



Scrutiny Reporting Back

Chorley Council's Annual
Report on Overview and
Scrutiny

2020/21

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1 Membership of Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2020/21



Councillor John Walker
Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2020/21



Councillor Roy Lees
Vice Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2020/21

Councillors John Dalton, Peter Gabbott, Yvonne Hargreaves, Alex Hilton, Hasina Khan, Marion Lowe, Matthew Lynch, June Molyneaux, Steve Murfitt, Debra Platt, Gillian Sharples, Paul Sloan and Kim Snape

2 Introduction by the Chair and Vice Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had a busy year under extraordinary circumstances undertaking a review of a range of service areas with one task group. Councillors John Walker and Roy Lees continued as Chair and Vice Chair respectively. There were also several new members welcomed to the Committee.

The Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel, consisting of six members and met three times to monitor the business planning and performance of the Council along with a focus on each of the Directorates in turn.

The task group review was “Sustainable Public Transport”.

Following the approval at the Executive Cabinet, the Committee continued to receive six monthly monitoring reports which included information about implementation and success of previous scrutiny reviews, these were:

- Developing the Council's Green Agenda
- Quality of housing provided by social landlords
- Roll out of Superfast Broadband by BT
- Child Sexual Exploitation

3 Challenging Performance

The Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel scrutinises the performance of the Council with all monitoring information considered. Scrutinising performance is essential as it ensures that key details are examined and questioned while ensuring consistency in performance.

The panel for 2020/21 consisted of the following membership:

Councillor John Walker (Chair)

Councillor Roy Lees

Councillor Christopher France

Councillor Alex Hilton

Councillor Marion Lowe

Councillor June Molyneux

The Performance Panel met three times; a fourth meeting was cancelled due to Covid-19. The Panel considered the Council's Corporate Strategy, key projects, all directorate and service level business plans and considered the performance of the directorates.

Customer and Digital

In July 2020, Asim Khan (Director Customer and Digital) attended with Councillor Adrian Lowe, Executive Member (Customer, Advice and Streetscene Services).

Asim Khan updated members and provided contextual information relating to the Directorate, which included the position of its budget, a summary of key performances, and an update on key projects within the directorate. The Customer and Digital Directorate included the following Council Services:

- Planning,
- Customer Transformation,
- Streetscene, and
- ICT

It was understood that Covid-19 had been a significant challenge to the operation of the Council and its services, but due to significant investment in ICT in 2019, 75% of the digital strategy had been delivered and the Council was able to successfully operate during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

Between the lockdowns, Streetscene services restarted grass cutting, street sweeping and weed treatments in addition to the installation of wildflower meadow sites. We noted that during the lockdown's that there had been an increase in fly tipping and cases were being worked and prosecutions sought.

We recognised that planning had outperformed their target in the first quarter in part due to the work of Officers, efficiency in staffing changes and the demand for houses.

We understood that the Council committed to more green spaces, wildflower, and wildlife corridors to support and increase biodiversity, colour and greenery in the borough. We suggested an increase in signage to raise awareness to residents nearby these areas.

We were reassured that precautions were in place to mitigate further issues due to Covid-19, the Council was well placed respond to the challenges and we understood that a significant impact on the next steps were dependent on the position of Central Government.

Policy and Governance

In November 2020, Chris Sinnott (Deputy Chief Executive) attended with Councillor Peter Wilson (Deputy Executive Leader and Executive Member Resources).

We noted that the Policy and Governance directorate led on delivering the first phase of Shared Services. Shared Services began 1 April 2020 and the Council benefitted from the increase in resilience offered by a larger, more diverse workforce, particularly when responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. The implementation of Shared Services had been impacted by Covid-19, but staff adapted well.

The overall performance for 2020/21 was good. Under the Policy and Governance directorate, there were four projects all performing on target. For key service level performance, there were 38 indicators,

- 24 (63%) were performing on or above target,
- 3 (8%) were performing worse than target but within the threshold
- 11 (29%) were performing below target.

The indicators that were below target related to events or attractions impacted by Covid-19.

The directorate had underspent by £160,000, savings were made due to Shared Services and Covid-19 which had resulted in cancelled events, or the transformation from in person to virtual.

We recognised a decrease in staff sickness and absence and discussed how the change in working dynamics affected this, we were reassured that managers were monitoring performance, productivity, and staff welfare.

Commercial Services

In March 2021, Victoria Willett (Shared Service Lead, Transformation and Partnerships) attended with Councillor Alistair Bradley (Executive Leader and Executive Member Economic Development and Public Service Reform).

We noted that a large number of capital schemes and major projects were underway, and it included but was not limited to Alker Lane, Tatton Development and Whittle GP.

The directorate was heavily involved with the Covid-19 emergency response and had supported local businesses with the administration of grants through online support and workshops.

We noted that there had been a last minute change by the Government about the use of the Public Works Loan Board for commercial investment, but Chorley Council was not impacted due to the focus of investment within the Borough.

We understood that in relation to the bus station, Lancashire County Council rejected a request to share funding for the next five years due to its current loss operation, time and financial investment required.

4 Key Messages from Scrutiny Task Groups

Sustainable Public Transport – Chaired by Councillor Kim Snape.

The task group was established in September 2020, it met 7 times and consulted virtually over Microsoft Teams with a wide variety of stakeholders to build a base of evidence. Stakeholders included:

- County Councillor Keith Iddon,
- Andrew Varley (Public Transport Manager, Lancashire County Council)
- Matt Davies (Managing Director, Stagecoach)
- James Mellor (Commercial Director, Stagecoach)
- Nick Small (Head of Strategic and Built Environment, Stagecoach)
- Tracy Keating (Manager, Central Lancs Dial-a-Ride)
- Owain Roberts (Regional Stakeholder Manager, Northern Rail)
- Sir Lindsay Hoyle (MP for Chorley)
- Chris Sinnott (Deputy Chief Executive)
- Jonathan Noad (Director of Development and Place)

The final report which included recommendations based on the evidence collected by the Task Group was taken to Executive Cabinet in March. All the recommendations set out in the report were approved.

5 Challenging the Executive

In addition to challenging the Executive Members through the Performance Panel, the Committee worked together positively with the Executive Leader and the Executive Cabinet in scrutinising their proposals.

Following on Executive Member Decision, the Clean Air Strategy was brought to Overview and Scrutiny to review and consider the current position and provision of the impact on the Borough and its residents.

6 Budget Scrutiny

In January 2021 we welcomed Councillor Peter Wilson, Executive Member (Resources) and Chris Sinnott (Deputy Chief Executive) who presented the report which set out the budget position for 2021/22.

We noted that the budget situation for this year was challenging, and there was outstanding uncertainty with business rates and the Fair Funding Review.

The deficit increased from £302,000 to £908,000 due to the cost of the leisure centre, in addition to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was estimated that the deficit would increase to £3.2m in 2022/23 and £4.3m in 2023/2024.

The administration expressed how they intended to balance the budget. First, there had been savings made through Shared Services. Income was also to be generated via Market Walk, Primrose Gardens, Strawberry Fields, and Logistic House. The deficit should reduce significantly to £107,000 and then increasing to £2m and then £2.9m the year after.

It was proposed that Council Tax would be increased by 1.99% and consideration was given to increase parking charges in the Borough, without adversely impacting the high street.

It was believed that with existing investment sites, the Council would save £1m by 2022-23 and £1.3m the year after.

In relation to reserves the Council possessed, the General Fund contained a committed £4m, and another £3.2m to cover Market Walk and asset maintenance support for local businesses.

It was clarified that the Council were only aware of the £500,000 it received from the Fair Funding Review and not future expectations. The leisure centre was forecast to lose £600,000 and the figure included the funds made available by Central Government to cover operating losses of leisure centres due to Covid-19, optimism was expressed for recovery in the financial year 2021-22.

Strawberry Fields was currently generating an income deficit of £170,000 but the site was a long-term investment for the Council, and there was growing interest despite Covid-19.

7. Other Topics Considered

Clean Air Strategy

In October 2020, we welcomed Zoe Whiteside (Service Lead for spatial Planning) and Carolyn Williams (Central Lancashire Local Plan Coordinator) and they informed members of the work that was underway for a draft Air Quality Strategy. Delays caused by staffing, Covid-19 and the delay of the Environment Bill in the House of Commons were acknowledged.

In November 2019, the Council declared a climate emergency with plans to recruit a Climate Change coordinator to implement the strategy and action plan.

Despite the delay to the Environment Bill, the Council intended to move forward with more specific targets for particulate matter 2.5 (PM 2.5). 20.2% of PM 2.5 emissions came from road transport. Chorley Council did not have an obligation to create and meet air quality targets, but the decision was made to voluntarily demonstrate the Council's commitment to the Air Quality Strategy and Climate Emergency and implement them regardless. The greatest issue that was facing Chorley was nitrous oxide due to the proximity of motorways, in 2018, motorways contributed to 60-70 tonnes of nitrous oxide.

Within the district, there are six monitoring stations, three of the stations recorded levels slightly above desired, but was below the levels required for Air Quality Management Areas (AQMA's).

We noted that local schools should have a role in the Air Quality Strategy. It was highlighted that several authorities across the country already had projects in place to improve the air quality around schools and nurseries. Measures included banning cars from making drop off and collections in a close radius to the school, implementing no car zones, and organising park and walk schemes.

In March 2021, Laura-Jean Taylor (Public Protection Team Leader, Early Intervention) provided a further update relating to the Clean Air Strategy explaining that current measurements of air quality did not exceed the acceptable limits of nitrogen dioxide or PM

2.5, although it was believed that the 'acceptable levels' and limits were likely to be amended by the Government.

The Council's Strategy was split into four key areas:

- The Council's internal actions
- The revision of policies and guidance documents
- Communication, education, and engagement
- Research projects.

The implications of not adopting the Clean Air Strategy could result in the failure of the Council to achieve the goal of carbon neutrality by 2030.

A key focus within the strategy is for the Council to consider the impact every decision had on air quality and for the Council to engage with commercial, industrial, and domestic sectors to meet the target of carbon neutrality.

It was likely that Clean Air would be considered and incorporated into the Local Plan and planning applications.

For the borough's taxi and private hire operators, there were plans to provide incentives and viable options to encourage the change to green and zero emission vehicles.

Leisure Contract

We welcomed Angela Barrago (Service Lead for Communities), and she provided an update on the Leisure Contract. The procurement process and award of the contract was delayed due to Covid-19 which resulted in the preferred bidder, Life Leisure to reluctantly withdraw their bid in September 2020.

At the General Purposes Committee that took place 16 September 2021, Members made the decision to bring the service under Council control for the short term while preparing for the longer term. Due to the transfer of operator, a closure period was required from the 30 September to 12 October, and allow time to clean up the site, replace lost equipment, and make the required repairs and replacements. A Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment Regulations) (TUPE) process was initiated as staff were to be employed by the Council going forward. New software had been developed to update the booking system and all members have been informed of the changes and social media to be updated as required.

We expressed our disappointment with the bid withdrawal but commended Life Leisure for being open and honest while continuing to provide advice in running a leisure centre.

We asked for elaboration if the leisure centre were to be a successful venture, would consideration be given to expand Council ran operations. We were informed that it was an unusual situation, the contracts were not signed, and the decision taken was the most sensible course of action.

Adoption of Estates

We welcomed Ray Bennett, Principal Officer, Highways and Transport at Lancashire County Council. He provided the definition of Adoption of Estates and various associated terms. He detailed the history and process of adoption. Highlighting areas where legislation required strengthening in addition to the barriers that could prevent an agreement of adoption.

We noted that the Highway Authority was unable to force a developer to enter into an agreement and the developer can not force the Highway Authority to adopt a road system.

We came to an understanding that there was some difficulties in communication between the Highway Authority and the Borough Council but we were made aware that there was a District Team in place to deal with enquiries from Parish Councils through to the Parliamentary Representative.

Updates on the Lancashire County Council Health Scrutiny Meeting

As the Council's representative on Lancashire County Council's Health Scrutiny Steering Group, Councillor Margaret France provided regular updates to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

In October 2020, we were advised that at the meeting of 15 September, the main focus was on the situation regarding the re-opening of Chorley's Emergency Department, the 111 first system, adult social care, winter preparations, test and trace and the flu vaccine programme.

It had been decided that Chorley's Emergency Department would not open due to difficulties in recruiting staff, a review would take place in December 2020. The 111 system was to assess and triage over the phone or internet and allow A&E departments to run smoother and decrease the risk of Covid-19 spread. The focus of Adult Social Care winter preparations was to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in care homes, and it was proposed that staff would be tested weekly and residents monthly. Dependent upon supply, all adults over the age of 50 would be eligible for a flu vaccine dependent on supply.

In January 2021, we noted the evolved situation of Covid-19. Test and trace, bed pressures, and the strategies employed to cope. We learned that the County Council was working with the military to deliver a six-week targeted surge programme of asymptomatic testing in the care, education, faith centres and large employers. We understood that the transmission of Covid-19 was high in hospitals but as infection control measures were implemented the numbers started to decrease. We were updated as to the rate of infection in the borough and was below the national average, and the highest numbers of infections were in the age groups of 16-19 and 30-44.

We noted that the benefits of the vaccination programme would not yield tangible results until March and April 2021. More than 80% of the over 80's had been vaccinated, and we understood that work was ongoing to dispel rumours circulating within the ethnic minority communities about animal products in the vaccine. We were updated with the figures of Covid-19 enforcement.

In March we noted that the proposal to close Chorley's A & E Department had been withdrawn and was currently open 1 hour a day from 8am to 8pm and that the new Health Infrastructure Plan 2 was in development, but was going to be a long process before implementation.

8. Conclusion and the Year Ahead

It has been an interesting year for scrutiny, resulting in some key recommendations on topics of concern to members and the public. The challenges ahead, following the impacts of Covid-19, are to continue to scrutinise areas of interest for Members and their constituents and to follow up on the implementations of scrutiny recommendations. We need to work effectively with our partners on scrutiny and continue to challenge the Executive in a constructive way with recommendations that result in positive outcomes for the residents in Chorley.

The Council will hold four meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and five meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel in 2021/22.

Due to all members being up for local elections in May 2021 because of Covid-19 and boundary changes, there could be significant changes to the committee memberships. The draft work programme will be considered at the first meeting of the Committee in July. This includes the monitoring of previous inquiry recommendations and potential future topics.