



Northumberland

County Council

COMMITTEE : AUDIT COMMITTEE

DATE: 29TH JANUARY 2024

Best Value for Money Workstream Progress Report

Report of : Jan Willis, Executive Director – Transformation and Resources, and Executive Sponsor of BEST, Audrey Kingham, Executive Director - Children, Young People and Education and Senior Responsible Officer for Best Value for Money Workstream

Cabinet Member: Cllr Richard Wearmouth, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Corporate Services

1 Purpose of report

The purpose of the report is to update the Audit Committee on work undertaken to date as part of the Best Value for Money Workstream, covering the period 1st April 2023 – 15th January 2024.

2 Recommendations

The Audit Committee is invited to note and comment on the activity and progress of the Best Value for Money Workstream.

3 Link to Corporate Plan

3.1 The Best Value approach and Planning, Performance and Accountability Framework form part of the Corporate Plan, to provide us with a clear mechanism to ensure we are doing the right things well, achieving the best impact from our decisions and demonstrating the value we are delivering for our residents. In order to achieve our Best Value ambition, and operationalise and embed our Planning, Performance and Accountability Framework, a number of targets were set within the Corporate Plan:

- PPAF – develop and launch the Framework for how the Council plans, prioritises and measures and ensures its strategic objectives are delivered (March 24)
- Develop Value for Money Assessment process and pilot through the Workstream (Summer 23)

- All services complete a value for money assessment to inform the improvement actions within their service plan and set a baseline for improvement to be measured against (Summer 23)
- A forward plan prioritising how services will be identified for a deep dive will be developed through the Planning, Performance and Accountability Framework. Deep dives into the performance of individual services to be completed in line with the prioritisation plan (Summer 23)
- Service Planning – to be developed to set out how each division will contribute to the Corporate Plan outcomes and how impact will be measured (Summer 23)

4 Key issues

The Best Value for Money Workstream forms part of BEST delivery. The aim of the Workstream is to introduce a more rigorous approach to planning and performance management, and perform Deep Dive reviews into specific service areas, with the aim of achieving better outcomes for customers while reducing demand on higher cost public services to make savings of: LOW £1.88m HIGH £2.68m.

5 Workstream Project Delivery:

5.1 Corporate Plan:

- 5.1.1 The Corporate Plan was developed by a core working group, supported by a wider Corporate Plan group with representation from each service area. Additionally, two policy conferences were held with Members, which took place on the 11th January 2023 (focussing on the proposed priorities), and a second on 3rd April 2023, which covered priorities, outcomes and actions, as well as an update covering values and behaviours. This activity was designed to inform the development of the Corporate Plan, and share learning from the summary and comparison of good practice to influence this approach. It was also designed to address relevant points on the previous Corporate Plan from the Caller Review. The Corporate Plan was approved in May 2023

5.2 Planning, Performance and Accountability Framework:



5.2.1 To endorse Northumberland as a land of great opportunities, we want to achieve best value in how we make our evidence based decisions and deliver our services. Our Planning, Performance and Accountability Framework is fundamental to achieving best value as it describes how we do and will do things in Northumberland. It sets out the rhythm of our council, describing the processes and mechanisms we have in place to ensure a consistent and effective approach to planning, performance, and assurance across our complex range of services.

5.2.2 The Framework guides officers and members by clearly describing our decision-making process. It shows the link between strategic corporate decisions and the work of all our staff, ensuring our services do the right things in the right way to achieve the greatest impact for residents in Northumberland. Our Framework gives us a shared approach, supporting all our staff to be clear about their role in achieving our shared vision of Northumberland as a land of great opportunities.

5.2.3 The Planning, Performance and Accountability Framework has been developed following a number of workshops with stakeholders from across the organisation, and has been co-designed with the aim of creating a clear thread from Corporate Plan throughout the organisation, and influence down to appraisal and supervision. Following on from the work to develop the Corporate Plan, the Task & Finish Group was merged in to the Planning, Performance and Accountability Framework Development Stakeholder Group, to ensure a level of consistency in approach and membership, as well as alignment to the principles of the Corporate Plan. Further engagement work has been undertaken via Corporate Briefings and attendance at DMT meetings. The Planning, Performance and Accountability Framework is currently in draft format, due for approval process at the end of February 2024, and embedding and comms activity will take place once approved.

5.3 Service Plans

5.3.1 Following three workshops held with a variety of staff from across the organisation to co-design the Service Plan approach, the first iteration of the Service Planning document was released in Summer 23 and has been completed by Service areas. During this process three more sessions were held virtually and in-person to provide support to officers who had any questions about the template or the process. Live learning sessions were then held in November 2023 with Service Directors following completion of the Service Plan document by Service Directors and their Heads of Services. The aim of this workshop was to learn from their experience completing the document and their reflections of the process providing the direction to refine and iterate the approach; leading to the imminent release of an updated second version of the Service Planning document for the next cycle of planning. The Service Plans are an integral part of corporate planning and the work underway to refresh the cycle for recording and reporting corporate performance will be core to the planning cycle and to reinforce links to the Corporate Plan.

5.4 Data & BI Strategy (Data Leaders)

5.4.1 A Data Leaders group has been set up, to identify ways of working together across the organisation to develop solutions to common data issues, and develop the Data and BI Strategy. This is held on a monthly basis, with representation from over 35 staff, from a variety of service areas. Key achievements of the Data Leaders group to date include:

- Sharing skills, knowledge and practice
- Assessment and consolidation of tooling (i.e. the apps and systems we use to complete our work)
- Set up an Emergency Response data working group and data set
- Helped review the Data Academy offer and continued assessment of value
- Removal of service blockers around data use / data sharing

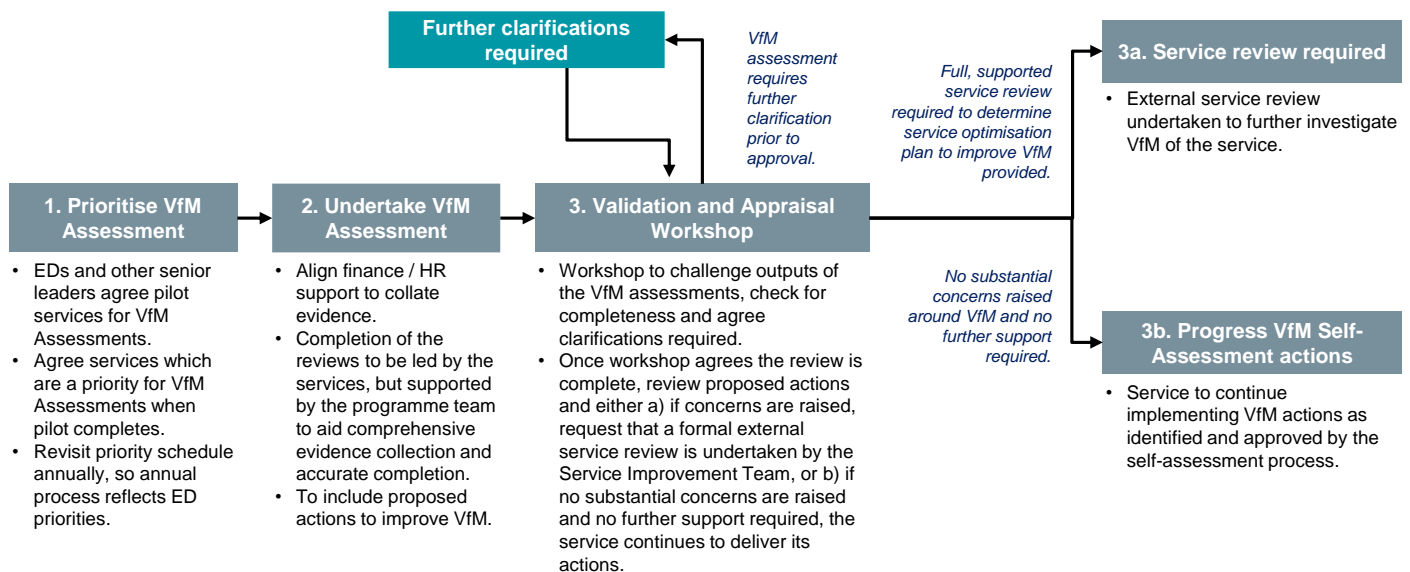
- Helped govern the GIS strategy and work to modernise and set standards for GIS across NCC

5.4.2 The Data Academy proposal has been developed and launched, with 50 staff members engaged in the first training cohort, due for completion December 2024. The impact of this will be around equipping staff with the skills to make faster and more accurate data-informed decisions. The Data and BI Strategy is currently in draft format, and is due to be completed by the end of the Financial year and will be part of the corporate document suite with the Corporate plan and the Planning, Performance and Accountability Framework.

5.5 Value for Money Assessment Framework

5.5.1 The Executive Team have completed a high-level Best Value Assessment. A pilot with three service areas is now underway, the framework for the pilot has been developed in conjunction with our Delivery Partners. The self-assessment tool is being completed with the service areas and is also being reviewed, the core team are listening to the service team as this is our opportunity to adjust the tool and template prior to rolling out across all services.

Stages of the Value for Money Assessment Framework:



5.6 Service Reviews:

5.6.1 As a result of Value for Money Assessments corporately NCC will be able to identify areas/services requiring a Service Review or a topical Deep Dive. Ahead of having the VfM assessments Service Reviews were identified within the original Strategic Business Case proposals as a means of looking at service areas with high levels of demand. Key lines of enquiry were determined upon level of expenditure and demand pressures on the service. Service Reviews were recommended as ways to

determine opportunities to drive down demand or change operating models. The following service areas were identified as initial areas to explore.

5.6.2 Home to School Transport

- 5.6.3 Best Value for Money has brought together and extended the review of Home to School Transport which initially took place in 2022, with the aim of delivering on the subsequent recommendations. The Transformation Fund has supported with funding monies to develop roles and the work of Independent Travel Trainers as a proof of concept project. Two Independent Travel Trainers have now been employed on a 1 year fixed-term basis to develop the project, aimed at supporting travel independence for our SEND young people, developing skills and confidence, where it is identified that the potential to use public transport or walking to school may be achievable. The initial target is to work with 21 young people in this first year.
- 5.6.4 Engagement work with parent carers regarding the potential for developing Enhanced Personal Budgets to enable them to organise or deliver their own home to school transport arrangements has been undertaken, and the project team are developing the policy and eligibility criteria. The engagement work consisted of an initial questionnaire to a cohort of 51 families, based on users of single occupancy vehicles in the top 10% of cost, followed by the opportunity to engage more on a one to one basis, which was taken up by five parent carers. There is an intention to go back out to these families for further engagement once proposals are more advanced.
- 5.6.5 Terms and conditions are being drafted to support pilot activity around devolving elements of the school transport budget directly to schools, with two schools having been identified, as well as the limited pilot activity currently being operated in partnership with Mowbray Primary School. Business Cases are currently being developed with identified schools.
- 5.6.6 A Service Review of contracting arrangements and finance was commenced in November 2023 to determine whether best value is being achieved and identify opportunities for improvement, alongside recommendations to be used as part of the contract review cycle. This is due for completion March 2024, and has been undertaken by the Service Review team, in conjunction with Internal Audit, who completed a baseline of reviewing internal processes covering Governance, contract terms and conditions, contract awards and compliance.
- 5.6.7 A key aspect of the Overall review is to determine a new way of working for home to school transport with children and families at the heart of our systems and approaches. This will include all Home to School Transport and School Admissions processes. This includes Transport policies, Service User Consultation development, Child Safeguarding, working groups around Childrens and Adults Social Care, Transport Eligibility and Transport Management System options.

5.6.8 Environment

5.6.9 The Service Review of Environment is to be the first Review to be completed under the joint approach of our internal Service Review Team and our Delivery Partner, and it has been agreed at an Executive level that rather than focusing on individual areas, as set out in the original Strategic Business Case, an overarching review of the service would be more efficient, looking at structure, process, technology etc. The joint approach and design principles are being agreed with Deloitte, and it is intended that the review will be complete by the end of the financial year/early 24-25. The review will focus on both financial and non-financial outcomes and any financial savings will feed in to the budget. The project team will be made up of Service Review Team, Delivery Partner and SME's from the service, working jointly to identify improvement and efficiencies alongside identifying best practice to share with the wider organisation. The Project Lead will be agreed from within the Service Review team.

6 Implications

Policy	This paper provides an overview of activities to date of the Best Value for Money Workstream. Policy implications identified within the Workstream relate to Home to School Transport. Working groups containing Subject Matter Experts have been established to consider these implications and ensure process will be adhered to.
Finance and value for money	No additional funding required. Savings of between £1.88m - £2.68m have been attributed to this Workstream, as part of BEST.
Legal	It is not anticipated that the actions of the Value for Money will have any legal implications, however there may be implications in relation to any policy changes required. Some developments relating to the development of the PPAF should support our reporting of performance measures and statutory obligations.
Procurement	None identified
Human Resources	No new recruitment is identified. However, service areas will need to devote resources in terms of staff / officer time to deliver these actions. It may be that as part of developing implementation plans, organisations will need to consider recruitment or resourcing implications.
Property	There are no specific implications for Estates.
Equalities	None.

(Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	An Impact Assessment is not applicable as the report does not require a key decision.
Risk Assessment	N/A
Crime & Disorder	None identified
Customer Consideration	Engagement work with parent carers has provided a starting point for work around Home to School Transport, and is considered against any proposals to be taken forward. The proposals are intended to improve the lives of our residents.
Carbon reduction	None identified at present, though some recommendations around Home to School Transport, and options that may come out of the proposed review of Environment, will be considered as means of contributing to carbon reduction aims.
Health and Wellbeing	Potential positive impact on the health and wellbeing of residents through enabling independence and healthy options in travel related to Home to School Transport
Wards	All

Background papers:

None

Report sign off.

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

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