



Northumberland County Council

County Council

Wednesday, 1 November 2023

Annual Portfolio Report – Looking After Our Environment

Report of Councillor(s) Councillor Colin Horncastle, Cabinet Member for Looking After our Environment

Responsible Officer(s): Simon Neilson, Executive Director - Place and Regeneration

1. Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan

- 1.1 **Achieving Value for Money** – The Portfolio contributes to Value for Money by seeking to maximise income and investment into the county, its services and assets. It conducts all commissioning and contracting via the NCC procurement service. All teams constantly review activities in relation to County Council priorities and Central Government/statutory requirements. A significant proportion of activities are funded by self-contained or traded budgets, such as the Housing Revenue Account.
- 1.2 **Tackling Inequalities** – The Portfolio plays a key role in driving delivery of the Council's Inequalities Plan through addressing the underlying causes of spatial patterns of inequality, specifically health inequality via its focus on the wider determinates of health and well-being.
- 1.3 **Driving Economic Growth** - The Portfolio contributes to driving economic growth by planning sufficient housing and infrastructure to support long term economic competitiveness. The Portfolio also helps to create and maintain safe, clean and attractive places in which to live and to do business. The development and adoption of formal, long-term strategies, such as the Northumberland Local Plan, give confidence, and more certainty for both the investment community and local residents about the development of land assets and property.

2. Purpose of report

- 2.1 This is the Annual Portfolio Report from the Portfolio Holder for Looking After our Environment. 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.

3. Recommendations

3.1 Council is recommended to:

- a) Note the update from the Portfolio Holder for Looking After Our Environment.

4. Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable

18th October 2023. The report is to note and does not require key decision.

5. Background

5.1 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.

5.2 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 Looking After Our Environment Portfolio.

Looking After Our Environment - Context

5.3 The new Local Plan (adopted March 2022) gives a key spatial context for change, environmental protection, development and growth in the County until 2035.

5.4 In October this year, the Council's Cabinet agreed a new overarching Environmental Policy Statement, demonstrating the high priority given by the Council to environmental matters, such as Climate Change, Nature Recovery & Biodiversity, Heat and Renewable Energy, Sustainable Waste Management, Travel and Transport, Water Quality, Parks & Green Spaces and Safeguarding Public Health. The Policy Statement covers the 4-year period from 2023/24 to 2026/27, after which time it will be reviewed and updated. It identifies and communicates how the diverse range of environmental policy and service delivery activities undertaken by the Council are all part of its commitment to maintain, protect and enhance the environment.

5.5 It is intended that the Environmental Policy Statement will be used to help support improved public awareness, engagement and active participation on these important environmental matters.

5.6 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 services within this Portfolio. 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.

Achievements – Housing

5.7 As a responsible and caring landlord, the Council continues to offer additional support to its tenants. For example, the Welfare support team worked with tenants and brought in an extra £572k of income to our most vulnerable tenants through income

maximisation, grants and additional benefit entitlement. Alongside this, the Council also introduced a 'hardship fund' of £350k to help tenants with the rent increase and the cost-of-living increase. Vulnerability Officers secured £65k in grant funding for new vulnerable tenants working with Northumberland Communities Together to source grants, food parcels, white goods and furniture. And, the 'Working Homes Project' saw 70 tenants find employment and 40 into training programmes.

- 5.8 A Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy for Northumberland 2022–2026 was completed and approved by Cabinet on the 14th March 2023. And, Armed Forces Outreach Workers dealt with 256 referrals from current or ex-forces personnel, for help and support around their housing.
- 5.9 We provided 41 properties as part of the Asylum Seekers Vulnerable Person scheme, 18 Properties as part of the Afghan resettlement Programme and 5 properties for Childrens Services to house up to 15 unaccompanied Asylum Seekers. The Homes for Ukraine scheme was quickly set up and currently supports 181 households.
- 5.10 Following a submission to the Government, a 2-year revenue grant of £660k was awarded as part of the 'Blyth Deep Dive Levelling Up' funding allocation to establish a dedicated Empty Homes Team for Blyth. This team will form part of the Private Sector Housing Team.
- 5.11 The total number of affordable homes delivered in 2022/23 was 152. A total of 1,579 affordable homes were given planning permission in year, including 52 as new NCC Council Homes. Work continues to bring forward several development sites with 244 new units in the pipeline.
- 5.12 Also, substantial funding from Government was secured in 2022/23 to support a range of housing improvements in Blyth. This funding will support regeneration of some low demand housing and to support new housing developments in Blyth.
- 5.13 Our housing maintenance continues to be effective, with 95% of planned Capital improvements to Council owned homes completed in 2022/23. This includes, kitchen, bathroom, electrical, roofing and heating upgrades.

Achievements – Planning

- 5.14 In March 2022 Council adopted Northumberland's first Local Plan addressing a key area of corporate risk and providing a platform for the delivery of corporate priorities.
- 5.15 Since then, we have met all key Government targets. This has included the Housing Delivery Test (280%) and the 5 year Housing Land Supply test (11.8 years or 236%). This places NCC in the top 5% performing English Local Planning Authorities. An increasing proportion of Local Authorities are not meeting this challenge. Some 39% are unable to demonstrate a 5 year housing land supply. All other national statutory planning performance targets have been surpassed during a period of historic high planning application numbers.
- 5.16 The new approach now being taken to s106 reporting was defined as "exemplar" and representing "Best Practice" by DLUHC in 2022, and, the NCC Planning Performance Agreement approach was defined as representing "Best Practice" by DLUHC in 2022. The total amount of money received from planning obligations during the last year was £5,050,707.
- 5.17 The Planning Team continue to support key strategic schemes, providing planning and design input into: the Northumberland Line Stations; Blyth Relief Road;

regeneration Initiatives (including in Blyth and Ashington); the Council's affordable housing delivery programme; the disposal and use of Council assets; site search and analysis for inward investors; and, working closely with Public Health and the Climate Change Team on initiatives.

- 5.18 There are a range of approaches being supported by the County Council aimed at supporting community-led planning initiatives. These complement a range of strategic priorities and, are becoming a key tool for local areas to shape issues such as responses to affordable housing and climate change. Northumberland was a national Neighbourhood Plan pilot authority, and since there has been a high level of interest. As of August 2023, there are now 20 neighbourhood plans formally "made" (adopted) in Northumberland, with half being agreed in the last 3 years.

Achievements - Historic Environment and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

- 5.19 The Council is working in partnership to deliver the Hexham High Street Action Zone, with £4,352,254 funding provided to improve the local economy through heritage-led regeneration and public realm improvements.
- 5.20 We have also provided conservation support and advice to major Council and other strategic initiatives, including Union Chain Bridge, Berwick Maltings, Northumberland Line, Berwick Infirmary and Hexham Shambles.
- 5.21 Our 'Coast Care' volunteering initiative continued to grow in 2022. There are now 160 active volunteers undertaking daily tasks in and around the AONB. These include beach cleans, habitat management, wildlife surveys, access improvements and other practical tasks.
- 5.22 We also secured a £355,600 grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund which has allowed the previously hidden secrets and insights into the lives of Bamburgh's Anglo Saxon past to be unveiled through new cutting-edge interpretation recreating Northumbria's Golden Age. The interpretive display and digital ossuary at St Aidan's Church and Crypt in Bamburgh tells the story of 110 skeletons dating back to the 7th and 8th centuries unearthed from what is believed to be the burial ground for the royal court of Northumbria.

Achievements – Parks and Open Spaces Environment

- 5.23 Having high-quality local environments for people of all ages is an important part of promoting wellbeing. That's why we are delighted this year, when twelve of Northumberland parks were awarded the Green Flag Awards (increased from 11 last year). This award recognises them as some of the very best in the country.
- 5.24 We are also pleased that performance outturn data for last year show neighbourhoods continue to be clean and tidy, where fly tipping issues are dealt with swiftly. In addition to the work undertaken directly by our Neighbourhood Services teams we support a wide range of individuals and groups who volunteer to do their bit in helping litter pick and keep their local area clean, by providing them with equipment and picking up the litter they collect. Last year we hosted an environmental champions conference to further support and celebrate the work of our fantastic volunteers and we also held our Love Northumberland Awards to recognise and promote the excellent work being undertaken by volunteers and community groups across the county.

- 5.25 The annual 'Love It Like It's Yours' campaign was launched again this year ahead of the summer, led by NCC in collaboration with a broad range of partner organisations, such as Forestry England, Northumberland National Park, HM Coastguard, NFRS, Northumbria Police and Visit Northumberland. This visitor management behaviour change campaign is undertaken as part of the Northumberland Destination Management Plan and has been ran each summer for the past 3 years to promote a warm welcome to visitors to the county whilst also encouraging responsible behaviours that respect local communities and safeguard wildlife and the environment. This year's campaign had a particular focus on prevention of wildfires including use of disposable BBQs, water safety and promoting safe crossing times at Holy Island Causeway.
- 5.26 The Council is also currently delivering its free tree scheme for 2023, the scheme offers every household the opportunity to obtain and plant a tree and is now entering its 4th year of operation.

Achievements – Waste & Recycling

- 5.27 Waste services reported an 85% overall satisfaction rate from the annual customer survey and in every category satisfaction levels improved in 2022/23, compared to 2021/22 results, demonstrating high levels of satisfaction with all Waste Services.
- 5.28 Our glass and food waste recycling pilot schemes have proven to be very popular with participants and are providing valuable data that is being used to develop effective and efficient plans for rolling out these services when Government new burdens funding is made available (now expected in 2025).
- 5.29 We are currently delivering a full roll out of communal bin areas in the Hirst area of Ashington, which will improve residents access to recycling services, and remove the use of plastic sack refuse collections which will help reduce litter and fly tipping in the area.

Achievements – Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management

- 5.30 Within the past year the Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management (FCERM) Team have completed surface water flood alleviation schemes at Bingfield, Seaton Delaval, Wark and Ovingham resulting in 41 properties being better protected from the risk of surface water flooding. These schemes have been largely funded by Flood Defence Grant in Aid (FDGiA) and Local Levy funding. In their role as Lead Local Flood Authority the team have responded to over 850 planning consultations, ensuring drainage and surface water flood risk has been properly considered through the planning process and have also reviewed 33 Land Drainage Consent Applications for works within ordinary watercourses.

Cemeteries & Crematoria

- 5.31 Following discussions with representatives of the Muslim community in Blyth, we have developed a dedicated area for Muslim burials in Bedlington to serve people of Muslim faith in the Southeast of the County. We worked with community representatives to ensure the new section and our burial service met their needs. This included ensuring grave spaces are correctly orientated to Mecca and introducing arrangements to ensure burials can take place as quickly as possible, ideally within 24 hours.
- 5.32 During 2022 Badger Proof fencing was installed in Tweedmouth cemetery Berwick, which completed the introduction of several measures designed to deter badgers from damaging the surface of graves in the cemetery. Prior to the introduction of these

measures badger damage was a significant cause for concern to people whose loved ones were buried in the cemetery, the introduction of the fencing and other measures such as landscaping and reducing food sources has significantly improved the situation for visitors to the cemetery without harming or moving the badgers or their setts.

Key Areas of Focus for the Coming Year – Housing

- 5.33 The most significant areas of focus for Housing Teams are related to the impending implications of the **Social Housing Regulation Bill** and the need to provide a more aligned social/affordable housing stock offer to rural and urban communities.
- 5.34 The Bill is intended to create a stronger regulatory framework and drive standards up across the sector to help registered providers of Social Housing deliver a better service to social housing tenants. It introduces ‘Ofsted-like’ inspections of providers, carried out by the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH), with as little as 48 hours’ notice, while the RSH can now order landlords to carry out emergency remedial work and issue unlimited fines. The County Council has volunteered to be part of a national pilot for Housing Regulation Inspections, one of only four local authorities in England to do so at the stage in the introduction of the new system.
- 5.35 Following the Tier 1 & 2 restructure with Housing and Planning being aligned under the same Directorate, it is timely to look at a revised Housing Delivery Strategy that reflects not only what the Council is able to do in terms of direct delivery and investment, but also captures how NCC is able to enable and facilitate affordable homes across the county, through partnerships and securing external funding. Some £5.5m of Brownfield Housing Funding has already been secured and there is an opportunity to do more with the wider Combined Authority and through One Public Estate and Homes England.
- 5.36 An updated Housing Strategy is now being drafted and will soon be shared for consultation. This strategy will detail the aspirations for Housing in Northumberland and form the basis of the priorities for the Housing Service over the next 5 years, supporting the delivery of the Corporate Priorities.
- 5.37 We will continue to respond to imminent and far-ranging changes in the planning system, proposed through legislation and national policy. The most significant of these is likely to be the wholesale replacement of the current Developer Contributions system, commonly called “Section 106 agreements”.

Key Areas of Focus for the Coming Year – Waste & Recycling

- 5.38 Government has delayed funding by 12 months for the roll-out of kerbside glass recycling originally planned for 2024/25. This year the service will be undertaking the detailed route design work and other logistical planning to enable us to provide kerbside glass collections from April 2025 (subject to Government funding announcements).
- 5.39 Work will continue with our Waste PFI contractor to progress expansion of the range of materials that can be included in household recycling bins to include plastic pots, tubs & trays and tetrapak cartons for 2025/26 (subject to Government funding announcements).
- 5.40 Detailed plans will also be finalised to introduce weekly food waste collections in April 2026 (subject to Government funding announcements).

- 5.41 Clearing roadside litter on fast speed roads is a challenge for all Councils due to the costs involved in ensuring it is safe to do this work, and it can be very detrimental to an area's visual amenity. We are currently reviewing the approach to litter picking on high-speed roads, with proposed changes due to be considered as part of next year's budget setting process.
- 5.42 This year we are also reviewing the deployment and productivity of our mechanical sweeper fleet to identify opportunities to improve this element of our service.

Key Areas of Focus for the Coming Year – Flood & Coastal Erosion Risk Management

- 5.43 It is the intention of central government to implement Schedule 3 of the “Flood & Water Management Act 2010” in 2024. This will make NCC a Sustainable Drainage System (SuDS) Approval Body (SAB), with a duty to approve, adopt and maintain sustainable drainage systems on all new developments serving more than one property. The enactment of Schedule 3 will make sustainable drainage systems mandatory for new developments in England. This will reduce the risk of surface water flooding, pollution and help alleviate the pressures on our traditional drainage and sewerage systems. Once the role of the SAB is in place, the FCERM team will be looking to carry out a review of the Local Flood Risk Management Strategy, to ensure that all policies and strategies are in alignment.
- 5.44 In our role as the Coast Protection Authority we will also be finalising the refresh of the Shoreline Management Plan and will provide an update to the Council and its members.
- 5.45 In terms of capital flood and coastal projects, we are proposing to undertake a waste recovery scheme in Lynemouth Bay to address a historic colliery spoil and waste tipping site, which has been actively eroding onto the beach and into the marine environment. We are working towards mobilising and establishing the site in January 2024 with all enabling works completed by April, when the process of excavation, separating the contaminated materials and reinstatement would begin. Completion is expected in Autumn 2024.
- 5.46 As part of a six-year Environment Agency funded research project via the 'Innovative Flood and Coastal Resilience Programme' we are leading on a Next Generation Flood Resilience Project with the Environment Agency, Northumbria University, and specialist engineering consultancies. The project will create a novel artificial intelligence system with Smart sensors to provide an enhanced flood warning system. This innovative method will provide a cost effective and more accurate solution for these areas that often lack investment and funding for flood warning systems.
- 5.47 Alongside these two major capital projects, the team will be continuing to progress the remainder of the flood protection capital programme which currently has 49 schemes on it at various stages of development. Within the next year we hope to deliver several smaller FCERM schemes which will hopefully see 47 properties be better protected from flooding or coastal erosion.

Key Areas of Focus for the Coming Year – Parks and Open Spaces and Environment

- 5.48 The Parks Enhancement Programme, including QEII Commemoration Schemes is a major programme of work that will deliver improvements to parks and country parks across Northumberland, with additional funding allocated to expand the number of

projects. We will be implementing enhancement schemes at parks and green spaces across the county next year, including provision of a new climbing boulders feature at Plessey Woods Country Park, replanting woodland areas, path improvements and a QEII memorial rose garden at Gallagher Park in Bedlington, improvements to Blyth Promenade and Blyth Beach as well as a major scheme to improve accessibility / paths and the horticulture in the formal entrance to Carlisle Park in Morpeth. In addition to these schemes we will also be looking to improve path networks within green spaces to encourage more people to get out and get active in their local environment.

- 5.49 A review is going to be undertaken this year of the current Grounds Maintenance service, including service standards around amenity grass cutting to consider moving away from a blanket standard of 10-13 cuts per year to a range of different maintenance regimes tailored to be suitable for different areas of grassland to help improve biodiversity and nature recovery whilst maintaining a high-quality local environment and visual amenity. Local communities and stakeholders will be consulted on the priorities for these new maintenance standards which once agreed will be piloted in an agreed locality during 2024/25 before being rolled out further.
- 5.50 A new Tree Management Policy will be developed to provide a balanced and proportionate framework that enables the County Council to effectively manage the risks presented by trees. This will include details of our approach to dealing with the issues caused by diseases such as Ash Dieback. We will also be completing the clear-up and preparation of areas of NCC woodland that were badly damaged by Storm Arwen so that these areas can be replanted and, where appropriate, improved public access arrangements will be provided.

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

- 6.1 This report highlights achievements over the past year and, outlines some of the areas of focus for the coming year. The recommendation to Council is to note the Cabinet Member for Looking After Our Environment.

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 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
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?	No - not required at this point N/A
Risk assessment	None at this stage.
Crime and disorder	N/A
Customer considerations	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	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 Wards);

8. Background papers

Not applicable.

9. Links to other key reports already published

Corporate Plan 2023-26
 Corporate Plan Achievements Report March 2023
 Northumberland Local Plan 2022

10. Author and Contact Details

Paul Jones, Director of Environment and Transport
 Email: paul.jones01@northumberland.gov.uk
 Rob Murfin, Director of Housing and Planning
 Email: rob.murfin@northumberland.gov.uk