



Northumberland

County Council

COMMITTEE: COUNCIL

DATE: 6TH SEPTEMBER 2023

Annual Portfolio Report – Improving Our Roads and Highways

Report of: Councillor John Riddle, Cabinet Member for Improving Our Roads and Highways

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

1. Purpose of report

1.1. This is the Annual Report from the Cabinet Member for Improving our Roads and Highways. 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.

2. Recommendations

2.1.1. Council is recommended to:

- (i) Note the Cabinet Member for Improving our Roads and Highways' Annual Report.

Link to Corporate Plan

- **Achieving Value for Money** – The Portfolio contributes to Value for Money by securing best value in contracting, commissioning and income raising initiatives. We also aim for continuous improvement and innovation in our services to residents.
- **Tackling Inequalities** – The Portfolio plays a vital role in driving delivery of the Council's Inequalities Plan through creating and maintaining a safe and sustainable transport network for all, and in particular, putting in place the infrastructure to encourage more people to cycle and walk.
- **Driving Economic Growth** - The Portfolio contributes to driving economic growth through building and maintaining the infrastructure and services that support thriving businesses across our towns and villages.

3. Key issues

3.1. The Annual 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.

4. Background

- 4.1. The Council adopted the Corporate Plan at its Annual General Meeting 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 Improving our Roads and Highways Portfolio.

5. Context

- 5.1. The Highways Teams use an asset management approach for maintenance of roads, footways, cycleways, bridges and street lighting, including winter and severe weather response. It conducts highways and bridges inspections, network management, including parking and 'streetworks.' The Team also undertakes design and project management of highway and transport improvement schemes, road safety and delivery of Local Transport Plan capital programme. All of this work underpins vibrant places and local economies, ensuring businesses can thrive and grow. Equally important, it helps our residents to access services, jobs, access to leisure and other opportunities.
- 5.2. In the past year, the country has experienced high levels of inflation, and this impacts on almost all of the goods and services used by the Highways Team. This places even greater importance on our ability to secure value for money and innovation in everything we do, and this will be a core theme for this Portfolio in the coming year.

6. Achievements

- 6.1. We have continued investing in our highways network, with a £23.4m Local Transport Plan (LTP) programme delivered in 2022/23 across sustainable transport, road safety, roads, bridges, and landslips. Work is also now well underway on a further £23.4m LTP programme for 2023/24.
- 6.2. Much of this investment has been on maintaining the roads, footways and structures that form our highways asset. This is managed through a formal Transport Asset Management Plan to ensure comprehensive knowledge of all aspects of the network, to manage inspections and provide condition data for planning investment interventions. Over the past year, the Transport Asset Management Plan has been subject to a comprehensive review and refresh. Associated systems are also being put in place to deliver better services. For example, we are implementing the new, 'Alloy maintenance management system' which uses Artificial Intelligence to help us develop a smarter maintenance programme. We are also in the final stages of implementing 'Appyway,' a map-based system which will streamline our process for issuing Traffic Regulations Orders for on-street parking.
- 6.3. The LTP programmes for 22/23 and 23/24 have provided over £40m of capital investment in the roads, footways and bridges on our network. In addition, we have successfully completed a further £2.225m programme of capital maintenance to U and C roads and footways from own capital. A further £3.872m was received from Government in the March 2023 budget and the programme for these road repairs has been approved and is being delivered. With regard to the 23/24 LTP programme the

£4.3m surface dressing programme has been successfully delivered across the summer by our own workforce, providing improved road surfaces to over 386,000 square metres of road on over 45 miles of the network.

- 6.4. We have also completed the Steel Bridge Refurbishment project, which has allowed the painting and refurbishment of eight of our large steel bridges and which was 75% funded by additional funding won through the DfT Highway Maintenance Challenge Fund. And of course, we have completed the restoration and re-opening of the historic 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 and the work has received international recognition as well as a national award.
- 6.5. This Summer, we started our Enhanced Pothole Repair Trial, investing just under £500k to conduct a twelve week trial of first-time patch repair. This 'invest to save' trial is progressing well, and we look forward to analysing the outcomes on its completion. Potholes are, of course, a challenge for all councils, but in Northumberland we are determined to innovate and find new solutions to old challenges.
- 6.6. Members will also be aware of the work that has been undertaken to improve our systems for public reporting through the introduction of 'Fix My Street Pro.' The system makes reporting issues, providing locations and adding photographs all much easier for residents. It also helps us to feedback to residents on the issues they have raised. Since the launch we have received over 10,000 reports across Local Services. Continuous improvements are being made to the Fix My Street system with updates being made weekly to help inform people who are reporting issues through the system and to further develop the system itself. This includes working with Customer Services teams and across a range of Council departments.
- 6.7. We have continued to invest in new plant and equipment to ensure operations are efficient.. For winter services, nine new gritters were brought into service for winter 22/23. And the winter services weather stations across the County were renewed and upgraded to ensure information used to control our winter operations is accurate and up-to-date.. This investment secured another very effective season of winter services operations. We have also invested in four new replacement 'gully emptiers' with enhanced capabilities which have been added to the fleet. And we have acquired a multi-functional 'Pothole Pro' road patching and repair machine which is being used to great effect to carry out efficient repairs to our roads. Our teams are well-equipped to deliver the services residents, businesses and visitors expect.
- 6.8. The past year has seen the completion of a number of key car park improvements schemes, with the opening of new car parks at Goosehill in Morpeth, Alemouth Road in Hexham and Turner Street in Amble and the extension of the Quayside car park in Berwick. These car park improvements have provided much needed additional capacity in these areas to assist in boosting the economies of the towns. The introduction of contactless payments in car parks has increased the reliability of the ticket machines and reduced the reliance on cash and cash collection activities.
- 6.9. We have also been carrying out a trial of Motorhome parking. This has allowed Motorhomes to stay overnight in three sites in the county, Links Road, Bamburgh, Amble Braid and Beadnell overflow car parks. There have been over 1,000 bookings since implementing the scheme and we have received over 300 survey responses

from past users. Feedback on the scheme has been very positive. We are now considering how this scheme can be extended to other locations.

- 6.10. Road safety continues to be a key focus in my Portfolio. Despite the excellent work on road safety engineering, enforcement and education, we must do all we can to avoid and reduce casualties on our roads. We undertake significant analysis of road accident data and accident clusters, with much of the analysis showing that individual accidents have been caused by driver behaviour such as inappropriate overtaking, loss of concentration, use of mobile phones, speed and drink or drug impairment. We have continued our extensive programme of providing engineering solutions, including improved signage, speed limits, traffic calming and pedestrian crossings. Over the past year we have also carried out eight route action schemes and 15 high risk site improvements. We have implemented 20mph schemes at 147 schools, with a further five currently in construction..
- 6.11. In addition to engineering schemes, we have also carried out road safety education and behaviour change activities including cyclist and horse rider campaigns, motorcycle safety signs, supporting regional and national road safety awareness campaigns and working with schools and family hubs. Staff are currently engaged with over 50% of the schools in the County and have been using new methods to spread the road safety message including using Padlet computers and Green Cross Coding – learning the right actions to cross a road safely through programming the actions in computer code.
- 6.12. The Big Northumberland Gear Change has promoted community walking, cycling and cycle repair and the six-week walking and cycling summer challenge. We have also supported balance bike libraries, community cargo bikes and free cycle training as well as working with schools to encourage walking and cycling through Mode shift Stars and provided bike ability training to over 2500 children.
- 6.13. As part of our overall ambitions to improve walking and cycling facilities we have completed cycle and walking improvement schemes at Waterloo Road, Blyth and at Wylam Wagonway and have commenced work on the first phase of the Ponteland to Callerton cycleway.
- 6.14. The Green Spaces and Countryside Team's public rights of way staff developed and implemented a number of improvement projects to enhance and improve public access across the county. Works have been completed on the King Charles III England Coast Path (formerly known as the England Coast Path). The official opening of the Bamburgh to the Scottish Border section in August will mean that residents and visitors in Northumberland will be able to follow the county's coastline along this most recent addition to the National Trail family. The Council's Green Spaces and Countryside Team, in partnership with Forestry England, recently appointed an Assistant Area Countryside Officer (Forest Trails) to improve the investigation and resolution of rights of way issues in forested areas.
- 6.15. Cutting sections of the Highway Verge is essential for road safety but the Council understands the need to balance this with improving biodiversity and we are fortunate in Northumberland to have verges with plant communities of particularly high conservation value. This year we have further increased the number of Highway

Verges we cut later in the season and there are now over 90 verges that we maintain in a different way for the benefit of nature.

- 6.16. In addition to the comprehensive refurbishment of Seahouses and Holy Island (Green Lane) public toilet facilities, full refurbishment and modernisation works have now been completed in three further facilities (The Shambles in Alnwick, Wooler Bus Station & St Mary's Wynd in Hexham), with full refurbishment work also underway at Castlegate in Berwick. Essential refurbishment works have also now been delivered in four toilet facilities with a further six due to start imminently. Where schemes have been delivered, the Council has received excellent feedback from both local stakeholders and visitors acknowledging the investment made, the good standard of work undertaken and the quality of toilet provision in that locality.
- 6.17. The last year has been challenging for Markets which, along with high street businesses, are experiencing significant change to shopping patterns. Fewer new traders are coming forward to replace those who leave Northumberland as the competition from discount retailers and online sales make traditional markets less viable. The Council has worked closely with partners to try new speciality markets such as Vegan or Craft markets and introduced a range of incentives to attract new traders. We are keen to expand this approach with Local Councils to improve their local markets.
- 6.18. The 2022/2023 Fleet Replacement Programme delivered 81 new vehicles at a cost of £2.93m. A further ten vehicles were on order with suppliers at cost of £0.9m
Fleet Workshops now maintain 766 vehicles and over 1,000 items of small plant and equipment. There are 37 Electric Vehicles (Small Vans) with another seven ordered with suppliers.

7. Key Areas of Focus for the Coming Year

- 7.1. Over the next year we will continue to develop our highway asset management and highway maintenance systems to improve their effectiveness and integration. We will focus on the full implementation of Alloy and the development of Horizons, as well as further embedding the use of Fix My Street. We will assess the outcomes of the Enhanced Pothole Repair Trial to identify lessons learned and next steps. A review will also be undertaken of our gully cleaning operations and policies utilising data on productivity from the operation of the new 'gully emptiers.' We will also be developing a new Network Management Plan.
- 7.2. We will continue to deliver the LTP capital programme for 23/24 and other associated capital maintenance programmes. The major landslip repair scheme at Todstead will be completed and a major refurbishment scheme for the stonework of Berwick Old Bridge will be undertaken. We will also develop the programme for Local Transport Plan 2024/25.
- 7.3. There are still a number of schemes that are under development for our car parking improvements such as at Corbridge and the old Duchess school site in Alnwick. We will further develop these and other potential schemes to increase necessary capacity. In parallel, we will deliver a programme of cycling and walking infrastructure to support sustainable transport. These include schemes for Blyth, Ashington, Bedlington and Hexham to Corbridge. We will build on the success of our Local

Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) and continue our behaviour change initiatives.

- 7.4. We will work with partners such as the Police, other local authorities and Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service to improve road safety and will prepare a new Road Safety Strategy. We will complete the 20mph at schools programme and will investigate a potential trial for average speed cameras.
- 7.5. The publication of the Council's new Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) is scheduled for 2024. This involves a review of the previous ROWIP, consultation with stakeholders, consideration of plans, proposals, and resources available. The new plan will set out the Council's approach to its management of public rights of way across the following 10-year period. The recent launch of Fix My Street as a user-friendly way for members of the public to report issues and problems on public rights of way has paved the way for the implementation of the Alloy asset management system in 2024. This system will receive and handle complaints and reports, improve customer service and provide officers with an efficient system for managing operational performance.
- 7.6. We will undertake a review of the Council's Markets strategy with partners and local stakeholders. Through this, we will identify how we can work together with Local Councils to improve their local markets.
- 7.7. This year the Fleet Replacement Programme includes the purchase of 338 vehicles to ensure we continue to have a modern, fit for purpose fleet, which is essential for the delivery of a wide range of Council services. We will be further improving our regulatory compliance by introducing digital pre use checks for drivers and defect reporting via a mobile app following procurement, we will introduce a fully automated fuel management system to ensure we make the most efficient use of our supplies.

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 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	N/A
Human Resources	N/A
Property	N/A

Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A
Risk Assessment	None at this stage.
Crime & Disorder	N/A
Customer Consideration	N/A
Carbon reduction	Each of our three Priorities have an important a part to play in responding to the Climate Change Emergency.
Health and Wellbeing	N/A
Wards	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:

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