



# Northumberland

## County Council

**COMMITTEE: COUNCIL**

**DATE: 14<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2023**

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### **Leader of Council Annual Portfolio Report**

**Report of:** Councillor Glen Sanderson, Leader of Council

**Responsible Officer:** Dr Helen Paterson, Chief Executive

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#### **1. Purpose of report**

1.1 This is the Leader of Council's Annual Portfolio Report. The Report contains issues that set the context for delivery of the Leader's Portfolio. It highlights achievements over the past year and, outlines the areas of focus for the coming year.

#### **2. Recommendations**

2.1 Council is recommended to:

- (i) Note the Leader of Council's Portfolio Report.

#### **Link to Corporate Plan**

- **Achieving Value for Money** – The Leader's Portfolio contributes to Value for Money by ensuring the Council makes the best decisions within a robust governance framework and, that the Council works with Government as well as regional and local partners to secure the best for Northumberland's residents.
- **Tackling Inequalities** – The Leader's Portfolio plays an important role in driving delivery of the Council's Inequalities Plan, as a core part of the Council's corporate strategy.
- **Driving Economic Growth** - The Leader's Portfolio works closely with the Supporting Business & Opportunities Portfolio, in particular to deliver substantial investment in the County's strategic transport and infrastructure as well as delivery of flagship growth and employment initiatives.

#### **3. Key issues**

3.1 The Annual Portfolio reports from each of the Council's Cabinet Members provide an 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.

#### **4. Background**

4.1 County Council adopted the Corporate Plan at its AGM on 17<sup>th</sup> 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 report and

the other forthcoming Portfolio reports provide an opportunity for Members to drill down further into the work of individual Portfolios.

## **5. Leader of Council Portfolio - Context**

- 5.1 This past year has been one of momentous change and challenge nationally and globally. In June of last year, the whole County joined in a wonderful weekend of celebration for Her Majesty, The Queen's Platinum Jubilee. I was proud that the County's stunning landscape provided a spectacular backdrop to the opening of the celebrations with the lighting of the beacon at the Hadrian's Wall, World Heritage Site.
- 5.2 Of course, sadly, The Queen passed away in September. Again, the County's people came together to mark this sad occasion with dignity and respect. And, in a spirit of renewal, resilience and continuity we celebrated the Coronation of our new King in May.
- 5.3 Globally, the War in Ukraine has resulted in a new and horrifying humanitarian disaster. The Council and communities across the County have played their part in responding to this crisis. Together, we have raised much-needed funds to alleviate the suffering of families. We have provided essential equipment and provisions, including firefighting kit. Supported by the Council's Housing Team, we have also helped some 460 refugees, of whom 177 are children, to find sanctuary in Northumberland. People across our County have opened their doors to refugees and welcomed them into their homes. I am deeply proud but not at all surprised by this collective response and thank all our communities and Members for this.
- 5.4 The Ukraine War, coupled with other conditions – let us not forget, we continue to recover from the Covid Pandemic - have impacted households and businesses through spiralling cost increases. Again, the Council has acted to support those most in need and we will continue to do that within the confines of our powers and resources.
- 5.5 Despite the national and global challenges which have impacted locally on all of us, the Council has maintained focus on delivering high-quality, day-to-day services in communities as well as investing in Northumberland's future.

## **6. Achievements**

- 6.1 I and my Cabinet colleagues are proud of our refreshed Corporate Plan. This key policy document clearly sets the direction for how we will deliver on the Council's three priorities of: Achieving Value for Money; Tackling Inequalities; and Driving Economic Growth. I thank Council for adopting its Corporate Plan at the Council's AGM in May. I believe the Plan's priorities will resonate with all Members and that we can work together across the Council Chamber to deliver these for the benefit of all our residents, communities and businesses.
- 6.2 I am also delighted that during the past year we have made substantial progress in delivering a wide range of initiatives, as well as high-quality, day-to-day services which have made a positive impact on our three priorities. Some of these key achievements are highlighted below. I believe these are a testament to the focus of the Council's Portfolio Holders and the dedication and professionalism of our staff across the organisation. These achievements also represent the hard work and ingenuity of all Members across the Council contributing through, for example: Scrutiny and other committees; Policy Conferences; and working directly in their communities. I extend a warm thank you to all Members for their excellent endeavours.

## **7. Achieving Value for Money**

7.1 In February this year, I was pleased that County Council approved a budget focused on protecting frontline services, investing in the future and looking after the most vulnerable. Among the priorities agreed for the year ahead were:

- Protecting and maintaining key frontline services;
- Looking after the most vulnerable and supporting everyone with cost-of-living issues;
- Continuing work to re-open the Northumberland Line;
- Delivering new school builds and ongoing education improvements; and,
- Investing in leisure centres, open spaces and town-centre regeneration.

7.2 The Budget contains an ambitious £223 million capital programme for 2023-24, including £92 million to improve and regenerate towns and communities across the County, over £19 million for housing, £31 million for schools and £35 million for road and path repairs and flood-prevention schemes.

7.3 Reflecting what residents said was most important, the Council significantly increased the budget for Adult Social Care by 16% (from £111m to £129m (net)) as well as Children's Services funding - net budget increasing from £67.194 million to £74.889 million (an increase of 11%).

7.4 I am pleased the Council has delivered its actions and initiatives in our Improvement Action Plan. This included a redrafted constitution, a new Corporate Plan and Member Development Plans. Also, the introduction of 'Policy Conferences' in the past year has helped foster wider Member involvement in Council policy-development. The establishment of our 'BEST ways for working' will further strengthen and refine the Councils' continuous improvement.

7.5 I know all Members have been pleased to welcome our new Chief Executive Officer, Dr Helen Paterson. The new Chief Executive taking up her new post came alongside the appointment of a new top team of Executive Directors to deliver on the Council's priorities. This now gives the Council the stability needed to take the organisation forward.

7.6 In July 2022, the Council launched a pilot of on-street electric vehicle (EV) chargepoints as part of our ongoing commitment to make electric vehicles more accessible. On-street chargepoints were installed at locations across the county. These supplement the Council's existing network of EV chargers located mainly in town centre and other car parks.

7.7 These chargepoints represented the Council's first move towards 'on-street' kerbside EV charging and a further 75 of these charging points are now being rolled out in other areas in the County, with further phases planned for the next 2 years with funding from Government, so that those homeowners who don't have their own driveways on which to charge an EV have access to EV charging infrastructure. This is an important part of the Council's Climate Change Action Plan which aims to have 30% of cars in the County electric by 2030. The Council has also continued to develop district heating networks which will utilise mine water from the former Bates Colliery as a heat source to provide low carbon heat to commercial and domestic properties around Blyth.

7.8 The development of the County Hall Solar Car Port is a significant investment in renewable energy for the Council and one of the largest of its kind in the UK.

## **8. Tackling Inequalities**

8.1 Following adoption of the Tackling Inequalities Plan by County Council in September last year, 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. I am pleased we have developed this plan and are delivering in partnership.

8.2 Our Tackling Inequalities Plan is so significant because it goes beyond mere words and commits Council resources, services and projects to making a difference to communities. I am committed to ensuring this continues to be the case.

8.3 Having high-quality local environments for people of all ages is an important part of promoting wellbeing. That's why I was delighted that last year, when eleven Northumberland parks were awarded the prestigious Green Flag Awards. This award recognises them as some of the very best in the country.

8.4 Equally, ensuring young people have access to the best educational facilities is fundamental to reducing inequalities and as Leader of Council, I continue to support substantial investment in our schools across the County.

8.5 For example, work is now underway on the Gilbert Ward Academy in Blyth, a new special free school for Northumberland. In addition, the Council has approved a multi-million investment in the Coquet Partnership of schools and, following extensive consultation, a £40m 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. All of this follows the redevelopment of Queen Elizabeth High School and Hexham Middle School which recently won a national award. The Council has also pledged investment for schools in Berwick.

8.6 Since the Great Northumberland Forest was announced in 2019, over 700 hectares of woodland creation and 240,000 trees have been planted. These have been delivered through Forestry Commission Grants, Forestry England delivery, Countryside Stewardship, Green Recovery and private financed schemes. The pipeline for future woodland creation is also looking healthy, with over 800 hectares planned for this season and approximately 3,000 hectares awaiting agreement.

8.7 The Council has continued its free tree scheme with 15,000 saplings distributed for planting during the Winter months. This hugely popular scheme encourages residents to get directly involved in achieving Northumberland's target to become carbon neutral by 2030.

8.8 Finally, and, on a personal note, I am thrilled with the restoration and re-opening of the 202-year-old Union Chain Bridge, the oldest vehicle suspension bridge in the world. The famous structure connecting England and Scotland has been rebuilt piece by piece over the past two years.

## 9. Driving Economic Growth

- 9.1 I am delighted that construction has now started on the Northumberland Line, with six new stations granted planning approval. When fully operational, it will see journeys between Ashington and Newcastle with no need to change trains. Passengers in the North-East will be able to connect with friends and family and enjoy greater access to business, education and leisure opportunities when the historic line re-opens.
- 9.2 In October last year, the Council's Cabinet approved a new programme to help reinvigorate Ashington Town Centre. The Ashington High Street Innovation Programme will see a range of projects delivered in the Town over the coming months, worth over £2.3m. Around £1.9m of the funding was secured in a successful bid to the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) Towns and High Streets Programme, which identified Ashington as one of three centres that would benefit from targeted funding to support innovative projects aimed at revitalising the Town Centre and High Street. Following this, we welcomed Government's announcement, in the Spring Budget, of £16m investment for Ashington Town Centre.
- 9.3 In a significant milestone for the Borderlands Growth Deal, the fantastic Ad Gefrin Distillery in Wooler opened to the public in March. Attracting thousands of visitors and providing good-quality local jobs, Ad Gefrin will bring a boost to the local economy.
- 9.4 Last year also marked the completion of the Bates Clean Energy Terminal, delivered in partnership with the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and Port of Blyth. We also saw in the past year the completion by Advance Northumberland of the new dock at Cambois which facilitated the arrival of 'JDR Cables'. The Council and the LEP invested in the development which otherwise would have seen the site left empty and unused. Both these milestones underline the link between growth and Climate Change.

## 10. Key Areas of Focus for the Coming Year

- 10.1 I am pleased with our achievements over the past year. As you would expect though, I am determined to achieve even more for our residents, communities and businesses. As Leader of Council, I have clearly defined Portfolio responsibilities and, in the subsequent paragraphs, I share my headline ambitions on these for the coming year. At the same time, the Leader's Portfolio is somewhat unique in that it involves working closely with all Portfolio Holders to ensure we are delivering the very best for our residents. That is a real privilege and, I very much look forward to working with my Cabinet colleagues in the coming year, supporting and celebrating their achievements in their Portfolios.
- 10.2 **Corporate Strategy** – I look forward to working with partners to develop a County Plan which will embed a shared vision and aims for Northumberland. We will start this with a partner roundtable event on inequalities on July 13<sup>th</sup>, and we will continue those conversations, in the coming months, including with Members.
- 10.3 **Partnerships** – As well as strengthening local partnerships, I will ensure Northumberland plays its part in the development of the new, expanded Devolution Deal for the LA7 area. The Deal will bring £4.2 billion additional investment to the region over 30 years and I will ensure our County secures its fair share of this investment in transport, education & skills, housing and regeneration.

- 10.4 **Communications** – In the coming year, we will build on previous campaigns to promote all that is great about Northumberland. I invite all Members to join me in ‘talking up’ the achievements of our Council and promoting the County as a ‘Land of Great Opportunities’.
- 10.5 **Consultation & Engagement** – This summer will see the start of greater engagement with our residents and communities, and I will ensure we listen to what they tell us. Moving into the Autumn and Winter, we will also build on previous engagement to deliver another successful Budget Consultation, including a survey as well as engagement with LACs, towns and parishes. I also look forward to even stronger engagement with all Members through, for example, our ‘Policy Conferences’.
- 10.6 **Governance** – Good governance is at the heart of any well-functioning council. In the period since I called for an independent review of governance and the subsequent report from that review, I believe we have reached an important milestone. Our redrafted Constitution was adopted by Council in May this year. Our Codes of Conduct have been updated to reflect best practice. We have undertaken reviews of the Council’s Scrutiny Function as well as the LACs to strengthen engagement and enhance decision-making. I also established Policy Conferences to give all Members the chance to participate in policy development in a more informal setting. In the coming year, I am determined to build on the progress we have made to strengthen governance and I am committed to further, deeper engagement with all Members in Policy Conferences. I look forward to working with all Group Leaders and indeed all Members in this.
- 10.7 **Rural Growth & Sustainability** – As Leader of Council and Portfolio Lead for Rural Affairs within the North of Tyne Combined Authority, I am committed to the County and wider Combined Authority Area becoming a national exemplar for rural stewardship and growth. This pledge is at the heart of the recently announced “minded to” devolution deal for the wider North East region.
- 10.8 Working with the Combined Authority and the Borderlands Partnership, I will champion delivery of the Northumberland Stewardship and Rural Growth Investment Plan. The aim of the Plan is to enhance our environment, grow our rural economy, and improve opportunity and prosperity in our communities. The plan has been shaped by our recent ‘Future of Farming in Northumberland Inquiry’ that I commissioned early last year. From a combination of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Rural Economic Prosperity Fund, and North of Tyne Investment Fund, an initial tranche of £9 million has been secured to drive delivery of the Plan. The first wave of projects is to create a new Northumberland Small Business Service (NSBS), establish innovative Rural Asset Multiplier Pilots (RAMPs) targeted at the Coast AONB area and part of the National Park Authority area, and to prepare a Northumberland Food Strategy and Action Plan.
- 10.9 **Strategic Transport & Infrastructure** – I am pleased with progress on the ground to deliver the Northumberland Line for our residents and businesses. In the coming year, I will ensure we ‘stay on track’ with this truly game-changing project. At the same time, I will continue to make the strongest possible case to Government for further investment in our strategic road network, in particular the A1 dualling proposals. I also welcome the recent, substantial Government investment to fix potholes and look forward to working with the Portfolio Holder for ‘Improving Our Roads and Highways’ to ensure every penny of this new investment is put to good use.

10.10 **Climate Change** – In the coming year, I will continue to champion and drive forward a wide range of exciting projects to protect and enhance our environment. For example, I look forward to the completion of the County Hall solar car-charging project which will showcase what major employers can do to lead by example on carbon reduction. I also want to use the coming year to work with partners and all Members on how we reach people who are interested but, not yet actively engaged in the Climate Change agenda. Reaching those people as well as continuing to work with those already engaged will be key to achieving our Climate Action Plan ambitions.

**Implications**

<b>Policy</b>	This report supports delivery of all three priorities of the Corporate Plan.
<b>Finance and value for money</b>	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.
<b>Legal</b>	Whilst this report contains no immediate legal implications, the delivery of the individual actions within the Leader of Council's portfolio may have legal implications, which would form separate reports as these arise.
<b>Procurement</b>	N/A
<b>Human Resources</b>	N/A
<b>Property</b>	N/A
<b>Equalities (Impact Assessment attached)</b> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	None at this stage.
<b>Crime Disorder &amp;</b>	N/A

<b>Customer Consideration</b>	N/A
<b>Carbon reduction</b>	Each of our three Priorities have an important a part to play in responding to the Climate Change Emergency.
<b>Health and Wellbeing</b>	N/A
<b>Wards</b>	All

Enclosure

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	Suki Binjal
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Jan Willis
Relevant Executive Director	-
Portfolio Holder(s)	Cllr Glen Sanderson

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