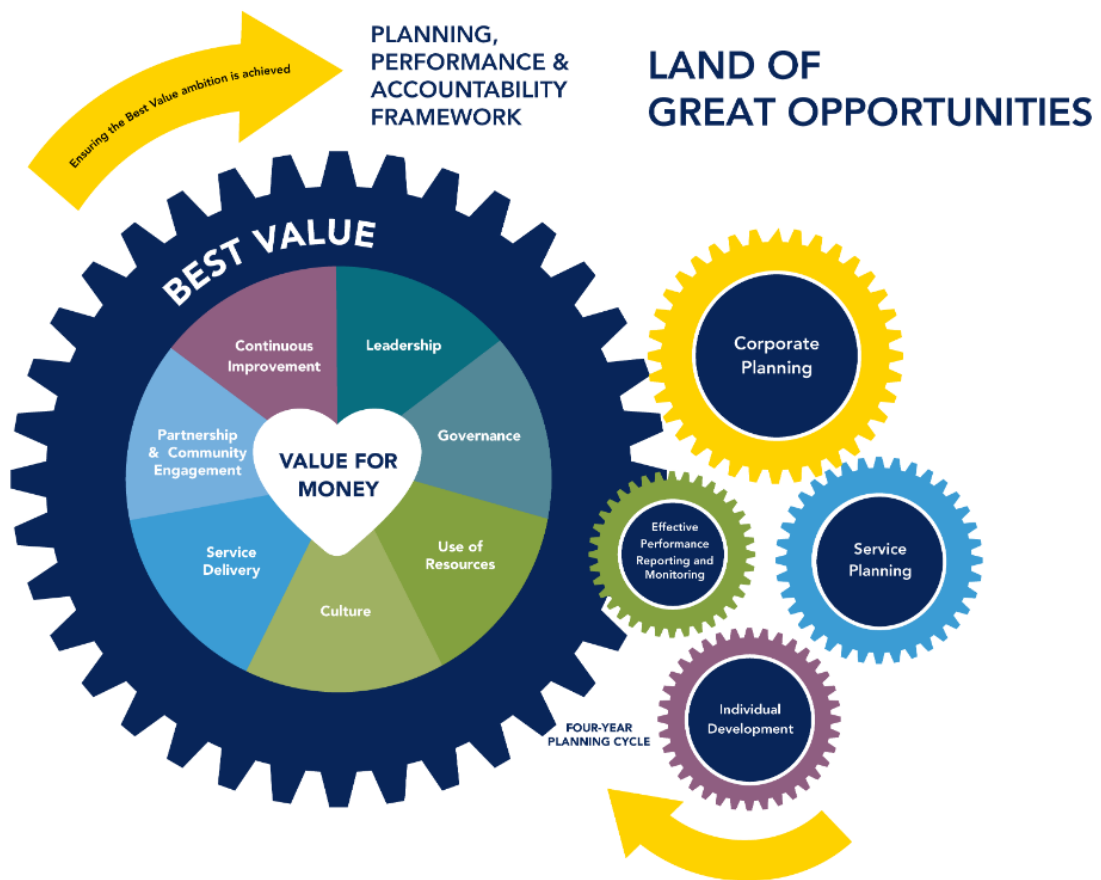


# Northumberland County Council

Productivity Plan Submission to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities July 2024



This Productivity Plan has been endorsed by the Leader of the Council and we welcome feedback from Government to take into our future consideration and learning from this Plan.

## **1. How the Council has transformed the way it designs and delivers services to make better use of resources:**

The Council approved a new [Corporate Plan](#) in May 2023, setting out a clear vision and three corporate priorities. In achieving the priorities, we will ensure we pass on a healthy, clean, and sustainable environment to future generations. Each of our three priorities has a part to play in responding to the climate change emergency, and we also focus on protecting and enhancing our environment as set out in our [Environment Policy Statement](#).

Despite the challenging context, we have agreed proposals which will deliver a [balanced budget for 2024-25](#) and 2025-26. These proposals will sustain good quality day-to-day services whilst continuing to invest in new or refurbished schools, leisure centres, regeneration, and infrastructure. The proposals contain savings of £10.834 million (2024-25) and £14.939 million (2025-26).

In July 2022, the Council agreed a [new senior structure](#) at tiers 1 and 2, which has reduced senior management costs by £1.3m per annum. We are confident we now have the Officer leadership capacity and, crucially, stability to realise our vision and three corporate priorities.

The Council has set out an ambitious programme of work to change the way it delivers its services and ensure that it remains within its financial envelope. Savings from our BEST initiative which will transform all services, were agreed by full Council when it set its budget for 2024-25 and Medium-Term Financial Plan for the period 2024-2028 in February 2024. Our budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan ensure resources are aligned to our corporate priorities.

BEST is the Council's new way of working. It enables the Council to give residents the best experience through its services. It is the Council becoming more financially efficient and sustainable and ensuring value for money in the delivery of services. These changes not only focus on improving productivity and efficiency but also on managing demand and inflationary pressures. This includes the way the Council is run, how we utilise our resources, technology, assets, and people and how we deliver our services to customers. Our [Strategic Change Business Case](#) sets out our proposed programme of improvement projects that will deliver sustainable savings and service improvements across the Council. It is envisaged that BEST will deliver recurrent and cashable savings of £16.760 million over the next three years.

The programme is underpinned by a robust Benefits Management Framework, a structured approach for maximising positive outcomes and return on investment. As benefits are identified they are categorised (financial/cashable, quantitative/non-cashable, and qualitative) and aligned with strategic objectives. A key requirement of our business transformation is cultural change enabling our staff to adapt to new technology and new ways of working.

To ensure we are making the right progress to improve our services for our residents, customers, and visitors we monitor our improvement journey monthly through the Best Working Board, chaired by the Executive Director of Transformation and Resources. Regular updates are provided to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

Examples of capital spending to improve services, preventative approaches and locally led partnership working is detailed in Appendix 1.

## **2. How the Council plans to take advantage of technology and make better use of data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources:**

We have transformed our approach to data and business intelligence. Our new 'Data & BI Strategy' is being continually developed and drives this work, focusing on three key principles: advancing the practice of collecting, storing, and using data; ensuring our people are data literate and skilled; and embedding a data driven culture across the organisation. We have established a Data Leaders group which is a network of professionals from across the organisation who work together on continuous improvement, efficiency and innovation and we are investing in our workforce following the launch of our Data Academy in November 2023. This gives staff the opportunity to enhance their data and analytical skills through an apprenticeship.

The breadth of operational, and often legacy systems in use presents challenges to data quality. They often facilitate low data quality during the data entry process and have limited native tooling to spot data issues. Detecting and fixing data quality issues often requires additional tools and systems (duplication of effort). Suppliers are often reluctant to change systems and/or the cost of change is high, impacting our ability to make fixes.

We aim to overcome this challenge by rationalising our software/application estate and ensuring system and data integration is a priority in the procurement roadmap. This will identify solutions, timescales, analysis of impact and risks and a cost benefit analysis to help streamline our technical architecture. We will ensure the implementation of a fit for purpose information and data architectures that will enable improved discoverability of data and documents while enhancing our data security.

The scale of NCC means there are always opportunities to apply technology to improve the way we work. In the data space specifically, we have plans that start with highlighting and fixing data quality issues in operational systems and demonstrating the impact that high quality linked data offers. Specifically, this work should show impact in the customer services, adult social care, and collaboration with public health space.

Examples of our technology led efficiencies to date and planned improvements can be seen in Appendix 1.

### **3. How the Council plans to reduce wasteful spend within the organisation and systems**

Our Planning, Performance and Accountability Framework is fundamental to achieving best value as it describes how we 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 accountability across our complex range of services.

To support and enable a value for money culture across the Council, services complete an annual Value for Money Self-Assessment. The self-assessments provide services with a baseline against which they can track improvements against five core dimensions of value for money (Economy, Efficiency, Effectiveness, Equity and Sustainability) and identify opportunities for improvement which are then built into service plans.

As a Council, equality is a cornerstone of the work we are carrying out across the organisation and is very much embedded within our core vision and values. We remain fully committed to fostering a culture of diversity, equity & inclusion across our county and to support this aim we have moved from Equality, Diversity and Inclusion to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to reflect that our organisation recognises and embraces diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. Under the Equality Act 2010 (Public Sector Equality Duty) Northumberland County Council as a public body is required to publish equality information annually. As part of this duty, we collect and publish information about our workforce and the actions we are taking as an employer to meet our equality objectives: [Equality Workforce Report 2024](#). [Equality Information Report 2024](#).

Our DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) team is proportionate to our equality duty and consists of 3 FTE staff with a cost of £132,231. All DEI training is delivered internally and via online training materials. Eight Staff Network Groups have been formed in response to feedback received through our employee surveys; they are run by staff, for staff and provide opportunities and mutual support networks. Networks meet quarterly. There is a small budget of £1,500 available to support promotional activities. The effectiveness of our work can be seen in Appendix 1.

We have robust controls in place to minimise expenditure on agency and consultancy costs. Agency costs for 2023-24 represented 2.36% of the total staff budget. Consultancy costs for 2023-24 represented 0.02% of the total staff budget. Trade union facility time for 2023-24 represented 0.02% of the total staff budget.

NCC has been a constituent authority of a Mayoral Combined Authority since 2019, with the creation of the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) to deliver an agreed Devolution Deal across Northumberland alongside neighbouring authorities of North Tyneside and Newcastle. It has been a positive experience, with a strong collaborative partnership approach to deliver an ambitious devolution deal to drive inclusive economic growth in the area. Since May 2024 Northumberland County Council has been a constituent authority of the North East Combined Authority (NECA), with the neighbouring 6 Local Authorities, to deliver a wider devolution deal covering the 7 North East Local Authority area. Achievements from the NTCA are detailed in Appendix 1. We are also one of the five local authorities in the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal, which was established to unlock the potential for sustainable and inclusive economic growth across the South of Scotland and North of England. Borderlands' funding has supported a range of projects in the county, from the AdGefrin distillery in Wooler, a new arts centre in Berwick and the Lilidorei playscheme in Alnwick. Representing up to £452 million of fresh investment to the Borderlands area.

#### 4. The barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove

Greater flexibility around the use of capital receipts would be helpful. Currently Councils can utilise up to £0.500 million of capital receipts from the sale of certain assets to fund the short-term revenue costs that support qualifying invest-to-save and efficiency projects to provide revenue savings in the future. It would be helpful if the limit were increased to allow further investment in transformation to take place.

There are several Government policies and practices which in themselves drive costs and inefficiencies which if reviewed would enable all Councils to make significant improvement in productivity and value for money. These include:

- **Devolution of funds** – this is valuable as this allows the longer-term view to be taken and provides flex across funding streams/projects/programmes when required allowing places to take a whole place view.
- Build on the **local assurance framework** approach – Local Authorities as trusted deliverers and grant givers to support the development of their places and economies; trusted to take some of this local development and delivery from central government, whilst delivery Government objectives and priorities in a way that fits local need.
- DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) supporting enabling greater **data integration** to enable more automated processing in areas such as blue badge applications, benefit claims and court of protection cases.
- Co-ordinating the requirements of place shaping between the **NHS and local Councils** to enable place preventative planning and shaping being prioritised alongside delivery such as acute services.
- Enabling greater freedoms over **ring fenced grants** to allow more local decision making.
- Reduce bureaucratic **capital bidding processes** that bear no relation to evaluation criteria and awards.
- Provide a **multiyear needs-based funding system** and settlement that enables local authorities to plan for the longer term.
- Resolving the position on Adult social care **unregulated placements and court award cases** to enable greater management of the provider market or provide additional funding for greater local authority led provision.
- Address **SEND** issues – increase funding to meet eligibility criteria or reduce eligibility criteria to match available funding.
- Reform **home-to-school** transport entitlement to make it more proportionate and affordable.
- Clarification of **Social Care Reforms**, including charging and ensure adequate funding is provided.
- Information as soon as possible on the potential income, and obligations, for LAs from **Extended Producer Responsibility (Packaging)** reforms accompanied by an appropriate level of recurrent funding.

# Northumberland County Council

## Productivity Plan Submission to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities July 2024

### Appendix 1.

#### **1. How the Council has transformed the way it designs and delivers services to make better use of resources:**

##### **Use of capital spending**

- The Council is currently using capital funding and building a number of children's homes (including procurement of existing buildings) in order to significantly reduce the level of expenditure incurred on out of county children's placements and enable children to remain resident within the county. It is envisaged that once this project is complete that there will be a net annual revenue saving of £1.390 million.

##### **Preventative approaches**

- A new Communities First model will provide better outcomes at lower cost, preventing people from going into higher cost health and care services. Our model seeks to shift demand from high need, high-cost services to lower cost community driven services that are accessible to residents where they live and in so doing increasing community capacity, capability and cohesion. Similar models of delivery have shown an average cost of VCS intervention at £1,882 per interaction annually. This compares to Northumberland's average homecare packages costs of £7,512 annually. This model can deliver savings by transitioning those who receive low level packages of care to community-based services, deflecting referrals from the adult social care front door and Care Act assessment waiting list to community-based services and prevent additional care needs.
- We are currently piloting a revised front-end triage of all cases entering adult social care by bringing together different elements of services, including care management, social work, occupational therapy, physio, short term support intervention. We are looking to involve the voluntary sector and potentially NHS partners in the future. The aim is to increase independence for individuals through short term interventions and signposting to other services. This should ultimately give clients a better outcome, but with the byproduct of reduced pressure on adult care services (and by implication spending). The pilot in Cramlington has only been running a few weeks but initial signs are positive. In the first 3 weeks, just over 80 cases were triaged and only 1 went on to long term care. The pilot team felt this was fundamentally different to what would have happened if they'd gone through the previous "duty" system straight to the long-term teams for review. Staff are positive as well as there appears to be reduced pressure on long term teams and the high intensity problem solving approach to the triage is proving popular with those staff involved in the new "preventive" front end. Further pilots are intended soon for Belford in the north and the west of Northumberland. It is too early to estimate exact savings potential, but the early signs are this could assist in delivering the adult social care savings of £3m per year required from the budget for the next few years and will produce better outcomes for clients who should remain more independent in their communities for longer.

## Locally led reform

Partnership working is fundamental to our ambition to make the best use of resources and maximise for our communities. Some examples of our partnership working:

- The Council currently operates a partnership with the ICB (previously the CCG) for the management of Continuing Health Care (CHC) on the ICB's behalf. This is inherently efficient for both parties as the tasking involved is pretty much identical across the two organisations. Both organisations need to operate case management of clients with broadly similar needs, both are buying from the same care markets and dealing with the same providers. This is also efficient for clients who don't need to change case manager when they move between the Council and the ICB if they meet the eligibility threshold for CHC. For the providers they only have to raise one bill per period for payment and it is irrelevant to them whether the client is LA funded, or CHC funded, we do the work on that in the background and simply bill the ICB for their element of cost in aggregation each month. The ICB pay us £1.1m currently to do this on their behalf and this has been seen as good business for them as to put the infrastructure in place to manage this directly would cost them a lot more than that. For us, there is inherent efficiency as we need the infrastructure in place to manage our own clients anyway.
- 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. This ensures appropriate assurance, oversight and development of those respective areas and maximises opportunities for learning and development across children's and adults. The DfE have seen and are using our work, particularly around independent scrutiny, to inform national approaches.
- 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 Global Bridge, 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 convened 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 last year, the Inequalities Plan has now been signed by key partners across the County and beyond, demonstrating the commitment by all partners. Our Plan outlines key goals that can be delivered at scale over the coming years to level off and start to reduce the gap in healthy life expectancy. We have developed this plan and are delivering in partnership. We have built on this work by establishing a countywide partnership committed to developing a shared 'County Mission' focused on reducing inequalities.

## **2. How the Council plans to take advantage of technology and make better use of data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources:**

The short-term focus of the BEST Use of Technology will be on demonstrating value with a small number of achievable goals aligned to our customers service needs to have the greatest impact. Some examples of efficiencies to date include:

- Fix My Street implemented May 2023, 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.

- Modern.Gov implemented September 2023, a platform to provide paperless management and publication of democratic papers and approvals. The benefits of this system are a streamlining to the process of publishing papers improving efficiency, improved governance and auditability of decision making and papers and stakeholders have access to modern technology that enable them to work effectively and securely.
- iCasework implemented November 2023, 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.

Some planned improvements include:

### **Assistive Technology**

We are looking at assistive technology solutions across the ADASS region to try and improve support to clients and improve efficiency. Each authority is trialling one product and the intention is to then compare notes and share information on what has worked and what hasn't. Our product is "Amazon Show". It proposes to use an Echo Show 8 in partnership with a service provider.

The idea is that service users can use Alexa to easily access information and be more independent, empowered and connected. Screen devices allow both voice and visual display and video calls to take place. This allows virtual visits to take place as wellbeing checks, reminders, and medication prompts. The device can also be used to send messages to users e.g., 'remember to have a drink' There are also quizzes and games available for stimulation and to decrease loneliness and the device has other practical functions such as turning on lights and equipment such as the television etc.

There have been false starts with assistive tech before, but with a number of products being trialled across the region the hope is this will bear some fruit and offer something of genuine use to clients and local authorities.

### **Adult Social Care IT System - Azeus**

The Council is replacing its outdated adult social care client database (SWIFT) with a new fit for purpose product (Azeus) during 2024 and into 2025. This system is a critical piece of software as it not only handles all case management of adult social clients (and NHS CHC clients that we manage on behalf of health), including risk monitoring, safeguarding, etc, but it also acts as a costed package of care database that facilitates payment processing for Dom Care currently and potentially res/nursing care as well. Res/Nurs and Dom care together equate to around £150m of Council spending.

The old system is inherently inefficient with slow response times and lags for staff moving between pages within the system. Simply implementing the new system should produce efficiency savings for staff. However, it also offers the potential for things like web-based interfaces with clients, automated online starts to care assessment processes and much improved performance information. It also offers the potential to extend payment processing to res/nursing and potentially fundamentally change the payment process in those areas to



removing the need for invoicing from providers and improve efficiency for the Council and the providers who would be billing us.

### 3. How the Council plans to reduce wasteful spend within the organisation and systems

#### Assessing the effectiveness of EDI

Effectiveness of our work can be monitored and evidenced through our staff survey, and the following survey response data demonstrates significant areas of improvement witnessed in 2022 and illustrates cultural gains.

QUESTION	2019 (FULL)	2022 (FULL)
I often/always look forward to going to work	59%	71%
I feel my role makes a difference to residents/service users/customers	87%	96%
I think that communication between the executive leaders and staff is effective	31%	63%

#### Achievements of working with a combined authority

Between 2019 and 2024 activity through the NTCA has delivered 5,377 new jobs in the pipeline for growing businesses; £126m has been invested in projects to enable growth and innovation and there have been 115,000 skills and training courses provided to support people into good jobs. The partnership has allowed us to support rural communities and businesses; it has supported our growth sectors in particular offshore and renewable energy and wider manufacturing as well as sectors of the economy such as culture and tourism which are important in many of our more rural areas. The strength of the partnership allowed us to provide rapid and flexible support during the Covid pandemic, to support businesses pivot to online operations, as well as being responsive to the needs of sectors such as culture, given the significant impacts seen during this period.

Over the period Northumberland has benefitted from over £33m of projects led directly by the County Council, as well activities and investment programmes led by others, including innovation programmes helping businesses to respond to new opportunities, particularly in growth sectors, skills and training, employability support to support people into or to progress in work, grants for voluntary and community sector supporting volunteering and engagement, cultural development and events, support for key regeneration and high street improvements such as the Energy Central Learning Hub and Ashington town centre, programmes to support business growth, productivity gains and jobs and significant transport and connectivity improvements.