. The LGA's approach to Peer Review covers:
- Local priorities and outcomes;
 - Organisational and place leadership;
 - Governance and culture;
 - Financial planning and management;
 - Capacity for improvement;
- 5.3 Within this framework, we asked the Peer Review Team to focus on the Council's three priorities of: Value for Money; Tackling Inequalities; and Driving Economic Growth.
- 5.4 There were five phases to NCC's Peer Review: a scoping meeting; preparation and engagement; onsite Corporate Peer Review; Report (see Appendix 1) and NCC's proposed actions responding to the Report (see Appendix 2); and progress review. All the Group Leaders were briefed (written and verbally) on background and preparations for the Peer Review at their meetings in September, October and December 2023.
- 5.5 The 'onsite' element of the Peer Review took place during the week of 15th January 2024, with the Review Team spending four days at County Hall. They met and listened to Members, staff, partners and residents. Participants received briefings in advance of these sessions, so they understood what Peer Review was and what to expect.
- 5.6 The Review Team comprised:
- Cllr Martin Hill - Leader of Lincolnshire County Council (Conservative Political Peer);
 - Cllr Steve Morpew - Leader of Norfolk County Council's Labour Group (Labour Political Peer Lead);
 - Terence Herbert - Chief Executive of Wiltshire Council;

- Anna Eastgate, Corporate Director of Place Services, Dorset Council
- Owen Jenkins - Director of Place, Transport and Infrastructure, Oxfordshire County Council
- Paul Cracknell, Executive Director of Strategy and Transformation, Norfolk County Council;
- David Powell, Former Deputy Chief Executive & Chief Finance Officer at Powys County Council;
- Frances Marshall (Senior Regional Advisor), LGA Peer Review Team;
- Francesca Stott (National Advisor), LGA Peer Review Team.

- 5.7 At the end of the onsite meetings, the Review Team presented their initial findings to the Council's Executive Management Team and Cabinet Members. All Group Leaders were also invited to attend this feedback session.
- 5.8 The Review Team have now produced their Report which is attached at Appendix 1.

Summary of Report

“Northumberland has made improvements it can be proud of and should focus on further embedding these...it should celebrate and be proud of the significant progress made...Whilst at the same time remaining focussed on embedding, driving, and monitoring the impact of further change...Lasting and sustained improvement inevitably takes time...” (Extracts from Executive Summary of Feedback Report)

- 5.9 In its Report the Review Team states: *“It is clear the council understands its place and has a vision reflected in its new corporate plan and priorities”*. The Report reflects on what more we can do to embed the Corporate Plan, ensuring this is understood by all Members and staff.
- 5.10 We very much welcome the Report highlighting Northumberland's workforce as an *“asset, with loyal, committed staff who are passionate about the communities they serve and proud to work for them”*. We wholeheartedly agree with this. It is also pleasing to see the report outline examples of innovation and high performing NCC services which should be celebrated as best practice.
- 5.11 Of course, the Review Team also encourage the Council to focus on service areas that perform less well, making better use of data, intelligence, best practice and community approaches. We accept this and indeed are working on a number of initiatives to drive performance improvement, for example in strengthening our approach to recycling. We are also taking steps to strengthen and deepen our working with Towns and Parishes, as key partners in what NCC does across the County.
- 5.12 The Report acknowledges the wide-ranging improvement and cultural change journey the Council has taken forward during the past 18 months and states:
- “Northumberland is proud of the progress made to improve culture, governance, and value for money (VfM)...The Leader, Chief Executive, and new Executive Management Team (EMT) are widely recognised for their roles in championing this improvement...The pace of changes undertaken has been impressive.”***

- 5.13 Encouragingly, the report highlights the positive role played by the Leader, CX and her Executive Management Team in driving forward impressive improvement and change in the organisation. It is also pleasing to see our vision for Northumberland as a 'Land of Great Opportunities' being reflected in the Report.
- 5.14 The Report also highlights improved relationships between Members, and between Members and Officers. Naturally, the Report also emphasises there is more to do to ensure these improvements are felt by and role-modelled by all Members and Officers and offers some insights for how this might be achieved. We welcome this advice from the Review Team. It's important all Members and Officers can feel positive change and be part of NCC's improvement journey and we will continue to offer support and listen to any Members' and Officers' views on how they can be included in this 'journey'.
- 5.15 Reassuringly, the Report states: "*Northumberland has a clear understanding of its financial position*" and is in a relatively strong position with a solid reserve base and a good track record of delivering savings in the current financial year. The Report also underlines the opportunity to strengthen our financial capability and financial support model to meet future financial challenges. The Review Team believe the Council's BEST approach has '*huge potential*' to transform services and outcomes if delivered successfully.
- 5.16 The Report outlines how the Council has built positive relationships with key local and regional stakeholders, and is seen by most as a "*supportive, constructive partner*". It encourages NCC to continue to develop and deepen its role with partners. The Report also acknowledges the role NCC has played in securing a new Devolution Deal and an expanded Combined Authority for our region.
- 5.17 Finally, the report highlights as strengths, NCC's track record of securing Government investment, to drive economic growth and tackle inequalities. It acknowledges how NCC has continued to invest in community infrastructure at a challenging time. The Report recommends that NCC further strengthens its capital management and develop a longer-term capital programme and recognises we are taking steps to do this.

Next Steps

- 5.18 Appendix 2 sets out the recommendations made by Peer Review Team in their Report. Alongside this are actions which we believe respond positively to those recommendations. Many of these actions continue work that has been started in the past 18 months, with the Peer Review providing an opportune moment to reflect on progress, refine and further embed activities.
- 5.19 The lead Peer Reviewers will re-visit us in around six-months to reflect on our progress since January.

6. Options open to the Council and reasons for the recommendations

- 6.1 This report provides a valuable opportunity for Council to consider and comment on the Report of the Peer Review Team following their work with us in 2023/24. Whilst 'Peer Review' is entirely voluntary, it is considered good practice to undertake a Review and to respond positively to the findings and recommendations of our peers in the local government sector and we are committed to doing that.

7. Implications

Policy	This report supports delivery of all three priorities of the Corporate Plan.
Finance and value for money	Value for money is a priority for the Council. This report contains no direct financial implications. The ongoing delivery of the individual actions may have financial implications which would form separate reports as these arise.
Legal	Whilst this report contains no immediate legal implications, the delivery of the individual actions may have legal implications, which would form separate reports as these arise.
Procurement	N/A
Human resources	N/A
Property	N/A
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?	A full assessment is not required. This report does not propose a change to specific services or functions.
Risk assessment	None at this stage.
Crime and disorder	N/A
Customer considerations	N/A
Carbon reduction	N/A
Health and wellbeing	N/A
Wards	(All Wards);

8. Background papers

Not applicable.

9. Links to other key reports already published

Not applicable.

10. Author and Contact Details

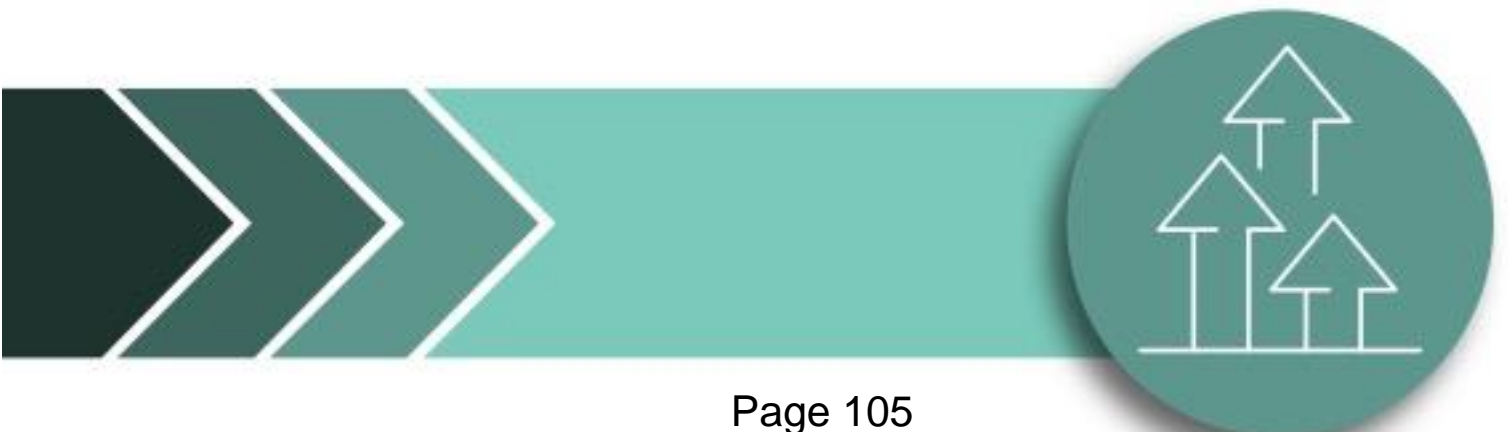
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LGA Corporate Peer Review

Northumberland County Council

15 – 18 January 2024

Feedback report





Contents

- 1. Executive summary 3
- 2. Key recommendations 6
- 3. Summary of the peer review approach 8
- 4. Feedback 10
- 5. Next steps 23

1. Executive summary

As one of the largest, least densely populated local authority areas in England, Northumberland County Council (Northumberland) seeks to balance the distinctive needs of residents and communities across its diverse geography. It is clear the council understands its place and has a vision reflected in its new corporate plan and priorities. Whilst the plan is well understood by cabinet members and senior officers, there is still further to do so this is reflected across the authority and its ambitions are translated into delivery and performance monitoring. Now is an opportune time to consider how cabinet members will own and lead the council's priorities and direction on an ongoing basis.

The past 18 months has seen the council embark on a wide-ranging improvement and cultural change journey following an Independent Governance Review in Spring 2022 and subsequent introduction of an independent Challenge Board.

Northumberland is proud of the progress made to improve culture, governance, and value for money (VfM). The Leader, Chief Executive, and new Executive Management Team (EMT) are widely recognised for their roles in championing this improvement. The pace of changes undertaken has been impressive. Many elected members, staff and partners spoke of 'green shoots' and reflected that it feels like a different organisation from 18 months ago. There were however differing views as to the degree of change achieved, having started from a low base, and with the consequences of the past still impacting confidence for the sustainability of these changes. There is further to go across all areas for change to be embedded, felt by all, and sustainable.

Improvement in relationships between elected members, and between elected members and officers, were reported. There nevertheless remains residual mistrust across some elected members which continue to impact on the council. Working with all elected members to continue to grow an environment of openness and trust will be important to draw a line under the past. Further work is also required for all elected members to role model fully inclusive behaviours. An on-going, embedded and well attended Member Development programme will support these efforts.

Northumberland's workforce is an asset, with loyal, committed staff who are passionate about the communities they serve and proud to work for them. They will

be critical to delivering BEST – the council’s blueprint for new ways of working and culture change. Developing workforce planning, and building capacity and skills, should be prioritised to complement the delivery of BEST and mitigate risk around delivery.

Northumberland has a clear understanding of its financial position. The council is in a relatively strong position with solid reserve base of £229m of General Fund Reserves at 31 March 2023, and a good track record of delivering savings in the current financial year. However, the delivery of savings has been less successful in some previous years. The challenges that lie ahead means there is an opportunity to strengthen the authority’s financial capability and reassess the financial support model. This would bring greater ownership of and consistency across the council, guard against unexpected budgetary variances and avoidable use of reserves¹.

The financial outlook is nevertheless challenging for Northumberland, with inflationary and service pressures. These pressures are being experienced widely across the sector. Savings of £10.9m are required in 2024/25, and £18.5m in 2025/26. This savings requirement would be considerably higher without the planned use of reserves to meet non-recurrent pressures² as well use of £7.3m Collection Fund Surplus in 2024/25. The council’s medium-term financial sustainability is contingent on its BEST initiative delivering financial savings. BEST is currently at an early stage, though has huge potential to transform service outcomes and efficiencies if delivered successfully. To succeed, Northumberland will need to be clear on the return on investment, ensure BEST is data driven, collectively owned and staff are empowered to innovate and collaborate across services.

Delivering value for money (VfM) is important to Northumberland, with positive measures introduced to strengthen risk management and audit. Further work is required to define and articulate what VfM means for Northumberland, so this is understood by all staff and permeates into day-to-day operations. Embedding this new approach to corporate risk, reviewing and agreeing refreshed financial borrowing arrangements of Advance Northumberland, and undertaking an external review of the Audit Committee will all be important to provide further assurance and future certainty, and mitigate risk.

¹ £0.9m overspend at quarter three of 2023/24 financial year, with a significant unexpected variance in children’s services

² £19.5m in 2024/25 and £11.6m in 2025/26

There are many examples of innovation and high performing services of which Northumberland is understandably proud and should celebrate as best practice. There are also areas that perform less well, with perceptions of variation in service provision across the county, and examples of slow responses to service requests. Greater systematic use of data and intelligence, modernising of practices and systems, consistent responsiveness to service requests, and more community enabling approach would help address variation and drive improvement.

The council has forged positive relationships with key local and regional stakeholders, and is seen by most as a supportive, constructive partner. Whilst understandably having had a strong internal focus over the past year, Northumberland could benefit from now extending its strategic role with local and regional partners to fully leverage its place leadership position to deliver shared ambitions. Continuing to involve partners in Northumberland's change journey will be important so they can have confidence in the organisation's long-term stability and assurance that past lessons have been learned.

The council has an ambitious place agenda. Its track record of partnership working, securing Government investment, and synergies across its priorities to drive economic growth and tackle inequalities in their widest sense³ are strengths. Northumberland is proud of its ambitious and wide-ranging capital programme, continuing to invest in community infrastructure at a challenging time to do so. Steps should be taken to further strengthen capital management and develop a long-term capital programme to address recurrent underspending in recent years⁴, which if left unresolved could undermine confidence with strategic partners.

Northumberland has made improvements it can be proud of and should focus on further embedding these. It is vital that everyone in the authority recognises that it is relatively early in its change journey and there is further to go. Having been through a challenging period there is an understandable desire for stability. It is important this however does not inhibit the council from fully embracing openness and learning from constructive challenge. A 'growth mindset' will enable Northumberland to solidify and build on the encouraging foundations it has put in place and mitigate risk

³ Based on the four domains of inequality – protected characteristics, geographical, social economic factors and inclusion groups)

⁴ 2022/23 by £37.3million and is forecast to be underspent in 2023/24 by 56.8million-

of progress made being lost which is an anxiety for a range of parties.

The ingredients are coming together for Northumberland to be able to achieve its ambitions. To do so, it should celebrate and be proud of the significant progress made and harness the strength of its partnerships and regional sub-regional working. Whilst at the same time remaining focussed on embedding, driving, and monitoring the impact of further change to promote lasting stability. Lasting and sustained improvement inevitably takes time and requires embedding.

2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

2.1 Celebrate and recognise progress made on Northumberland's improvement journey, whilst remaining focussed on embedding, driving, and monitoring impact of further change.

This will support the council to embed, drive and track the impact of further change to promote continuous improvement and lasting stability.

2.2 Continue to grow the environment of openness and trust with all elected members and find a way to draw a line under the past.

This will continue to improve organisational culture and enable the council to fully focus on the future.

2.3 Ensure there is a systematic on-going effective Member development programme.

It will further strengthen governance, scrutiny, and political leadership. It should include elected members committing to role modelling fully inclusive behaviours and working together.

2.4 Enhance and systemise consistent use of data and analytics to drive performance monitoring, horizon scanning and service improvement.

This will strengthen service delivery, as well as greater enablement of communities and demonstrate progress against the corporate plan and the measures included in it.

2.5 To create the conditions for BEST to succeed:

2.5.1 Embed and foster collective ownership at every level of the organisation of the Corporate Plan and BEST. This will strengthen alignment between strategic objectives, operational delivery and outcomes.

2.5.2 Empower staff through BEST to engage with cross organisational working opportunities, innovation and sharing of good practice. This will promote innovation, embed BEST as a way of working, and cultivate the skills required for programme delivery.

2.5.3 Build capacity and skills within existing workforce to complement delivery of BEST and mitigate risk. This will support development of homegrown talent to optimise the delivery of BEST and alleviate reliance on external partners.

2.6 Further develop the council's strategic role with partners and within the region, continuing to involve partners in your change journey.

This will further strengthen Northumberland's place leadership and provide confidence to partners on the organisation's improvement trajectory and long-term stability.

2.7 Consider, and progress, how Northumberland can be more enabling of local communities.

As being pursued through Northumberland's Inequalities Strategy, a more empowering, resident-centred approach will enhance outcomes, foster community resilience and support demand management.

2.8 Be clearer about what value for money means for Northumberland and fully develop the longer-term capital programme.

Doing so, with clear success measures, will embed value for money ethos and practices across all levels of the organisation and strengthen capital management and timely delivery of the ambitious programme.

2.9 Continue to be open to - and fully embrace learning from – internal and external challenge.

A 'growth' and continuous improvement mindset will enable Northumberland to build on the encouraging foundations and mitigate risk of progress made being lost.

3. Summary of the Peer Review approach

3.1 The peer team

Peer Reviews are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the Peer Review and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Terence Herbert, Chief Executive, Wiltshire Council
- Cllr Martin Hill OBE, Leader, Lincolnshire County Council
- Cllr Steve Morphew, Leader of Labour Group, Norfolk County Council
- Anna Eastgate, Corporate Director of Place Services, Dorset Council
- Owen Jenkins, Director of Place, Transport and Infrastructure, Oxfordshire County Council
- Paul Cracknell, Executive Director of Strategy & Transformation, Norfolk County Council
- David Powell, Former Deputy Chief Executive & Chief Finance Officer at Powys County Council
- Francesca Stott and Frances Marshall, Local Government Association

3.2 Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Reviews. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

Woven within these themes, the council asked the peer team to also consider Northumberland County Council's three corporate plan priorities:

- Value For Money
- Driving Economic Growth
- Tackling Inequalities

3.3 The peer review process

Peer Reviews are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent four days onsite at Northumberland County Council, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from more than 55 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 200 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.

This report provides a summary of the peer team’s findings. It is not intended as an exhaustive record of the information shared and conversations had with the peer team, but rather as an overview and evidence underpinning the key feedback from the peer team. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.

4. Feedback

4.1 Local priorities and outcomes

The county of Northumberland has a wealth of assets, from scenic natural landscapes and cultural sites to growing economic sectors, such as offshore and renewable energy. As one of the largest and least densely populated local authorities in England, it serves communities with distinctive characteristics, heritage, functions and needs. This diverse geography includes rural settings through to densely populated urban towns. It has some of the largest health inequalities in the country with 23 areas within the most deprived 10 percent nationally, and 19 within the least deprived 10 percent.⁵

The council has a distinct vision to be “a land of great opportunities for current and future generations”. This vision is articulated within a new corporate plan and underpinned by three clear key priorities. Launched in 2023, the corporate plan has landed well and is clearly understood by cabinet and senior officers. Staff and partners reported a notable positive shift in the council’s clarity of purpose. There is

⁵ Indices of Deprivation LSOAs statistics - [Indices-of-Deprivations-2019-Summary-Report.pdf \(northumberland.gov.uk\)](#) IMD 2019

more to do to embed the corporate plan and vision throughout the organisation, with priorities less consistently understood outside the corporate centre. The council's environmental aspirations would benefit from greater clarity and embedding. Sitting within the three key priorities, inevitably it has less prevalence and penetration across the organisation than other aspects of the corporate plan. The recent change in focus from a climate action priority to a broader environmental agenda is at early stage meaning there is work to do as it is not yet well understood or translated into what this means for delivery across Northumberland's activities.

With a new corporate plan - and the wider organisational reset of elected member and officer relationships that has taken place - now is an opportune time to consider how cabinet members will own and lead the council's priorities and direction on an ongoing basis. This will enhance the realignment that has taken place to strengthen empowered political leadership.

The council understands its distinct communities and places. This is reflected in the strong and mature relationship with the Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) and evident through the targeted Inequalities Plan centred on community voices shaping Northumberland's future direction. A county wide residents' survey has recently been undertaken, although the results were not available at the time of the Corporate Peer Review.

Tackling inequalities as a core priority is widely understood by elected members, staff, and partners. The Leader's role in driving this agenda has been instrumental and widely recognised. The council's activities to tackle inequalities are a significant strength, taking a data driven and partnership approach, with activity focused on community asset-based action and links between macro and hyper local working. Its approach is innovative, and beginning to permeate through the organisation, and well regarded by partners. With the 'County Mission' partnership at an early stage, delivery will now be key. There is a desire from partners for tangible long-term actions and targets to understand how they can fully contribute to these shared goals.

A refreshed approach to corporate performance reporting has been undertaken, linking the corporate plan with service planning, performance monitoring, reporting and appraisals. This renewed performance focus is relatively recent. It continues to

evolve with plans to further refine success measures and key performance indicators. Northumberland should take steps to strengthen alignment between the budget, corporate plan, performance management and BEST, making systematic use of data in monitoring and horizon scanning. This will strengthen and embed a performance culture across the organisation and drive service improvements and outcomes. It will also provide a positive link between the return-on-investment from BEST and the future service provision.

There are examples within services of data and insight being harnessed to good effect. The Place Standard Tool is a notable example of best practice, providing rich improvement focused insight through blended quantitative and qualitative approach. However, systematic use of data, analytics, and benchmarking to drive improvement and prioritisation is not consistent across the authority. Addressing this is a key tenant of Northumberland's BEST strategic change initiative. Positive steps have been taken, with an evolving Data & Business Intelligence Strategy, Data Leaders Group and Data Academy established. Nevertheless, there is a long way to go, with the council recognising it is at an early stage in its ambitions. Consideration should be given to how Northumberland engages communities in this, enabling them to share their requirements and the ownership of resulting improvements. How local communities access data and are better facilitated to self-service will be important to support demand management and community resilience.

It is commendable that operational services continued to be delivered throughout the challenging period of instability which led to the Leader requesting an independent Governance Review. The council has many high performing services and innovative practice that should be celebrated. Examples include – though are not limited to - Family Hubs, Early Help, Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub, Fire and Rescue Service, Energising Blyth community engagement activity, above average number of 'good' or 'outstanding' rated primary schools, and strong linkages between regeneration and improving outcomes for local people.

The performance of key statutory services can also be seen through recent inspection judgements which the council is proud of. Ofsted judged all aspects to be 'good' in its most recent inspection of Children's Services⁶. Similarly, His Majesty's

⁶ [Northumberland County Council Ofsted](#) in 2020

Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services judged all areas of Northumberland's Fire and Rescue Service to be 'good' or 'adequate',⁷ demonstrating significant improvement since its 2021 inspection. In relation to Adult Social Care Contracting and Commissioning, 88.7 percent of Northumberland based service providers were rated by CQC as 'outstanding' or 'good'.⁸

However, there are several areas where Northumberland's performance is notably lower than its highest performing services, and lower than other local authority comparators. This is the case for example on household waste recycling rates, residual waste, and recycling contamination rates, when compared to its Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) 'family' grouping of similar authorities using the most recently available data.⁹ The peer team also heard there is a perception that service provision varies across the county based on geography and relationships. The peer team would encourage Northumberland to celebrate its high-performance areas, but also focus on those areas that are comparatively less strong to bring delivery of services to a consistently high standard across the breadth of Northumberland's activities. It can build on the energy and focus invested in services with a high profile – such as education and skills – to use this experience as a template for positioning less prominent service areas.

4.2 Organisational and place leadership

In the past year Northumberland has experienced significant organisational change, with a new Chief Executive, a new permanent senior officer team and restructure to tiers three and four. These changes have been embedded at pace. It is widely recognised, both internally and externally, that the Chief Executive and new EMT have made a noticeable positive difference to how the organisation works. They are well regarded and seen as working well together.

The Leader's role in championing positive organisational change is also widely recognised. Many elected members, staff and partners the peer team talked with reflected that it felt like a different organisation from 18 months ago. Although views as to the extent and sustainability of improvement varied. (See Governance and

⁷ [Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service 2023-2025](#) in 2023

⁸ As of November 2023

⁹ [Waste management - Local Authority Data Explorer Oflog Dashboard - CPFA comparators](#) [Oflog Dashboard - All Councils comparators](#)

Culture paragraph).

Direct engagement from the Chief Executive with staff across internal communication channels, as well as meeting staff face-to-face, has been welcomed and landed well. Whilst the peer team heard some positive feedback about the visibility and engagement of the senior team, especially in the early days, this was not consistent across all organisational levels. Re-energising efforts to increase visibility of senior political and officer leaders within directorates - particularly with frontline and satellite staff – would benefit staff morale and the embedding of corporate messages.

It is commendable that in parallel to internal organisational changes, the council has taken an outward looking approach and sought to forge positive relationships with key local and regional stakeholders. Notable successes can be seen in the establishment of the 'County Mission' partnership focused on reducing inequalities, the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal, and Northumberland's role in securing a new devolution deal for the North East Mayoral Combined Authority.

Investment by the senior political and officer leadership in resetting partnership relationships has been well received. The peer team heard that after a period of uncertainty partners are relieved and excited about the future potential of the county and region.

The council should now look to extend its strategic role with partners and within the region to further build confidence and capitalise further on the already successful regional relationships and national funding and development opportunities. Some partners were anxious to understand how recent positive changes will be embedded for the long term to ensure lessons from the past have been learned. Consideration should be given to how positive change is sustained, monitored, and not tied into the political cycle, to give confidence for the organisation's long-term stability.

Northumberland is predominantly seen as a supportive, constructive partner, with positive feedback from almost all external stakeholders the peer team spoke with. Partners spoke positively of their access to senior figures and the clear leadership set by the Leader and Deputy Leader. This bodes well for future partnership working. To ensure longevity, it will be important that relationships with partners permeate other levels of the authority.

The leadership have led steps to enhance engagement with localities and Town and

parish councils. The Peer Team nevertheless heard mixed views on the effectiveness of relationships and processes in local areas. There are perceptions that service provision varies across the county, as well frustrations at inadequate responsiveness from officers to issues raised. Whilst the diversity of Northumberland's geography inevitably means 'no one size fits all', understanding and addressing any inconsistency will be important. Recognising it is 'early days', further exploring opportunities for local organisations, including town and parish councils, to be better informed of council policies - and enabling them to enhance service provision - is one approach through which to do so.

Northumberland is actively pursuing an ambitious place agenda. The council has had notable success in securing Government funding to support its ambitions. For example, the 'Energising Blyth' regeneration scheme has leveraged in £110m via five different central government funding streams. There is a great opportunity to utilise learning from this to support efforts to leverage government agencies for the benefit of the county on other areas, such as National Highways.

The council's place shaping activities are unambiguously driven by its two corporate plan priorities to drive economic growth to support communities and businesses to thrive, and to tackle inequalities. The strong linkages between the two priorities are evident and praiseworthy. This is reflected in the involvement of a diverse range of services from Fire and Rescue to Social Care in supporting these joined-up agendas in a truly cohesive place-based approach.

There are numerous good practice examples of Northumberland being proactive in its place leadership. Examples include effective coordination between partners such as the joint safeguarding team, through to deep collaborative working across multiple sectors leading to creation of economic growth, local jobs, and regeneration of a locality.

The council has a large and ambitious capital programme amounting to £223m in the 2023/24 capital programme approved in February 2023. It is proud of having continued to invest in schools, housing, leisure centres, regeneration, and infrastructure at a challenging time for the sector. There is however a history of significant slippage in the capital programme, with a £37.3m underspend in 2022/23 and £56.8m underspend forecast in 2023/24. In recognition of the impact of external

national economic factors and external funding on deliverability, the programme has been reprofiled. Nevertheless, steps should be taken to further strengthen capital management, with a longer horizon and process improvements to mitigate risk and address the pattern of underspending. In doing so there is also a need to ensure the appropriate delivery models are in place for such an ambitious capital programme.

4.3 Governance and culture

In the past 18 months the council has invested significant energy and resource in a broad governance and cultural change agenda following an Independent Governance Review in Spring 2022. This has included - though not limited to - a permanent Executive Management Team, new values and behaviours model, investment in elected member development, changes to the constitution, scrutiny function and Member Code of Conduct, clear rationale for Council owned arms-length companies, and introduction of Annual Reports¹⁰ for transparency.

Northumberland is proud of the strides it has made and the positive impact this is having on organisational culture and governance. This can be seen with statutory officers reporting being comfortable and confident in exercising their powers within usually accepted professional boundaries. Many staff and elected members the peer team spoke with talked of 'green shoots' and reported a big positive shift in organisational culture. Differing views were however expressed about the degree of change and how consistent or embedded this is, having started from a low base. With the consequences of past activities still impacting on the authority, the peer team heard concerns that without continued focus and momentum, this positive trajectory may start to stall.

Marked improvement in relationships between members, and between members and officers, were also highlighted as hallmarks of Northumberland's change journey. There nevertheless remains residual mistrust across some elected members which continues to impact on the council. It will be important to find a way for all elected members to draw a line under the past. Respect between members needs to become the established norm to ensure progress is not impacted, with improvements likely to be tested during future election periods. There is a desire for more engagement with backbench members and cross-party involvement and a real

¹⁰ [04.1 Corporate Plan Achievements.pdf \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

commitment to openness, to continue to improve the culture and strengthen decision making. This can be used as a platform to continue to grow an environment of trust and enable Northumberland to fully focus on the future.

Significant work has been undertaken to co-develop and promote – with staff and elected members – a new values and behaviours model. These corporate values are well understood, lived, and modelled by senior officers. There is further work to do - which the council recognises - to cascade these throughout the rest of the organisation so they are embedded. The core values of the front-line staff are incredibly strong, with a commitment and pride in the communities they serve. This alignment with Northumberland's ethos should mean embedding the council's corporate values will be easier to achieve.

The council has taken steps to understand and respond to the issues raised by the Challenge Board around the voices of female elected members struggling to be heard. This has been in the form of a survey and non-mandatory tailored elective member development sessions. Nevertheless, the peer team heard and feel that there is still further work to do to ensure that all elected members consistently demonstrate fully inclusive behaviours in line with organisational values.

There is a shared desire from the political administration, scrutiny members and officers for scrutiny to make a positive contribution to governance. Efforts have been made to strengthen the scrutiny function following a formal review. This 'refresh' is showing positive progress, with plans to integrate scrutiny into mainstream governance and decision making welcomed. There is scope to strengthen scrutiny further to improve its efficacy. To do so, consideration should be given to closer alignment between Scrutiny work programmes, the corporate plan and cabinet work programme. In parallel, more consistent use of data across all scrutiny committees, further scrutiny training for elected members, and including the value of effective scrutiny within training for new staff will maintain momentum and embed scrutiny into the culture.

There has been significant investment in elected member learning and development over the past 12 months. This has included the introduction of policy conferences, training programmes and personal development plans. This enhanced support is widely recognised and welcomed. It will be important to build on this good work by

ensuring there is an on-going programme which is attended, well understood and embedded.

The pace of changes undertaken, both culturally and structurally, has been impressive. Nevertheless, the peer team heard mixed views on how established or extensive the change is across all aspects of the council. The strong commitment from the political and officer leadership to improvement needs to be matched by a recognition by everyone that sustainable change takes time, requires continuous determined effort from all Officers and Members, and is aided by fully embracing of learning from constructive challenge. The council has voluntarily invited external challenge through the Governance Review and independent Challenge Board. Having been through a challenging period there is an understandable desire for stability. It is important this however does not inhibit the council from fully embracing openness and transparency, recognising that actions flowing from constructive challenge are a means to an end, not an end in itself. Northumberland should take steps to further solidify and embed cultural and structural changes, building on and celebrating its achievements to date. In doing so, it is imperative that Northumberland is clear how cultural change will be monitored, tracked, and sustained. Without clear success measures, how will the council systematically know if it is continuing a positive trajectory or otherwise?

4.4 Financial planning and management

The council has a relatively strong financial position with a solid reserve base of £341.7m of useable reserves as of 31 March 2023 and sound finance function. The financial outlook nevertheless continues to be challenging for Northumberland, with inflationary and service pressures being felt across the local government sector. A £0.5m overspend was reported at quarter three of 2023/24 financial year, which included a significant unexpected variance in children's services. Whilst such demand pressures are a common challenge for councils nationally, robust financial management should provide early visibility on variances. Going forward Northumberland should consider establishing a consistent vision for its finance function, and business partnering model, supported by finance training for services.

Revisiting, and developing an action plan, in response to the findings of the CIPFA review will also be important, with this not having happened due to the onset of the pandemic. Continuing efforts to recruit to a Head of Corporate Finance role will fill a gap in financial planning capacity. Overall these factors would further strengthen financial planning and management by bolstering financial skills and ownership across the authority.

There is a sound understanding of the council's financial position, with clear assumptions about pressures and growth underpinning the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP). In December 2023, the draft MTFP projected £10.9m savings required for 2024-25, £18.5m for 2025-26, and further £34.8m covering 2026-27 to 2027-28. This relies on using £31.2m of reserves over the four years.¹¹ The council has a recent record of savings delivery against set targets, with 94 percent delivered in 2023/24. However, the delivery of savings has been less successful in some previous years with only 57 percent delivered in 2022/23. Having recently moved away from centrally set savings targets for Departments, Northumberland will want to assure itself that this does not detract from the delivery of the corporate plan or lead to avoidable use of reserves.

The council's strategic change initiative – BEST – is integral to the authority's medium term financial sustainability; being key to delivering future savings. In 2024/25 it is expected to deliver a third of the £10.9m savings and in 2025/26 to deliver nearly half of the council-wide savings target. To succeed, it is imperative there is clarity on the return on investment from BEST and that it is data driven, embedded, and collectively owned across the Council. (See Capacity to Improve paragraph).

The appointment of a permanent, experienced Section 151 Officer has had a positive impact and brought much needed stability in this key role following previous turnover. Recent steps to strengthen financial planning and management have included greater political and organisational engagement in the 2024/25 budget setting process and moves towards a two-year budget. This move towards a longer-term view of financial management is good practice and a balanced second year puts budget setting for 2025/26 on the front foot, notwithstanding the second year is

¹¹ [04 Budget 2024-25 and MTFP.pdf \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

advisory and subject to change.

The council has an awareness of financial performance with monthly internal reports. It could consider increasing the frequency of formal financial reporting to cabinet to further increase transparency, accountability, and public awareness.

Delivering value for money (VfM) is important to Northumberland, being one of the council's three corporate plan priorities. The peer team heard that progress is being made on the VfM opinion in accounts for 2019/20 onwards. It is important these outstanding issues are concluded to assist the council's improvement journey to help it demonstrate it has resolved past issues. There is a high-level understanding of the need to deliver VfM, but more work is needed to embed how this relates to individuals, their roles, and day-to-day operations. Further work to define what VfM means for Northumberland should be undertaken so that this understanding is translated into work programmes and practices across all levels of the organisation.

There has been a concerted effort to raise the profile of risk management and audit over recent years. This has included a refreshed Corporate Risk Register and risk management approach, developing a clear rationale for the council's arms-length companies, and changes to Advance Northumberland's¹² governance and finance structures. Embedding the new approach to corporate risk will be important so there is a consistent awareness across the council.

There is an understanding of both the opportunities and challenges around Advance Northumberland. The peer team heard that its predecessor body had been the subject of considerable discussion and challenge, but that the current position had been strengthened. This included greater engagement with a new Shareholder Committee in place and a reconstituted Advance Ltd Audit Committee chaired by a non-executive. As a wholly council owned company, Advance Northumberland's significant levels of borrowing on an interest only basis of approximately £276m is a potential financial liability. It is positive that external advice has been sought to identify a solution to resolve the financing of borrowing position with a proposed way forward received in 2023. Northumberland are aware that this needs to be resolved as a priority because it is a potentially significant risk, and resolution likely needs cross party support.

¹² The Council's arm's length growth and development company.

The council's Audit Committee includes several independent persons, including an independent chair. This is good practice and is commendable to bring to bear external skills and scrutiny to the council's activities. With the Committee currently in the process of recruiting a new Chair and an independent committee member, the peer team would encourage this to be completed as early as possible. Making these appointments will be important for confidence and governance with elected members, staff, partners, and the public. Northumberland should also consider undertaking an external review of the Audit Committee. This would provide further assurance beyond the annual self-assessment to both internal and external audiences.

4.5 Capacity for improvement

Northumberland's workforce is an asset, with skilled, committed staff who are proud to serve their communities. Partners and service users described staff as passionate, dedicated, and capable. Many staff spoke positively of Northumberland as an employer, valuing the flexibility and opportunities for progression it afforded and the supportive colleagues. In a recent staff pulse survey 80 percent of staff recommended the council as a good place to work.¹³

The new permanent EMT has brought stability - which is widely welcomed - following period of flux and turnover in senior roles. Corporately, levels of staff sickness and turnover however remain an issue. Currently 11.5 days currently being lost to sickness annually against a target of 7.5 full time equivalent, with rates having increased since 2019.¹⁴ It will be important understand the underlying factors – and how they correlate to Northumberland's change journey - to be able to address this.

There are strong internal communication mechanisms with staff through regular newsletters, social media groups, staff networks and corporate briefings. Recent improvements to engagement have been appreciated by staff, such as the Awards and thank you letters, which have helped promote a 'one team culture'. There is scope for further improvement, with experiences varying across the organisation and

¹³ Pulse Survey December 2023

¹⁴ [Corporate Performance Quarter 2 Cabinet Report Sickness absence causal factors and intervention strategies - Corporate Services & Economic Growth Overview Scrutiny](#)

instances where staff would have valued more proactive communication. These inconsistencies are reflected in varied levels of awareness of corporate messages, as well as a desire for clarity on certain issues such as the remote working policy.

The nine Staff Networks¹⁵ created to understand and respond to the experience of staff are good practice and spoken highly of by staff. These include Networks reflective of protected characteristic such as LGBT+ and Race Equality, as well as experiential groups such as Armed Forces and Apprenticeship. The breadth and depth of the Networks reflect Northumberland's passionate and engaged workforce, and positive working with council leadership and human resources. There is appetite from the Networks for greater engagement on decisions and changes which impact on staff. Putting substantive processes in place to enable Networks to shape decision making would empower staff and support Northumberland's wider organisational change journey.

The council has a good relationship between the Trades Unions, with regular communications with the Leader and Chief Executive welcomed. Ensuring early communications and engagement processes are consistently followed will be important to maintain this. More broadly, positive relationships and joint working at an operational level with other external partners provides a good platform to potentially leverage capacity for shared aspirations. Equally, it will be important for Northumberland to be mindful of how the pace and scale of its activities may impact on partners' capacity to resource shared endeavours.

Workforce planning is recognised as an essential tool to support Northumberland's ambitions, with the development of a new People Strategy underway. This strategy needs to address the breadth of HR issues Northumberland is dealing with. This includes talent and skills development, recruitment and retention, succession planning and performance management. Developing these priorities will be critical to realising the opportunities within BEST and to meet future challenges. For example, building capacity and skills within Northumberland's existing workforce to complement delivery of BEST will mitigate risks of single points of failure and reduce reliance on delivery partners.

With the rollout of BEST at an early stage, awareness of it understandably varies

¹⁵ Menopause Network, Carers Network, Race Equality Network, Autism Spectrum Disorder Network, Enable Disability Network, Mental Wellbeing Network, LGBT+ Network, Armed Forces Network and the Apprenticeship Network.

across organisational levels and workstreams. Peers heard that it had already begun to motivate staff. Clear, consistent communication to frontline staff would strengthen its corporate identity and harness this positivity. To unlock its potential, Northumberland should empower staff through BEST to innovate, share good practice and engage with cross organisational working opportunities.

If delivered well, BEST has huge potential to modernise practices and systems, deliver efficiencies, boost capacity, and enhance service experience for residents. It is a key part of Northumberland's budget strategy and its success is a critical component in supporting future balanced budgets. Delivery of it will be assisted by Northumberland's current sound financial base, however it will be important previous patterns of using reserves does not continue. To succeed it will be imperative that it is collectively owned across the council, with greater clarity on the defined savings, benefits realisation, and projected costs. A more systematic and enhanced approach to data collection, reporting and interpretation will be central to achieving this. (See Local Priorities and Outcomes paragraph).

The ingredients are coming together for Northumberland to be able to achieve its ambitions. To do so, it must build on its impressive progress to date and remain focussed on embedding, driving, and monitoring the impact of further change to promote lasting stability.

5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer Review. The CPR process includes a progress review within twelve months of the CPR, which provides space for the Council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the recommendations from this report. In the meantime, Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser for the North East, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Mark is available to discuss any further support the Council requires – mark.edgell@local.gov.uk.

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APPENDIX 2

**CORPORATE PEER REVIEW 2024
RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS**

Corporate Peer Review Recommendation	Proposed Actions	Programme / Governance / Workstream
<p>2.1 Celebrate and recognise progress made on Northumberland’s improvement journey, whilst remaining focussed on embedding, driving, and monitoring impact of further change.</p>	<p>Programme of internal and external communications</p>	<p>BAU+</p>
	<p>Continuing the successful internal staff awards, building on what we did in December 2023</p>	<p>BAU+</p>
	<p>Using existing networks, processes and approaches to further embed key initiatives such as BEST and the Corporate Plan (e.g. Corporate Briefing, Performance Reporting, Service-Planning)</p>	<p>BAU+</p>

Corporate Peer Review Recommendation	Proposed Actions	Programme / Governance / Workstream
	Submit nominations for NCC examples of good and outstanding practice for national and regional awards as part of sharing learning and areas of good practice with colleagues across the sector as well as learning from them.	BEST Talent & Opportunities
2.2 Continue to grow the environment of openness and trust with all elected members and find a way to draw a line under the past.	Continue the programme of Group Leaders meetings	BAU+
	Communicate the positive progress that is being made with Member-Member working as well as Member to Officer working	BAU+
	Develop the new programme of Policy Conferences for 2024/25, listening to and reflecting on Members' feedback and ideas for improving these	BAU+
2.3 Ensure there is a systematic on-going effective Member development programme.	Continue to strengthen the Member Training offer in 2024/25 (listening to Member feedback) as well as improving communication on this	BAU+ Member Services Working Group
2.4 Enhance and systemise consistent use of data and analytics to drive performance monitoring, horizon scanning and service improvement.	Deliver Data & Business Intelligence Strategy	BEST Use of Technology
	Refine and clarify the link between improved use of 'data & BI' and corporate performance reporting	Planning and Performance

Corporate Peer Review Recommendation	Proposed Actions	Programme / Governance / Workstream
		Accountability Framework
2.5 To create the conditions for BEST to succeed:		
2.5.1 Embed and foster collective ownership at every level of the organisation of the Corporate Plan and BEST.	Using existing networks, processes and approaches to further embed key initiatives such as BEST and the Corporate Plan (e.g. through Corporate Briefing, Performance Reporting, Service, Planning, Appraisal)	BAU+
	Use the rollout of BEST reviews to contribute to this embedding by involving staff at all levels in the reviews	BEST (all)
2.5.2 Empower staff through BEST to engage with cross organisational working opportunities, innovation and sharing of good practice.	Develop and rollout NCC's new Workforce Development Plan Using existing networks, processes and approaches to further embed key initiatives such as BEST and the Corporate Plan (e.g. through Corporate Briefing, Performance Reporting, Service, Planning, Appraisal)	BEST Talent & Opportunities BAU+
2.5.3 Build capacity and skills within existing workforce to complement delivery of BEST and mitigate risk.	Use the rollout of BEST reviews to contribute to this embedding (See Rec 5)	BEST (all)
2.6 Further develop the council's strategic role with partners and within the region,	Establish the County Partnership and progress towards a shared 'County Mission'	County Partnership

Corporate Peer Review Recommendation	Proposed Actions	Programme / Governance / Workstream
continuing to involve partners in your change journey.	Refresh and clarify Member and Officer arrangements in relation to the new Combined Authority. As part of this, consider what NCC services and functions could do differently to work even more effectively with the new CA.	BAU ⁺
2.7 Consider, and progress, how Northumberland can be more enabling of local communities.	Develop and roll out 'Northumberland Communities First' model	BEST communities First
2.8 Be clearer about what value for money means for Northumberland and fully develop the longer-term capital programme.	Deliver Value for Money Statements for each NCC Service as part of 2024/25 Service Planning Process	BEST Value for Money
	Continue to develop and re-profile the Capital Programme	BEST Use of Resources
2.9 Continue to be open to - and fully embrace learning from – internal and external challenge.	Undertake six-month review of Corporate Peer Review in line with LGA best practice	BAU ⁺
	Continue to strengthen and learn from Scrutiny	BAU ⁺
	Continuing to act on advice and recommendations from External Audit	BAU ⁺ Audit Committee

Corporate Peer Review Recommendation	Proposed Actions	Programme / Governance / Workstream
	Aligning NCC's Corporate Performance with Oflog 'dashboard and embracing learning from developments across the Local Government Sector.	BAU+

Note BAU+ is about continuing to deliver many of the actions that are already in place and progressing and are therefore 'business as usual'. The 'plus' element is about reviewing these actions in light of the Peer Review recommendations, reflecting on progress, refining activities and focusing on outcomes.

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Northumberland County Council

County Council

Wednesday, 20 March 2024

Report of the Director of Law and Corporate Governance

Report of Statutory Officer: Stephen Gerrard, Director of Corporate Governance and Monitoring Officer

1. **Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan**

This report links to the value for money priority of the 2023-2026 Corporate Plan as it addresses the steps taken by the Council to ensure value for money in relation to matters concerning the employment of senior staff.

2. **Purpose of report**

The purpose of this report is to assure Council that all appropriate steps have been taken such that future decisions will be in full compliance with the law and guidance. There is no ongoing issue, all steps to remedy the flawed process have been taken and adopted.

3. **Recommendations**

- 3.1 To note and adopt this report of the Director of Law and Corporate Governance reporting as the Monitoring Officer under Section 5 of the Local Government & Housing Act 1989.

4. **Background**

- 4.1 Section 5 of the Local Government & Housing Act 1989 requires the Council to appoint an Officer to act as the Council's Monitoring Officer. The Council has appointed the Director of Law and Corporate Governance as its Monitoring Officer. The Act provides that it is the personal duty of the Monitoring Officer to report formally to the Council on any proposal, decision or omission by the Council which has given rise to, or is likely to, or would, give rise to, the contravention of any enactment, rule of law or statutory code of practice.

- 4.2 In preparing this Report I have formally consulted with the Chief Executive, as Head of Paid Service, and the section 151 Officer. Members are required to formally consider the report at a meeting of the Full Council. Members will recall that on 26 July 2023 the Executive Director of Transformation and Resources (the 151 officer) advised the Audit Committee that certain payments made to officers may not have been in accordance with the prevailing statutory guidance. That was a very full public report which can be found on the council's website (see below). I do not propose rehearsing the background in this report. All the relevant facts were put in the public domain in the Audit report.
- 4.3 As a result, I have taken the view, on a precautionary basis, that my duty to report under section 5 has been triggered. This report is intended to provide the assurance to Council that the necessary steps have been taken to regularise the position.
- 4.4 The Executive Director of Transformation and Resources and I have, since the report to the Audit Committee taken further advice from leading counsel. The collective view is that this report also satisfies the reporting duty of the Executive Director of Transformation and Resources.
- 4.5 The error was primarily in relation to the adoption, in particular, of a revised Pay Policy in the three years 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22. This document, which the Council must adopt annually, sets out how such decisions relating to the remuneration of certain senior officers are to be made. In what appears to have been an attempt to streamline the process, the role of Members was reduced. The extent to which Members were taken out of the process was inconsistent with government issued guidance. As a result, it was arguable that the policy was not lawful. As a consequence, payments made under that policy were potentially made under a flawed process.
- 4.6 In essence the revised Pay Policy procedure which the Council had been advised to adopt in 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22 failed to provide for the proper level of democratic oversight. The reasons for this remain unclear. Following a detailed review by internal audit a detailed report was presented to the Audit Committee (see the link below). This identified several occasions when it appeared the payments received by officers as part of their severance arrangements may have been made under a flawed procedure. There is no evidence that the officers receiving those payments realised the Council's adopted process was flawed. They received the payments in good faith. The sums received were broadly in line with the arrangements that had previously been made. However, the fact remained that Members were not given the appropriate opportunity to express a view before the payments were made.
- 4.7 In light of the fact that recipients of the payments were not at fault the payments have now been regularised through further consideration by the Staffing and Appointments Committee. The Pay Policy has been completely revised and the necessary element of Member oversight has been restored. This revised policy was adopted by full Council at the last meeting. Compliance with that policy will ensure there can be no recurrence of earlier problems. The advice of leading counsel has been sought throughout when revising the policy.
- 4.8 The purpose of this report is to assure Council that all appropriate steps have been taken such that future decisions of this nature will be taken in full compliance with

the law and guidance. There is no ongoing issue, all steps to remedy the flawed process have been taken and adopted.

- 4.9 It is important to understand what this report cannot do. This report does not seek to assign responsibility for the error to any persons. That is not the purpose of this report. That would be wholly inappropriate in such a setting. This report is solely to confirm to Council that all steps have been taken and adopted to ensure that all identified shortcoming in process have been addressed.

Policy	as set out in the text of the report
Finance and value for money	as set out in the text of the report
Legal	as set out in the text of the report
Procurement	none
Human resources	as set out in the text of the report
Property	none
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?	No - no equalities issues identified
Risk assessment	None
Crime and disorder	None
Customer considerations	None
Carbon reduction	None
Health and wellbeing	None
Wards	All

5. Background papers

Not applicable

6. Links to other key reports already published

The Audit Committee 26 July 2023

<https://northumberland.moderngov.co.uk/documents/g2473/Public%20reports%20pack%2026th-Jul-2023%2010.15%20Audit%20Committee.pdf?T=10>

7. Author and Contact Details

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Northumberland County Council

County Council

Wednesday, 20 March 2024

Proposed reconfiguration of role of Director of Integrated Commissioning and Performance – Adults, Ageing and Wellbeing

Report of Councillor(s) Councillor Glen Sanderson, Leader of Council

Responsible Officer(s): Dr Helen Paterson, Chief Executive

1. Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to all areas of the Corporate Plan as it relates to ensuring that the Council is compliant with the constitution and is fulfilling its legal duties and requirements to ensure that there is an effective and fit for purpose staffing establishment.

2. Purpose of report

The purpose of this report is to consider the recommendation of the Staff and Appointments Committee held on 22 February 2024 that confirmed staffing budget be utilised to increase the establishment from 0.5 FTE by a further 0.5 FTE to create a 1.0 FTE role.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 To approve the recommendation from the Staff and Appointments Committee which was held on 22 February 2024 to increase the establishment from 0.5 FTE by a further 0.5 FTE to fund a 1.0 FTE role.
- 3.2 To note that the Staff and Appointments Committee has agreed that the Band 16 (£100,157 - £109,081) job description and associated job evaluation established via the senior management review of summer 2023 continue to apply.
- 3.3 To note the approved selection process.
- 3.4 To note that any offer of appointment will be subject to full Council approval and the Council's standard pre-employment checks.

4. Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable

N/A

5. Background

- 5.1 The Council had a relationship with the Integrated Care Board (ICB) whereby the previous incarnation of this post was jointly funded and undertook roles across both organisations. The individual in role was required to take on a wider suite of roles back in the ICB in late 2022 and into 2023 which led to consideration of the ongoing viability of the shared position.
- 5.2 In addition, concerns were raised regarding capacity on the Council side of the arrangement to manage our largest revenue funded service with only one full time Service Director that was a shared resource with the ICB.
- 5.3 It should be highlighted that this decision was in no way a reflection on the individual who performed strongly in the joint role. However, as the demands from the ICB and Council increased, it became clear this arrangement ceased to be viable for either organisation.
- 5.4 In order to compensate for the loss of 0.5FTE funded by the ICB it is proposed that an additional 0.5FTE is established to maintain the 1FTE necessary to deliver the role to best effect.
- 5.5 The funding for the additional 0.5FTE has been sourced from vacant posts within Adult Social Care and agreed and confirmed by Corporate Finance.

6. Options open to the Council and reasons for the recommendations

- 6.1 Option 1 - To approve the increase to establishment
- 6.2 Option 2 - To reject the increase to establishment
- 6.3 Option 1 is the recommended option based on the importance of ensuring sufficient capacity is allocated to this critical role.

7. Implications

Policy	Oversight of HR Policies and Procedure
Finance and value for money	Permanent appointment is deemed to be appropriate in relation to finance and value for money. The cost of the increase to the establishment can be met from existing staffing budgets.
Legal	The role of Director of Integrated Commissioning and Performance will report into the Executive Director of Adults Ageing and Wellbeing, making the role a Deputy Chief Officer. Appointment to the role has been approved by the Staff and Appointments Committee. Because the salary is over £100,000, under section 40

	of the Localism Act 2011, the appointment must also be approved by a vote of full Council.
Procurement	N/A
Human resources	The appointment will be made in line with appropriate employment recruitment processes.
Property	None identified
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?	No - no equalities issues identified The recruitment process for this post will be in line with best practice in relation to promoting equality and diversity within the Council's recruitment processes.
Risk assessment	None identified
Crime and disorder	None identified
Customer considerations	No impacts identified
Carbon reduction	None identified
Health and wellbeing	None identified
Wards	(All Wards);

8. Background papers

Not applicable

9. Links to other key reports already published

[StAC report of 22 February 2024](#) (pages 19-34)

10. Author and Contact Details

Sarah Farrell, Director of Workforce and Organisational Development
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Northumberland County Council

COUNTY COUNCIL

20th March 2024

Appointment of the Preferred Candidate for the Position of Assistant Chief Fire Officer

Report of the Leader of the Council

Purpose of the Report

In accordance with the Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) Regulations 2001, matters relating to the appointment of an Assistant Chief Fire Officer are reserved to the Full Council.

The purpose of this report is to consider the recommendation of the Staff and Appointments Committee held on 22nd February 2024 to appoint Stephen Kennedy to the role of Assistant Chief Fire Officer. Please see published report at Appendix A.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Full Council:

1. approve the recommendations from the Staff and Appointments Committee which was held on 22nd February 2024 to permanently appoint Stephen Kennedy to the role of Assistant Chief Fire Officer.
2. note that the Staff and Appointments Committee has agreed that the remuneration for the post of Assistant Chief Fire Officer will be at £103,133 per annum with access to staff benefits in line with all Council employees.
3. note the appointment will be subject to the Council's standard pre-employment checks.

Links to the Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to all areas of the Corporate Plan as it relates to ensuring that the Council is compliant with the constitution and fulfilling its legal duties and

requirements to ensure that there is an effective and fit for purpose staffing establishment.

Key Issues

1. Following the successful appointment of the previous Assistant Chief Fire Officer to the post of Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Stephen Kennedy has been acting up on a temporary basis to the Assistant Chief Fire Officer post since August 2023.
2. On 5th December 2023, Staff and Appointments Committee agreed the appointment process for the recruitment to the permanent post of Assistant Chief Fire Officer. The report contained an Assistant Chief Fire Officer job description, the spot salary, recruitment process and selection methodology.
3. On 31st January 2024, a selection process took place that identified the preferred candidate as Stephen Kennedy. This conclusion was reached following a comprehensive recruitment process and assessment of his extensive experience. The assessment centre outcome concluded that Stephen Kennedy has the requisite skills to successfully undertake the role of Assistant Chief Fire Officer.
4. Stephen Kennedy has been informed that he is the preferred candidate and has indicated he would accept the appointment, should a formal offer of appointment be made subject to the recommendations of Staff and Appointments Committee and subsequent full Council's approval.
5. Staff and Appointments Committee considered the preferred candidate on 22nd February 2024 and resolved subject to there being no objection from the Leader or Cabinet to the appointment, to recommend to full Council that Stephen Kennedy be appointed as the Assistant Chief Fire Officer.
6. The Staff and Appointments Committee also agreed that the remuneration for the post of Assistant Chief Fire Officer will be £103,133 per annum with access to staff benefits in line with all Council employees.
7. Note the appointment will be subject to the Council's standard pre-employment checks. The commencement date is proposed to be 21st March 2024.
8. The Officer Appointment Rules have been followed as per the Constitution of the Council. Under the Constitution the proper officer designated for this purpose is the Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service and I can confirm that no objections to the appointment were received.

Implications:

Policy	Oversight of HR Policies and Procedure
Finance and value for money	Permanent appointment is deemed to be appropriate in relation to finance and value for money. The cost of the appointment can be met from existing budgets as it will be a direct replacement.
Legal	Under s40 of the Localism Act 2011 all appointments with a salary of £100,000 and above must be approved by a vote of Full Council.
Procurement	N/A
Human Resources	The appointment has been made in line with the appropriate employment recruitment processes. Relevant legal implications have been set out in the body of this report.
Property	N/A
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	The recruitment for this process has been in line with best practice in relation to promoting equality and diversity within the Council's recruitment processes.
Risk Assessment	Consistent approved management restructure with Corporate Governance Review.
Crime & Disorder	There are no crime and disorder implications within this report.
Customer Consideration	There are no specific customer consideration implications within this report.
Carbon reduction	There are no carbon reduction implications within this report.
Health and Wellbeing	The recommendations will support the health and wellbeing of Council Employees at varying levels within the organisation
Wards	The recommendations do not relate to any particular ward but cover the whole of Northumberland.

Background information

N/A

Linked Reports.

5th December 2023 Staff and Appointments Committee report prepared by the Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service - providing further details of the proposed recruitment process.

22nd February 2024 Staff and Appointments Committee report prepared by the Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service - providing details of preferred candidates.

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

	Full Name of Officer
Director of Law and Corporate Governance (Monitoring Officer)	Stephen Gerrard
Executive Director of Transformation & Resources (s151 Officer)	Jan Willis
Chief Executive (Head of Paid Service)	Dr Helen Paterson
Portfolio Holders(s)	Staff & Appointments Committee

Authors and Contact Details

Graeme Binning – Chief Fire Officer

Deborah Watson – HR Manager



Northumberland County Council

Appendix A

Staff & Appointments Committee

22nd February 2024

Appointment of Assistant Chief Fire Officer

Report of Responsible Officer : Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service

1. Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan

- 1.1 This report is relevant to all areas of the Corporate Plan as it relates to ensuring that the Council is compliant with the constitution and is fulfilling its legal duties and requirements to ensure that there is an effective and fit for purpose staffing establishment.

2. Purpose of report

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to confirm and set out to the Staff and Appointments Committee the outcome of the selection process for the Assistant Chief Fire Officer and to seek approval for the appointment of the preferred candidate. Attached to this report is a confidential (part 2) exempt Appendix 1 setting out the application of the preferred candidate.
- 2.2 The Committee will recall at its meeting on 5th December 2023, that arrangements for the permanent recruitment to the Assistant Chief Fire Officer role was agreed.
- 2.3 This report also reminds the Committee of the requirements under the Officer Employment Procedure Rules in relation to the appointment (or dismissal) of all Chief and Deputy Chief Officers. Accordingly, please note that the appointments referred to in this report are subject to no substantial and well-founded objections being notified to the Leader of the Council, in accordance with Part 4.3 of the Constitution (Officer Employment Procedure Rules).

3. Recommendations

To agree the following recommendations:

- 3.1 To accept the findings of the selection panel that the preferred candidate be appointed to the role of Assistant Chief Fire Officer. Details are set out in the attached confidential appendix 1.

- 3.2 To agree that in the event that any objection is received from the Leader and/or Cabinet that the appointment in question be referred back to this Committee for urgent consideration.
- 3.3 To note that offers of employment will be subject to all necessary pre-employment checks.
- 3.4 To note that the effective date of commencement of employment is to be confirmed following all necessary pre-employment checks.
- 3.5 To agree that the Assistant Chief Fire Officer will align to the National Joint Council for Brigade Managers of Fire and Rescue Services terms and conditions (Gold Book) with remuneration aligning to NCC pay grade of Band 16, £103,133 SCP 65. This cost excludes employer's national insurance and employer's pension contributions.

4. Background

- 4.1 At the meeting of the Staff and Appointments Committee on 5th December 2023 the appointment process for the role of Assistant Chief Fire Officer was agreed. Also agreed was the Job Description (and salary scale point), the indicative timetable for the recruitment process and the selection methodology.
- 4.2 The assessment and selection process for the single shortlisted candidate involved the following:
 - 4.2.1 Psychometric assessment using Lumina Spark, with full outcome report presented to interview panel.
 - 4.2.2 A staff panel question and answer session with 6 employees from Northumberland Fire and Rescue facilitated by Human Resources.
 - 4.2.3 A 10-minute presentation including question and answer session as well as a structured interview comprising the Portfolio Holder, Chief Fire Officer to whom the role reports to, Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Chief Fire Officer from Tyne & Wear Fire Brigade and a HR Manager.
 - 4.2.4 A summary session was conducted to discuss the outcomes of the earlier assessment centre exercises – Lumina Spark and Staff Panel.

5. Options open to the Council and reasons for the recommendations

- 5.1 Following completion of the assessment set out above, the interview panel identified the preferred candidate for the role, currently employed as Area Manager.
- 5.2 Conclusions were reached following a thorough assessment of the candidate's skills, knowledge and experience. The processes also considered the candidate fit against the Council's values and the Nolan Principles. The candidate's application form (confidential) is attached at appendix 1.

5.3 The candidate has been informed that he is the preferred candidate for the role and has indicated his acceptance of the conditional offer of appointment. The offer has been made subject to the recommendation of this Committee and the Officer Employment Procedure Rules (as set out below).

5.4 Officer Employment Procedure Rules

5.4.1 The Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) Regulations 2001 (as amended) requires that, where a Council is operating a Cabinet and Leader model of governance, before any offer of appointment is made to a Chief or Deputy Chief Officer, the Proper Officer designated for that purpose, notifies the Leader and every member of the Cabinet of the intention to make the appointment, the name, salary and other relevant particulars of the post, and allows the Leader and Cabinet an opportunity to make any substantial or well-founded objections to that appointment, before the appointment is made. These provisions apply irrespective of whether the appointment is made by the full Council, a committee, or by an officer of the Council delegated to do so. The provisions are broadly set out in Part 4.3 of the Northumberland County Council Constitution.

5.4.2 Accordingly, for these purposes, appointment of the Assistant Chief Fire Officer is deemed to be a deputy chief officer.

5.4.3 The Proper Officer designated for this purpose is the Chief Executive/Head of Paid Service. Accordingly, the Council’s Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service will discharge the functions as required under the Officer Employment Procedure Rules.

6. Implications

Policy	Oversight of HR Policies and Procedure
Finance and value for money	Permanent appointment is deemed to be appropriate in relation to finance and value for money. The cost of the appointment can be met from existing budgets as it will be a direct replacement.

Legal	<p>The functions of the Staff and Appointments Committee are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. To discharge the Council's functions of the employer in relation to the Chief and Deputy Chief Officers. b. To consider, approve, or make recommendations to the County Council, in relation to any changes to the overall structure of the Council's workforce, and the number and designation of Chief Officer and Deputy Chief Officer posts. c. To determine the terms and conditions relating to employees of the County Council to include the remuneration and terms and conditions of employment for the Head of Paid Service and Chief and Deputy Chief Officers. <p>Section 2 (6) of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 specifies that the chief officer of a fire brigade maintained under the Fire Services Act 1947 is a Statutory Chief Officer. The Assistant Chief Fire Officer reports to the Chief Fire Officer and is, therefore, classed as a Deputy Chief Officer</p>
Procurement	N/A
Human resources	The appointment will be made in line with appropriate employment recruitment processes. Relevant legal implications have been set out in the body of this report.
Property	N/A
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?	<p>This process will be conducted in line with best practice in relation to promoting equality and diversity within the Council's employment processes.</p> <p>N/A</p>
Risk assessment	Consistent approved management restructure with Corporate Governance Review.
Crime and disorder	N/A
Customer considerations	N/A
Carbon reduction	N/A
Health and wellbeing	The recommendation will support the health and wellbeing of employees
Wards	Not related to any particular ward but cover the whole of Northumberland

7. Background papers

N/A

8. Links to other key reports already published

StAC Report dated 5th December 2023.

9. Author and Contact Details

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

	Full Name of Officer
Director of Law and Corporate Governance (Monitoring Officer)	Stephen Gerrard
Executive Director of Transformation & Resources (s151 Officer)	Jan Willis
Chief Executive (Head of Paid Service)	Dr Helen Paterson

This report has been prepared by Deborah Watson, HR Manager
Contact details: deborah.watson@northumberland.gov.uk

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