



# Northumberland County Council

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**Date:** 8 November 2022

*Dear Mr Otterway*

## **NCC ELECTORAL REVIEW – COUNCIL SIZE SUBMISSION**

As Leader of Northumberland County Council, I am pleased to enclose NCC's Council Size Submission as part of the ongoing Electoral Review.

The Submission has benefited from input from all the Council's Political Group Leaders and was agreed unanimously by Full Council at its meeting of 2nd November 2022. I note subsequent revisions to the current and forecast electorates have been made since our Full Council meeting, following discussion and clarification between your team and NCC Officers. These revisions are now included in the enclosed Submission.

In addition to our evidence on Council Size, I also confirm (as per pages 4,7 of the Submission), that we request the Commission consider whether a single-member division pattern can be achieved that delivers electoral equality and reflects the identities and interests of the local communities in the Alnwick area (Alnwick being the County's only two-member Division).

I look forward to the Council working with the Commission in the next phase of the Review.

**Councillor Glen Sanderson**  
**Leader of the Council**

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# Appendix 1 - NCC Council Size Submission Document - 24 October 2022

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

This is the submission of Northumberland County Council. In its preparation, Officers have worked with the Council's Group Leaders to develop evidenced proposals on Council size to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE or 'the Commission'). This Submission also reflects the results of a Member Survey undertaken in July-August 2022. The Submission is subject to agreement at a meeting of Full Council on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2022.

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England is undertaking this review because Northumberland County Council meets the Commission's criteria for electoral inequality. Specifically, one division (Kitty Brewster) has a variance of 33% and additionally, 20 of the 66 divisions (30.3%) have variances of more than 10% from the average for the County. This review was not requested by the County Council although, of course, the Council is actively participating, engaging and supporting the Commission in its work throughout the review.

In considering this Submission, the Council's Group Leaders, Members and Officers have considered a Membership which provides for effective, efficient governance and strong community representation, whilst ensuring political structures are kept as streamlined as far as possible.

In thinking about the future Council size, we have considered the background to the 2008 creation of the Unitary Authority in shadow format. Prior to that, the County Council was comprised of 67 Members. In addition, at District and Borough levels, there were over 300 Councillors. At its inception, many of the decision-making, leadership and representational responsibilities of existing District and Borough Councillors were assimilated into the roles of the new Council's 67 Councillors. Of course, Parish and Town Councillors continue to play a critical role in shaping their respective local areas and representing residents alongside County Councillors. Whilst effective democratic representation certainly encompasses issues and arguments beyond finances alone, it can be argued that the creation of the Unitary Council in 2008 and its formal commencement of operations in 2009 represented a significant streamlining in the financial costs associated with democracy in Northumberland.

The Commission will consider this Submission and evidence provided by other parties, alongside its own research, and will make its judgment on the Council's size by considering three broad areas:

- **Governance arrangements** of the Council and how it takes decisions across the broad range of its responsibilities.
- The Council's **scrutiny functions** relating to its own decision making and the Council's responsibilities to outside bodies.

- The **representational role of councillors in the local community** and how they engage with people, conduct casework and represent the Council on local partner organisations.

This submission is intended to cover the questions posed by the Commission across the three board areas above.

## **Summary of evidence and conclusions**

### **Council Performance, governance, Covid and budget.**

Since the Unitary County Council was formally established, the performance of services and functions has generally been considered to be good. In particular, performance in critical functions such as Children’s and Adults’ Services as well as schools is currently positive.

The strong performance in key functions such as services to Children, Adults and in schools suggests 67 Members has proven adequate to provide strategic direction and oversight, and to drive improvement in the Council’s strategic functions. The Council’s sound and sustainable financial position is evidence we have an effective number of Members (67) to ensure strategic decision-making, oversight and stewardship of the Council’s strategic financial position. However, we note current and future financial pressures alongside financial pressures on residents themselves will demand maximum participation of Members at strategic and ward / community levels.

Where there are areas of service improvement required, these have been identified by Members and adequately reflected in the Administration’s Corporate Plan priorities. There is no evidence to suggest the Council’s service performance is adversely impacted from having too few or too many Members.

The 67 Member authority has, since its creation, delivered well-performing functions, services, sound financial management and has identified and responded to strategic and local issues that require improvement. There is compelling evidence that the Members could not effectively discharge their strategic leadership and representative functions with less than 67 Members. In short, we consider 67 to be NCC’s minimum requirement.

However, looking to the future, we have also considered in this Submission a modest increase to 70 Members. Our learning from the experience of the Covid Pandemic provides evidence for such an increase. In common with councillors across the country, NCC Member capacity was, during the Pandemic, stretched to respond to a flood of resident and business enquiries as well as representing their interests and helping to coordinate support. Whilst Covid restrictions are now lifted, Covid has not gone away and, unfortunately, we cannot rule out the risk of future, similar pandemics. Alongside these risks, other national and global trends such cost-of-living pressures on households point towards an even greater role for local government and the need for comprehensive Member responses.

### **Governance Review and Council Size**

The Recent, Independent Review of Governance in Northumberland County Council (known as the Caller Review) highlighted significant governance issues within the County Council and outlined a set of challenging recommendations to reset effective working between Senior Officers and Members.

The Council responded positively to the Caller Review, accepting its findings and recommendations. It has moved quickly to develop and agree an action plan for improvement and has prioritised resources to deliver this. An external 'Challenge Board' was established during August 2022 to provide additional oversight and advice on action plan implementation.

The Caller Review focused in particular on the breakdown in relationships at the most senior levels of the organisation. There is no evidence from Caller that the governance issues facing the County Council have resulted from having the wrong Council size. However, as part of the response to Caller, the Council's improvement plan is very much focused on ensuring NCC is a Member-led authority now and for the future. This creates a strong argument for a minimum baseline of 67 Members or even a modest increase to 70 Members.

### **National and Regional Policy Trends and Council Size**

The creation of the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) has brought substantial benefits to Northumberland and the wider North of Tyne area. Naturally, this has increased the demands on Members at a strategic leadership level as well as at scrutiny levels. Currently, North East Authorities are developing, with Government, an expanded Combined Authority and Devolution Deal to cover a larger geography. Assuming the new, larger Combined Authority is established to replace the existing NTCA, the new Combined Authority governance should involve at least the same level of commitment from NCC Members as for the existing arrangements in the NTCA.

Our Member Survey of July - August 2022 indicates a high and rising caseload for Members, significantly impacted by the Covid Pandemic and likely to remain high in the medium term due to the social and economic challenges faced by households. Again, this creates a strong argument for a minimum baseline of 67 Members or even a modest increase to 70 Members.

### **Geography, population and Council Size**

Due to the geographical size of the County, the running of Northumberland County Council is sometimes described as akin to that of running a small country. Getting across the large and sparsely populated rural areas presents unique challenges for Members, particularly so during extreme weather events when our most rural settlements are vulnerable.

Alongside our large, rural areas, we also have more urban areas concentrated mostly (but not exclusively) in the South-East of the County. These areas include some of our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, presenting a high and complex caseload for Members.

Whilst our Local Plan sets out policies for housing and employment growth, the projected increase in our older population will likely increase demand for Council services as well as advocacy from Members.

The diversity of our towns and villages is reflected in our having 162 Town & Parish Councils across the County. Members are expected to attend Town & Parish meetings regularly to ensure their needs and views are represented at a County Level.

The Council's own projected increase in electorate of 14,735 by 2028 and the unique geography of Northumberland, provides evidence for a Council size of no less than 67, with the potential for a modest increase to 70 Members. The increase in the electorate will be driven largely by forecast housing growth in the South and East of the County. However, we also forecast not insubstantial pockets of electorate growth in other parts of

the County including in North Morpeth. Northumberland's towns, villages and smaller settlements have distinct identity and cohesion and to a large extent that is reflected in current Member representation of Divisions. As our electorate is forecast to grow and as Divisional boundaries are redrawn to ensure electoral equality, it will be important to residents and Councillors (at County and Town & Parish levels) that community identity and cohesion is respected and maintained as far as possible. A relatively modest increase to 70 Members would, it is argued, accommodate the forecast increase in electorate in those areas with the most significant growth whilst helping to mitigate fragmentation of well-established communities as boundaries are redrawn.

### **Single Member Representation**

The unitary Northumberland County Council was created with single member divisions. Alnwick became the County's only two-member division from May 2013. Single member representation throughout the county enables accountability and effective representation by offering a uniform pattern of single member divisions for the whole of the Council. While ensuring a uniform division pattern is not a requirement under legislation, a single member division pattern can still be achieved that delivers electoral equality and reflects the identities and interests of the local communities in the Alnwick area. Single representation in the Alnwick area as part of this review would bring this part of the county back in line with the rest of Northumberland.

### **Deprivation and Council Size**

Northumberland has some of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the country. Many of these neighbourhoods are clustered in the urban South-East of the County, although there exist significant pockets of disadvantage in other parts of the County. Higher levels of disadvantage drive higher levels of individual, complex caseload for Members as well as the need for Members to represent these issues in Full Council and in committees. Importantly, the challenges of poverty are not confined to the urban areas of the County. Our rural communities face obstacles of connectivity, employment and in-work poverty. All of these issues demand active support and representation from Members.

### **Challenges, changes and Council Size**

Whilst increased use of digital interfaces could reduce travel times for Members, our recent Member survey indicated a continued preference for face-to-face meetings. And, whilst digital will make the Council's 'front-door' more accessible for residents to transact business and resolve issues, we note that Member caseload is most often driven by more complex cases which are harder to resolve in digital interfaces. Further, increased use of digital has the potential to increase demands on Members as residents demand higher levels of accessibility to local Members.

Beyond Council services, the broader trend to online products and services could further marginalise some communities and increase demand for Member support.

### **Accountability, Regulation, Outside Bodies and Council Size**

The current Council size (67) has, since the creation of the Unitary Council, ensured an active and participative Scrutiny Function. NCC has, over the years, actively reflected on

its Scrutiny function, with the current number, size and operation of Scrutiny Committees evolving to the current structure.

The Council, through Members and Officers is able to discharge its regulatory functions although Members have indicated the need for additional training for committees and work on outside bodies. Some 79% of Councillors responding to a recent Survey said that the workload associated with committees and outside bodies is about right. Some 21% said the current workload is too high. The combined Council and partnership response to the Covid Pandemic as well as recent severe weather events is evidence that Member capacity is sufficient to participate positively across the range of outside bodies in the County. Further evidence of this can be found in the number, range and scale of investment initiatives NCC has secured for the Country through the Combined Authority and Borderlands Partnership.

### **Electorate and Council Size**

Our current Council size (67 Members) is on the upper quintile of our range (67) compared with our CIPFA comparator authorities and just above the median number for the range (63). The lower quintile in the range is 48 Members. NCC's current Council size is not outside the range of our statistical near neighbours. A modest increase to 70 Members would place NCC just above the upper quintile (67) for our CIPFA comparator authorities, though it is argued not significantly so.

As set out above, NCC has considered the arguments for an increase to 70 Members alongside the evidence for maintaining the current Council size of 67 Members. A Council size of 70 Members would produce a modest reduction in the ratio of 'Electorate to Member' when averaged across all Divisions. Alongside this, as stated above, three additional Members would take account of the forecast increase in electorate across the County, whilst ensuring Division Boundaries reflect community identities and maintain community cohesion.

### **Strategic Leadership and Council Size**

The current Council size (67) has, since the creation of the Unitary County Council, proved adequate to establish Leadership and Cabinet arrangements covering the broad spectrum of the Council's functions and services. The Council has had sufficient strategic leadership capacity to participate in new governance structures such as the North of Tyne Combined Authority for example.

### **Caseload and Council Size**

Whilst the Council supports Members in their casework through a range of mechanisms, Members have indicated a high and rising caseload as a result of Covid, financial pressures on households and changing expectations. Changing engagement channels can make resident engagement more efficient and lessen the need for Member travel. However, a wider menu of engagement and more instantaneous channels of communication may actually lead to higher caseload.

### **Summary of evidence for Council Size**

In this submission we have considered the evidence for retaining the current Council size of 67 alongside a relatively modest increase to 70 Members and ask that the Boundary Commission consider the merits of each in reaching their final determination. The table below summarises the evidence for each option.

Key Council size issues	Summary of Evidence for Proposed Future Council Size	
	67 Members	70 Members
1. Ensures capacity for strategic leadership and decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Council currently discharges these functions effectively</li> <li>• Able to participate and secure benefits for NCC at regional and national levels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future proofs leadership and decision-making capacity against rising demands to represent an increased electorate alongside pressures from cost of living and potential, future events.</li> </ul>
2. Member capacity & oversight to delivery good-quality services and functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Since creation of NCC, services have generally been considered to be of good quality</li> <li>• Evidence of high-performing services - e.g. in Children's Services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future proofs Member oversight capacity against rising demands to represent an increasing electorate alongside pressures from cost of living and potential, future events.</li> </ul>
3. Recent reviews of Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No evidence in Caller report that governance issues resulted from an incorrect Council size</li> <li>• Improvement plan emphasises the need for NCC to be Member-led; supports argument for no less than 67 Members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No evidence in Caller report that governance issues resulted from an incorrect Council size</li> <li>• Improvement plan emphasises the need for NCC to be Member-led; supports argument for no less than 67 Members</li> </ul>
4. Capacity to respond to current and future trends and to balance local representation and caseload with other responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Members were able to respond to the demands of the Covid Pandemic but, have indicated an ongoing, increasing caseload post-Covid, driven in large part by cost-of-living pressures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides additional Member capacity to meet increasing demands on Members associated with an increasing electorate</li> </ul>
5. Northumberland's geography and population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Given the large geography and diversity of communities, 67 has proved effective to represent the different parts of the County and is the minimum Council size required</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An additional three members will take account of NCC's forecast increase in electorate whilst mitigating the risk of geographical communities being fragmented across new Divisional boundaries</li> </ul>
6. Deprivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Member caseload pressures from deprivation and inequalities argue against any reduction from the current Council size</li> <li>• Poverty is a challenge for both urban and rural communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is not certain that new housing growth in the County will result in a significant increase in deprived neighbourhoods and therefore Member caseload. However, Members are already experiencing rising caseloads, and economic</li> </ul>

		trends suggest these are likely to persist
7. Discharging scrutiny and regulatory functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Council currently discharges these functions effectively</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future proofs Scrutiny and Regulatory capacity against rising demands to represent an increased electorate alongside pressures from cost of living and potential, future events.</li> </ul>
8. Cost of Council size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No anticipated increase beyond future, inflationary cost increases or remuneration reviews.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An increased cost associated with three additional members will require to be met from Council budget (i.e. not from national funding)</li> <li>• Argument that a modest cost increase (relative to the Council's overall budget), is offset by the benefits from additional capacity for local representation and is commensurate with a forecast increase in electorate</li> </ul>



## **A About this submission**

This is the submission of Northumberland County Council. In its preparation, Officers have worked with the Council's 'Group Leaders' to develop evidenced proposals on Council size to the Commission. This Submission also reflects the results of a Member Survey undertaken in July-August 2022. This submission is subject to agreement at a meeting of Full Council on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2022.

## **B Reason for review**

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England is undertaking this review because Northumberland County Council meets the Commission's criteria for electoral inequality. Specifically, one division (Kitty Brewster) has a variance of 33% and additionally, 20 of the 66 (30.3%) divisions have variances more than 10% from the average for the County. This review was not requested by the County Council although, of course, the Council is actively participating, engaging and supporting the Boundary Commission in its work throughout the review.

## **C The Context for our proposal**

### **Governance arrangements and impact on effectiveness**

In 2009 Northumberland was one of five counties in England that went through the process of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). At the time, the County Council combined with the six Borough and District Councils (Alnwick, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Blyth Valley, Castle Morpeth, Tynedale and Wansbeck) to form the present Unitary Authority of Northumberland County Council. The new Council existed in shadow form between May 2008 and 2009, the first elections taking place in 2008.

The Northumberland (Electoral Changes) Order 2011 resulted in the following changes:

- The number of Electoral Divisions reduced from 68 to 66 through the deletion of Lesbury and Ulgham Divisions;
- Of the 66 electoral divisions, Alnwick gained one additional councillor, resulting in the current Council size (67 Councillors);
- Boundary changes resulted in the addition of Druridge Bay, inclusion of Stannington with Ponteland East, and redrawing of Ponteland divisions from East/West to North/South.

Further, as a result of The Northumberland (Electoral Changes) Order 2021, two areas of Bothal were redefined as part of Pegswood, and one area of Pegswood was redefined as part of Bothal. Current Community Governance reviews in the Parishes of Allendale (size) and Tasset with Greystead (wards) are due for completion in late 2022.

Northumberland County Council was created as a unitary council with single member divisions. Alnwick became the County's only two-member division from May 2013. Single member representation throughout the county enables accountability and effective

representation by offering a uniform pattern of single member divisions for the whole of the council.

While ensuring a uniform division pattern is not a requirement under legislation, we believe a single member division pattern can still be achieved that delivers electoral equality and reflects the identities and interests of the local communities in the Alnwick area.

Single representation in the Alnwick area as part of this review would bring this part of the county back in line with the rest of Northumberland.

## **Service Performance**

The creation of the Unitary County Council has had a broadly positive impact on strategic and service functions across the County. The results of the last Residents Survey (undertaken in 2018 and summarised below) highlighted a mixed picture in terms of satisfaction, with some services and functions improving, whilst others declined. However, Local Government Association analysis undertaken at the time highlighted a national downward trend of net satisfaction across various key performance measures, including overall Council satisfaction, feeling informed by the Council, perceptions that the Council acts on behalf of resident's concerns, and perceived Council value for money. So, the shifts in satisfaction rates reflected national trends and Northumberland was not an outlier in this respect.

Since the last Residents Survey in 2018, our Children's Services have been rated as 'Good' by Ofsted and currently 84.9% of all Northumberland-based Adults Social Care providers were rated as Good or Outstanding at the end of June 2022 (87.3% at the end of December 2021).

The overall figure for the percentage of First / Primary schools judged by Ofsted as Good or Outstanding was 92% at the end of June 2022, which is above the national average of 88%. This equates to 112 / 122 schools. The overall figure for the percentage of Middle / Secondary/ High schools judged by Ofsted as Good or Outstanding improved from 70% at the end of December 2021 to 77% at the end of June 2022, which is just below the national average of 78%. The figure of 77% equates to 23 - 30 schools. The local authority along with health partners participated in a pilot of the new special educational needs and disabilities inspection framework in March 2022. The feedback from this was positive.

At the End of Year 2021/22 performance of the 205 operational Corporate KPIs was as follows:

- 53% were above target (Green);
- 12% were below target but within agreed tolerances (Amber);
- 35% were below target (Red);
- Performance against the 'Absence KPI' was 4.5% (against a target of 3.5%);
- Staff turnover was 12%, which is above the LGA benchmark (9%);
- The provisional outturn showed an underspend for the year of £14.52m (prior to transfers to earmarked reserves and provisions).

## **Creation of the North of Tyne Combined Authority**

Alongside North Tyneside Council and Newcastle City Council, Northumberland County Council formed the North of Tyne Combined Authority in November 2018. In May 2019, elections were held for a directly elected Mayor who took on certain powers and funding devolved from Westminster to the newly formed Authority. A fund of £600 million over 30 years has been secured as part of the Devolution Deal with Central Government. Northumberland has already secured from the Combined Authority, tens of millions of pounds of investment in jobs, skills, education, culture and inclusion.

## **Borderlands Partnership**

The County Council is also a key partner in the Borderlands Partnership (with UK and Scottish Governments, Scottish Borders Council, Dumfries & Galloway Council and Cumbria County Council). This partnership is underpinned by the Borderlands Growth Deal to promote economic growth and competitiveness of the area straddling the Scotland-England border. The Borderlands Growth partners are working together to deliver transformative change across the region to maximise the benefits of growth. This includes two key economic challenges - the need for population growth and improved productivity.

## **Financial Pressures**

Like almost all local authorities across the country, Northumberland has set savings targets to achieve a balanced budget position and deliver on its Medium-Term Financial Plan. These targets are deliverable, and the Council finances remain on a sound and sustainable footing. However, all councils across the country, including NCC, are experiencing in-year and future years' financial challenges due to substantial inflationary pressures. As a result, the Council will inevitably have to make difficult decisions on investment and spend through its next budget-setting process. This will require maximum participation from Members at Cabinet, Scrutiny, Full Council and Local Area Council levels to ensure strategic budget decisions are balanced with clear representation from communities across the County. Alongside this, Members will also likely face additional pressures to support residents and communities who are impacted by cost-of-living pressures.

## **Governance challenges**

In the summer of 2021, the Council Leader requested that the Council commission a Best Value-style corporate governance review of the Council. This review commenced in January 2022 and reported to a meeting of Full Council on 8th June 2022.

Amongst the key messages from the Independent Governance Review (known as the Caller Review) was the need for a fundamental reset to establish an appropriate operating model and clear working rules for both Members and officers, including a comprehensive review of the Constitution.

The Governance Review report, setting out eleven recommendations, was welcomed by the Leader of the Council at the Council meeting on 8 June 2022. Following publication of the report on 8 June, the Council moved quickly to establish a cross-party Task & Finish Group which has agreed a plan of action to implement each of the Caller Review Recommendations. This was agreed by full Council at its meeting of 21 June 2022. Since

then, the Council has developed a robust action plan and programme management to take forward the Caller Review recommendations. Delivery of this plan has now commenced. The Leader has also established an external, independent Challenge Board of local government experts (Members and Officers). This Challenge Board will advise on and help shape the Caller improvement actions as these are taken forward in the coming months.

## **National Policy Trends**

The Council influences local policy through the current North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) and will continue to do so in any future arrangements in the Region. The following Members provide direct, strategic and decision-making input or scrutiny into the Combined Authority:

- Cabinet - 2 x NCC Members (Leader and Deputy)
- Audit and Standards - 3 x NCC Members
- Housing and Land Board - 2 x NCC Members
- Inclusive Economy Board - 1 x NCC Member
- Overview and Scrutiny - 3 x NCC Members.

Northumberland has four parliamentary constituencies, whose Members of Parliament actively raise the County's profile in Parliament. The Leader and Deputy Leader engage with our four MPs regularly, primarily through catch-up meetings and correspondence to ensure MPs are up to date on key issues for the Council and the County residents. Council Cabinet Members and indeed all Councillors also interact with our local MPs. This interaction was heightened throughout the Covid pandemic and indeed is likely to continue as a result of the significant cost of living pressures faced by residents and the Council itself.

From July 2022, the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System (ICS) - a regional partnership of the NHS, Councils and others - has responsibility for commissioning healthcare services in the region. The ICS will provide means for working together on regional issues that need to be tackled at scale. Northumberland County Council is a member of the local North Integrated Care Partnership (ICP), a committee of the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board and the thirteen local authorities from across the North East and North Cumbria. The ICP is one of four local partnerships based around the main centres of population in the region. The ICPs will develop a strategic picture of health and care needs from their constituent local authority places, working with a wide range of partners to assess the needs of local people and set local priorities for health and care improvement. To be effective and ensure Northumberland's communities are well-represented, three NCC Members are on the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the North East & North Cumbria ICS & North & Central Integrated Care Partnerships.

As we continue to recover from the Covid Pandemic locally and nationally, it is clear some Covid-driven changes are set to become permanent features of how we work, how Members interact and, how communities and businesses are impacted. In particular, changing working patterns, including increased homeworking will be a long-term trend.

This increased use of technology for meetings will continue. Our Member Survey highlights that face-to-face meetings continue to be preferred by a large number of Members. However, informal, virtual meetings have clearly helped Members to interact effectively with residents and Officers, reducing the need for travel to County Hall and across large geographical divisions.

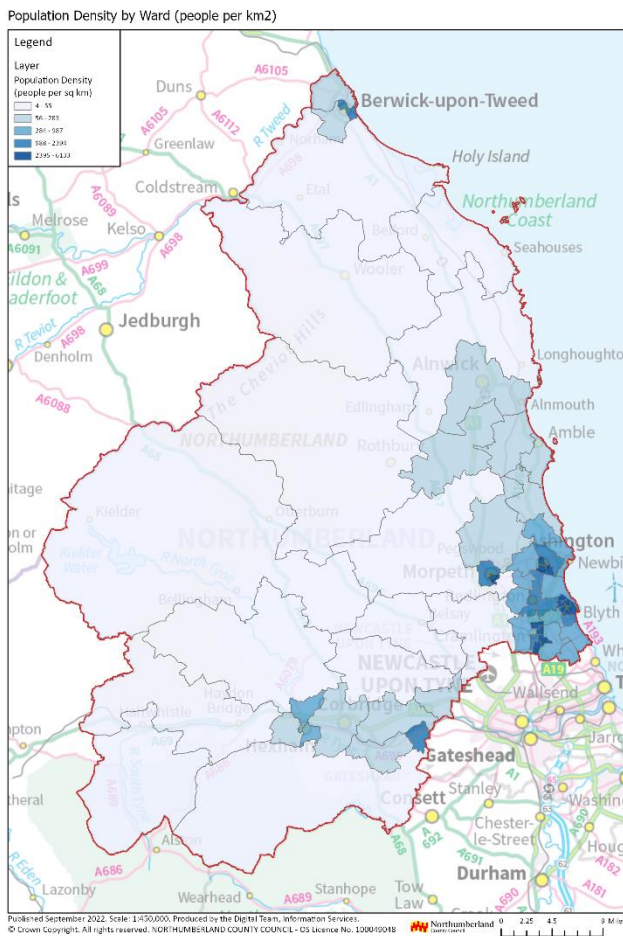
Our Member Survey (July / August 2022) highlighted an increase in Member caseload. This trend appears to have started pre-Covid and naturally intensified throughout the Pandemic. Members also commented that, as we continue to recover from Covid, they are seeing increased caseload related to the cost-of-living pressures households are facing. In short, Member caseload is likely to continue at high rates or even increase at least for the medium term.

During the past decade, the importance of responding to the challenges of Climate Change has intensified. This is an evolving and complex policy agenda which will increasingly require high levels of Member engagement at leadership and community representation levels.

## **D Local Authority Profile**

Northumberland is England's northernmost County, stretching from the Scottish Border in the north and west to Tyneside and County Durham in the south. The County is the largest unitary authority by geographic coverage with the greatest area of Green Belt of any Local Planning Authority. Northumberland covers an area of 5013 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 323,820 (2020). Data from the 2021 Census shows that Northumberland is the least densely populated of the North East region's 12 local authority areas with 64 people per sq. km (6th most sparsely populated local authority in England).

Some 96.7% of the County's land area is classed as rural, with just under half of the population living in this area and 51% of the population living in 3% of the land area (mainly in the South-East of the County). The different parts of the County have distinct characteristics, heritage, functions and needs contrasting from urban to rural, coastal to upland and well-connected to remote.



The south-east of the County is the most densely populated, with the three largest towns, Blyth, Cramlington and Ashington. These act as main employment centres, drawing from a wider area than just south-east Northumberland. Beyond the south-east, the County's main settlements are located along the Tyne Valley corridor, and on a north-south axis across the lowland coastal strip; both areas incorporate main roads and rail lines. Morpeth, Hexham, Prudhoe, Berwick-upon-Tweed and Alnwick are the main market towns, all of which have significant rural hinterlands. The predominantly rural areas of the County are interspersed with smaller towns, some with their own hinterlands, as well as numerous villages, hamlets and isolated farmsteads.

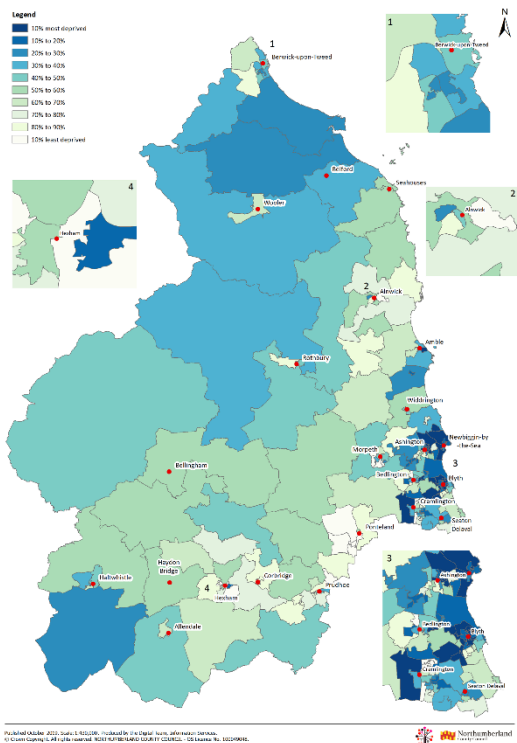
Projections show there is likely to be a significant acceleration in the ageing of Northumberland's population profile. Between 2020 and 2043 there is projected to be a significant increase in

older age groups, including:

- 59% increase in people aged 75-79 (15,486 to 24,619)
- 86.7% increase in people aged 80-84 (10,638 to 19,866)
- 102% increase in people aged 85+ (9,896 to 19,989).

Currently there are approximately 152,000 dwellings across Northumberland. Many of these are in the larger settlements in the south-east, together with market towns across the County. However, there are also a significant number of dwellings in smaller villages and hamlets. To assist in the delivery of economic growth, the Local Plan makes provision for at least 17,700 new homes in Northumberland over the plan period 2016-2036. The focus of new housing development will have been in the Main Towns and Service Centres across Northumberland. Housing design and location will allow older people and vulnerable groups to live as independent lives as possible.

## Deprivation



Approximately 12% of Northumberland’s population live in one of the 10% most deprived areas of England (IoD 2019). The County falls into the most deprived 20% of local authorities in the country for employment (the number of people employment deprived), ranked 39th overall and for the income scale (the number of people income deprived), ranked 50th. Northumberland is in the top ten local authorities in England for the percentage point increase in the proportion of Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the most deprived 10% between the IMD 2015 and 2019.

The most deprived LSOA in Northumberland is located in Croft and Cowpen Divisions, Blyth. This LSOA is ranked the 133rd most deprived area in England (falling into the most deprived 1% of LSOAs).

The least deprived LSOA in Northumberland are in the Cramlington West and Cramlington North Divisions. This LSOA was ranked 32,495th, falling into the 2% least deprived LSOAs in England.

Residents in our most deprived communities have an average life expectancy of 75 years compared to 87 years in the least deprived. There is a 17-year age gap in good health (healthy life expectancy) between those living in the least deprived areas and those living in the most deprived communities.

Covid 19 has exacerbated existing inequalities, hitting the poorest and most disadvantaged communities hardest. It has further highlighted economic inequalities and the fragility of some systems of support.

The County Council adopted the Northumberland Inequalities Plan 2022 - 2032 at its September 2022 meeting. This outlines proposals for system development and enablers, focused areas of action and short, medium and long-term indicators of progress. The report is a statement of intent to work on these actions and deliver better outcomes over the next 10 years. The report recognises the importance of governance and accountability, requesting that a cross party members group is established to monitor the progress of the plan.

Our Plan takes a ‘community centred approach’ to tackling inequalities, based on five principles and three questions. The principle of ‘Maximising our civil level responsibilities’ encompasses active Member participation at both strategic leadership and community representation levels.

## **Rural challenges**

As a sparsely populated County, Northumberland faces challenges of connecting remote rural communities. Socially and economically, there are wide variations among the County's communities which pose challenges for all Members. A range of rurality challenges have been identified by the charity *Community Action Northumberland (CAN)*, including a shortfall in the availability of affordable housing, transport, childcare, broadband and mobile signal infrastructure, and a 'voice' for young people.

Other rural issues identified by CAN are detachment from labour markets, low pay and poverty in work. Fewer employment opportunities have caused out-migration of young people. The impacts of an ageing population include isolation and loneliness and, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), 6.3% of households in the County consist of one person over the age of 65, living alone. CAN have observed a lower take-up of benefits, hidden and dispersed poverty and, more recently, fuel poverty. Common attitudes to, and perceptions of, the County's rugged and beautiful rural landscapes are of belief in the 'rural idyll'. This can prevent recognition of rural disadvantage.

## **Other constraints and challenges**

As a result of Covid, we are seeing an acceleration in the transition to digital interfaces. Access to many services switched to digital during lockdown and these have continued in some form as restrictions have eased. For example, many GPs are currently conducting a large proportion of their consultations via phone or webcam, and the NHS is keen that high levels of phone and online appointments will continue. During the pandemic, many families, schools and businesses have also significantly increased their use of video conferencing services. It is reasonable to assume that the general trend for an increased use of digital interfaces will continue and even accelerate. This has implications for how Members, Council Officers, residents and partners engage now and in the coming years. Whilst there are obvious benefits to this such as less travel time and more efficient use of time more generally, increased use of digital interfaces could raise expectations in terms of Member availability and could reasonably increase the pressures on Members' time.

Also, as residents conduct more of their activities online, there is a risk that a vulnerable minority of people across Northumberland will no longer be in easy reach of key amenities such as a bank, post office, shop, or medical facility, particularly in more rural areas. Again, this increases the demands on Members to represent their communities.

Given the challenges of recovering from the Pandemic, alongside the severe cost of living pressures on households, public services will likely need to play an even bigger part in many people's lives in the coming years and this will likely involve an expanded role for local government. The Council experienced this during Covid (for example, supporting businesses, communities and vulnerable people) and is already providing additional support to address the challenges of cost-of-living pressures. All of this is likely to place additional demands on Members at both strategic leadership and community levels.

## **E Council Size**

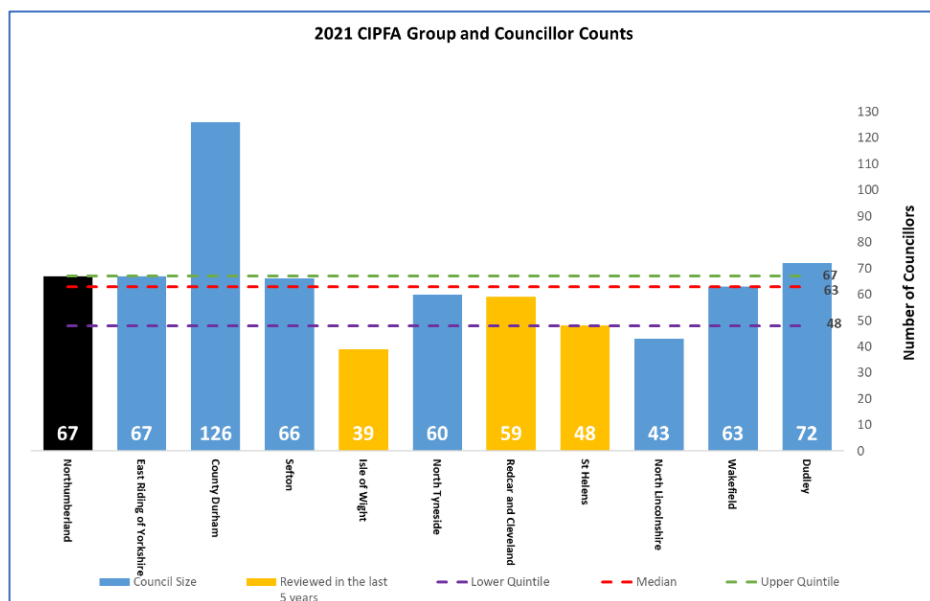
### **Strategic Leadership**

The Council currently comprises 67 Members (Councillors). One Member is elected by the voters of each Electoral Division in accordance with a scheme drawn up by the



Boundary Commission except in the case of the Alnwick Division, which has two members.

The chart below illustrates NCC’s current Council size compared with our ‘nearest neighbour’ authorities as set out by CIPFA. The chart shows our current Council size (67 Members) to be on the upper quintile of our range (67) and just above the median number for the range (63). The lower quintile in the range is 48 Members. NCC’s current Council size (67) is not outside the range of our statistical near neighbours and it is argued a relatively modest increase to 70 Members (reflecting our forecast increase in electorate) would not place NCC significantly above the upper quintile for our comparator authorities.



The table below shows a comparison of current ‘Electorate per Member’ between Northumberland and other County Councils.

Council	Electorate	Members	Electorate Per Member
Northumberland	251,363	67	3752
Durham	386,272	126	3066
Cornwall	435,628	87	5007
Dorset	295,846	82	3608
Herefordshire	147,114	53	2776
Wiltshire	382,869	98	3907
Shropshire	245,828	74	3322
Buckinghamshire	412,844	147	2808

At 3,752 ‘Electorate per Member,’ Northumberland is currently above the median for this dataset (3,465 ‘Electorate per Member’). Currently, we have two projected electorates for 2028:

(1) Using the Boundary Commission’s standard calculation projection - 254,754, giving an ‘Electorate per Member’ of 3,802 (based on current Council size and compared to current median = 3,465).

(2) Using NCC’s own projection - 266,098 - giving an ‘Electorate per Member’ of 3,972 (based on current Council size and compared to current median = 3,465).

In developing this Submission, NCC’s Group Leaders noted NCC’s initial, projected electorate forecast increase of 11,080 by 2028. On this projection, Group Leaders asked Officers to consider the case for additional councillors on a range of 67-70 Councillors. Following discussion between NCC and Commission colleagues, the forecast increase by 2028 has been revised to 14,735.

Based on a projected electorate of 266,098, the ‘Electorate per Member’ for the three scenarios of 67-70 Members would be as follows:

<b>NCC Projected Electorate (2028)</b>	<b>Number of Members</b>	<b>Electorate per Member</b>
266,098	67	3,972
266,098	68	3,913
266,098	69	3,856
266,098	70	3,801

Increasing the number of Members to 70 Members would reduce the ratio of ‘Electorate to Member’ when averaged across all Divisions. It should be noted that any increase in the number of Members would need to be met from the Council’s budget and that there is no provision for the costs of additional Members to be provided from national funding.

### **Roles and functions of all councillors**

Now and moving forward, the Council will operate an Executive Leader Model of governance. The regular election of councillors will be held on the first Thursday in May every four years. The terms of office of councillors will start on the fourth day after being elected and will finish on the fourth day after the date of the next regular election. All Councillors will:

- Collectively act as the ultimate policy-makers and carry out a number of strategic and corporate functions;
- Represent their communities and bring their views into the Council’s decision-making process, i.e. become the advocate of and for their communities;
- Deal with individual casework and act as advocates for constituents in resolving particular concerns or grievances;
- Balance different interests identified within the Electoral Division and represent the Electoral Division as a whole;
- Be involved in decision-making;
- Be available to represent the Council on other bodies; and,

- Maintain the highest standards of conduct and ethics.

Every Northumberland County Councillor receives an annual budget allocation of £15,000 for use with local improvement schemes. Members are free, subject to any relevant conflicts, to disburse those funds as they consider appropriate.

### Member Group Places on Committees - 2022/2023

Name of Committee	Total Membership 2022/2023	Conservative Group	Labour Group	Independent Group	Liberal Democrat Group	Green Party	Non-affiliated
Cabinet	8**	8					
Appointments Committee - School Governors and Academies	4	2	1		1		
Audit Committee	8*	4	2	1	1		
County Emergency Committee	8	4	2	1	1		
Dismissal Advisory Committee	8	4	2	1		1	
Disputes Panel (Fire and Rescue Service)	8	4	2	1	1		
Fostering Panel	1	1					
Governing Body of Netherton Park	3*	2	1				
Grievance Committee	2	2					
Health & Wellbeing Board	6*	5	1				
Joint Consultative Committee	5*	4	1 (observer)				
Licensing Committee	14	7	4	1	1	1	
Licensing and Regulatory Committee	14	7	4	1	1	1	
Local Area Councils (13+13+13+12+16)	67	33	20	6	4	2	2
Petitions Committee	9	4	3	1	1		
Health & Wellbeing O & S Committee	10	5	3	1	1		
Communities and Place O & S Committee	10	4	3	1	1	1	

Name of Committee	Total Membership 2022/2023	Conservative Group	Labour Group	Independent Group	Liberal Democrat Group	Green Party	Non-affiliated
Corporate Services and Economic Growth O & S Committee	10	5	3	1			1
Family and Children's Services O & S Committee	10*	5	3	1	1		
Schools Forum	2 (observers)	2					
Staff and Appointments	9	4	3	1	1		
Employment (Appeals)	5 (from pool of 20 Members)	2	1	1	1		
Standards	9*	4	3	1	1		
Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education	4*	2	1			1	
Strategic Planning	16	7	5	1	1	1	1
11 Working/Liaison Groups Appointed by Full Council	88	39	27	9	8	4	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	338	170	95	30	26	12	5
<b>338 places for 67 Members = 5 roles per Member average</b>	100%	50%	28%	9%	8%	4%	1%
(*external appointments also made)	(**also 3 further portfolios, non-voting Deputy Members)						

## County Council

Full Council remains directly responsible for the functions listed below:

- Adopting and changing the Constitution;
- Approving or adopting the policy framework and the budget;
- Appointing the Leader, the Business Chair, Civic Head and Deputy Civic Head of the County Council, and the Chair of the Standards Committee;
- Agreeing and/or amending the terms of reference for committees, deciding on their composition, and making appointments to them; appointing the Chair and Vice Chair of all committees of Council;

- Appointing representatives to outside bodies unless the appointment is an executive function or has been delegated by the Council to the Local Area Councils or otherwise;
- Adopting a Members' Allowances scheme;
- All other matters set out in Part 3 of the Constitution under the terms of reference for Full Council;
- Subject to the 'urgency procedure' in the Constitution, making decisions about any matter in the discharge of an Executive function which is covered by the policy framework or the budget.

## **Cabinet**

The Cabinet carries out all the Council's functions which are not the responsibility of any other part of the Council, whether by law or under the Constitution. The Cabinet will consist of the Leader appointed by the Council together with at least 2, but not more than 9 Members appointed by the Leader.

The Leader will be a Member appointed by the Council at its annual meeting following whole Council elections. The Leader will hold office for a four-year period or the remaining term of the Council unless: they resign from the office of Leader; or they are removed from office by resolution of the Council in accordance with the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000; or they are no longer a Councillor.

The Cabinet collectively shall have clear responsibility for a range of corporate decisions and individually, Cabinet Members will provide the strategic leadership for their portfolios.

## **Strategic Policy Making**

The Council's Budget and Policy Framework is agreed by the Full Council and the executive functions are performed by the Cabinet within that framework. Each Cabinet Member has a portfolio of responsibilities, however the decisions, announced 28 days beforehand, will be taken by Cabinet as a whole.

The Leader has discretion to determine how Executive functions are carried out and may determine who to appoint to the Cabinet and the responsibilities within individual portfolios. In addition, Cabinet can form sub-committees or working groups to deal in more depth with particular political and Council priorities.

The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committees assist in the development of County Council policy by looking at existing policies and the effectiveness of their delivery, and by reviewing whether new policies or changes to existing policies are needed.

## **Portfolios**

In total our Cabinet comprises eight members, with three Deputy Cabinet Members. Council Cabinet posts are part-time positions. Formal decisions are taken collectively by the whole Cabinet.

Currently, under the Council's Executive Leader model of governance, the Leader doesn't delegate anything in the constitution to either Cabinet Members or officers. The Leader can make formal delegations to Portfolio Members and / or officers for the Municipal Year

by presenting such delegations to the Council's Annual General Meeting (AGM). Outside of the AGM, the Leader can make delegations to Portfolio Members and / or officers for specific situations. These delegations are made 'as and when' required. All 'key decisions' will be taken by the full Cabinet.

### **Delegations to Officers and Committees**

All matters not reserved to the Council, to the Cabinet, or to a Committee for decision are delegated to the appropriate Executive Director as well as the Head of Paid Service, subject to the conditions and limitations set out in the Council's constitution. Each Executive Director as well as the Head of Paid Service in making decisions under this scheme is required to do so within the internal scheme of management for their own department. The specific areas of responsibility of each Executive Director within their service area or Group as well as the Head of Paid Service are set out in the Council's Constitution.

All 'key decisions' within the remit of the Council's executive are taken by the Cabinet. Decisions on the Council's 'Policy Framework and Budget', as defined by the Council Constitution, will be taken by the Full Council, which includes all 67 Elected Members.

### **Accountability: Scrutiny**

The Council will appoint Overview and Scrutiny Committees to discharge the functions conferred by section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000 or regulations under section 32 of the Local Government Act 2000. Within their terms of reference, the Overview and Scrutiny Committees, and their subcommittees, will:

- Review and/or scrutinise decisions made (and proposed), or actions taken in connection with the discharge of any of the Council's functions;
- Make reports and/or recommendations to the full Council and/or the Cabinet and/or any policy, joint or Local Area Council in connection with the discharge of any functions;
- Consider any matter affecting the area or its inhabitants;
- Exercise the right to call-in, for reconsideration (through the Chair's Group), decisions made but not yet implemented by the Cabinet and/or any policy or Local Area Council decision.

The Council has currently appointed four Overview and Scrutiny Committees:

- Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee;
- Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee;
- Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee; and
- Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Overview & Scrutiny Task & Finish groups are appointed on an ad hoc basis when the need is identified as the Committee makes progress through its agreed work programme. Terms of Reference are drawn up for each project in accordance with its identified needs and they generally set milestones for a work programme of short duration. The group's Members are either expert in the field or have relevant experience, for example through their work in the community. The membership of Task & Finish groups is taken from

Committee Members who volunteer to take part in the project. The size of the group is kept to a minimum in the interests of flexibility and usually there are between three and six Members in the group. In general, a Task & Finish group will complete its business within three or four meetings.

The number of Scrutiny Members serving on the committees changed several times in the first years of the new structures. Initially, in 1999, the Resources Management and Environment Committees had 18 Members each, with 10 each on the Policy and Personal (Education and Children’s Services) Committees. In 2000 the number of committees was reduced to three, Services (10 + 1 non-voting), Services-Education (10 Cllrs + 12 other) and Strategy (18 + 1 non-voting). In 2000, with the reduction of O & S committees to three, two new Policy Boards (later reduced to one) were established. The Policy Boards assumed some aspects of the early O & S remits. Also, Area Working Groups were introduced at this time to facilitate local involvement.

From 2009, when the Council became unitary, until 2013 and again from 2017 to date, there have been four Overview and Scrutiny Committees, providing a total of 40 Councillor places. The remits of the four committees cover the essential elements of Council business, local services, resources, education and health. Each element has been developed into a remit that incorporates the appropriate associated service areas.

Between 2013 and 2015 the remits of the four committees were altered to provide for six committees (a total of 60 Councillor places) and in 2016 a seventh committee was established (a total of 70 Councillor places). The division of the original four committee remits into seven had the effect of providing Councillors with opportunities to focus more exclusively on contributions to policy formulation and revision over a narrower range of services, though over a wider geographical area. When the structure was reviewed again in 2017, it was found that the advantages of spreading the O & S remit over three additional committees were countered by the reduction in the range of activities leading to smaller work programmes, shorter agendas and even cancellation of meetings owing to lack of business. The committee structure was accordingly restored to the previous version which had stood the test of time. Since the number of O & S Committees reverted to four in 2017, this arrangement has continued to be effective in fulfilling the statutory Overview and Scrutiny role.

### **Statutory Functions: Planning**

The proportion of planning applications determined by Members over the period 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2022 is shown below in percentage terms. Numbers determined by Members increased to almost seven percent of the total in 2019-2020, the majority being determined by Officers under the Council's delegation scheme. Since 2020 Member decisions have decreased by four points in percentage terms, however the overall numbers are continuing to increase.

### **Planning Applications determined by Officers and Members of Local Area Council Planning Committees and the Strategic Planning Committee**

	<b>Delegated</b>	<b>Committee</b>	<b>Committee Percent</b>
2017-2018	2460	113	4.4 percent
2018-2019	2223	134	5.7 percent
2019-2020	2129	155	6.8 percent

2020-2021	2286	58	2.5 percent
2021-2022	2637	86	3.2 percent

The Covid-19 pandemic inevitably had an impact. In that period, a higher number of applications were determined by Officers under the delegation scheme than would otherwise have been the case, however the Covid restrictions had less of an impact on our planning process than might have been expected because the Council's Business Recovery Plan worked well and live virtual meetings began immediately after they were authorised. Rather than a falling off in application numbers, we experienced a 20 per cent spike during the Covid period because, for example, many of the people spending so much more time at home than usual took the opportunity to make improvements.

After the legal Covid-19 restrictions were removed the number of applications continued to grow and the total for 2021-2022 is higher than it was in 2017-2018. The proportion determined by Members is likely to increase again.

The Council operates with 5 area planning committees (the 5 Local Area Councils - see below) and a countywide strategic planning committee:

- Ashington and Blyth LAC
- Castle Morpeth LAC
- Cramlington, Bedlington and Seaton Valley LAC
- North Northumberland LAC
- Tynedale LAC.

All members of the Council serve on the Local Area Council planning committee relevant to their area. This includes the Leader, Deputy Leader and members of the Cabinet. Sixteen members also serve on the strategic planning committee. The Council currently runs six planning committee meetings per-month and they are mostly between 2-3 hours in duration depending on the agenda.

### **Statutory Functions: Licensing**

The Council has two formal Licensing Committees, the Licensing Committee (the Statutory Committee dealing with all matters to do with the Licensing Act and Gambling Act) and the Licensing and Regulatory Committee (dealing with hackney/private hire and all other licensing regimes). Both these Committees meet on a quarterly basis and comprise 15 elected members.

When dealing with objections to licensing, or applications which cannot be dealt with using delegated powers, those applications will be considered by a sub-committee drawn from the parent committee, each of which is made up of three members and a "reserve".

In addition to meetings of the two main parent Committees, which meet quarterly, there will be approximately:

- LC 12 - 16 per year, each of three hours; and,
- L&R 12 per year, each of two hours.

Meetings of the L&R Sub-Committee tend to be diarised but all LC Sub-Committee meetings are called on an ad-hoc basis.

### **Other Regulatory Bodies: Health and Wellbeing Board**



There are six Councillor Members of the Health and Wellbeing Board: NCC Business Chair; Council Leader; Portfolio for Holder Adult Wellbeing and Health; Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, Portfolio Holder for Healthy Lives; and an Opposition Group Member. A further thirteen members of the board are made up of NHS, other health and charitable bodies, as well as three NCC Officers.

On 1 July 2022, the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System came into effect through the Health and Care Act 2022. It is a statutory NHS body serving as a partnership of organisations including local councils, voluntary and community services that provide health and care services across the North East region. It will be led by an NHS Integrated Care Board, which held its first meeting as a statutory body on 1 July 2022. The Board has eight Partner (Ordinary) Members, four of whom will be from the local authorities responsible for providing Social Care, contributing the perspective of their sector to Board decisions, but not as delegates of the sector.

## **External Partnerships**

### **North of Tyne Combined Authority**

The three Member Councils in the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) agree matters for decision in-house and their representatives are authorised by their individual authorities to express those decisions to the NTCA Cabinet. Committees of NTCA on which the Council is represented are the Cabinet, Audit & Standards, Housing & Land Board and Overview & Scrutiny.

NTCA works in partnership with the North East Combined Authority (NECA) through the North East Joint Transport Committee. This Committee was established by NTCA but NECA is the accountable body for transport matters in the region.

The North East Transport Committee has an Audit Committee and an Overview & Scrutiny Committee. NCC Members represent the Council on all of these Committees, a total of four member places plus four substitutes.

There are currently forty-six organisations independent of the Council which have an impact on its service areas. In order to maintain effective partnerships with them, representatives of the Council, usually Elected Members, sit on the various committees and forums that are responsible for them.

For the year 2022/2023, the Full Council has agreed a total of 56 NCC places on 20 outside bodies (including the seven committees/joint committees of the NTCA). Twenty-eight Elected Members are appointed to those places. The Cabinet has agreed a total of 46 NCC places on 26 outside bodies. Eighteen Elected Members are appointed to fill those places.

In our most recent Member Survey (July-August 2022) we asked Members how many hours per week they spend on Council (and political) business. In summary, respondents to the Survey indicated:

- For most tasks Councillors spend up to 5 hours. 79% spend up to 5 hours a week in political group meetings. 76% spend up to 5 hours in formal regulatory meetings weekly and 70% said they spend up to 5 hours each week in pre meetings / informal briefings.

- 40% of Councillors say they spend between 6-10 hours a week dealing with constituent enquiries and requests with a further 15% saying they spend 11-15 hours.
- 36% spend 6-10 hours weekly preparing for meetings (e.g. reading papers). 30% spend between 6-10 hours travelling.
- 12% say they spend over 25 hours in formal council meetings.
- 8 Councillors said they spent time on other things. These included responding to press enquiries, writing press releases, and updating social media. Time was also spent preparing material / communications for residents and delivering leaflets / newsletters.
- 61% of Councillors said the time they spend on Council business is not what they expected when they became a Councillor.
- Of the 20 Councillors who answered that it is not what they expected 90% said they spend more time on Council business than they anticipated. They site more casework, higher levels of enquiries and the growth in work as reasons for this.

When asked to consider, the associated workload from the number of committees, outside organisations and partnerships that they have been appointed to sit on by the Council, 79% of Councillors responding said that the workload associated with this is about right. Some 21% said the current workload is too high.

## **Community Leadership**

In common with Members across local government, our Councillors carry out their representational role with electors through a variety of approaches including:

- Participation in the decision-making and non-decision-making committees of the Council, including Full Council;
- Membership of Council Boards as well as a wide range of outside bodies and organisations;
- Direct participation in community and voluntary groups;
- Participation on one of the five Local Area Councils;
- Membership of or attendance at Parish or Town Council meetings.

In May 2017, the Council replaced its local area committees with five Local Area Councils (LACs). This change was made to enable a closer connection between the Council and Northumberland communities. All LAC meetings are held in public. The LACs have wider terms of reference than the previous local area committees, including a separate local planning authority statutory decision-making role, recommending adjustments to budget priorities in relation to annual local transport plan issues within their area, and making decisions in relation to devolved capital highway maintenance allocations. The LAC Terms of Reference aim to empower citizens, strengthen communities and improve services, and all councillors for each particular area are involved (therefore including the Leader of Council and the Cabinet as individuals). There are Local Area Councils for North Northumberland, Tynedale, Castle Morpeth, Cramlington, Bedlington and Seaton Valley, and Ashington and Blyth. The table below, summarises leadership, electoral divisions, and political breakdown under each LAC.

<b>NORTH NORTHUMBERLAND (13)</b> Chair: G. Castle Vice Chair: S. Bridgett Vice Chair (Planning): C. Hardy	<b>TYNEDALE (13)</b> Chair: T. Cessford Vice Chair: D. Kennedy Vice Chair (Planning): A. Scott	<b>CASTLE MORPETH (13)</b> Chair: J. Beynon Vice Chair: D. Towns Vice Chair (Planning): J. Foster	<b>CRAMLINGTON, BEDLINGTON and SEATON VALLEY(12)</b> Chair: M. Swinburn Vice Chair: S. Lee Vice Chair (Planning): R. Wilczek	<b>ASHINGTON AND BLYTH (16)</b> Chair: L. Grimshaw Vice Chair: D. Carr Vice Chair (Planning): B. Gallacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Alnwick (1)</li> <li>● Alnwick (1)</li> <li>● Amble</li> <li>● Amble West with Warkworth</li> <li>● Bamburgh</li> <li>● Berwick East</li> <li>● Berwick North</li> <li>● Berwick West with Ord</li> <li>● Longhoughton</li> <li>● Norham and Islandshires</li> <li>● Rothbury</li> <li>● Shilbottle</li> <li>● Wooler</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bellingham</li> <li>● Bywell</li> <li>● Corbridge</li> <li>● Haltwhistle</li> <li>● Haydon and Hadrian</li> <li>● Hexham Central with Acomb</li> <li>● Hexham East</li> <li>● Hexham West</li> <li>● Humshaugh</li> <li>● Prudhoe North</li> <li>● Prudhoe South</li> <li>● South Tynedale</li> <li>● Stocksfield with Broomhaugh</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Choppington</li> <li>● Druridge Bay</li> <li>● Longhorsley</li> <li>● Lynemouth</li> <li>● Morpeth Kirkhill</li> <li>● Morpeth North</li> <li>● Morpeth Stobhill</li> <li>● Pegswood</li> <li>● Ponteland East and Stannington</li> <li>● Ponteland North</li> <li>● Ponteland South with Heddon</li> <li>● Ponteland West</li> <li>● Stakeford</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bedlington Central</li> <li>● Bedlington East</li> <li>● Bedlington West</li> <li>● Cramlington East</li> <li>● Cramlington Eastfield</li> <li>● Cramlington North</li> <li>● Cramlington South East</li> <li>● Cramlington Village</li> <li>● Cramlington West</li> <li>● Hartley</li> <li>● Holywell</li> <li>● Seghill with Seaton Delaval</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ashington Central</li> <li>● Bothal</li> <li>● College</li> <li>● Cowpen</li> <li>● Croft</li> <li>● Haydon</li> <li>● Hirst</li> <li>● Isabella</li> <li>● Kitty Brewster</li> <li>● Newbiggin Central and East</li> <li>● Newsham</li> <li>● Plessey</li> <li>● Seaton with Newbiggin West</li> <li>● Sleekburn</li> <li>● South Blyth</li> <li>● Wensleydale</li> </ul>
Conservative - 8 Green - 1 Labour - 1 Independent Gp - 2 Liberal Democrat - 1	Conservative - 6 Green - 1 Labour - 1 Indep. Gp - 2/Indep - 1 Liberal Democrat - 2	Conservative - 9 Labour - 4	Conservative - 7 Labour - 2 Independent Gp - 2 Independent - 1	Conservative - 3 Labour - 12 Liberal Democrat - 1

LAC meetings are held at different venues throughout the area (pre-covid). They are not intended to duplicate or replace any Parish or Town Council roles. The LAC Terms of Reference provide that they engage with all key stakeholders from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors to facilitate the delivery of area priorities. This includes regular liaison with Town and Parish Councils. While Town and Parish Councils have no formal relationship with the LACs, as questions are taken from members of the public at LAC meetings, town and parish representatives can interact directly with the LAC by this means. Also, many County Councillors are Town and/or Parish Councillors and this enhances their exposure to and experience of local matters.

Local Area Council (Planning) Committees meet monthly to consider categories of planning applications set out in the Council's Delegation Scheme. Meetings of the Planning Committee meetings are held separately from those of the LACs but are scheduled to coincide with the bimonthly LAC meetings, taking place immediately beforehand.

During the Pandemic, the extended lockdown provided an opportunity to consider the Local Area Councils' effectiveness. The LAC Chairs have undertaken a review of the Councils, considering the current Terms of Reference of the Northumberland LACs together with those of area committees in similar authorities (Cornwall Council, Cumbria County Council, Durham County Council, Shropshire Council and Wiltshire Council). The Review has also taken into account how other organisations, stakeholders and officers fit into the process. Findings and recommendations arising from the review are due for submission to Council.

Early in 2022, after NCC discussions with the Northumberland Association of Local Councils (NALC), the Association included questions about the LACs in their 'Survey on the relationship between Northumberland's Parish, Town and Community Councils and the County Council'. The following survey responses were encouraging:

- Some 64.44% of respondents agreed that the local County Councillor attended meetings of their Parish, Town or Community Council; and
- 80.43% felt that they had the right degree of contact with their local County Councillors.

## Councillor engagement with constituents

During July-August 2022 we surveyed NCC Members on a range of issues related to their workload and engagement with residents. The table below sets out the range of approaches Members take to engaging and their preferred methods.

Option	Total	Percent
Face to Face (e.g., Meetings / Councillor surgeries)	32	96.97%
Social Media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat)	21	63.64%
Text / WhatsApp	19	57.58%
Letter	11	33.33%
Email	33	100.00%
Newsletters	20	60.61%
Blogging	4	12.12%
Telephone	30	90.91%
Newspapers	11	33.33%
Noticeboards	6	18.18%
Flyers	14	42.42%

100% of Councillors responding to the survey use email to engage with their constituents. This was closely followed by face-to-face meetings (97%) and telephone (91%). Only 12% use blogging and 18% noticeboards. In terms of preferred communication channels, Councillors said they prefer to engage with constituents face to face with 42% ranking face to face as their first choice. Some 30% chose email as their most preferred channel. Councillors are spending less time communicating using letter and spending more time or significantly more time using emails. Telephone communication has also increased with 58% saying they were spending more time / significantly more time using this channel to communicate with residents.

## Mechanisms in place that help councillors interact with young people, those not on the electoral register, and/or other minority groups and their representative bodies

### Participation & Engagement

Northumberland County Council takes its Corporate Parenting role seriously and all Councillors and Elected Members receive training and regular updates on Corporate Parenting.

Councillors can access and engage with services offered through Northumberland Youth Service who carry out a number of engagements, consultation and advocacy services on behalf of young people. Work with young people includes:

- Coordinating a wide range of democratic processes, such as Youth Parliament and Youth Cabinet\_giving young people an opportunity to represent their local communities and engage with the democratic process.
- Active involvement in Local Democracy week and the 'Make Your Mark' ballot.
- A coherent advocacy strategy that ensures effective representation and opportunity for vulnerable groups - this is delivered independently and important when a young person feels their voice is not being heard.
- Coordinating groups such as Respect Equals Change (REC), a group dedicated to young people with disabilities, providing opportunity to have their voices heard.
- Coordinating groups such as Voices Making Choices (VMC), a service that brings Looked After Children and Young People together to have their voice and say on local issues and matters that impact upon them.

In addition to the activity of the Youth Service, the Council engages with various Voluntary & Community Sector organisations and partnerships who represent the interest of young people. Councillors may engage with or utilise these partnership arrangements and relationships as part of their areas of responsibility and Council portfolios. These organisations include:

- NE Youth, a charitable organisation supporting over +140 youth organisations with an indirect reach to over 140,000 young people.
- YMCA Northumberland an independent charity, bringing together local people and organisations to support young lives in Northumberland.
- Children North East deliver services, support and initiatives that provide a platform for children, young people and families to work through issues, take action and provide them with the tools to reach their full potential.
- Northumberland Cultural Education which was established in 2016 brings together the County's education and cultural sectors in order to meet the needs of its children and young people, offering a platform for engagement, collaboration and coproduction.
- Thriving Together Northumberland showcases the VCSE, offering the wider opportunity to build a culture of collaboration, investing in cross-sector working and to develop opportunities to make a difference to the lives of Northumberland Residents.

For engagement with underrepresented groups, the Council maintains relationships through:

- The Integrated Care Board, which has a Health Inequalities Group;
- Faith Leaders and Church Groups across Northumberland;
- BAME community groups such as 'Being Women' for example; and,
- LGBTQ+ community groups and organisations including Northumberland Pride, Trinity Youth Association and LGBT Foundation.

## Community meetings

Of the 67 County Councillors, 21 are also members of Town and Parish Councils, 16 on Town Councils and 6 on Parish Councils (one Councillor on both). Beyond direct Membership, there is an expectation that County Councillors will regularly attend Town and Parish Council meetings within their respective Divisions. For Members with strategic leadership responsibilities (Leader and Cabinet), this will often involve attending Town and Parish Council meetings outside their Divisional boundaries. In our Member Survey (July - August 2022), some 81% of Councillors who responded stated they attend Parish / town council meetings monthly. Others responded that they attended weekly, bi-monthly, as requested and whenever they are held.

## Casework

Nearly a quarter of Councillors who responded to our recent Member Survey indicate, on average, they deal with 11-15 cases per month, with some 18% saying they handle over 50 on average per month. The table below provides a breakdown (from our Member Survey 2022) on the approaches respondents take to dealing with the casework.

	Fully deal with and respond to a request		Contact an officer for input / advice before you respond		Send the query to an officer to respond on your behalf		Liaise with another member about the query		Liaise with a parish / town councillor about the query	
Option	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Very frequently	17	51.5%	12	36.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	4	12.1%
Frequently	13	39.4%	16	48.5%	12	36.5%	9	27.3%	11	33.4%
Infrequently	2	6.1%	5	15.2%	15	45.5%	19	57.6%	14	42.4%
Never	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	5	15.2%	3	9.1%	3	9.1%
Not Answered	1	3.0%	0	0.0%	1	3.0%	2	6.1%	1	3.0%

Some 52% of Councillors who responded fully deal with and respond to a request very frequently, with some 49% frequently contacting an officer for advice and / or input before responding. Some 46% infrequently send the request to an officer to respond.

Our Member Survey illustrates how technology continues to influence the way Members work, with increasing use of social media and text channels. However, the Member Survey also underlined how face-to-face continues to be the preferred choice of the Members who responded (42%).

In the Survey (July-August 2022) we also asked Members how their workload had changed over time. In summary, respondents to the Survey indicated:

- 79% of Councillors feel that their workload has increased over time.
- Reasons for the increase include the impact of covid, joining more committees / boards, growth in the number of residents in their division, growth in certain issues nationally (covid, cost of living) and locally (Storm Arwen, grass-cutting, investment in infrastructure, homelessness).
- Respondents also highlight a change in communication and behaviour of residents. For example, an increase in the use of social media to contact Councillors and a

feeling that residents are more likely to complain than in the past.

### **Council - service users' engagement/dispute resolution with service providers and managers rather than through councillors**

Service Users can make contact with the Council via a number of different channels:

- Website - there are many online forms that users can submit service requests and feedback direct to departments.
- Telephone - The council has a Contact Centre which take requests for Council services and answer enquiries. There is also a Contact Centre for Social Service enquiries.
- Face-to-face - there are currently seven offices located across the County where customers can report issues, raise service requests and complaints.
- Social media - social media comments and direct messages are managed by the Council's Communications team who triage issues raised and direct to the appropriate team.
- Email - users can email [complaints@northumberland.gov.uk](mailto:complaints@northumberland.gov.uk) to report any issues. These are then assigned to the correct process whether these are service requests or complaints.
- Letter - residents can write in to the Council and their enquiry will be directed to the appropriate department.

Often the Council resolves service users' complaints directly with the relevant service without the need to progress through to the Corporate Complaints Process. Where possible, an informal resolution can be pursued. If the issue can be dealt with informally within 24 hours of receipt and the service user is satisfied with the outcome, an informal resolution will be recorded rather than progressing through one of the following formal complaint processes. In the event a complaint is not resolved to the service user's satisfaction, residents have recourse to the Local Government Ombudsman.

**ENDS**