



# Northumberland County Council

County Council

Wednesday, 20 March 2024

## Corporate Peer Review Report

**Report of Councillor(s)** Cllr Glen Sanderson, Leader of Council

**Responsible Officer(s):** Dr Helen Paterson, Chief Executive

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

**Achieving Value for Money** – The Corporate Peer Review helps to inform the Council's approach to Value for Money by focusing on: local priorities and outcomes; organisational and place leadership; governance and culture; financial planning and management; and, capacity for improvement.

**Tackling Inequalities** – We asked the Peer Review Team to reflect on the Council's three priorities, including tackling inequalities. The Report of the Peer Review Team highlights the progress we are making as well as offering recommendations on how we can continue to develop our work on tackling inequalities.

**Driving Economic Growth** – We also asked the Peer Review Team to focus on our priority to drive economic growth. The Report underlines the impressive progress we have and continue to make on regeneration and investment across the County.

### 2. **Purpose of report**

This report summarises the process of the Council's recent Corporate Peer Review, shares the Report of the Peer Review Team, and proposes further actions including ongoing activities, which respond positively to the Peer Review Team's recommendations.

### 3. **Recommendations**

#### 3.1 Council is recommended to:

- Thank the members of the Local Government Association's Peer Review Team for their time and hard work on the Council's Corporate Peer Review.
- Note the recommendations set out in the Peer Review's Report.

- Note the proposed actions, including ongoing activities and initiatives, which respond positively to the Peer Review Team's recommendations.

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

Not applicable

#### 5. **Background**

- 5.1 Corporate Peer Review (also known as Corporate Peer Challenge) is a peer-led method of improvement, led by the Local Government Association. It provides councils with a robust and effective improvement and assurance tool. It is owned and delivered by the sector, for the sector. Peers remain at the heart of the peer review process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.
- 5.2 Though voluntary, councils are expected to have a Peer Review every 5 years. These are delivered at no additional cost to the council. Peer Review, as the name suggests, is **not an** inspection. It is part of being a well-run, best value council. The LGA's approach to Peer Review covers:
- Local priorities and outcomes;
  - Organisational and place leadership;
  - Governance and culture;
  - Financial planning and management;
  - Capacity for improvement;
- 5.3 Within this framework, we asked the Peer Review Team to focus on the Council's three priorities of: Value for Money; Tackling Inequalities; and Driving Economic Growth.
- 5.4 There were five phases to NCC's Peer Review: a scoping meeting; preparation and engagement; onsite Corporate Peer Review; Report (see Appendix 1) and NCC's proposed actions responding to the Report (see Appendix 2); and progress review. All the Group Leaders were briefed (written and verbally) on background and preparations for the Peer Review at their meetings in September, October and December 2023.
- 5.5 The 'onsite' element of the Peer Review took place during the week of 15<sup>th</sup> January 2024, with the Review Team spending four days at County Hall. They met and listened to Members, staff, partners and residents. Participants received briefings in advance of these sessions, so they understood what Peer Review was and what to expect.
- 5.6 The Review Team comprised:
- Cllr Martin Hill - Leader of Lincolnshire County Council (Conservative Political Peer);
  - Cllr Steve Morpew - Leader of Norfolk County Council's Labour Group (Labour Political Peer Lead);
  - Terence Herbert - Chief Executive of Wiltshire Council;

- Anna Eastgate, Corporate Director of Place Services, Dorset Council
- Owen Jenkins - Director of Place, Transport and Infrastructure, Oxfordshire County Council
- Paul Cracknell, Executive Director of Strategy and Transformation, Norfolk County Council;
- David Powell, Former Deputy Chief Executive & Chief Finance Officer at Powys County Council;
- Frances Marshall (Senior Regional Advisor), LGA Peer Review Team;
- Francesca Stott (National Advisor), LGA Peer Review Team.

- 5.7 At the end of the onsite meetings, the Review Team presented their initial findings to the Council's Executive Management Team and Cabinet Members. All Group Leaders were also invited to attend this feedback session.
- 5.8 The Review Team have now produced their Report which is attached at Appendix 1.

### Summary of Report

***“Northumberland has made improvements it can be proud of and should focus on further embedding these...it should celebrate and be proud of the significant progress made...Whilst at the same time remaining focussed on embedding, driving, and monitoring the impact of further change...Lasting and sustained improvement inevitably takes time...”*** (Extracts from Executive Summary of Feedback Report)

- 5.9 In its Report the Review Team states: *“It is clear the council understands its place and has a vision reflected in its new corporate plan and priorities”*. The Report reflects on what more we can do to embed the Corporate Plan, ensuring this is understood by all Members and staff.
- 5.10 We very much welcome the Report highlighting Northumberland's workforce as an *“asset, with loyal, committed staff who are passionate about the communities they serve and proud to work for them”*. We wholeheartedly agree with this. It is also pleasing to see the report outline examples of innovation and high performing NCC services which should be celebrated as best practice.
- 5.11 Of course, the Review Team also encourage the Council to focus on service areas that perform less well, making better use of data, intelligence, best practice and community approaches. We accept this and indeed are working on a number of initiatives to drive performance improvement, for example in strengthening our approach to recycling. We are also taking steps to strengthen and deepen our working with Towns and Parishes, as key partners in what NCC does across the County.
- 5.12 The Report acknowledges the wide-ranging improvement and cultural change journey the Council has taken forward during the past 18 months and states:
- “Northumberland is proud of the progress made to improve culture, governance, and value for money (VfM)...The Leader, Chief Executive, and new Executive Management Team (EMT) are widely recognised for their roles in championing this improvement...The pace of changes undertaken has been impressive.”***

- 5.13 Encouragingly, the report highlights the positive role played by the Leader, CX and her Executive Management Team in driving forward impressive improvement and change in the organisation. It is also pleasing to see our vision for Northumberland as a 'Land of Great Opportunities' being reflected in the Report.
- 5.14 The Report also highlights improved relationships between Members, and between Members and Officers. Naturally, the Report also emphasises there is more to do to ensure these improvements are felt by and role-modelled by all Members and Officers and offers some insights for how this might be achieved. We welcome this advice from the Review Team. It's important all Members and Officers can feel positive change and be part of NCC's improvement journey and we will continue to offer support and listen to any Members' and Officers' views on how they can be included in this 'journey'.
- 5.15 Reassuringly, the Report states: "*Northumberland has a clear understanding of its financial position*" and is in a relatively strong position with a solid reserve base and a good track record of delivering savings in the current financial year. The Report also underlines the opportunity to strengthen our financial capability and financial support model to meet future financial challenges. The Review Team believe the Council's BEST approach has '*huge potential*' to transform services and outcomes if delivered successfully.
- 5.16 The Report outlines how the Council has built positive relationships with key local and regional stakeholders, and is seen by most as a "*supportive, constructive partner*". It encourages NCC to continue to develop and deepen its role with partners. The Report also acknowledges the role NCC has played in securing a new Devolution Deal and an expanded Combined Authority for our region.
- 5.17 Finally, the report highlights as strengths, NCC's track record of securing Government investment, to drive economic growth and tackle inequalities. It acknowledges how NCC has continued to invest in community infrastructure at a challenging time. The Report recommends that NCC further strengthens its capital management and develop a longer-term capital programme and recognises we are taking steps to do this.

### **Next Steps**

- 5.18 Appendix 2 sets out the recommendations made by Peer Review Team in their Report. Alongside this are actions which we believe respond positively to those recommendations. Many of these actions continue work that has been started in the past 18 months, with the Peer Review providing an opportune moment to reflect on progress, refine and further embed activities.
- 5.19 The lead Peer Reviewers will re-visit us in around six-months to reflect on our progress since January.

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

- 6.1 This report provides a valuable opportunity for Council to consider and comment on the Report of the Peer Review Team following their work with us in 2023/24. Whilst 'Peer Review' is entirely voluntary, it is considered good practice to undertake a Review and to respond positively to the findings and recommendations of our peers in the local government sector and we are committed to doing that.

## 7. Implications

<b>Policy</b>	This report supports delivery of all three priorities of the Corporate Plan.
<b>Finance and value for money</b>	Value for money is a priority for the Council. This report contains no direct financial implications. The ongoing delivery of the individual actions may have financial implications which would form separate reports as these arise.
<b>Legal</b>	Whilst this report contains no immediate legal implications, the delivery of the individual actions may have legal implications, which would form separate reports as these arise.
<b>Procurement</b>	N/A
<b>Human resources</b>	N/A
<b>Property</b>	N/A
<b>The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?</b>	A full assessment is not required. This report does not propose a change to specific services or functions.
<b>Risk assessment</b>	None at this stage.
<b>Crime and disorder</b>	N/A
<b>Customer considerations</b>	N/A
<b>Carbon reduction</b>	N/A
<b>Health and wellbeing</b>	N/A
<b>Wards</b>	(All Wards);

## 8. Background papers

Not applicable.

## 9. Links to other key reports already published

Not applicable.

## 10. Author and Contact Details

Philip Hunter, Director of Strategy and Communications  
Email: [Philip.Hunter@northumberland.gov.uk](mailto:Philip.Hunter@northumberland.gov.uk)