



Northumberland

County Council

COUNCIL

DATE: 17TH JANUARY 2024

Annual Portfolio Report – Looking After our Communities

Report of: Councillor Gordon Stewart, Portfolio Holder for Looking After Our Communities

Responsible Officers: Graeme Binning, Chief Fire Officer and Gill O'Neill, Executive Director of Public Health, Inequalities and Stronger Communities

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1. This is the Annual Portfolio Report from the Portfolio Holder Looking After Our Communities. 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. Council is recommended to:
 - (i) Note the Portfolio Holder for Looking After Our Communities Annual Portfolio Report.

Link to Corporate Plan

- **Achieving Value for Money** – All of the services within this portfolio strive to achieve the best value for money in everything they do.
- **Tackling Inequalities** – The Portfolio plays a vital role in driving delivery of the Council's Inequalities Plan through ensuring that residents, particularly vulnerable households are supported to be safe from fire and other harms.
- **Driving Economic Growth and Jobs** - The Portfolio contributes to growth and jobs by ensuring business premises are safe and well-regulated for everyone to enjoy, creating a positive trading environment for residents and businesses alike.

3. Key issues

- 3.1. 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.

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 Looking After Our Communities Portfolio.

5. Context

- 5.1. This report sets out an impressive set of achievements and continuous improvement across Public Protection, Fire & Rescue, Community Safety, Registration and Coroner services. These achievements and improvement are set in the context of continuing to safely manage business recovery from the Covid Pandemic as well as responding effectively to new challenges such as Avian Flu outbreaks. The Portfolio Holder would like to place on record his thanks to all the Officers involved for their hard work, innovation and dedication to looking after Northumberland's communities.

6. Achievements

Public Protection

- Public Protection successfully delivered the 2022/23 Food and Feed Safety & Standards Service Plan. All the targets were met or exceeded. The delivery of this work was focused on the 'ask' from the Food Standards Agency in terms of its recovery plan after Covid 19. The 2023/24 plan was adopted by Cabinet in October and is currently being delivered.
- The Animal Welfare Team achieved the RSPCA's Platinum Award for its stray dog collection service after achieving 15 years of gold standard awards.
- 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.
- 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.
- Avian Flu was at unprecedented levels in the last year, mainly in the wild bird population. Responsibility for dealing with outbreaks sits with the Animal and Plant Health Agency, but locally Public Protection react to outbreaks. There were a number of wild dead birds found in Northumberland's beaches and the Team acted swiftly to ensure clean up as well as keeping residents informed.

Building Control

- In a year the Building Control service generally oversees building works to the value of over £100 million.
- The Service has overseen major construction works at the new leisure centres in Berwick and Morpeth, along with the Ad Gefrin in Wooler. The service is currently looking at the design works for the Blyth Culture Centre.
- Throughout the year, the Service dealt with a number of dangerous buildings, including the emergency demolition of a premises which went on fire in Haltwhistle. For the first time in some years, the Service has had to take court action to ensure works were completed and dangers removed by either the Council or building owner.

Licensing

- The Licensing Team in Public Protection are responsible for issuing licences across a large number of areas, including: taxis, alcohol, street trading, animal boarding, zoos, caravan sites, gambling establishments and scrap metal dealers. In the past year this resulted in 2,900 being issues by the Service.
- The Service has produced a number of reports on various licensing matter for the Licensing and Licensing & Regulatory committees. A main focus over the last few years has been how rising costs have impacted many areas covered by licensing. This includes 'taxi tariffs', which are set by the Council. This has required consultation with interested parties and a final agreement by the Committee. The 'taxi tariff' is to be reviewed in 2024.

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.

Safer Northumberland Partnership (SNP)

- The Partnership 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. Having reviewed membership and ensuring understanding of joint aims and objectives, this continues to advance and in turn the SNP has been reinvigorated, which has been recognised by stakeholders.
- 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. This has allowed identification of SNP objectives and priorities across five themed work areas and will focus future activities.

- 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. This initiative has recruited four staff into Northumberland Communities Together (NCT) that will be embedded into community activities and seek to improve lives.
- 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.

Registration Service

- The Registration Service partnered with "Settld during 2023 to offer bereaved families attending a death registration appointment the opportunity to receive free administrative support when taking the steps to administer the estate and affairs of a loved one. Focusing on working with private sector organisations to provide death notification data, the Settld service complements the already established Tell Us Once for Bereavement service offered to bereaved families who are registering a death, which focuses on death notifications to public sector organisations. Together, both services offer families "wrap around bereavement support and this has been well received to date by those families who have opted to use Settld.
- During 2022/23, the service conducted a total of 2,476 ceremonies across the county, the highest annual volume to date. Ceremonies in Northumberland continue to be popular, and the county has an excellent reputation as a destination for ceremonies, offering a wide range of venues. Year to date, during 2023/24, 2,255 ceremonies have been delivered.
- In April 2023, the service was subject to a Stock and Security Audit conducted by its governing body, the General Register Office (GRO). To provide assurance to the Registrar General and His Majesty's Passport Office Assurance Senior Information Risk Officer, regular reconciliation of the secure certificate stock held by the Registration Service is undertaken. This provides assurance under the HMG Security Policy Framework that local authorities have systems and processes in place to minimise risk and protect both assets and services appropriately and supports the wider Home Office Public Protection agenda. The audit involved examination of the security arrangements around the receipt, storage and use of secure certificate stock held. In addition, a review of the data storage arrangements and security of and access to registration records and information was also undertaken. The outcome of the GRO Stock and Security Audit has ranked the Northumberland Registration Service as demonstrating an assurance level of 'high'.

- The Registration Service was able to showcase birth registration across the Family Hub network to Dame Andrea Leadsom, the Government's Early Years Advisor when she visited Blyth Family Hub in May 2023. This highlighted the impact and potential of delivering this service in a 'family centric' setting and how this contributes to giving children the 'best start in life'.

Coroner Service

- Andrew Hetherington, Senior Coroner for Northumberland provided an update on the Coroner Service to Cabinet and the Health and Wellbeing Board during 2023, reflecting on the previous year's achievements, statistics and service delivered. The report highlighted that, despite a growing caseload for the service, attributed to more effective reporting of deaths in line with the Notification of Death Regulations 2019 and the emerging influence and scope of NSECH, the service carried no backlog of cases over 12 months. The timeliness of cases progressed to inquest in court was below the England and Wales average of 30 weeks, with Northumberland at 26.5 weeks.
- As part of his national Welfare Tour, the Council welcomed HHJ Thomas Teague KC, Chief Coroner for England and Wales in February 2023 as he took time to visit the Coroner Service, meeting with the Senior Coroner, Leader, and Executive Director, along with Coroner's Officers and support staff. Following his visit, the Chief Coroner commended the County Council for its excellent facilities within County Hall to enable the work of the Senior Coroner, and to support bereaved families who are required to attend court during an undoubtedly challenging time when coping with bereavement and loss.
- In March 2023, the Senior Coroner and Head of Community Services were invited by the Chief Coroner to speak at his annual Local Authority Conference, held in Central Hall Westminster, to highlight the excellent Covid 19 recovery work delivered by the Northumberland Coroner Service. During the Pandemic, the service operated as usual working within safe working practice guidelines, with risk assessed procedures to ensure that investigation and inquest work could continue. This has resulted in no backlog of casework, and bereaved families being able to achieve conclusion and closure following loss in a timely manner.

7. Key Areas of Focus for the Coming Year

The following summarises, key areas of focus for services in this Portfolio in the coming year.

Public Protection

- Delivery of the 2023/24 Food and Feed Safety & Standards Service Plan in line with the Food Standards Agency Code of Practice. This will enable the Team to reflect on and respond to expected changes in Food Standards 'risk scores'.
- Continue to promote the use of the newly acquired CCTV and take positive enforcement action when needed, with the aim that the number of offences reported or seen is reduced.
- Continue to deal with any notifiable diseases outbreak and work with partners to ensure Northumberland is in the best position it can to deal with these.

- Ensure a smooth transition of some of the work carried out by the Local Land Charges Team as this moves across to His Majesty's Land Register.
- The Building Control Service will ensure staff are trained and assessed to meet the requirements of the Building Safety Act.

Fire & Rescue Service

- During 2023/24, Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service was inspected by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS). The report was published on 29 November 2023. We are delighted that overall, Northumberland has made significant improvements since the previous inspection. Key highlights include:
 - No Causes of Concern.
 - No 'Inadequate' grades.
 - No 'Requires Improvement' grades.
 - Seven 'Adequate and four 'Good' grades.
 - Twelve 'Areas for Improvement' (representing a 52 percent reduction since the second round of inspections).
- Inspectors found Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service to be good at making the service affordable now and in the future, supporting the Council's priority of Achieving Value for Money. His Majesty's Inspector states that the service has '*a sound understanding of its future financial challenges and plans accordingly, using their assessment of risk within the county to guide them.*' Inspectors noted that the service '*actively seeks efficiencies using technology to enhance performance.*'
- When considering the Council's priority of Tackling Inequalities, HMICFRS has found that Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is good at preventing fires and other risk. Inspectors have recognised that 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.
- On Driving Economic Growth, Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service delivers a risk-based inspection programme to focus resources on those businesses most likely to be non-compliant when considering the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order to reduce risk across the county. The Service recognises that nearly 60 percent of businesses never recover following a fire, and therefore it is essential that risk in this area is reduced. Inspectors noted that the service uses the full range of enforcement powers and, where appropriate, it prosecutes those that don't comply.
- 'Areas for Improvement' will direct focus for the Service going forward. These include:
 - Further embedding quality assurance arrangements for Site Specific Risk Information (SSRI).
 - Completing a comprehensive review of protection arrangements across the service, ensuring robust quality assurance arrangements are further embedded.

- Reviewing policies and procedures for mass evacuation in the event of a major incident.
- Strengthening business continuity testing arrangements.
- Evaluating collaboration activity.
- Undertaking a training analysis to further strengthen progress already made against workforce planning.
- Continuing to improve equality, diversity, and inclusion across the service.
- Updating the appraisal process in collaboration with Human Resource colleagues.
- Further embedding the talent management process for aspiring leaders.
- Progress against these key areas will be monitored using the Service's Continuous Improvement Plan, with progress presented monthly at Directorate Management Team meetings.

Safer Northumberland Partnership (SNP)

- Development of SNP representation and influence, embedding refreshed strategic membership, governance, engagement, and partnership activities.
- Ensuring all business areas fulfil statutory requirements, including in particular:
 - The Crime and Disorder Act (1998) - NP partnership plan.
 - The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (2022) - Serious Violence Legal Duty.
 - The Counter Terrorism and Security Act (2015) – 'Prevent' assurance.
 - Terrorism (Protection of premises) draft bill – 'Martyn's Law' expected 2024.
- Establishing greater coordination across other Council-led strategic partnerships, such as Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board (DALPB), Northumberland Childrens and Adults Safeguarding Partnership (NCASP), as well as SNP representation and attendance at local and regional boards and other national forums essential to develop, advance and deliver the priority areas and statutory responsibilities.

Registration Service

- The Service will work with local schools to develop a 'citizenship' learning opportunity whereby young learners will attend a citizenship ceremony delivered by the Registration Service, where new citizens will be awarded their Certificate of Naturalisation, and therefore become a British Citizen. As part of the ceremony, children will take an active part in the event and learn about the process to become a British Citizen, what citizenship entails and the value it brings to local communities.
- The introduction of the Medical Examiner service as a statutory service effective from 1 April 2024 is expected to improve the accuracy and timeliness of Medical Certificates of Cause of Death, a key document produced by doctors when death is

certified and required by families before a death can be registered. Consequently, a higher percentage of deaths are expected to be registered within the key performance indicator of 5 calendar days from when death occurred.

Coroner Service

- The Service is working with Northumbria NHS Trust to ensure a more efficient and cost-effective mortuary service is provided by the Trust to the Senior Coroner. New arrangements are expected to be in place by April 2024.
- From February 2024, a new body conveyancing contract for the Coroner Service will be awarded for a period of up to 4 years. This will ensure that the deceased are transported across the county at the direction of the Senior Coroner to meet exacting standards of care and to preserve dignity, whilst also providing best value.
- From 1 April 2024, the present North Northumberland and South Northumberland coroner areas will merge to form a new, single Northumberland coroner area. This will be enabled by Statutory Instrument and will involve the Service working in tandem with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and Chief Coroner's Office. No significant service changes will be apparent post-merger, other than for administrative purposes when submitting an annual return to MOJ.
- The national Medical Examiner Service will become a statutory service from 1 April 2024. This service provides independent scrutiny to all deaths, not just those which are deemed sudden, suspicious, or not natural cause and as such referred to the Coroner. The Department of Health and Social Care published draft regulations for the statutory system in December 2023.
- In Northumberland, the Medical Examiner service is already established and is based at NSECH. An excellent relationship is in place between the Senior Coroner and Lead Medical Examiner for the trust, and as the service becomes statutory, this relationship will continue to develop with a shared focus on delivering excellent scrutiny into deaths which occur in the county and providing assurance to bereaved families.

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.
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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