

Scrutiny Reporting Back

Chorley Council's Annual Report on Overview and Scrutiny in 2012/13



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1. MEMBERSHIP OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



Councillor Steve Holgate
Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2012/13



Councillor Roy Lees
Vice Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2012/13

Councillors Julia Berry, Matthew Crow, Graham Dunn, Robert Finnamore, Chris France, Hasina Khan, Marion Lowe, Joyce Snape, Kim Snape and Ralph Snape

1. FOREWORD BY THE CHAIR AND VICE CHAIR OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

2012/13 saw some changes within Overview and Scrutiny. We started the year by scrutinising the newly appointed Executive Cabinet on their priorities for the year following the change of administration.

A dedicated Performance Monitoring Panel was implemented, consisting of six Councillors meeting quarterly to look at Council and Local Strategic Partnership performance, along with a focus on a particular service issue.

We still continue to receive six monthly monitoring reports following the Executive's response on the implementation of outcomes and measured success from past scrutiny reviews that have included:

- Allotments – additional plots have been created across the borough that represents a 36% increase from those available in 2010 and a welcome reduction to the waiting lists.
- Asset Management – the rationalisation of the key administrative sites has generated budget savings and released premises for market options.
- Highways – the Council has now undertaken the highway verge cutting in the outer Chorley areas and the implementation of a Severe Winter Weather Action Plan has improved operational arrangements during the winter months.
- Lancastrian – the introduction of the flexible pricing policy as seen usage of the Lancastrian increase significantly and income has more than doubled.
- Tourism and Promoting Chorley – the staging and support of move events within the borough has encouraged more visitors to Chorley.

The Committee has undertaken one major review which was on the Adoption of Estates. This topic was suggested by Members of Chorley Council after very many requests by residents across the borough to address the growing number of estate and open space adoption issues. It has proved invaluable in understanding the many frustrations around successful adoption. It is expected that our recommendations will improve the present procedures and policies to better serve the residents of new estates.

1. THE YEAR AHEAD

The Council will hold a total of eight scrutiny meetings in 2013/14, with four main Overview and Scrutiny Committee and four Performance Panel meetings. In addition Members have proposed future review topics for inclusion in the Work Programme for 2013/14 that includes Select Move, which will be our first review of the year, chaired by Councillor Graham Dunn.

We welcome back Members of the Conservative Group and Councillor Mark Perks has been appointed as my Vice Chair.

2. CHALLENGING PERFORMANCE

This year we implemented a dedicated Performance Panel that focused on the performance elements of scrutiny and considered all monitoring information. Scrutinising performance is a key role for scrutiny and one of the benefits to this dedicated resource was that a smaller number of Members were able to drill down to the detail in key areas and adopt some consistency in approach.

The Membership of the Performance Panel consisted of the following Membership:

Councillor Steve Holgate – Chair
Councillor Julia Berry
Councillor Graham Dunn
Councillor Hasina Khan
Councillor Roy Lees
Councillor Kim Snape

The Panel has met four times in the last 12 months and has considered the Councils Corporate Strategy key projects and monitoring; Chorley Partnership monitoring information and directorate business planning monitoring reports. Each meeting also had an additional performance focus, outlined below, where we looked at particular areas of concern or poor performance and the relevant Executive Member was invited to attend. The areas of focus are summarised below:

3.1 ICT PROGRAMME PLAN

(Councillor Peter Wilson, Executive Member for Resources, Policy and Performance attended)

The Panel were provided with an overview of the current ICT transformation projects with an update on their progress to date; scheduled dates for completion, and project dependencies. There had been a move away from the previous directorate approach of ICT implementation to a more corporate solution which had included the creation of a transactional team.

We were informed of the need for change; the information revolution; becoming more efficient and increasing productivity; and meeting customer expectations. Although we had initial concerns regarding the Council's delivery of such an ambitious ICT programme, particularly with the significant delay in delivering the Council's new website, assurances were given that there was sufficient funding available and that there were the required skills within the ICT team to deliver all the intended projects.

3.2 PLANNING PERFORMANCE

(Councillor Dennis Edgerley, Executive Member for Resources, Policy and Performance attended)

The service had experienced a significant increase in the volume of minor applications in the early part of the year and significant printing demands generating from safeguarded land applications. To compound the situation, there had been printing and indexing issues that had impacted the service's ability to easily and effectively process the applications that were received. As the timescales for these type of applications were relatively short (at 8 weeks), issues such as these, easily impacted on performance.

The volume of applications still remains high, with around 70 applications being received on average each month. However at the time of scrutiny, four of the last six months had seen applications receiving in excess of 80 and as high as 102 applications received. In addition the service deals with a large volume of pre application work to the region of 700 applications per year.

The transition of the Local Plan and production of the new site allocations DPD had also generating a significant number of safeguarded applications for large sites. Re-consultations outside the control of the Council for the revision of plans to overcome objections was around 170 per annum which extends the application beyond the 8/13 week deadline. The volume of neighbour notifications and responders remained extremely high which can impact on performance, particularly when IT and printing systems are down. In addition the volume of appeals work remained high which requires the preparation and attendance at appeals and the Council's performance in this regard is high at 72% and above the industry average at 65%.

We were informed that a number of measures had been put into place, including additional staffing, workflow modifications, management controls and temporary ICT fixes and it was expected that performance would improve for the next quarter. However although the measures had been implemented and customer satisfaction with the service remained high, achievement of the end of year target for minor applications would not be achieved due to anticipated future volumes and the issues that can arise with this type of application.

3.3 STREETSCENE MODERNISATION

(Councillor Terry Brown, Executive Member for Places was unable to attend and sent his apologies)

The Panel received contextual information and initial questions to help Members understand the performance of streetscene and it was reported that performance against the key indicators for the service was excellent compared to the targets set, with all being achieved.

The service had recently undertaken a modernisation project over the last year, to review working practices and ensure they were fit for purpose. A strategy had been developed and the Panel were provided with an action plan that provided details on the development action taking place within the service. Under the four main headings of Leadership Development, Modern Working Arrangements, Service Delivery and Support Services and Business Development Opportunities

It was explained that the service was currently undertaking a benchmarking exercise that would provide appropriate data from which to develop a set of relevant performance indicators to help further develop the service. The Panel requested that a performance indicator be considered for grass cutting.

A customer satisfaction survey was now undertaken each month against a sample of customers who had been in contact with the service the previous month resulting in more meaningful feedback that could be used to improve services; develop staff training methods; or make appropriate changes to maintenance schedules.

A new structure had been implemented that brought all the different teams together under one overarching Manager and two team leaders. The result was a multi skilled pool of staff that can better respond to the needs of the service. Staff are more engaged in the work of the service are actively encouraged to suggest any improvements for service delivery.

3.4 SELECT MOVE

(Councillor Adrian Lowe, Executive Member for Homes and Business attended)

The Panel considered a confidential report that provided responses to a number of questions raised by Members around

- the time taken to process, determine and allocate priority banding to applicants of Select Move
- simplifying the Select Move application to make it more user friendly but ensuring correct information is received
- measures that could be taken to help those applicants who know their existing tenancy will be terminated before they become homeless
- improvements to the interface between Select Move and members of the public
- information on the bidding cycle
- ensuring that social housing providers get an allocations service that they value.

It was explained that the Council used comparative information when developing the application forms to make sure that they followed a consistent approach and captured all the relevant information needed from which to form an accurate assessment of the applicant's needs.

Members were informed of the type of information required from Select Move applicants before an assessment of banding can be made and the common reasons for delay. A dedicated officer was currently working with Registered Social Landlords to identify those people that were struggling to pay their rent and to ensure help and assistance is offered to prevent tenants being at a risk of becoming homeless.

The Panel had concerns that the online service was not as good as it could be. Some of the Registered Social Landlords did not supply adequate information including photographs, whilst this was something that the Council sympathised with, they had very little control over but with the support of the Executive Member they continued to lobby the companies in an effort to improve the process for the customers and the Council.

3. KEY MESSAGES FROM SCRUTINY TASK GROUPS

4.1 ADOPTION OF ESTATES

The Scrutiny inquiry into the Adoption of Estates was suggested by Members of Chorley Council after very many requests by residents across the borough to address the growing number of estate and open space adoption issues.

The Task Group, chaired by Councillor Matthew Crow, looked in detail at the present problems that many constituents face when trying to get their estates adopted. It was accepted that there were some real issues for residents across the Borough and Members looked at past performance to identify areas where the process of adoption of estates has been both successful and less successful and lessons learnt from those experiences. Ways to improve the process could be identified for the future and further excessive delays prevented.

A mix of small and large housing estates were identified from across the Borough (that had or were still having, adoption issues) to be used as case studies from which to identify the concerns and issues that existed. The Group then interviewed the developers of these estates, along with borough and county officers and residents.

The estates chosen were

- Gillibrand, Chorley
- Buckshaw Village
- Kittiwake, Heapey
- Fairview Farm, Adlington

It was also highlighted that the Council needed to improve relations and communications with existing developers and other partner organisations in the Borough and to better engage with the public to develop their understanding and knowledge of the adoption process.

Whilst undertaking the review we were informed about a national review that is taking place by the Department for Transport (DoT) and Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and a similar scrutiny review that had been undertaken by Northamptonshire County Council that provided us with a platform from which to start.

The findings of the Task Group and the specific recommendations resulting from them have the capacity to make improvements for customer and developer, adoption processes and partnership working.

The Task Group recognises that some of the recommendations will have financial implications on both the Borough and County Councils, and will therefore need to be given particular consideration by both Executive Cabinets, given the current financial pressures on the public sector.

The issues associated with the process of adoption are not just limited to this authority. It was recognised that changes are needed on a national scale and can only be achieved by changes to legislation.

That is not to say that Chorley Council can't play its part in ensuring that these changes are made. By developing existing procedures and policies and working more effectively with both our County Council colleagues and developers, we believe that we can progress current practices and improve the customer experience of the adoption process and we look forward to the Executive's response from both authorities..

4.2 UPDATE ON PRIVATE RENTED HOUSING CONDITIONS

Suggested by a Member of the Council and chaired by Councillor Beverley Murray, this Group which first met on April 2012, aimed to identify and tackle poor housing standards in some private rented properties in the Borough, to improve housing conditions for those tenants.

The Group were recommending that the Executive Cabinet consider the introduction of a partially proactive scheme of inspection which would use current intelligence and data sources - ie councillor and officer knowledge; estate agents; housing register etc. The scheme would be reactive to tenant complaints and would provide a base service from which a full inspection programme could be developed. The scheme would not capture all poor housing standards but would target bedsit and multi occupied property and poor housing hotspots.

We were informed that a report providing a full response to the recommendations from the review would be submitted to a forthcoming Executive Cabinet, however in the meantime work had already commenced within the Environment and Neighbourhoods Team to establish a

programmed inspection regime utilising existing resources of officers who were trained to inspect housing to the required standards. In addition, the introduction of a new IDOX database system had enabled the team to build up a comprehensive database of private rented accommodation using local intelligence, housing benefits information and council tax details.

The action currently being taken to address the issues raised within the final report of the task group were welcomed and we look forward to a further update later in the year.

4. CRIME AND DISORDER

The Committee is required to scrutinise the work of the Community Safety Partnership through at least one meeting a year. This year along with reviewing the performance of the partnership, additional areas were identified through the Performance Panel for the Committee to review.

5.1 COMMUNITY SAFETY PERFORMANCE

The review focused on the main crime categories of All Crime, Acquisitive Crime, Violent Crime (including domestic abuse), Criminal Damage (including Arson) and Anti-Social Behaviour.

Whilst the Partnership had experienced unwelcomed increases across several crime categories, Chorley's figure was still lower than the comparative group average, with the Chorley and South Ribble Partnership being 7th out of a cohort of 15. It was also important to consider what percentage of these crimes had been detected. Detection crimes are important, as they can limit further offences being committed by an individual and can also provide reassurance to our communities that criminals are being caught.

The Partnership is structured to ensure that statutory agencies and wider partners are able to respond as effectively as possible to the strategic and often dynamic priorities. 2012/13 has proved to be a challenging one for the Partnership as in addition to the recurrent seasonal threats to crime and disorder, there has been a number of one off events such as the Olympics, Euro 2012 and the Queens Jubilee which have presented unique challenges.

5.2 POLICE AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT OFFICERS

The Chair of the Chorley and South Ribble Partnership provided us with information on the roles, duties and productivity of the Police and Community Support Officers (PCSO's) deployed in the Chorley Borough area that was partly funded by the Council.

Day to day, Lancashire Constabulary PCSO's carry out a number of varied duties which aim to reduce crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour along with helping to reduce reoffending, and work to improve community confidence and reassurance. They support a number of Council, Community Safety Partnership and wider policing issues and contribute to the priorities of the Community Safety Strategy including domestic abuse, child sexual exploitation, and night time economy, crime and anti-social behaviour.

5.3 INDEPENDENT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ADVOCACY – FUNDING UPDATE

We were provided with an update of the funding arrangements sought for the Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy (IDVA) Service in 2013/14 and beyond. The required funding position now needs to be sourced from its constituent partner agencies. We were informed that

as a number of these agencies cover the wider Lancashire footprint; discussions at county level were underway to ensure these agencies make the necessary budget provision on a countywide scale to include the portion necessary for the Chorley and South Ribble service to continue.

Officers had recently met with victims of domestic violence to talk through their journey and identify what improvements could be made to the service, particularly around suitable interventions and preventative measures.

5. CHALLENGING THE EXECUTIVE

At the start of the year, the Executive Leader, Councillor Alistair Bradley and the Deputy Executive Leader, Councillor Peter Wilson attended a meeting to talk about the top ten priorities that the new administration aimed to deliver.

The Executive Leader welcomed the Committee scrutinising how well the proposals were working and felt that the overview would provide us with a good basis upon which we could work together positively with the Executive Cabinet and scrutinise the delivery of these actions in the future.

The following areas are Executive Cabinet items that Overview and Scrutiny has considered and made recommendations in 2012/13

- Community Safety and Crime and Disorder
- Update Report on Section 106 monies
- Budget Principles

6.1 CALL-IN REQUESTS

There have been three requests to call in decisions made by the Executive Cabinet or relevant Executive Member. The first two requests, decisions relating to the former MacDonald's site and Chorley Remembers: Astley Coach House Gallery were rejected. The third request however, relating to a Town Centre Grants Package was upheld and the Executive Member for Homes and Business was asked to reconsider his decision.

Procedural lessons have been learnt in considering Call in requests. It was pleasing to see that the call-in process can generate public attendance and participation at scrutiny meetings.

7. FINANCIAL SCRUTINY

The Executive Leader and Executive Member for Resources, Policy and Performance attended the Committee to answer Members questions about the Executives budget principles for 2012/13.

The information provided on the budget consultation was more detailed than in previous years. The proposals aimed to provide a budget that was more sustainable and took a longer term view to take into account the uncertainty facing local government finance settlements. The proposals also delivered projects to achieve the priorities of the administration, in the Town Centre, within neighbourhoods and relating to jobs and investment.

The Executive Leader stressed the importance of generating funding streams independently of grants from the Government, given the uncertainty regarding the future of local government finance. Other local authorities had become reliant on funding streams and were now struggling as the Government had withdrawn this funding. It was also important to create job opportunities for people and enable them to be financially independent and contribute to the local economy.

8. CONCLUSION

2012/13 has been an interesting year for scrutiny, resulting in some key changes to approach with the creation of the Performance Panel. Challenges ahead are to continue to scrutinise areas of interest and concern to Councillors and their constituents; to follow up on the implementation of scrutiny recommendations; to work more effectively with our partners on scrutiny and to continue to challenge our Executive Members in a constructive way with recommendations that result in positive outcomes for the residents in Chorley.