



Northumberland County Council

County Council

Wednesday, 20 March 2024

Annual Portfolio Report - Deputy Leader and Corporate Services

Report of Councillor(s) Councillor Richard Wearmouth, Deputy Leader

Responsible Officer(s): Jan Willis, Executive Director for Transformation and Resources, S151 Officer

1. **Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan**

Achieving Value for Money – the Portfolio contributes to Value for Money by ensuring the Council sets and delivers a balanced budget with robust systems for managing assets, enabling services and ensuring staff are equipped to deliver high-quality services.

Tackling Inequalities – by ensuring the Council has robust and sustainable finances to deliver its priorities and has strong enabling services, this portfolio contributes to tackling inequalities.

Driving Economic Growth – the Portfolio develops and manages an ambitious and sustainable Capital Programme which enables the Council to invest in infrastructure, regeneration and economic growth across Northumberland.

2. **Purpose of report**

This is the Annual Portfolio Report from the Deputy Leader of Council. The Report contains issues that set the context for delivery of finance, assets, governance, strategic change, digital and human resources within Northumberland. It highlights achievements over the past year and outlines the areas of focus for the coming year.

3. **Recommendations**

Council is recommended to note the Deputy Leader's annual Portfolio Report.

4. **Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable**

Not applicable

5. Background

- 5.1 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.
- 5.2 The Council adopted the Corporate Plan at its Annual General Meeting on 17 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 each year) 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 Deputy Leader's Portfolio.

6. Achievements

Finance

- 6.1 The financial outlook for our Council and indeed all local authorities continues to be challenging. National finances are uncertain due to global events which have resulted in spikes in energy costs, significant inflation, higher interest rates, volatile financial markets and the cost-of-living pressures. Despite the challenging context, I am delighted we are on track to deliver a balanced outturn for 2023-24 and have agreed and will deliver a balanced budget for 2024-25. The budget will sustain good-quality day-to-day services whilst continuing to invest in new or refurbished schools, leisure centres, regeneration and infrastructure.
- 6.2 I am pleased we listened to Members with regard to budget engagement. In response we built 'policy conferences' into our budget-setting process, and our Budget engagement for 2024-25 with all Members started in July 2023, followed by another budget policy conference in October. The Cabinet's budget proposals were scrutinised ahead of Cabinet in December 2023. This year also produced a comprehensive 'Budget Engagement Document' which set out the Council's financial position, the options for achieving a balanced budget and our proposals. We used this to encourage deeper, better-informed engagement with Members, residents and stakeholders. Our S151 Officer briefed all group leaders and their groups on the budget proposals, answering their questions and listening to their ideas. Overall, I believe our engagement on the Budget was extensive though we will continue to listen to all Members on how we can enhance this in future years.

Capital Programme

- 6.3 I am delighted the value of the projects being taken forward across the County stands at over £460m, including a range of economic development, regeneration and strategic transport projects. This includes Council match-funding of around £134m, private sector contributions of £74m and external funding of approximately £252m. We reviewed our Capital Programme to take account of the rising cost of borrowing. This will ensure that our Capital Programme is affordable and sustainable and will allow us to continue to invest in infrastructure, facilities, regeneration and growth.

Best Value, BEST and Strategic Change

- 6.4 BEST is the Council's new way of working. It enables the Council to give residents the best experiences through its services. It opens up opportunities and broadens experience for staff. It is the Council becoming more financially efficient and ensuring VFM is achieved. We have recognised the Council can no longer do all the things it does in the way it currently does them, nor would we wish to where there are better ways of working. BEST will transform services so that they are delivered in a more cost-effective way. This includes the way the Council is run, how we utilise our resources, technology, assets and people and how we deliver our service to customers. Financial constraints are not the only reasons for change. BEST supports the Council to deliver its three corporate priorities.
- 6.5 In Summer 2023, we re-focused on what it means to be a Best Value authority. Executive Directors undertook an initial Best Value corporate 'baselining' exercise, based on the latest Best Value guidance. Building on this through our BEST ways of working, we have developed a programme of reviews which will incorporate Value for Money reviews.
- 6.6 All seven workstreams in BEST have commenced delivery. Some key achievements to date across workstreams have been:
- Implementation of Fix My Street, iCasework and Modern.gov;
 - A Planning, Performance and Accountability Framework has been developed, establishing one corporate approach with a clear thread from corporate plan to service planning to individual appraisal;
 - The continued roll out of the living Leader Programme to staff as part of the Leadership Framework developing our people and establishing a common language for change;
 - A depot review completed in November 2023, with a number of recommendations to improve and streamline depots.
- 6.7 We continue to work with services to identify opportunities for continuous improvement and improved value for money. The majority of the work this year has been supporting BEST Workstreams. There have also been a number of 'stand alone' reviews carried out with individual services which have resulted in efficiencies. The work in this area is now focused on carrying out a 'Rapid Improvement Review' in each service of the Council.

Information Services, Digital, Data and Business Intelligence

- 6.8 Digital, data and intelligence are critical to delivering modern, efficient and fit-for-purpose services to residents. It is also important that we are supporting residents and communities, so they have access to digital services. Key examples of progress we have made on this in the past year include:
- Mobile and future connectivity - we commissioned an innovative solution, so we can better understand mobile coverage in the county. Working with Streetwave, we have installed devices to local services vehicles, that scan for connectivity strength. This data will enable us to see where the 'not-spots' are, and work with mobile operators to address them. In addition, we have worked with the Combined Authority on a Government-funded programme (Digital Connectivity

Infrastructure Accelerator). This will simplify the process for connectivity providers to find and use public assets, such as lampposts and Council buildings and help accelerate the rollout of improved and innovative connectivity across the region.

- Broadband Vouchers – We are working with communities and network providers to drawdown government funded Gigabit vouchers to connect our rural communities. Cabinet agreed a Northumberland Top-Up scheme, with £1.15m from gainshare income set aside for re-investment in county connectivity. The top-up scheme will provide a voucher of up to £2,500 for eligible properties to provide a “top-up” to the government funded Gigabit Vouchers of £4,500, to provide up to £7,000 per property to suppliers to connect some of our more remote communities.
- ‘5GIR’ - we were partners in two bids for the 5G Innovation Regions funding, and both bids were successful. The first bid backed by the LA7 includes 5G to support Agritech in Northumberland working with Newcastle University and exploring 5G and Future connectivity in the Port of Blyth. The Borderlands backed bid, includes a proposal to install future connectivity solutions in Kielder and The Sill.
- WAN (Wide Area Network) – some 138 Council sites are now migrated to our new provider, Commsworld. The sites are operating on upgraded infrastructure, providing faster more reliable connectivity. The procurement won an MJ award to recognise the innovative social value elements and featured in the Guardian newspaper earlier in the year. The contract provides £114m of private investment in the county, with 260km of new fibre being installed, helping to better connect our county for residents and businesses.
- To ensure the Council can recover from a major failure of IT systems, such as after a cyber-attack, a service has been established that allows data to be copied to a secure secondary online site that can be brought into operation should our IT Disaster Recovery Plan be needed. This site allows staff to continue to access systems and provide services to residents and business while IT staff rebuild the primary systems.
- Digital Services - we have successfully launched our garden waste application and received 89% take up and an overall high success rate of the digital application with 18.7k transactions to date.
- ‘Labman’ - we worked closely with a delivery partner to develop a digital solution for our Highways Service to support further income generation for the Service through further digitisation of their processes.
- ‘FixMyStreet’ – in May last year, we launched this new online service for people to report problems on the County’s streets. Using ‘FixMyStreet’, people can now photograph, locate and highlight an issue all by using their mobile phone. Issues can be reported simply by going to nland.cc/fix on a mobile phone, computer, tablet or the council’s website. All reports go straight into the Council’s digital systems where they can be assessed, allocated for any necessary actions and if the user sets up an account they can be informed of progress and completion. This is significantly improving communication with residents, reducing duplication and speeding up responses.

- Data and business intelligence - our new 'Data & BI Strategy' is being continually developed to support better decision-making and improve service provision. The 'Data Leaders Group' is well established. We are investing in our workforce following the launch of our Data Academy in November 2023. The Academy will give staff the opportunity to enhance their data and analytical skills through an apprenticeship. We think making the best use of data will empower our staff, inform decision-making, and ensure we are using our resources effectively.
- 'Craster Mast' - we have secured a commitment from a mast provider (Atlas) to install a mobile mast at Craster to help address poor connectivity in the community. This will help support the large numbers of visitors as well as residents.

Managing Risk

- 6.9 The management of risk is key to achieving what is set out in the Corporate Plan and to ensuring we meet all our responsibilities. Our Risk Management Policy is fundamental to the system of internal control and forms part of a sound business operating model. It involves an ongoing process to identify risks and to prioritise them according to likelihood and impact. The Council has a process to manage risks and assist the achievement of its objectives, alongside national and local performance targets. The process is reviewed and updated on a regular basis with reference to available good practice and to ensure it reflects the rapidly changing environment in local government.

Performance reporting and improvement

- 6.10 In November this year, I was pleased to present the Quarter 4, Performance Outturn Report (2022-23) to Full Council. That report, alongside Quarters 1 and 2 Performance Reports for 2023-24 show positive trends of improvement across many of our key corporate performance indicators. Naturally, these reports also highlight areas for improvement which we continue to focus on.

Staffing, Engagement and Culture Change

- 6.11 This year we have continued to listen to and engage with the Council's biggest asset, our staff. The Council has eight staff network groups, which consult on matters affecting individuals and teams and we run regular surveys to help us understand the employee experience. Every 18 months we run a full comprehensive staff survey and we follow up with 'pulse surveys' every 6 months. We use the results of the survey to inform our approach to improving practices and to increase involvement and engagement with our staff. Our last full survey took place in September / October 2022 and we have since held topical pulse surveys in May 2023 and December 2023. The headline results of that latest 'pulse survey' tell us we are on the right track as an employer as well as highlighting areas where we can continue to respond to our staff and make improvements.
- 6.12 I am pleased we have maintained positive and constructive relationships with the trade unions. With the Leader, I met regularly with trade union representatives in the past year ensuring good communications, building trust and allowing for greater collaboration on important issues. We are grateful to all trade union representatives for their ongoing engagement and input.
- 6.13 Our staff are at the heart of everything we do. For them to carry out their work efficiently and effectively, we ensure they have access to information that keeps

them up-to-date with Council business and ongoing projects. We have also provided information on policies and procedures, how the Council can support staff development, and support and advice to look after their wellbeing too. In the past year, we have provided a range of channels across the organisation for staff to access this information, including:

- Staff intranet, 'The Beat', which is home to all information from HR & OD, Payroll, service information to health and wellbeing updates.
- Two e-newsletters, sent weekly; The Business (Corporate Updates) and The Buzz (Wellbeing and staff stories). Both feature regular updates from the Chief Executive.
- Social media channels; Viva Engage and Staff Facebook - where staff have been able to ask questions and share their own stories.
- Printed information shared with sites across the organisation, including seasonal leaflets and posters.
- Members' Briefing; a bi-monthly e-news update to elected Members linking to a Member Portal which is home to information on Member training, latest news and committee meetings.
- Engagement opportunities through a number of 'Ambassador' networks including BEST as well as events across the year.
- 'Corporate Briefing'; a monthly briefing session for all senior managers, led by the Chief Executive and Executive Directors.

6.14 Governance arrangements for the appointment of senior Officers have been strengthened in the past 12 months. As a result, we have real confidence in the transparency of the staffing decisions that have been made and Members are informed and actively engaged in the process.

Customer

6.15 Customer Service is the 'front door' for most Council services and as such we work closely with services to continually improve the customer experience and highlight issues. We have been able to effect positive change, for residents and have also been able to provide valuable training, so staff are more adept at having meaningful conversations with residents. Key customer services highlights include:

- **Lindisfarne Centre-** Following the opening of the Lindisfarne Centre in January 2023, the Customer Information Centre team have continued to work with partners on site (Citizens Advice, Town Council, Food Bank) to provide a more holistic service to residents and also promote the centre and encourage its use by the wider community.
- **Town Hall, Ashington.** The Customer Information Centre relocated in March 2023 into the Town Hall, and over the last 12 months the team have worked closely with the Community Bank and Registrars' team in that location to provide a more joined up service to residents.
- **The Hub@Cramlington-** to meet increased demand we have amended the opening hours of the Information Centre based in the Hub at Cramlington. The team are now present daily.

- **Contact Centre** - we have maintained performance on our key indicators, ensuring customer / call wait times are kept to a minimum utilising data from the amazon platform to understand business pressures and to maximise the use of staff recourse to meet customer demands at times during the day/ week.
 - **Amazon Connect Development** - we worked with Adult Social Care to carry out an options appraisal of telephony and have successfully onboarded both teams onto the Amazon Connect Platform. Building of the platform was carried out in-house, within timescale and without the need for expensive third-party support.
 - **iCasework** – we have implemented a new case management system for complaints, FOIs and corporate feedback.
 - **‘Front Of House’** – we have continued to work with the Library Service in adopting a ‘blended working’ approach to service delivery as a new way of working across both Customer and Library Services. This is providing greater opportunities for better service delivery to customers and best use of resources.
- 6.16 These initiatives, particularly work on the Amazon System and ‘Fix My Street’ are making systems and processes much more efficient and this frees up capacity and resources, enabling staff to focus on the priorities. Our Customer Services are continuing an overall trend of improvement. We receive around 30,000 calls per month and have delivered impressive performance with the ‘% of calls answered’, achieving an average of 95.6%, and for ‘average time to answer calls’, the team achieved 73 seconds for the quarter. This compares to 292 for the June 2022, an improvement of 219 seconds.

Assets

- 6.17 Integrated Services manage and maintain responsibility for our facilities, ensuring staff and service users can use property assets of the Council in a safe, efficient and effective manner. This has included:
- Delivery of KPI's across the estate, all within performance target (repairs & maintenance, statutory testing and corporate landlord compliance);
 - Successful reopening of refurbished sites, including County Hall and the Lindisfarne Centre;
 - Supporting the Leisure, Culture and Depot Review processes to improve service delivery;
 - Closure of buildings to support estate rationalisation, resulting in maximising efficiency of estates portfolio;
 - Working with services to provide Integrated Services for new facilities and buildings eg, Port of Blyth;
 - Working alongside other services to launch and manage the pioneering solar car port at County Hall, which is estimated to produce 50% of County Hall's energy needs.
- 6.18 One of the key projects under the BEST Use of Assets workstream is the property review and estates plan. This will give us an in-depth understanding of estate, enabling us to identify and plan where our investment is best targeted, how our estate can better be leveraged and where there are more opportunities for community interaction and partnership.

Governance

- 6.19 Our rewritten constitution, agreed by Full Council in May last year, brings greater clarity and regularisation to our decision-making and Council proceedings. I am confident we now have a fit-for-purpose Constitution that underpins delivery of our vision and priorities. Thank you to all Members who input into the review of the Constitution. At monthly Group Leaders' meetings, we continue to listen to feedback on how the Constitution is working.
- 6.20 As part of our work to update and strengthen governance we have also developed a clear rationale for the Council's arms-length companies. For 'Advance Northumberland', we established a new, Shareholder Cabinet Committee. Advance are reviewing their articles of association and scheme of delegation as well as corporate structure and financial model.
- 6.21 We also reviewed and refreshed the Council's Scrutiny Function and will continue to develop and strengthen Scrutiny arrangements in ways that work for Scrutiny Chairs and Members.

Key Areas of Focus for The Coming Year

- 6.22 In the coming year, my Portfolio's number one focus will be to deliver our balanced budget, ensuring the Council continues to deliver high-quality services, whilst investing in communities and local economies. Delivering our budget throughout the year, underpins all three of our Corporate Priorities.
- 6.23 In a challenging financial context, where external factors such as price inflation continue to impact on all services, our focus on regular financial performance reporting is critical. Cabinet considers a detailed Financial Performance Report prepared by the S151 Officer on a quarterly basis. These reports provide key information and analysis on the Council's financial performance and use of resources in each quarter and a projected year-end position at the date of the report. In previous years, these have enabled Cabinet to take swift action, with senior Officers to ensure we deliver our financial targets. The coming year will be to continue and build on this approach.
- 6.24 Having recently agreed the Council's Budget and MTFP, Members will be aware of the significant savings which will be delivered through the BEST workstreams. This will involve important work to deliver our BEST service reviews and reviews of contracts, active management of vacancies and other key actions. With the Leader and Cabinet Colleagues alongside the Council's Executive Management Team, I will ensure our BEST reviews remain on track to deliver more efficient services which better meet the needs of residents. I am sure Scrutiny will take a keen interest in this work and welcome their input.
- 6.25 Through the work of this Portfolio, we will also continue to engage extensively with our staff, responding to their key messages and supporting and equipping them to do what they do best for our residents and businesses. On that note, I take this opportunity to thank all staff for the excellent work they do every day and feel sure all Members will join me in expressing our collective gratitude to colleagues across all services.
- 6.26 We will also ensure we continue to bring further investment to the County from Government, the Combined Authority and private business.
- 6.27 We will also continue to drive performance, maintaining the standards in our best performing services whilst focusing on those areas that have room to improve.

- 6.28 I very much look forward to the coming year and believe, working together, Members and Officers will more than meet the challenges, whilst maximising the opportunities before us.
- 6.29 We will continue to work hard to maximise the potential of our website as our digital ‘front door’. We aim to make the user experience as simple as possible online, and that starts with how our customers navigate our website to find what they need. We’ve carried out extensive user research with members of our ‘people’s panel’ asking them about how they use the website today. We are learning from this feedback to improve the experience.
- 6.30 We are redesigning our Council Tax digital service and in 2024 we will be launching a new online service to help residents and businesses view their Council Tax bill, as well as making changes to their Council Tax account.
- 6.31 We are also engaging with staff to understand how we can provide the right technology they need to work smarter.

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

This report provides a valuable opportunity for Council to consider and comment on the work of each Portfolio. The recommendation to Council is to note the Deputy Leader’s Annual Portfolio Report.

8. 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 Deputy Leader’s 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 Deputy Leader’s 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	No - no equalities issues identified N/A

required and attached?	
Risk assessment	None at this stage.
Crime and disorder	N/A
Customer considerations	N/A
Carbon reduction	N/A
Health and wellbeing	Our ongoing engagement with staff is important to understand the health and wellbeing of staff groups across the organisation as well as communicating the many ways the Council can support staff health and wellbeing
Wards	(All Wards);

9. Background papers

Not applicable.

10. Links to other key reports already published

Corporate Plan 2023-26

Corporate Plan Achievements Report March 2023

11. Author and Contact Details

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