



Narrative Report for the Year ended 31 March 2021 - Draft

1. Introduction

This Narrative Report provides information about the North East Combined Authority (NECA), including the key issues affecting the Authority and its accounts. It provides an explanatory narrative to key elements of the statements and sections in the accounts and also provides a summary of the Authority's financial performance for 2020/21 and its future financial prospects.

This report provides the reader with:

- A guide to the different financial statements within the Statement of Accounts.
- An overview of the activities and significant matters which occurred during the year.
- A summary of the Authority's financial performance during the year ending 31 March 2021 and its financial position at that date.
- A look ahead to 2021/22 and beyond.

The Statement of Accounts sets out the financial performance of the Authority for the year ending 31 March 2021 and its financial position at that date. They have been prepared in accordance with proper practices as set out in the Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy (CIPFA) Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom (the Code). The Code requires that the accounts give a true and fair view of the financial position of the Authority. In line with the Code, suitable accounting policies have been applied and where necessary prudent judgements and estimates have been made.

The accounts feature four main financial statements:

- Movement in Reserves Statement.
- Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement.
- Balance Sheet.
- Cash Flow Statement.

The purpose of each of the above statements is described at the end of this report and the actual statements are contained within the accompanying Statement of Accounts document, which also includes detailed notes providing further information relating to specific amounts and balances.

The main statements are supplemented by a further section which presents the Group Accounts, consolidating the figures of Nexus with those of the Authority.

These statements and accounts collectively provide a comprehensive view of the Authority's financial position during the period to which they relate. The format of the accounts changed in 2018/19 to reflect the impact of the Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside and Northumberland Combined Authority (Establishment and Functions) Order 2018 (the [Order](#)) which changed the boundaries of NECA on 2 November 2018.

The Authority seeks to make the best possible use of resources available with regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness. This is a responsibility shared by Members and Officers of the Authority, with the Chief Finance Officer having a specific role in ensuring the adequacy of resources and proper financial administration. Our budget proposals for 2021/22, available on the NECA website (www.northeastca.gov.uk) sets out how we will do this looking forward. The Statement of Accounts accompanying this report looks back at our performance over the past year. Reviewed together they provide the reader with an understanding of the financial position of the Authority.

2. What is the North East Combined Authority?

The North East Combined Authority (NECA) was established in April 2014 as a legal body that brought together the seven councils which serve Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside and Sunderland. It had transport and economic development powers and its ambition was to create the best possible conditions for growth in jobs, investment and living standards, making the North East an excellent location for business and enabling residents to develop high-level skills so they can benefit long into the future.

The North of Tyne authorities secured a devolution deal with devolution funding for the North of Tyne area, which required the establishment of a separate North of Tyne Mayoral Combined Authority during 2018/19. On the 2 November 2018, the Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside and Northumberland Combined Authority (Establishment and Functions) Order 2018 changed the boundaries of NECA.

As a result of these governance changes, from 2 November 2018 the boundary of NECA covers the Local Authorities of Durham, Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland. At the same time the North of Tyne Combined Authority was established, and the North East Joint Transport Committee was created, which continues to exercise the Transport functions over the area covered by the two Combined Authorities.

A Deed of Cooperation was made on the 4 July 2018 between the seven Constituent Authorities in the area that outlines a framework for collaborative working across the region, the Deed of Cooperation was updated in March 2020. On 20 November 2018 NECA was formally confirmed as retaining the Accountable Body role for Transport on behalf of the North East Joint Transport Committee.

NECA continued to be the accountable body for the North East Local Enterprise Partnership (North East LEP) until the North of Tyne Mayoral Combined Authority (NTCA) was fully established. The role of accountable body for the North East LEP transferred on 1 April 2020.

NECA continues to work closely with other bodies in the region to secure external funding, including funding for transport; infrastructure; economic development; skills and employment activities.

NECA works closely with the North East LEP and the wider business community to deliver the Strategic Economic Plan for the North East and capitalise on these opportunities.

Revenue Financial Summary 2020/21

Revenue expenditure covers the cost of the Authority's day to day operations and contributions to and from reserves. A summary of NECA expenditure against the budget is set out in the Table 1 below. Expenditure totalling £125.049m was slightly higher than the revenue budget of £124.794m due to slightly higher than forecast payments made to constituent authorities for Covid 19 transport grants. Income received was £118.463m, which resulted in a net deficit to fund from reserves of £6.586m. This was in line with forecasts presented to the Leadership Board and the JTC during the year and included an advance to TT2 Ltd in connection with the Tyne Pass project, funded from Tyne Tunnels reserves.

Table 1: Summary of Revenue Expenditure

	2020/21 Revised Budget	2020/21 Actual	Variance
	£000	£000	£000
Expenditure			
Joint Transport Committee			
- Retained Levy Budget	1,991	1,907	(84)
- Grant to Durham	15,456	15,456	-
- Grant to Nexus	59,000	59,000	-
- Grant to Northumberland	6,224	6,224	-
Tyne Tunnels			
- Contract Payments	13,933	12,717	(1,216)
- TT2 Advance (Tyne Pass)	6,670	6,670	-
- JTC costs	263	457	194
- Financing Costs	6,507	7,428	921
Other Transport Activity			
- Transport Strategy Unit	1,273	1,062	(211)
- Covid Grants	13,211	13,868	657
Corporate/Central Budget	266	260	(6)
Total Expenditure	124,974	125,049	255
Income			
External Grant Funding	(14,114)	(14,655)	(541)
Transport Levies	(82,800)	(82,800)	-
Tolls Income	(20,650)	(20,544)	106
Interest/Investment Income	(80)	(107)	(27)
Contributions from Constituent Authorities	(161)	(161)	-
Other Income	(178)	(196)	(18)
Total Income	(117,983)	(118,463)	(480)
Net Revenue Expenditure to fund from Reserves	6,811	6,586	(225)

This statement provides a comparison of the outturn position with the NECA (including JTC) revised revenue budget for 2020/21, before any allocation of costs and income between the accounts of NECA and NTCA. The purpose of this statement is to give the reader an understanding of overall spending and income for the whole year, in comparison with the revised budget.

Within the accompanying Statement of Accounts document the **Comprehensive Income & Expenditure Statement** (CIES, page 6 of the Statement of Accounts) sets out the Authority's financial position for the year before taking account of statutory adjustments required to be made to

the accounts. The figures presented in the accounts can appear different from the budgeted revenue income and expenditure as they include accounting adjustments for costs such as Depreciation, Revenue Expenditure Funded by Capital Under Statute and certain pensions account adjustments not included in the revenue budget.

The **Movement in Reserves Statement** (MIRS, page 5 of the Statement of Accounts) reflects these statutory adjustments and shows how the financial performance for the year has impacted on the Authority's reserves. There has been a decrease in reserves from £125.141m at 31 March 2020 to £99.316m at 31 March 2021, mainly due to the transfer of reserves relating to the North East LEP to the North of Tyne Combined Authority on 1 April 2020.

The gross cost of services during the year including capital grants to third parties as well as revenue expenditure was £79.781m (£104.772m). This includes a significant amount of 'Revenue Expenditure Funded by Capital Under Statute' – representing investment in capital assets owned by third parties, not by the Authority itself.

After deducting specific grants and income from fees and charges, the net cost of services was £30.325m (£41.510m in 2019/20). This was funded from sources including the Transport Levy, other contributions from Constituent Authorities and Government Grants. The net cost was lower than in 2019/20 because the previous year included income and expenditure relating to the North East LEP which is now accounted for by the NTCA.

The balance of usable reserves at the year-end was £43.032m, which is a £12.685m decrease on the previous year. This is made up of a number of different elements, most of which are held for specific purposes. The decrease is due to the transfer of usable reserves to the NTCA partially offset by an increase in capital grants received which have not yet been applied to fund expenditure (known as the Capital Grants Unapplied reserve) and the creation of new earmarked reserves to hold funds relating to the Bus Partnership and Metro Studies projects.

3. Capital Investment

Capital investment (including Nexus as part of the NECA Group) during the year totalled £83.449m. Expenditure consisted of capital expenditure on the Authority's own assets and capital expenditure via capital grants to third parties. An analysis of capital investment by programme are shown in the following table.

Table 2: Capital Expenditure by Programme

	2020/21 Revised Programme	2020/21 Actual	2020/21 Variance
	£000	£000	£000
Transforming Cities Fund Tranche 1	2,725	1,932	(793)
Transforming Cities Fund Tranche 2	1,517	726	(791)
Go Ultra Low	384	426	42
Ultra-Low Emission Vehicles - Taxi Project	497	419	(78)
Metro Asset Renewal Plan	24,635	20,990	(3,645)
Metro Fleet Replacement	48,605	43,689	(4,916)
Nexus Other Capital Projects	2,074	770	(1,304)
Metro Flow	1,702	1,142	(560)
Tyne Tunnels	1,007	952	(55)
Local Transport Plan *	11,309	11,246	(63)
Active Travel Fund (capital elements)	1,157	1,157	-
Total Capital Programme	95,612	83,449	(12,163)

* Amounts shown in these lines are net of LTP funded expenditure included within the Metro Asset Renewal Plan to avoid double-counting.

A summary of how this capital investment was financed is shown in the following table:

Table 3: Capital Funding 2020/21

	2020/21 Actual	2020/21
	£000	%
Local Growth Fund Grant	1,057	1.3%
Local Transport Plan Grant	14,226	17.0%
Metro Capital Grant	23,605	28.3%
Metro Fleet Grant	35,800	42.9%
Transforming Cities Fund Grant	3,883	4.7%
Other Capital Grants	2,032	2.4%
Reserves	2,846	3.4%
Total Funding	83,449	100.0%

4. Treasury Management

The Balance Sheet on page 7 of the accounts shows external borrowing of £95.550m at the end of the year, which is split between short term borrowing (£1.274m) and long term borrowing (£94.276m), after the allocation of part of the transport borrowing to NTCA accounts. This is a small decrease compared to balance of £96.37m the previous year due to repayments made on Equal

Instalment of Principal (EIP) loans during the year. The average rate of interest on external borrowing for the year was 4.3%, which is comparable with the previous year.

The Balance Sheet also shows short term external investments of £29.946m in the NECA accounts at the end of the year compared to £58.236m at the end of the previous year. The total of investments included £6.655m of investments held on behalf of Nexus. A further £22.182m cash equivalents were held, including £11.091m on behalf of Nexus. The decrease compared to the previous year is due to NECA no longer holding balances on behalf of the North East LEP since these were transferred to NTCA.

5. Debtors

The Balance Sheet on page 7 of the accounts shows a short-term debtors balance at 31 March 2021 of £5.050m (£8.899m at 31 March 2020). This relates mainly to interest and principal repayments due within 12 months on borrowing by Nexus and is analysed in more detail in Note 14.

6. Creditors

Short term creditors at 31 March 2021 were £39.879m (£39.984m at 31 March 2020). These balances are analysed in more detail in Note 17. This includes a creditor for balances owed to Nexus for short term investments and cash equivalents placed on their behalf (£54m total creditor of which £28.715m is shown in the NECA accounts).

7. Pensions Costs

The Authority is an employer in the Tyne and Wear Pension Fund (the pension fund), which is part of the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS), which provides defined benefits based on members' final pensionable salary and years of service. In accordance with IAS19, the Authority is required to value all pension liabilities that have accumulated at the end of the year consisting of -

- Pension benefits that are being paid out to former employees who have retired.
- Pension benefits earned to date by current employees but not yet paid out.

IAS19 also requires the Authority to value all investments held by the pension fund at market value at the end of the year.

When assets and liabilities at year-end are compared this results in a surplus or deficit.

NECA has two types of pension liabilities – described as funded and unfunded. Funded pension liabilities are within the LGPS and are backed by assets attributable to the Authority. For the funded element of the scheme, the NECA pension fund is in a notional surplus position amounting to £7.15m at 31 March 2021, compared with £2.82m at 31 March 2020. The increase in year is due to market conditions at 31 March 2021 and the impact on asset values. For accounting purposes this surplus is restricted to nil on the NECA balance sheet. NECA gets a benefit from the surplus in the form of savings on employers' pension contributions for current employees, which has enabled significant savings on the revenue budget.

Unfunded or discretionary benefits (such as early retirement awards) sit outside the Authority's funded part of the scheme and are therefore not backed by assets and must be paid as incurred on a monthly basis. These costs relate to former Tyne Tunnels employees and are paid from the Tyne Tunnels revenue account, at a cost of approximately £50,000 in 2020/21. At the end of the year there was an unfunded liability of £0.87m (£0.84m at 31 March 2020) and this is disclosed on the Balance Sheet.

The deficit as at 31 March 2021 takes into account the national judgements on McCloud and Guaranteed Minimum Pensions (GMP). The actuarial valuation is influenced by a number of economic factors. Note 19 to the accounts provides further analysis and disclosure of the Pension Fund liability.

8. Net Assets

Net assets in the NECA accounts have decreased from £125.141m at 31 March 2020 to £99.316m at 31 March 2021. The decrease in total net assets is due to the transfer of net assets relating to the North East LEP to NTCA on 1 April 2020.

9. Group Results

The Group Accounts included as part of the Statement of Accounts fully incorporate the results of Nexus (The Tyne and Wear Passenger Transport Executive). More details can be found in Group Note G01 on page 81.

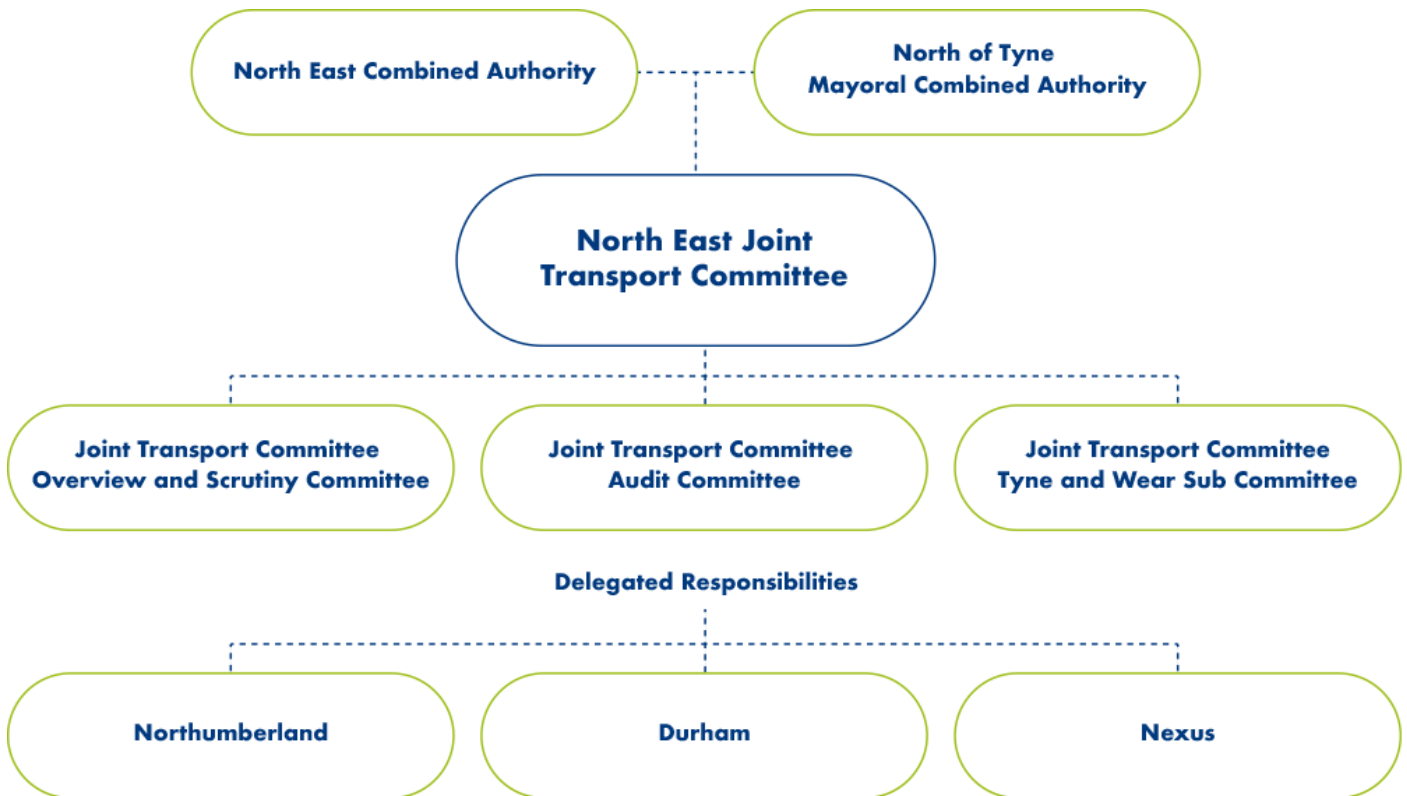
The Nexus accounts are apportioned between NTCA and NECA accounts (after elimination of intra-Group transactions), with the balance sheet information at 31 March 2021 allocated between the two Combined Authorities in proportion to their relative share of Tyne and Wear Population as set out in table 4. The full accounts for the Nexus Group and more information about their activity and performance can be obtained from the Nexus website at <https://www.nexus.org.uk>.

10. Accounting for the North East Joint Transport Committee

The North East Joint Transport Committee brings together a total of seven members from each of the Constituent Authorities of the region; four Members from the North East Combined Authority and three Members from the North of Tyne Combined Authority in accordance with the Order and was created on the 2nd November 2018.

Transport is of strategic importance to the North East, and the collaborative working of both Combined Authorities allows effective decision making across the region, which ensures that the local needs and priorities are delivered.

The structure for Transport that was established in November 2018 is shown in the diagram below.



Under the CIPFA Code, the JTC meets the definition of a 'joint operation', which determines its accounting treatment. Where a Joint Committee is accounted for as a Joint Arrangement each Joint Operator (in this case NECA and NTCA) must account for their own share of the assets, liabilities, revenues and expenses held or incurred jointly in their own financial statements. In order to comply with the CIPFA Code, NECA must:

1. Split the revenues between that which relates to NECA and NTCA. In this case, the constitution of the JTC and its funding arrangements suggests that, in the first instance, the revenues should be divisible into that which relates to Northumberland (allocated wholly to NTCA), that which relates to Durham (allocated wholly to NECA) and that which relate to Tyne and Wear (requires further division into NECA and NTCA).
2. The revenues which relate to Tyne and Wear must be divided into that which relates wholly to the NECA or NTCA area and that which relates to activities now wholly attributable under the preceding two points which requires apportionment.

The Order gives no clear instruction on the basis of division of revenues, but the Deed of Cooperation made on 4 July 2018 between the seven local authorities in the area indicates that resident populations shall be used as a basis of apportionment.

For the 2020/21 accounts the mid-year estimated population published by the Office of National Statistics as at June 2018 is used, which is the basis on which the Transport Levy payments for the year are required to be calculated. The calculation of the proportion used to allocate the figures in the accounts at 31 March 2021 is shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4 - Population used to allocate Transport Assets/Liabilities between NECA and NTCA

	Mid-Year 2018 Population	Proportion
	People	Proportion
NECA		
- Gateshead	202,508	
- South Tyneside	150,265	
- Sunderland	277,417	
	630,190	0.55456
NTCA		
- Newcastle	300,196	
- North Tyneside	205,985	
	506,181	0.44544
Tyne and Wear Total	1,136,371	

11. The Statement of Accounts

The Statement of Accounts is set out in the accompanying document, they consist of the following statements that are required to be prepared under the Code of Practice:

Movement in Reserves Statement (Statement of Accounts page 5)

This statement shows the movement in the year on the different reserves held by the Authority, analysed into Usable Reserves (i.e. those which can be applied to fund expenditure) and Unusable Reserves (which cannot). The surplus or deficit on the provision of services line shows the economic cost in accounting terms of providing NECA's services, more details of which are shown in the Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement. These are different from the statutory amounts required to be charged to the General Fund Balance for the purposes of setting the levy. The net increase or decrease before transfers to earmarked reserves line shows the statutory General Fund Balance before any discretionary transfers to or from earmarked reserves undertaken by the Authority.

Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement (Statement of Accounts page 6)

The Comprehensive Income and Expenditure Statement shows the accounting cost in year of providing services in accordance with generally accepted accounting practice, rather than the amount to be funded from the levy and other sources of income which is set out in the MiRS, as described above.

Balance Sheet (Statement of Accounts page 7)

The Balance Sheet summarises the Authority's financial position at 31 March each year. The net assets of the Authority (total assets less total liabilities) are matched by the reserves held by the Authority. Reserves are reported in two categories, Usable and Unusable as described above. Unusable Reserves include those which hold unrealised gains and losses (e.g. the Revaluation Reserve) where amounts only become available to provide services if the assets are sold; and

reserves that hold timing differences shown in the MiRS line “adjustments between accounting basis and funding basis under regulations”.

Cash Flow Statement (Statement of Accounts page 8)

The Cash Flow Statement shows the changes in cash and cash equivalents of the Authority during the reporting period. The statement shows how the Authority generates and uses cash and cash equivalents by classifying cash flows from operating, investing and financing activities. Investing activities represent the extent to which cash outflows have been made for resources which are intended to contribute to the Authority’s future service delivery. Cash flows arising from financing activities are useful in predicting claims on future cash flows by providers of capital (i.e. borrowing) to the Authority.

Group Financial Statements and Notes (Statement of Accounts page 77 onwards)

Reports the financial picture of all activities conducted by the Authority, including those delivered through partnership and separate undertakings controlled by the Authority.

12. Annual Governance Statement

To accompany the Narrative Report and Statement of Accounts, the leadership of the Authority prepares an Annual Governance Statement that sets out the principal arrangements that operate to ensure proper governance of the Authority’s affairs and the stewardship of resources at its disposal. It also outlines the principal arrangements that are in place to ensure that a sound system of internal control is maintained.

13. Non-Financial Performance

The Statement of Accounts is focused on the financial performance of the Authority. NECA also reports non-financial Performance through thematic updates on Economic Development and Digital, Transport and Finance, Skills & Employability. These are available on the NECA website under the Leadership Board agendas, with some examples picked out below:

Economic Development and Digital

- Inward Investment – 2020/21 was a challenging year for inward investment due to Covid-19, with a significant decrease in active inward investment project numbers and a very difficult environment in which to attract new investment. Provisional full-year success figures for the North East LEP area for 2020/21 are as follows: a total of 68 inward investment projects resulting in 2,935 jobs. Of these, 53 were foreign direct investment (FDI) projects leading to 2,713 jobs, the rest were new UK companies locating to the North East. The new jobs figure was helped significantly by Amazon’s investment in County Durham which led to 1,500 new jobs.
- There has been excellent collaboration on Digital Connectivity across the NECA area through the Digital Durham programme to boost superfast broadband (30mbps) across the NECA area. Digital Durham allows subsidised (through Government and Local Authority funding) rollout to areas which would not have been commercially viable. Subsequently, over 87,000 premises in the NECA area can now access superfast broadband as a result:
 - Durham – Over 63,700 (with some delivery left to complete)
 - Gateshead – Over 14,100
 - South Tyneside – Over 4,600
 - Sunderland – Over 4,600

- Current broadband coverage in the NECA area is ahead of the national average for superfast and ultrafast, but behind on gigabit-capable connectivity.

Finance, Skills and Employability

- Central to the Skills and Employability agenda are the issues of financing particularly the reliance on external funding as we approach the final stages of the current European Structural Investment Fund (ESIF) programme with little detail as yet as to the operation of the UK Shared Prosperity fund after the current Community Renewal Fund pilot exercise, alongside the ongoing development of good partnership and inter authority working arrangements that have been developed.

Transport

In March 2021, the JTC approved the first region-wide Transport Plan for the North East. The approval of the Transport Plan represents a significant milestone for the JTC and sets out collective ambitions up to 2035 to create a modern transport network, with schemes totalling £6.8 billion included.

The Plan seven Delivery Plan categories for implementing the objectives of the Plan and achieving the vision of 'moving to a green, healthy, dynamic and thriving north-east'.

- Helping people make the right travel choice
- Upgrading north east active travel infrastructure
- Bus, ferry and first and last mile
- Local rail and Metro
- Road infrastructure
- Maintaining and renewing our transport network
- National and international connectivity

NECA owns the Tyne Tunnels, which link the A19 under the River Tyne between Howdon and Jarrow. There are two tolled vehicle tunnels, and tunnels for both pedestrians and cyclists. The Tunnels are entirely self-financing from the tolls income raised, i.e. there is no call on the Authority's budget or local taxpayers to support them, and assets and liabilities associated with the tunnels are ringfenced to the Tyne and Wear constituent councils within the Authority. The Tyne Pedestrian and Cyclist Tunnels reopened to the public in August 2019 and have been well received and well used, although work is still ongoing on the completion of the glass inclined lifts. This was delayed in 2020/21 due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Traffic flows at the Tyne Tunnel have been significantly reduced since March 2020 when the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic took effect. The normal level of traffic pre-Covid was approximately 55,000 vehicles per day. As a result of Covid-19 lockdown measures, traffic levels dropped drastically during March and April 2020 to approximately 17,000 vehicles per day which is 30% of normal levels. This is the lowest level of traffic seen during the life of the TT2 contract.

During the summer months of 2020 traffic increased and by the end of August was almost 85% of normal levels. However, local Covid-19 restrictions put in place from mid-September onwards saw usage levels drop off again. Traffic during the November national lockdown was 73% of normal levels. During the early months of 2021 traffic dropped again to 65% under the January national lockdown restrictions and has remained around 70-75% of normal levels during March.

Table 5 – Tyne Tunnel Traffic Flow data

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Exempt	Total
2020/21	99,990	10,441,472	775,745	423,317	11,740,524
2019/20	153,474	14,928,809	824,798	648,435	16,555,516
2018/19	171,626	14,839,928	823,469	631,444	16,466,467
2017/18	172,655	14,802,233	855,656	584,809	16,415,353
2016/17	197,688	15,705,319	951,785	605,670	17,460,462
2015/16	204,751	16,218,493	989,451	581,377	17,994,072
2014/15	195,798	15,265,379	873,270	508,444	16,842,891
2013/14	185,471	13,970,360	804,147	464,529	15,424,507

Class 1 = Motorcycles; Class 2 = Car, Van or Bus less than 3m high with 2 axles; Class 3 = HGV, Van or Bus more than 3m high or 3 axles or more; Exempt = emergency vehicles and blue badge holders

The tolls were increased in line with inflation on 25 August 2020 from £3.60 to £3.70 (or £3.33 with a pre-paid permit) for Class 3 vehicles. There was no increase applied during the financial year for Class 2 vehicles which remained at £1.80 (or £1.62 with a pre-paid permit).

Tyne and Wear Passenger Transport Executive – Nexus

The North East Joint Transport Committee sets public transport policy for the region, which in Tyne and Wear is delivered operationally by Nexus. The following performance indicators describe the general performance of public transport in Tyne and Wear during 2020/21.

- The number of passenger journeys across all modes within Tyne and Wear in 2020/21 was estimated at 49.6 million; a 67.9% decline when compared to 154.5 million in the previous year:
 - Bus patronage reduced to 39.8 million in 2020/21; a 66.7% decline when compared to 119.4 million in the previous year.
 - Metro patronage reduced to 9.4 million; a 71.6% decline when compared to 33.1 million in the previous year;
 - Ferry patronage reduced to 0.154 million passengers in 2020/21; a 56.4% decline when compared to 0.353 million journeys in the previous year.
 - Rail patronage reduced to 0.250 million journeys in 2020/21; an 85.1% decline when compared to 1.680 million journeys in the previous year.
- Metro reliability (operated mileage) was 95.8% during 2020/21, stable versus the figure of 95.7% achieved in the previous year.
- Metro reliability (Charter punctuality) was 87.4% during 2020/21, an increase on the 80.8% achieved in the previous year.

NECA Staffing

- NECA continues to adapt and change to meet the requirements of the area, while keeping costs to a minimum. Many services are provided through Service Level Agreements with constituent local authorities.
- On 1 April 2020 the Accountable Body responsibility for the North East LEP transferred to NTCA and the TUPE transfer of LEP and Invest North East England staff to NTCA was also completed.
- On the same date, the TUPE transfer of 10 staff previously employed by Newcastle City Council and Nexus and seconded to NECA was completed. The majority of these staff work in the North East Transport Strategy Unit.

- Changes have been made to support arrangements during 2020/21, including the transfer of provision of financial systems support from Newcastle City Council to Durham County Council, and the provision of ICT support from Newcastle City Council to Gateshead Council.

Table 6 – Change in Staffing numbers since 2015/16

	Total NECA Employees at the year end	Employed on behalf of North East LEP
2020/21	16	0
2019/20	63	56
2018/19	43	39
2017/18	29	21
2016/17	21	18
2015/16	15	11

14. Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

It is clear that the pandemic has had a profound economic impact with the NECA area hit hard given the high proportion of jobs across the area in at-risk sectors (particularly hospitality, retail, visitor economy and travel). Town and city centres were hit by the major drop in footfall and national retailer restructuring and store closures, while manufacturers, particularly automotive, experienced supply chain issues. Many firms exhausted reserves and cash flows, with real concerns about survival.

The impact on the labour market was also significant, with a rise in total unemployment since March 2020 (5.4% in North East compared to 4.8% nationally) and the unemployment claim count in the NECA area up from 4.7% in March 2020 to 7.5% in April 2021, particularly amongst 18-24s (up 4,000). The rate has flatlined since the Autumn with Furlough keeping this down; circa 60,000 workers (13% of workforce) were on Furlough at the end of March 2021.

Over the past year transport has also been dominated by Covid-19. The major reductions in public transport use, and uncertainties over the scale and pace of any recovery in this remains a major challenge for the area. At the same time the rapid recovery of general traffic levels, in some cases to levels above those seen before the pandemic, emphasise the continued need to focus investment on more sustainable and less polluting forms of transport.

The NECA Response

The four Local Authorities have supported businesses throughout the pandemic, including:

- Restart Grants
- Open, Closed & Sector Local Restriction Support Grant schemes
- Additional Restrictions Grants
- Christmas Support Payments for Wet-led Pubs
- Helping businesses to access Government loans
- Signposting to support (particularly on import/export re EU Exit)
- Coordinating Kickstart six-month placements
- Accessing Getting Building Funds to accelerate key projects

This is alongside monitoring the impact upon key sectors and trends (an anecdotal rise in start-up activity and industrial unit demand is being seen) and reporting feedback and concerns to BEIS and MHCLG, such as issues around those excluded from support.

In Transport, NECA acting through the JTC has provided support to TT2 Ltd which experienced significant reductions in traffic volumes using the tunnels. Bids have been coordinated by Transport North East to obtain much needed grant funding support for transport activity for the seven north east councils and Nexus.

Staff working through our delivery partners including Nexus and TT2 have continued working on the front line throughout the pandemic delivering excellent customer service, often in difficult circumstances, to enable essential journeys to continue.

Delays have been experienced on some areas of the capital programme in 2020/21 as a result of the pandemic, particularly on Transforming Cities Fund schemes. This presents a challenge for future years as funding is time-limited and significant works are required by local authority scheme promoters to complete delivery.

15. Looking Ahead

Transport

During 2021/22 the North East Joint Transport Committee will need to publish a Bus Service Improvement Plan by the end of October, and by April 2022 will need to have a formal Enhanced Partnership with operators in place or be following the statutory process to decide whether to implement a franchising scheme.

Transport Programmes coordinated by Transport North East on behalf of the JTC area include Transforming Cities Fund (TCF) and Active Travel Fund. TCF will deliver major improvements to the area's sustainable transport infrastructure. The 'Metro Flow' project will deliver dualling of the single-track sections of Metro between Pelaw and Bede on the South Shields route. This will allow for improved reliability and potentially higher frequency services over much of the Metro network. Other schemes being funded from this source include a new bus station for Durham, improvements to Sunderland rail station and major improvements to pedestrian and cycle routes in Gateshead. A region wide scheme providing improvements to traffic signals on the main bus routes is also under development.

The Government's strategy for walking and cycling, Gear Change, published in July 2020, sets out a commitment to further investment in improving active travel. Local authorities are already developing ambitious proposals for improving active travel infrastructure and the additional funding promised in the strategy should help build on current work to provide further improvements in future.

Publication of the Government's Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) is still awaited. This will give greater clarity on future priorities for investment in key connections such as the East Coast Main Line. A programme board has been established to develop the business case for re-opening of the Leamside Line. This will bring together the various projects and interests involved in this to develop a single focused approach to re-opening the full extent of the line between Pelaw and Ferryhill.

Further improvements to infrastructure for Electric Vehicles, including the new Electric Vehicle filling station in Sunderland, have been delivered as part of the Go Ultra Low (North East) project. Further

funding has now also been secured by the North East Joint Transport Committee from the Local Growth Fund to fund further expansion of the network of charge points available.

It is estimated that increases in traffic levels at the Tyne Tunnels will occur at each stage of lockdown easing in spring/summer 2021, but there is no certainty that traffic levels will again reach the previous pre-covid levels. Many businesses and individuals have changed their journey habits due to Covid, for example shifts in modes of transport, more online meetings and more home-working, all of which may mean fewer journeys overall on a permanent basis.

Work is continuing in developing the 'Tyne Pass' project to introduce a fully automated payment system using Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) technology at the Tyne Tunnels, to replace the existing coin and permit systems, and it is planned to launch later in the 2021/22 financial year.

Economic Development and Digital

The inward investment outlook for 2021/22 is more promising, with a number of big projects opening or shortly to be announced.

Invest North East England continues working with partners on significant new projects in a variety of sectors which involve many thousands of new jobs. A particular focus this year will be on developing a Northshoring campaign; attracting energy sector projects; strengthening relationships with key overseas Department of International Trade posts, particularly in Europe, USA and India; contracting with Department for International Trade and programme managing the Northern Powerhouse Key Account Management programme in the North East and continuing to work on proactive lead generation.

Local Authorities are working on applications for the Levelling Up Fund, launched by Government in March 2021.

There has been excellent progress on broadband coverage following Digital Durham collaboration and the attraction of commercial rollout. There is now a need to collaborate further with the private sector and Government to drive gigabit-capable coverage.

Finance, Skills and Employability

Employment and Skills issues and opportunities for development remain under development through meetings of the Skills and Employment Working Group. In responding to the Further Education Reform White Paper, areas of interest and focus currently being examined by member authorities as part of the development of improved Employment and Skills working across the NECA area include:

- Strategic Development Funding to foster College-LA collaboration;
- Create a further Institute of Technology (based around digital or green growth) and/or widen sector focus of current North East IoT at New College Durham
- Pilot a sector-specific Skills Bootcamp linked to the National Retraining Strategy in a skills shortage area (i.e. manufacturing)
- Marketing push from Gov on Lifetime Skills Guarantee across LA7 (and potentially piloting something similar for higher level technical skills)
- Offer to be a pilot area for the new Skills and Productivity Board to look at employment projections and labour market needs analysis (with a real focus on reskilling and progression)
- Dedicated College Business Centres linked to key business sites
- Prioritise North East bids to FE Capital Transformation Fund

- AEB devolution across whole area LA7 so ensuring the whole of the North East can shape provision (with ability to tailor Skills Guarantee)
- DfE to work in partnership to ensure coherent place-based offer (by devolving Traineeship funds too)
- Raise 25% apprenticeship levy transfer threshold to 50% (and recycle levy underspend)
- Funding for more trained and qualified careers guidance specialists in schools and communities (pilot more locally based activity with the aim of reducing NEET levels)
- Creation of an Adult Education Maintenance Allowance to meet living costs (if UC changes allowing people to train full time covers training costs)
- Strengthened partnership with National Careers Service (beyond the new website being created) to realise their aim of an all-age careers system
- Further support for Furloughed employees who will need to change jobs/retraining

16. Further Information Available

Access to this report, the accounts and the Annual Governance Statement will be made available to the general public via the Authority's website. If this information is needed in another format or language, please use the contact below.

If you have any problems understanding this publication, any general enquiries on the accounts or have any suggestions on how it may be improved, please contact:

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