

AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

DATE	03/04/2025
REPORT OF	Sharon Wroot Executive Director Place and Resources
SUBJECT	Local Partnerships
STATUS	Open Report

CONTRIBUTION TO OUR AIMS

Good governance arrangements contribute directly to the achievement of the Council's strategic aims.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report seeks to bring to the Committee's attention an informal inspection report carried out by Local Partnerships around capital project governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Committee:

- Notes the content of the report set out in the annex.

REASONS FOR DECISION

Under its terms of reference, the Committee is required to consider the reports of external audit and inspection agencies insofar as they affect the Council's Corporate Governance Arrangements and to review any issue referred to it by the Chief Executive or a Director and any Council body.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

- 1.1 Funded by the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government and delivered through the Local Government Association, the Local Government Improvement Programme, enables assurance reviews to be given to participating local authorities delivered by Local Partnerships. These reviews are light touch, targeted assessments of risk areas identified by participating councils, with short, focused recommendations as outputs. The Council sought the involvement of Local Partnerships to look at capital programme delivery and supporting project management, with a view to identifying any perceived weaknesses and to give assurance where appropriate.
Approach
- 1.2 The methodology used by Local Partnerships included a document review and stakeholder interviews. The document review evaluated key project

documents to understand the transformation programme's goals and progress. The stakeholder interviews provided insights into the programme's progress and challenges. The review aimed to add value for the Council by being forward-looking, collaborative, and identifying potential improvements.

Executive Summary

- 1.3 The assurance review found that the Council still faced some challenges in delivering an ambitious capital programme exceeding £100 million. Despite the challenges, the Council demonstrated a maturity and ambition and were keen to do their best to deliver for the people of North East Lincolnshire. The organisations had a positive attitude towards change and a desire to improve its capital programme delivery. Steps have been taken to reestablish an in-house Project Management Office, implementing a business case-driven project lifecycle process, and recruitment of qualified individuals into key leadership roles. The review also noted the complexity of the organisational context, with the outsourcing of services to EQUANS, but noting the imminent insourcing of services from them as a natural occurrence to the expiration of the contract.

Recommendations

- 1.4 The report provides several recommendations, including:
- Reviewing the procurement strategy to deliver benefits from the whole programme value.
 - Developing a career path for project management within the organisation.
 - Better use of Quality Assurance and Senior User roles in project boards.
 - Additional scrutiny and optimism bias in initial project budget setting.
 - Modifying the terms of reference of the Major Project governance to include further gateway points.
 - Modifying the standard project highlight report to be more forward-looking.
 - Providing assurance through a peer project basis, independent Project Management Office or neighbouring authorities.
 - Establishing a permanent home for the Project Management Office after the EQUANS staff migration.

Findings Overview

- 1.5 The review highlights the Council's positive attitude towards delivering its capital programme and the challenges posed by the insourcing of EQUANS services. The strategic context included the availability of central government capital funding (Levelling Up, Future High Streets, etc.), providing the Council with a delivery challenge of a capital programme in excess of £100million.
- 1.6 The council see capital investment and the delivery of new 'place' elements as a key engine for growth. Improving their delivery capacity and capability in this respect is a priority.

Structure and Systems

- 1.7 The Council's programme governance included the Business Development

Group and Major Projects Group for strategic direction and oversight. Most capital projects were supported by a business case based on '5 case' principles. The review noted the need for a permanent Project Management Office and the final delivery organisation pending the decommissioning of the EQUANS Partnership. Risk management was addressed at various levels, with no link found between corporate risk appetite and project delivery.

Capacity and Capability

- 1.8 The Council had started from a low base in terms of capacity and capability for delivering a capital programme. The Council relied on consultants, primarily from the EQUANS partnership, and had employed project managers directly.

2. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- 2.1 Clearly the insourcing of the EQUANS contract at the natural end of its shelf life presents some opportunities to underpin project governance generally. However, until that work is completed it may be the case that the recommendations set out in the annexed report cannot be fully recognised and they will be implemented with an incremental approach over a period of time.
- 2.2 In the meantime, democratic oversight of major projects has been enhanced, both with the major projects featuring in quarterly reporting and the recent advent of the Regeneration Programme Oversight Committee.

3. OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 3.1 Not Applicable.

4. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1 There are no specific reputational or communications issues associated with this report. The Council is maintaining its journey insofar as continuous improvement is concerned by taking advantage of opportunities to have its governance and assurance frameworks suitably tested and challenged.
- 4.2 The attached report has been considered by the Regeneration Programme Oversight Group.

5. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are no immediate financial considerations arising.

6. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

There are no such issues immediately arising.

7. CLIMATE CHANGE, NATURE RECOVERY AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no such issues immediately arising

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no such issues immediately arising

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no such issues immediately arising

10. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS

There are no such issues immediately arising

11. WARD IMPLICATIONS

None specifically although all wards will ultimately benefit from the Council having a robust assurance framework.

12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

13. CONTACT OFFICER

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Appendix A

Local Partnerships Report 18th December 2024.



JOINTLY OWNED BY



North East Lincolnshire Council Capital Programme Review.

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Introduction and Background

Introduction

This report has been produced by Local Partnerships at the request of North East Lincolnshire Council (NELC) and funded by the LGA. It summarises the results of a brief assurance review of the council's Capital Programme on the 26th and 27th of November. It provides a brief summary of the key findings together with a number of conclusions and suggested recommendations that the council may wish to consider.

Background

Funded by MHCLG and delivered through the LGA local government improvement programme, Local Partnerships have, this year, provided a number of assurance reviews to participating Local Authorities. Each review was a light touch targeted assessment of an area that a council has identified as high-risk (e.g. due to cost pressures, or risk of non-delivery), with a short, focussed recommendations report as an output.

The subject matter for each review eligible for inclusion in the programme was wide ranging and could comprise any of the following.

- Capital strategies and programmes – How authorities decide their capital investment priorities and then go on to manage a portfolio of projects.
- Individual business cases or projects – looking at a specific business case or project in delivery which the authority considers particularly difficult or high risk.
- Specific services – particularly those subject to specific challenges (such as housing/regeneration Companies, Traded Services etc)

The recommendations were practically focussed and clearly linked both to the objectives of the council and nationally recognised best practice. The programme included a wider “lessons learned” type activity to disseminate key findings, particularly if common areas of challenge are identified.

The review was an opportunity for Local Authorities to gain an independent opinion on how their programme/project or service is run and whether it is likely to deliver the desired outcomes. The review was delivered on a ‘critical friend’ basis with Local Partnerships working in partnership with the participating authority.

Our approach

Methodology

The methodology utilised by Local Partnerships in conducting this review largely replicated that used across all our assurance products and was formed of two parts. The first was a document review, where key project documents were evaluated and appraised. This was undertaken to provide the review team a sense of what the transformation programme wanted to achieve and current progress towards that. The second was a series of stakeholder interviews with those either directly involved in programme or others who have an interest in its success. Both parts offered a powerful insight into the programme and provided the review team with an informed picture of progress so far and challenges still faced into the future.

Objectives and Terms of Reference

Following a discussion held on the 19th August with Rob Walsh, Chief Executive and Sharon Wroot, Executive Director, Place & Resources, it was agreed the following elements were to be viewed as in scope for a high-level assurance review into NELC's delivery of its capital/regeneration programme.

These included.

- Governance and Oversight. Looking at how its capital projects were managed and provided with strategic direction. Looking into the functioning, ToR and composition of Project and Programme boards and how projects are 'anchored' within the council's constitution and Scheme of Delegation.
- Management of the Project lifecycle. Looking at how projects enter the programme and how their progress is tracked and approved. The review was to look at the operation of the new Business Development Group and other Gateway arrangements NELC have in place to manage the programme.
- Delivery arrangements. The review would take an overview of the current delivery arrangements NELC have, particularly in light of the potential insourcing of services currently undertaken by the council's delivery partners EQUANS and current plans to insource these services.
- Finally, the review would look at risk, both at Project and Programme level. It would provide a high-level assessment of how this is currently managed together with any recommendations for improvements. Focussing particularly on how regeneration programme risks are escalated to the corporate risk register as required and how these risks are kept within the envelope of risk acceptance demanded by the organisation.

In undertaking the assurance review Local Partnerships sought to.

- Provide NELC's nominated Senior Responsible Owner with an assessment of delivery confidence.
- Identify areas of potential improvement and offer recommendations for how this could be achieved.
- Identify areas of potential risk in the future delivery of the programme and suggest potential mitigation and management actions.

Approach

The aim of the review was to add value for North East Lincolnshire Council. To this end, like all Local Partnerships assurance reviews, it was forward looking, collaborative and looked to identify potential improvements. Local Partnerships seek to always work with local authorities in a collaborative manner. It is **not** an audit. The specific findings of the review were shared only with the Senior Responsible Owner nominated by the council, Sharon Wroot.

As a part of an MHCLG funded LGA improvement programme, a general report identifying key themes and issues across the various reviews will be produced once all the reviews are complete. However, this will not refer to any specific findings included in this report, NELC or any other council or issue but concentrate on identifying the outcomes resulting from our work.

Executive Summary

Key findings

The assurance review found North East Lincolnshire Council faced with a significant challenge. Like many councils they have been successful in being awarded significant capital funds from central government, which, supplemented by their own capital budget, adds up to a programme well in excess of £100 million. Delivering a programme of this size on time and to budget and in line with the various funding programme requirements over the next few years will be demanding.

The interviews revealed, however, NELC to be a mature and ambitious organisation keen to do their best to deliver for the people of North East Lincolnshire. There is a positive attitude to change and a genuine desire to improve how they deliver their capital programme. NELC have already taken a number of steps to reinforce their capability. This has included the reestablishment of a PMO, the implementation of business case driven project lifecycle process and the recruitment of a number of qualified individuals into key leadership roles.

The organisational context in which these changes are being affected, is however complex. The joint venture organisation (between the council and Bouygues) EQUANs, in which many of the services which contribute to the delivery of the capital programme is itself being 'insourced' back into the council. This is providing a degree of uncertainty around specific roles, numbers and skills available to the council resulting from the TUPE process.

Through the assurance review, Local Partnerships were able to make a series of recommendations designed to build on the existing good work already undertaken by the council. These include leveraging additional benefits resulting from a programme rather than individual projects, improving initial project costing through the use of optimism bias and slight modifications to the project lifecycle process.

Recommendations

Table 3.2 provides a summary of the recommendations included in this report. A fuller narrative is included in section 5 of this report.

No.	Theme	Recommendations	Priority
1.	Procurement	NELC should undertake a review of its procurement strategy across the capital programme. It should consider the possibility of a long-term approach designed to deliver benefits derived from the whole programme value rather than simply individual projects.	Recommended
2.	Resource	NELC has begun to employ its own project managers who are suitable experienced and qualified. However, to ensure this expertise is retained and developed, the council should consider developing a 'job family' or career path for project management with the organisation.	Recommended
3	Governance	The council has in place individual project boards based on a Prince 2 term of reference and composition. The council should consider better use of both the Quality Assurance and Senior User roles to ensure a full set of outcomes are considered and managed.	Recommended

No.	Theme	Recommendations	Priority
4	Budgets	Initial project budget setting should be subject to additional scrutiny and the application of optimism bias of some form. Contingency should be linked to the risk profile of the project and the provenance of the financial case challenged by the Major Project Steering Group.	Critical
5	Lifecycle	The development of each project is underpinned by the development of a business case. NELC should consider modifying the ToR of the MPSG to include oversight of a number of further gateway points. This could include. The inclusion of an approval to proceed to business case on submission of a half page mandate. An additional gateway point to approve contract signature once procurement is complete.	Essential
6	Reporting	NELC should consider modifying the standard project highlight report to be more forward looking. They should include a justification of their RAG status and provide a monthly update of the 'financial forecast to complete'.	Recommended
7	Assurance	NELC should consider how assurance could be provided either through a 'peer project' basis, an independent PMO or the use of neighbouring authorities.	Essential
8	Organisation	NELC should consider a 'permanent home' for the PMO once the migration of staff back across from EQUANs has been completed.	Recommended

Table 3.2: Summary of Recommendations

Critical (Do Now) – To increase the likelihood of a successful outcome it is of the greatest importance that the programme/project should take action immediately.

Essential (Do within 3 months) – To increase the likelihood of a successful outcome the programme/project should take action in the near future.

Recommended – The programme/project should benefit from the uptake of this recommendation.

Findings Overview

Overview

- The interviews indicated a mature and ambitious organisation keen to do their best to deliver for the people of North East Lincolnshire. There is a positive attitude to change and a genuine desire to improve how they deliver their capital programme.
- The delivery of the capital programme and improvements in doing so are being undertaken within the context of the insourcing of EQUANS services and 'TUPEing' of staff.
- NELC's preference is to work collaboratively and in partnership with other organisations. A previous decision to outsource project management and technical services to EQUANS has not provided the anticipated partners benefits. What was set up as a partnership has defaulted to a conventional commissioned technical service provider.

Strategic Context

- NELC have benefitted from the availability of central government capital funding (LUF, FHSF etc.). Providing NELC with a delivery challenge to which they need to rise for a capital programme in excess of £100million.
- The council see capital investment and the delivery of new 'place' elements as a key engine for growth. Improving their delivery capacity and capability in this respect is a priority.
- This, amongst other factors, has led to the decision to insource the technical service group within EQUANS, its joint venture partner, when the contract expires next year. The re-establishment of the PMO last year has already seen improvements in how capital projects are managed.
- NELC are rebuilding their 'smart' client function. Once it is clear exactly what roles will be brought inside from EQUANS a new structure will be established.
- Recently the council has however seen a number of challenging projects 'fail'. Experiencing significant delays and 'cost overruns' (i.e. Corporation Road Bridge). This has seen the reputation of the service suffer.
- The view amongst officers is that these are predominantly associated with 'legacy' projects rather than those being delivered under new arrangements and are therefore unrepresentative of what the service will deliver in future. However, rebuilding trust with stakeholders will take time.

Structure and Systems

- NELC programme governance includes the BDG and the MPSG to offer strategic direction and oversight of projects.
- The majority of NELC capital projects are now supported by a business case based on '5 case' principles.
- Oversight and governance of each project is provided through a Project Board chaired by an SRO and attended by a number of
- Capital Projects are subject to a 'project lifecycle' assurance process throughout which there are stop/go gateways.
- The new arrangements do not yet include all capital projects. Educational capital for example still remains within the relevant directorate.

- The responsibility and management of the majority of the Capital Programme sits with the Director of Economy, Environment and Infrastructure. The final position of the PMO has yet to be decided.
- The final delivery organisation however is in obedience pending the decommissioning of the EQUANS Partnership.
- Risk is dealt with at a number of levels in the organisation. Corporate risk appetite is set out clearly within the investment strategy and monitored through project delivery. No indication was provided by the review of any link between the two.
- Procurement options are decided on a project-by-project basis with input from the relevant category specialist. No evidence was found of a programme wide approach to procurement.

Capacity and Capability

- Like many Local Authorities NELC have started from a low base in terms of capacity and capability associated with the delivery of a capital programme. This has started to be addressed over the last few years.
- NELC are largely reliant on consultants to help deliver their capital projects. These are drawn primarily from the EQUANS partnership, a range of outside sources including individual 'spot' procurements and local and national frameworks.
- There are now a number of project managers directly employed by NELC and supplemented by consultants. The review indicated these to be well qualified and in receipt of regular training and workforce development. The development horizon for these staff however seems only to extend to the end of their current projects.
- There is a perceived shortage of specialist project support roles such as legal and procurement.
- There are concerns around EQUANS and both what will be left to insource and its quality. This will remain an unknown determinant of success until the insourcing is completed.

Conclusions & Recommendations

From the key findings set out in section 4 we have derived a set of conclusions and recommendations which we suggest NELC should consider. These recommendations are intended to ensure that surety is provided to the delivery of the Capital Programme, and it fully aligns with the strategic objectives of the council.

Programme Procurement

Procurement for both consultancy support and physical construction works seems to happen on a project-by-project basis. In this respect the programme resembles a portfolio of individual projects managed individually, one at a time, rather than as a continuous pipeline of work. Little consideration seems to be made of the benefits approaching the market with a programme or part-programme of work going forward possibly offering aggregation benefits to the council.

The experience of other councils shows that adopting a longer term more strategic approach to procurement offers both tangible and non-tangible benefits. The former offers the potential for discounting and volume efficiencies, particularly from construction partners, if multiple, consecutive projects are taken to market at the same time. Non-tangible benefits include collaborative working and joint learning between NELC and its supply chain partners leading to operational efficiencies. It can also lead to a greater realisation of social value. Particularly around local economic benefit and the creation of local apprenticeships.

It is possible that a single project by-project approach has been a consequence of the relationship between the council and EQUANS in the past. Also, the council may also consider the current value of capital programme a 'peak' rather than business as usual. However, as this transitions to the new insourced arrangement the council may be keen to explore what the market has to offer in offering a longer-term relationship.

Recommendation: NELC should undertake a review of its procurement strategy across the capital programme. It should consider the possibility of a long-term approach designed to deliver benefits derived from the whole programme value rather than simply individual projects.

Retention Strategy and a Career Path.

NELC have recognised the value of possessing a core 'smart client' function within the council in terms of providing strategic direction and ensuring that the objectives in delivering the capital programme are entirely consistent with those of the organisation.

Although the review demonstrated a willingness to upskill and train its own project management staff, this seemed not to extend beyond individuals current project commitments. The council may wish to consider the creation of a career path and job family for project roles within the council. This would provide both a starting point and the potential for pursuing a career within the council, helping with talent retention..

Recommendation: NELC has begun to employ its own project managers who are suitably experienced and qualified. However, to ensure this expertise is retained and developed the council should consider developing a 'job family' or career path for project management with the organisation.

Governance.

NELC have demonstrated good practice in terms of governance and the creation of individual Project Boards to provide direction and oversight. The complex nature of capital projects in the authority can however stretch the expertise required of both the SRO and other board members unless carefully thought through.

This was highlighted particularly with regards to the Corporation Bridge Project. Initially treated as a simple highways structure, the review indicated that decisions made early on in the project had not taken into account the heritage status of the structure leading to erroneous time and cost estimations.

Greater consideration needs to be given perhaps to board composition in future to ensure that the right experience and skills are available to scrutinise and direct the project adequately. In using the Prince 2 governance model, greater consideration needs to be given to both the Senior User and Quality Assurance roles.

Recommendation: The council has in place individual project boards based on a Prince 2 term of reference and composition. The council should consider better use of both the Quality Assurance and Senior User roles to ensure a full set of outcomes are considered and managed.

Budget Setting.

Initial budgets at commencement are produced by the project team using initial cost estimates based on previous knowledge of other, similar schemes. Recent experience has shown that these initial budgets have proven to be inadequate as they fail to take into account design development and increased complexity, potential scope increases and construction price inflation.

This cost growth during the project erodes the cost benefit estimate provided within the business case, presents the council with a financial challenge and also damages confidence of senior management in the project team's ability to deliver on time and to budget.

These initial cost estimates need to take into account risk contingency and optimism bias as well as being subject to additional scrutiny and challenge.

Recommendation: Initial project budget setting should be subject to additional scrutiny and the application of optimism bias of some form. Contingency should be linked to the risk profile of the project and the provenance of the financial case challenged by the Major Project Steering Group.

Additional Gateway Process.

Each project is subject to a lifecycle approval process and required to pass through a series of gateways before it reaches the delivery phase. These are currently coincident with various iterations of the business case development process. This is entirely in line with best practice and demonstrates how NELC are looking to improve their delivery performance regarding the management of the capital programme.

The review indicated that this gateway process could be improved by the addition of two further gates.

Recommendation: The development of each project is underpinned by the development of a business case. NELC should consider modifying the ToR of the MPSG to include oversight of a number of further gateway points. This could include.

- The inclusion of an approval to proceed to business case on submission of a half page mandate.
- An additional gateway point to approve contract signature once procurement is complete.

Project Highlight Reports.

Project Highlight reports are completed monthly and are an important means by which progress is communicated to the project board and then the rest of the organisation. Expenditure that month, critical milestones achieved, and budget expended are all included and are pieces of key information necessary to ascertain project progress. However, they are very backward looking, focussing on what has happened over the last month rather than providing an assessment of delivery confidence going forward.

Recommendation: NELC should consider modifying the standard project highlight report to be more forward looking. They should include a justification of their RAG status and provide a monthly update of the 'financial forecast to complete'.

Assurance.

The review could not find any evidence of a formal independent assurance process in place to support projects and offer an independent assessment of project delivery confidence.

Recommendation: NELC should consider how assurance could be provided either through a 'peer project' basis, an independent PMO or the use of neighbouring authorities.













Organisational Change & Location of the PMO.

There are a number of options for where the PMO could sit as a part of the final organisational structure. Sitting as a common delivery service function under the AD for Infrastructure would produce operational efficiencies. However, NELC may require 'distance' between the PMO as an 'assurance' agency and other members of the project team. Placing the PMO under core corporate services (i.e. finance or audit) may provide this distance but would require a client/ contractor relationship to be developed between them and technical services.

Recommendation: NELC should consider a 'permanent home' for the PMO once the migration of staff back across from EQUANs has been completed.

Appendix 1:

List of Documents Reviewed

	2024.09 - Major Project Group Final
	202410- Major Projects Groups -ToR v1
	20240702 - Major Project Database v1
	Annex 2 Capital Programme
	Annex 3 Investment Strategy
	BCSS_Template
	Business Development Group - Terms of Refere...
	FTB_Template
	ITS_Template
	LGA assurance review
	Major Projects Steering Group - Revised Terms ...
	NELC Initial Thoughts and Recommendations R...

Appendix 2:

List of People Interviewed

Name	Role
Sharon Wroot	Executive Director Place and Resources
Carolina Borgstrom,	Director of Environment, Economy and Infrastructure
Richard Dowson and Drew Hughes,	Head of Project Management & Head of Policy Strategy and Performance.
Katie Mille	Project Manager
Guy Lonsdale,	Deputy Section 151 Officer
Cllr Jackson and Cllr Swinburn	Leader and Portfolio Holder.
Paul Evans	Assistant Director Infrastructure
Damien Jaines-White	Assistant Director Regeneration

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