

Annual Achievements Report 2023-24 – Appendix 1

The following document describes the level of activity, progress and achievements made against the Corporate Plan 2023 – 2026.

1. Value for money

Our BEST ways of working is driving the change to ensure we are delivering Best Value through efficient, effective and accessible services that respond to and meet the needs and expectations of our residents.

- **To ensure our residents receive the best customer experience**

We have redesigned the way our customers access our services to provide a coordinated, consistent and equitable offer of services that makes better use of the data we gather, delivers more pro-active services and makes the best use of digital services.

Achievements in 2023-24 to support our Value for Money priority include:

- OneCall, Enquiry Referral Coordinators (ERC's) and Revenues & Benefits now all use the same telephony platform (Amazon Connect). Integrating more services into the corporate contact centre will create capacity for service teams to deliver more complex work. It is enabling a more joined up experience for customers that can have multiple queries across the organisation dealt with in the one place and create the data to support “a single view” of the customer.
- Fix My Street implemented. A platform that allows residents to report public realm issues and get updates on progress. This system has improved the online offer for customers and has allowed better understanding and visibility of issues leading to more efficient service delivery.
- iCasework implemented, a case management platform for corporate feedback and information governance request. This system allows more efficient case handling as all correspondence and documents are within one system and allows better insight into customer needs through the capture and analysis of feedback and use of this insight to provide a better customer experience.

We know residents value being able to contact the Council quickly and conveniently to pay bills, ask questions, access services and resolve issues. Our Customer Services are continuing an overall trend of improvement. We 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.

We have refreshed and revitalised our approach to Best Value. We put this at the heart of our new Planning, Performance and Accountability Framework, showing how we can demonstrate impact (Value for Money) as a result of the activities. The Framework has established one corporate approach with a clear thread from corporate plan to service planning to individual appraisal.

- **Make the best spending decisions,**

Budget

We set a balanced budget for 2023-24 that sustains good-quality day-to services whilst continuing to invest in new or refurbished schools, leisure centres, regeneration and infrastructure.

We involved our residents, communities and partners in how we design and deliver equitable services to ensure they meet their needs by delivering a Budget Engagement consultation.

Commissioning and Procurement

We have commenced Commissioning Framework Co-Production Workshops with the aim to agree the key principles of our new commissioning framework, this will provide a robust and commercially minded focus on delivering good outcomes, value for money and social value in our spending decisions.

Procurement savings of £1.63m have been achieved in Q1/Q2 of 2023-24 and it is anticipated that final savings will exceed £2m by the end of 31 March 2024. These comprise recurrent and non-recurrent efficiencies arising from a range of initiatives.

Fire & Rescue finance

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service has been described by His Majesty's Inspector as having 'a sound understanding of its future financial challenges and plans, using their assessment of risk within the county to guide them. The Service actively seeks efficiencies using technology to further enhance performance' (HMICRFS, 2023).

In addition, the most recent inspection confirmed that the Service's collaborative work aligns to its Community Risk Management Plan, including the sharing of its estate with other organisations that service the community. Inspectors recognised that Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service has 'put in place the capacity and capability it needs to achieve sustainable transformation, and it routinely seeks opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness' (HMICRFS, 2023).

Data

Progress on improving how we use data and performance monitoring to inform and plan our services has been made with the development of a new Data and Business Intelligence Strategy. This will work alongside the refreshed Performance Monitoring framework to ensure services are making data driven decisions to ensure we are delivering improved outcomes and ensuring we focus on continuous improvement.

- **To work better, more efficiently**

Workforce culture

To achieve Best Value it is essential we have the right structures in place to enable both our people and other assets to have the greatest impact. We have supported our staff throughout the year to succeed by embedding a workplace culture that

focuses on learning and continuous improvement underpinned by our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion and achieving best value.

Learning & Development

We have agreed a new Data Academy and launched the data skills offer with first cohort of 50 staff commencing study in November 2023. This apprenticeship will equip staff across the organisation with the skills to support faster data-informed decisions.

- **Making a difference with digital**

Resident digital offers

- We launched a new digital offer for carers which aims to reach carers who are not currently supported or known by the council or local carer support organisations. The service is free and led by carers themselves. It runs alongside services provided by local carer support organisations, offering a range of online support, from website guides, regular contact through emails, a guide to caring e-course, 'virtual cuppas' and even individual support calls - seven days a week.
- In Jan 2024 we launched a new app to support parents during the challenges of separation has launched in Northumberland. It is the latest in a series of free relationship support packages now available for residents through the council's trailblazing Family Hub programme. This app will be the latest addition to our digital offer and is a valuable resource that offers both practical and emotional support for parents, whilst focusing on the needs of the children."
- 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.
- We worked closely with a local 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.

2. Tackling Inequalities

Our residents are our greatest assets and our communities are full of potential. By tackling inequalities, we want to reduce the gap in experiences our residents have across health, education, employment and social outcomes.

- **Empowered and resilient communities**

County Partnership

We are proud to have led the way in convening a countywide and partnership approach to tackling entrenched social, economic and health inequalities. Following adoption of the Tackling Inequalities Plan by County Council in September 2022, the Inequalities Plan has now been signed by key partners across the County and beyond, demonstrating the commitment by all partners.

In July 2023, we hosted a Partnership event which focussed on bringing people, place and policy together - 100 delegates with representatives from NHS (ICB, primary and secondary care), Local Authority (all departments), Housing providers, VCSE, faith, private sector, Fire, Police, Academia.

At this event we showcased our work on 'Asset Based Community Development' and how we are moving from 'What is wrong to what is strong'. There was a clear commitment from partners and it was agreed to establish a County Partnership and an overarching plan that sits above all current partnership boards, we also agreed to adopt the Marmot policy objectives which will create an inclusive framework.

Integrated Impact Assessment

During 2023-24 we have worked on bringing together our equalities and climate impact assessments into one Integrated Impact Assessment and this is due to launch early 2024. This assessment tool will help us better understand the potential impact of our activity and help us think about what actions we can take to mitigate any negative impacts or risks we identify, whilst ensuring all decisions the council takes on policy and how we spend money is considered through an "inequalities lens".

Northumberland Communities Together

In November 2023 NCT launched an exciting new series of events designed to connect residents across Northumberland with services and community groups to support them through the winter months. The dedicated spaces have been carefully curated into a new interactive online map, available via the Northumberland County Council website, so residents can search for warm spaces in their area, applying filters against key factors like accessibility. Teaming up with partners including Age UK, Citizens Advice, Green Doctors, Health Trainers and many more, the event series covers locations across the county, making the events accessible to all.

- **Children and young people having the best start in life and grow up well.**

Schools

We have continued to ensure our young people have access across the County to the best education facilities and are educated in high-performing schools. Following completion of new schools in Hexham and Ponteland, the Council has approved a multi-million investment in the Coquet Partnership of schools and, following extensive consultation, a £50.427m project will see Astley Community High School and Whytrig Middle School rebuilt on a new, shared campus to create a state-of-the-art learning environment for over 1,000 students. The Council has also pledged substantial investment for schools in Berwick.

We have continued to maintain our high performance in terms of choices made for school places with 98.2% of first choice for primary places successful (+6% points above Nat Av) and 95.5% of first choice for secondary places successful (+13% points above Nat Av)

We are delighted to see more children and young people attending good or outstanding primary schools. This continues the improving trend over the last 2 years. The figure of 95.5% is 5.5% better than the national average. For 'pupils in good / outstanding secondary schools' - we have seen very impressive performance over the last 2 years and at early March 2024, the figure is 83.6%. Inspection outcomes are approximately 2% above the national average.

Skills

We have brought together education and industry with a county wide Skills Strategy linking schools with businesses, expanding apprenticeship awareness and raising the profile of jobs available in Northumberland.

We are the first Local Authority to engage and commit to GlobalBridge, a digital connectivity platform where Universities, and businesses can share their offers and needs and our young people create their own profile for work experience and employment opportunities.

We have reshaped the post 16 skill offer for our young people in Northumberland leaving school. Particularly an offer for those who may be a little more vulnerable and less confident to join a large college campus. Our skills training that is focused on meeting the needs of local employers, developing apprenticeship models and extending the young people offer into adult learning provision for career changers and retraining chances.

SEND

We have responded to the rapidly growing need for more Special Educational Needs and Disabilities facilities, services and school places from residents. Demand is high. Services have been reshaped to support the demand as well as capacity building within the educational infrastructure to provide additional sites and facilities. Some 150 out of 167 schools are engaged in a Whole School Education project whereby schools standardise their approach and systems to meet the demand of SEND.

Family Hubs

We have led the way in developing new ways of working with children and families. Northumberland are one of 75 local authorities leading the implementation of Family Hubs and one of 14 Trailblazers selected to develop this further and faster. The services were visited by Dame Andrea Leadsom in May 2023 who commended our work.

Childrens Services

We have maintained our high standards of practice in Children's Services. Northumberland was also one of six local authorities nationally to participate in a Thematic Review of the Best Start in Life undertaken by Ofsted and CQC and similarly very positive feedback received from inspectors about our staff, the inclusive and child focused services, and the partnership work.

The Ofsted Focused visit last year made positive findings about how effectively we achieve permanence for our cared for children. In addition, Northumberland Youth Justice service was subject to an HMIP inspection in April 2023 and the overall judgement was Good with three areas being judged Outstanding.

Corporate Parenting

We have refined and further strengthened our approach to Corporate Parenting. This continues to be a key area of focus and has been further enhanced with the Leader of Council taking on the role of chair of the Corporate Parenting Group (CPG). Council services, partner agencies including the ICB, and the private sector have

been well engaged in developing and providing opportunities for support, education, training, and employment for cared for children and young people and care leavers.

Residential

We have maintained the quality of our in-house residential provision and committed funding to further enhance this, including the development of multi-site homes as a key element of our response to the significant sufficiency and cost challenges of placements for cared for children and young people.

Virtual School

Our Virtual School has been praised by DfE as a model of good practice and has effectively led the implementation of the duty to promote the education of children with a social worker.

- **All adults living well, regardless of age, background, illness or disability.**

Annual Adult Social Care Survey

We have continued to deliver high-quality Adults' Services. Our latest 'Annual Adult Social Care Survey' results and the Biennial Carers Survey results show excellent ASC survey results compared to North-East and England.

- All 12 'ASCOF' indicators from our 2 surveys report outturns better than the North-East regional and England average scores.
- All 5 indicators from the last ASC Carers Survey were ranked within the upper quartile, with 4 indicators ranked 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 6th in England.
- 6 out of 7 indicators from the ASC User survey were ranked in the upper quartile.

Adult Social Care Academy

We have invested in Adult Social Care practice and developed an Adult Social Care Academy for new Social Workers. This was reviewed by 'Skills for Care' in March and was described by the reviewer at the time as being 'the most positive visit I have ever made'.

Partnerships

We have maintained high standards in our Adults' partnership working. The Police consistently describe our MASH (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub) as the most developed model in the region and we have shared this good practice with other local authorities.

Smoking

In 2023/24 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 area.

Inspections

We have invested in good practice and now have a comprehensive workforce strategy, central to which our Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) Academy for social workers continues to be successful and was evaluated positively by The Skills for Care Council. Our Quality of Practice Framework is well respected, supports reviews routinely and contributes to our continuous improvement journey

Our Short-Term Support Services (STSS) were inspected by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) to ensure they are safe and well-led. The services provide a short period of support to help people regain their independence after a serious accident or illness. Each service retained its Outstanding rating.

Shared Lives Northumberland provides support in a family home for adults who are unable to live alone because of their age or disability. The service was inspected in October 2023 to check whether it is safe, caring and well-led. In a report published in January 2024, inspectors rated the service as Good overall, with individual ratings of Good for both safe and well-led, and Outstanding for caring. Inspectors described Shared Lives Northumberland as an 'exceptional service' where people were truly respected and valued as individuals.

Awards

In Jan 2024, we maintained our Gold Standard Award for the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme. The scheme rewards and recognises UK employers and organisations that show outstanding support to the armed forces community. In 2018, the Council was one of just nine local authorities across the whole of the UK to receive the coveted Gold Award, which must be revalidated every five years.

In July 2023 Council's adult social work academy was a finalist in the Local Government Chronicle award for the best next generation employer. The adult social work academy was launched in 2022 to provide a high-quality learning environment for Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) which promotes excellent practice. Each year there are two intakes of NQSWs, in September and March. They are supported by three team managers, whose role is to nurture them through the transition from academic study to social work practice.

Leisure

In April 2023, Morpeth's new flagship sports & leisure centre opened its doors to the public. The fantastic £21 million facility, funded by Northumberland County Council provides state-of-the-art facilities and a whole new customer experience for all ages of the local community.

- **Residents have the building blocks of a good life.**

Employability

In Dec 2023, the latest meeting of the Northumberland Employability Network, co-chaired by the County Council and Northumberland Community and Voluntary Action (CVA) was held at Newbiggin Community Hub. The network is convened as part of

the Employment Partnerships Project, this project is funded by North of Tyne Combined Authority.

Contributing to the council's commitment to tackling inequalities, over 40 members from employability and skills support services and organisations came together to share information, identify collaboration opportunities, and to discuss and progress solutions to employment barriers which Northumberland residents and employers face. Members deliberated a broad range of issues from engaging with employers to find innovative ways to work together to reduce the skills gap and increase recruitment opportunities, to reviewing training and skills needs from both employer and employee perspectives. They also considered how to progress inclusivity and advance support for individuals with special educational needs and disabilities.

Safeguarding

We have strengthened partnership working through our Northumberland Children and Adult Safeguarding Partnership (NCASP). We have successfully integrated the children's and adults safeguarding partnerships in Northumberland with streamlined and revised structures and processes in place, including specific development of independent scrutiny and enhanced business support. The DfE have seen and are using our work, particularly around independent scrutiny, to inform national approaches

Fire & Rescue Inspection

In its most recent His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Service (HMICRFS) Report, Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service is described as 'good at preventing fires and other risk' (HMICRFS, 2023). This shows an improvement from a judgement of requires improvement in 2021. Inspectors have recognised 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.

3. Driving Economic Growth

- **Thriving places and culture**

Blyth

Energising Blyth – represents a significant regeneration scheme in the County, with £110m being invested via a number of Government programmes, including Future High Streets Fund, Town Deal, a Levelling-Up Deep Dive and more recently through the Government's Long-Term Deal for Towns fund, as well as investments from the County Council and the Combined Authority. The programme has been led by the Town Deal Board, Chaired by a local business leader and with representatives from local councillors, community representatives and education and skills providers.

The programme of delivery is underway, with early schemes focusing on the improvement of public spaces and enhancements to industrial sites completed, with key flagship buildings under construction.

The ambition and drive of the Town Board and the people of Blyth have been key to getting the programme to this point. As have important partnerships in the town, including the Energy Central Partnership, made up of the Council, Advance Northumberland, Port of Blyth and the national Offshore and Renewable Energy Catapult.

Investments include Enterprise Zone status and associated investments into Bates Clean Energy Terminal, as well as completion of the new dock at Cambois which facilitated the arrival of JDR Cables into the region, creating new jobs and adding to the weight to the industrial cluster in the area.

Ashington

The Ashington Regeneration Programme, building on the Town Investment Plan led by the Town Investment Board, is a £30m portfolio for the transformation of Ashington town centre, and consists of two main components:

- Ashington High Street Innovation Programme (HSIP), with funding secured from the NTCA and Government to help targeted town centres to recover from the Covid pandemic period of lockdowns.
- Town Centre Renewal of Strategic Sites Programme, with funding secured from the Government as part of its overall approach to levelling up across the country. The Ashington Regeneration Programme builds on recent investment in the town to deliver a new leisure centre and is running alongside two major projects underway that will fundamentally alter the town's purpose, movement strategy, vitality and investment potential. These include the reopening of passenger rail services to the Northumberland Line, including Ashington station, and the development of Northumberland College's Gen Zero campus at Wansbeck Business Park.

Housing and Planning

The County Council has successfully been part of a national pilot on Social Housing Regulation and continue to monitor the new regulations and prepare for the introduction of inspections.

We have continued to maintain the standard of our own housing stock, by delivering over £10m of investment works to council homes, including upgrades to kitchens, bathrooms, heating, electrical and roofing works, as well as delivering over £500k worth of aids and adaptations to support customer to continue living independently in their homes.

We have secured almost £20m of external funding through Department of levelling up for Blyth Town Centre Housing Improvements, including the provision of new homes, energy improvements to existing homes, and approximately £4.5m of Brownfield Housing funding to support development of new housing on sites previously deemed not viable.

We have been managing a steady increase (+27%) of social housing applications via the "Homefinder" system. A large portion of these is due to increasing rents in the private sector, the cost-of-living crisis and private landlords choosing to leave the market. Although there is a high demand on the service, the Homefinder staff have remained focused and prioritised any urgent cases. All of the Homefinder staff have

safeguarding training and know how to make referrals, we also have a robust appeals process that allows our customers to ask for a review of a decision on their housing application by producing supporting evidence and information to the Senior Officer.

Our Vulnerable Persons Officers work closely with other departments and external partners to ensure our most vulnerable customers are supported, they have built good working relationships with partners i.e. Karbon Homes, along with Occupational Therapists, Social Workers and medical professionals to ensure the housing needs of our customers are fully understood

Despite national concerns about the supply of new homes, the County is exceeding our share of government target. We are achieving 270% of our Housing Delivery Target.

We have launched new Neighbourhood Planning support to help communities shape their areas and identify potential community led housing schemes. 19 Parish Councils are now involved in pilot work.

This year we reviewed and re-launched our pre-application service. The service now offers prospective applicants and developers a bespoke service, tailored to their needs. This can be from an individual householder looking for advice on making adjustments or improvements to their home to accommodate changing needs throughout their lifetimes, all the way up to large strategic scale housing developments and everything in-between. Our aim is to offer early advice and help identify opportunities and constraints and how to improve a scheme.

The Planning Team have been working with Homes England and the NEMCA Housing and Land Group to develop a "Strategic Place Partnership" to help us deliver support on affordable housing schemes and maximise the amount of government support for new affordable rent houses, flats and bungalows

The council purchased new affordable housing in Longframlington (2) and Alnwick (8 properties). Work is now starting on site to build 13 dementia friendly bungalows on Lyndon Walk, Blyth. Nine affordable bungalows are also to be built at New Hartley with work due to commence on site imminently.

We are working with architects on a Master planning exercise for the 16-acre old Hexham Middle School site. There is a wish for the land to provide something for all generations of the community, based on the current needs of local residents. Initial proposals incorporate a mixture of good quality housing, including affordable housing, bungalows, family homes and an extra care supported living scheme. We are consulting with the public in March.

Local environments

We have maintained high standards in our local environments, providing attractive, clean and safe places for people to do business. Our key performance indicators on cleanliness and attractiveness of places show good performance and we now have 12 parks with Green Flag status.

Council teams worked round the clock in October 2023 to ensure residents were kept safe during Storm Babet. The storm, which brought heavy rainfall and strong

winds caused significant impacts in Rothbury, while high river levels were also seen in Morpeth and other parts of the county.

Roads

In November 2023 the County Council welcomed millions in extra funding to improve the condition of the county's road network. An extra £2.768m is confirmed for the county for 2024-25 and it is expected this will continue thereafter, with a total uplift of over £184.836m over the next ten years. The Council's main funding for highway maintenance comes from Department for Transport and is around £21.780m per year. In addition to this since 2020-21 the Council has put in a further £17.225m in its own capital to improve road maintenance over the last three years.

Safer communities

The Safer Northumberland Partnership (SNP) 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- In Dec 2023 A new team of Community Safety Officers started work in Cramlington – working with police and partners to cut down anti-social behaviour (ASB). It comes after the council secured grant funding for ASB hotspot and transport initiatives run by Police and Crime Commissioner Kim McGuinness' office as part of the Home Office's Safer Streets programme
- 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.

- **Diverse and resilient economy.**

North of Tyne Combined Authority

We have maximised the benefits from devolution and powered regional growth. The County Council has been a constituent authority of the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA), alongside Newcastle City Council and North Tyneside Council, since its inception in 2018. The County has seen significant investment, supporting its priorities as a result of the devolution deal, including infrastructure investment, for example in Northumberland line stations and the road bridge, investment in key sectors such as digital, green and clean manufacturing and health.

The new Devolution Deal was agreed with Government in December 2022 and the process for establishing the new Mayoral Combined Authority has been underway throughout 2023 and is due to finalise with the establishment of the North East Mayoral Combined Authority and Mayoral election in May 2024. Through the Leader of the Council Northumberland is leading the development of the rural, environment and coastal Transition Portfolio, building on the Rural Investment and Stewardship Strategy developed by NTCA and incorporating the assets and priorities of all 7 authorities to make NEMCA a 'rural exemplar'.

Tourism

We agreed a Destination Management Plan in 2022 which sets out the ways in which the sector can be supported to develop and thrive. This is overseen by Visit Northumberland, one of the first Local Visitor Economy Partnerships (LVEPs) nationally, created by Visit England as a portfolio of nationally supported, strategic and high-performing Partnerships, providing strong local leadership and governance in tourism destinations all over the country.

Northumberland is also part of the first regional tourism pilot receiving £2.25 million from national government covering a period to March 2025.

Growth

The Borderlands Partnership, made up of the five local authorities along the English-Scottish border working together to achieve inclusive and sustainable growth, has been working together since 2016. The full £350m Inclusive Growth Deal was agreed between the Partnership and the UK and Scottish Governments in March 2021, to be delivered over a 10 year period. The programme is made up of a series of interlinked investment programmes and specific projects, including improvements to infrastructure and places, business, innovation and skills and encouraging Green Growth.

Two of the early projects are in Northumberland, which has seen the completion of the Ad Gefrin Distillery and visitor centre in Wooler, which is already attracting visitors and providing good-quality local jobs. In addition, Lilidorei, children's play park, the largest of its kind in the world, opened at the Alnwick Garden in May 2023.

A key part of the programme is the development of Place Plans across the Borderlands area, which includes 7 towns in Northumberland. Led by the community, via local Place Plan Boards, the Plans articulate the long-term vision for the regeneration, resilience and growth of the towns.

Culture and heritage

Culture and heritage led regeneration is being delivered in Berwick and Hexham, respectively, with the Culture and Creative Zone being delivered in Berwick, recognising the town as a focal point for many in the sector, as well as its unique assets such as the Barracks, owned by English Heritage and being revitalised as part of a significant programme of investment and the Borderlands investment into the Maltings Theatre.

Working with Historic England, Hexham attracted funding through the Heritage Action Zone, which has seen work to revitalise the historic town centre making it a more attractive, engaging and vibrant place for people to live, work, invest and visit. The Hexham High Street Heritage Action Zone is a £3.5m partnership between Historic England and Northumberland County Council which has brought vacant historic premises back into use and has restored traditional frontages along Priestpople, Cattle Market and Battle Hill. Ten buildings in Hexham have benefitted from heritage grants aimed at restoring and regenerating the town centre. A major public realm scheme is due for completion in May 2024 which has revitalised the streetscape in the centre of the town.

The award-winning approach taken on the refurbishment of the historic Union Chain Bridge involved close partnership working, securing external funding, whilst using the project as a catalyst to support a STEM education programme.

Business Support

Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service recognises that nearly 60% of businesses never recover after a fire. As such it delivers a risk-based inspection programme, using societal life risk, likelihood of a fire occurring and the likelihood of a non-compliance to target fire safety audits of commercial premises across Northumberland. This approach allows the Service to focus its resources on premises that are less likely to be compliant with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order and therefore reduces risk. Recognised during its most recent HMICRFS inspection, The Service consistently uses its full range of enforcement powers and, when appropriate, it prosecutes those who don't comply with fire safety regulations. Using Grant funds, the Service has increased its capacity and the competence of operational staff to be able to conduct audits at lower risk commercial premises.

- **Skilled and aspirational people**

Energy Central

Work officially began during the spring of 2023 on the £13.6m Energy Central Learning Hub situated in the clean energy cluster at Port of Blyth, an official ground-breaking ceremony took place during July. The campus will create a high-quality

talent pool, supporting the clean energy sector in meeting its ambitious growth aspirations, whilst inspiring, training and providing pathways to employment for the local community and wider region.

The strategic partnership formed between Northumberland County Council, Port of Blyth and the Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult to lead the development has focussed upon the construction phase of the project. However, during summer 2023, with construction underway, the focus has shifted and now officers from Education SEND & Skills are front and centre of developments to refine the vision and business model as well as engaging education delivery and industrial partners.

Northumberland Skills Welding & Fabrication training facility

The capital investment of £1.4m to deliver Northumberland Skills Welding & Fabrication training facility within the clean energy cluster at Port of Blyth reached completion and was handed over to the Skills team April 2023. The facility welcomed its first small pilot cohort of 9 young people for the remainder of the 2022-23 academic year, 2 of which have moved into apprenticeship and employment, while the remainder have returned for training to the next level on their journey to entering the engineering sector.

FUSE campus

During the summer of 2023 plans have been drawn up and costings developed to explore the expansion of learning space within the FUSE campus for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. It is concluded that in the region of 60 additional places can be created providing an additional vocational education option for more young people with SEND and providing greater reach of provision into the south and the Tyne Valley. Next steps will be to secure funding to allow works to be taken forward based upon the plans.

Northumberland Skills

Northumberland Skills continues to provide training models through apprenticeships in various vocational sectors and have availability in various roles across the county to work directly with internal and external employers. Apprenticeship recruitment continues to increase in 2023, headline achievement was 67.1%, 7.1% points above the current national rate and increased by 9.0% from 2021-22.

In 2023 The Employability Service successfully completed 2 programmes - The DWP JETS programme (Job entry targeted support) and The Refugee Employability Support Programme. The Employability Service continues to be well positioned to respond particularly to North of Tyne Inclusive Growth projects where the prime aims are to support residents into gaps, reduce inequality and disadvantage gaps and to support progression into employment as well as in work progression through training.

- **A connected county**

Northumberland Line

We have continued to invest in 'flagship' infrastructure. Construction is now well underway on the Northumberland Line, with six new stations granted planning

approval. Bringing passenger services back between the South East of the county and central Newcastle has made significant progress this year and will be open from Summer 2024. This is a hugely complex project with major station construction works being undertaken at six separate sites, signalling and track improvements along the line and changes to numerous level crossing points all of which must be co-ordinated and undertaken to minimise disruption to local communities, rail freight services and road users. With a journey time between Ashington and central Newcastle of around 35 minutes, the line will improve accessibility to employment, training and leisure for residents in southeast Northumberland, as well as opening up new opportunities for education and travel.

To maximise the economic impacts of the line we have developed a Northumberland Line Economic Corridor Strategy, which will support skills and training, business growth, housing and the wider cultural and visitor offer. Working with our partners in the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) £10m has already been agreed as the initial investment into key aspects of the strategy, focusing on early infrastructure investment and stations, including in Blyth and Ashington.

Mobile connectivity

In November 2023, the Council started using advanced monitoring technology to enhance mobile connectivity throughout the county, bridging the digital divide across communities. Council refuse vehicles have been equipped with mobile monitoring units which can assess real-time signal strength and quality across Northumberland during their regular routes. The initiative aims to collect comprehensive data on coverage, speed, and phone signal quality which will be used to create coverage maps, enabling major mobile operators like EE, O2, Three, and Vodafone to effectively address connectivity challenges. The initiative is being spearheaded by the iNorthumberland and Local Services teams at the Council with the technology being provided by mobile network analysts, Streetwave.

We have secured a commitment from a mast provider (Atlas) to install a mobile mast at Craster to help address the ongoing issue of poor connectivity in the community. Helping to support the huge numbers of visitors and tourists as well as residents.

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.

4. Environment

Environment Policy

In October 2023 we agreed to an ambitious new environmental policy which strengthens its commitment to a healthier environment and more sustainable future. The Environmental Policy Statement agreed at Cabinet highlights the diverse range of activities being undertaken by the Council to maintain, protect and enhance the environment and the key role that nature recovery can play in helping to tackle climate change.

Solar Carport

This year saw the Council install a £3.8 million state-of-the-art solar carport array, the third largest of its kind in the UK. It features photovoltaic panels which will provide 40% of County Hall's energy requirements with an overall goal of 50% when combined with the roof-based solar PV. Anticipated annual savings of £0.165m will be realised, contributing to a 50% reduction in carbon emissions by 2025. The carport will also power electric vehicle charge points and include rapid charge and overnight charging options for the Council's fleet vehicles. The project has been partially funded by the European Regional Development Fund and constructed by UK Power Network Services.

Climate Change Action Plan

The Policy Statement reaffirms the Council's on-going development of a new Climate Change Action Plan which will set out its climate and environmental targets for 2024 to 2026. It highlights the Council's responsibility in preserving the natural land to benefit the communities it serves and its strong commitment to front line services, whether it's dealing with littering and fly tipping or extra roadside litter clearing, creating more green spaces, woodlands and new nature trails, improving water quality, encouraging more active and sustainable transport, to tackling major societal issues such as climate change and the loss of biodiversity.

Northumberland Youth Voice

In December 2023 Northumberland County Council hosted a unique event at its Morpeth headquarters for pupils from several schools in the county to address environmental and climate change issues. High school and sixth form pupils from The Duchess's Community High School in Alnwick, The Blyth Academy, Queen Elizabeth High School in Hexham, King Edward VI School in Morpeth and Prudhoe Community High School came together for a day filled with presentations, talks, and workshops.

The student-led 'Northumberland Youth Voice on Climate Change' conference provided a platform for insightful discussions on critical topics such as transport, energy provision, heating solutions, and environmental challenges. Participants collaborated in workshops and engaged in a Dragon's Den style scenario, where they created and pitched tangible climate-related projects which they can begin to implement within their schools; fostering a sense of responsibility and ownership among the students for the well-being of their local environment.

Northumberland Schools Sustainability Network (NSSN)

The Council has already set up the Northumberland Schools Sustainability Network (NSSN) in partnership with the UK Schools Sustainability Network (UKSSN) to provide staff and students across the county with a virtual platform for sharing ideas and resources, facilitating collaboration and participation in local and national climate action initiatives. This has further been strengthened by the Council's 'Climate Change and Sustainability in Northumberland: Schools Resource Pack' which is a tool to help school staff inspire students, alleviate climate anxiety and empower them to take action locally.

Environment and Climate Fund

In January 2024, after a thorough evaluation process by the Climate Change Team at the Council, 17 projects have been selected from 35 applications for their innovative approaches. This has resulted in £55,000 being awarded for environmentally conscious projects collectively. Successful community groups will benefit from financial support from Northumberland County Council's Environment and Climate Fund to support environmental and climate change initiatives in the county.

5. 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.

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