



Scrutiny Reporting Back

Chorley Council's Annual
Report on Overview and
Scrutiny

2021/22

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1 Membership of Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2021/22



Councillor John Walker
Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2021/22



Councillor Roy Lees
Vice Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2021/22

Councillors Sarah Ainsworth, Julia Berry, John Dalton, Terry Howarth, Hasina Khan, Samir Khan, June Molyneaux, James Nevett, Aidy Riggott, William Simmance, Kim Snape, and Jenny Whiffen

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

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had a busy year, continuing to operate under extraordinary circumstances undertaking a review of a range of service areas with one task group ongoing. 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 five times to monitor the business planning and performance of the council along with a focus on each of the Directorates in turn.

The ongoing Task Group Review is 'Select Move'.

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
- Sustainable Public Transport

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 2021/22 consisted of the following membership:

Councillor John Walker (Chair)

Councillor Roy Lees

Councillor Sarah Ainsworth

Councillor Julia Berry

Councillor James Nevett

Councillor Aidy Riggott

The Performance Panel met five times. 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 June 2021, Asim Khan (Director Customer and Digital) attended with Councillor Adrian Lowe, Executive Member (Customer and Streetscene Services).

We understood that Shared Services had changed the landscape of the directorate, and responsibilities covered both Chorley and South Ribble.

The budget for the Directorate was £6,051,880 with a variance of £285,703 (4.7%). A leading cause was the number of vacancies in the directorate.

Online requests increased significantly, with fewer dissatisfied users compared to Quarter 4 2019/20.

For the 12 months following June 2020, the council suspended recovery action for Council Tax.

It took less time to process housing benefits and change of circumstances than the previous year, although there was a significant increase in missed residential waste and recycling collection at 43 per 100,000 collections. The council exceeded targets for the collections of public litter bins, high street cleaning routes and ground maintenance service requests.

The new council website, a Corporate Project was delivered, although its development and rollout was impacted by Covid-19. The demand for online services was expected to continue to grow due to the convenience provided, although the council understood the essential nature of face to face interactions and would continue to provide the service.

Five parks in Chorley received Green Flag status. The mini meadows and wildlife corridors were successfully delivered and contributed positively to the council's wider green agenda.

Planning and Development

In October 2021, Jonathan Noad (Director - Planning and Development) attended with Councillor Alistair Bradley (Executive Leader, and Executive Member Economic Development and Public Service Reform), and Councillor Alistair Morwood (Executive Member - Planning and Development).

The national shortage of building control officers resulted in an overspend due to retaining an external consultant to assist with internal training of Officers working towards their qualifications in Building Control.

Despite the lack of a named Enforcement Officer, enforcement continued. Within the Enforcement Service, 100% of building control applications, both major and minor were decided within the time frame or granted an extension.

The shortage of staff was not an issue unique to Chorley Council, but was widespread across the country.

The council was awarded the ISO 9001 Quality Assurance Certification.

Empty properties in the borough decreased and was below target. However, due to the impact of Covid-19, employment rates and the number of projected jobs created was below target. Many businesses struggled to maintain their position and survive.

Policy and Governance

In December 2021, Chris Sinnott (Deputy Chief Executive) attended with Councillor Peter Wilson (Executive member – Resources).

It was highlighted that the overall performance of the directorate was good, despite the impact of Covid-19. Eleven projects were rated green, one amber and one was completed.

There was an overspend in the budget, the Lancastrian event space was unable to reach its full revenue potential due to Covid-19 restrictions.

There was a decrease in social media engagement, visits to the Chorley Live website, but it was concluded this was due to fewer events being held.

The renovation at Astley Hall progressed, there were additional structural issues identified that required further work. The G7 event was praised as a fantastic achievement for the Hall.

As there was not the broken down, localised information related to the number of 16 and 17 year old's that were not in education, employment or training (NEET), we wished to investigate further and gain a greater understanding of what caused young people becoming NEET.

Communities

In January 2022, Jennifer Mullin (Director – Communities) attended with Councillor Bev Murray (Executive Member – Early Intervention).

The directorate underspent for the quarter due to the vacancies across the directorate.

The leisure centre performed well, visitors were up on the previous quarter, it was said that there was a positive atmosphere and culture for both employees and customers. The leisure centre was a separate company to the council and maintained its own budget. There was no current consideration to sell the leisure centre. Investment had been made to upgrade and modernise facilities.

The delivery of Disabled Facilities Grant underperformed compared to the previous quarter. As there were 262 people on the waiting list for an assessment, the council had considered employing its own Occupational Therapist.

Throughout the pandemic, the Public Protection Team continued to inspect food establishments, with the current inspection programme due to conclude at the end of March 2022.

Performance Indicators for Corporate Projects were all on track, but a significant amount of work was due to be completed by the end of March which included the homeless and rough sleeping plan.

The Neighbourhood Area Meetings resumed, with a varied level of success, some believed that there was not enough time to fully consider potential projects. The second round of meetings was due to start in January 2022.

Commercial and Property

Mark Lester (Director – Commercial Services) attended with Councillor Alistair Bradley (Executive Leader, and Executive Member Economic Development and Public Service Reform), and Councillor Peter Gabbott, Executive Member (Homes and Housing).

Of the 45 projects,

- 39 (81%) were classified as green or completed,
- 4 (8%) were put on hold and
- 5 (10%) were rated amber.

The directorate's spending was slightly overbudget, although generated income could vary yearly. The greatest expenditure was staffing. There had been a reduction of income due to the decrease in the collection of market rents and the removal of car parking charges prior to Christmas 2021.

The difficulty in recruitment and gaps in the organisational structure was a cause for the underperformance of some indicators.

Covid-19 was a cause for the below target figure for rent collected from the Digital Office Park. The council allowed those behind of their commercial rent time to recover and clear their arrears on a case by case basis. Guidance was in place for enforcement, and Officer discretion allowed. Businesses that requested grants for funding were required to provide access to their finances, and the council was able to learn the sustainability, and offer advice and support where possible.

The outstanding void in the covered market was temporary and created by the council while moving units around. In other areas of the town center, voids were below target at 14.7%.

There was optimism that the target of 7.5% would be met, it was however noted that there was the belief that some private landlords were levying rent too high when the current market and economic environment were considered.

Footfall in the town centre had increased, but it was acknowledged that it would take time to get over the issues caused by two years of Covid – 19 restrictions.

The new Market Walk had a single unit available, options were being evaluated. In the meantime, the unit was used by local charitable organisations to store collected aid for Ukraine.

With the reduction of Covid-19 restrictions, community centres were being supported to reopen, current occupancy rate was 44.17% against a target of 51%. Prior to Covid, the occupancy rate was 60%.

Accommodation figures were positive with low rates of voids at Primrose Gardens and Cotswold House. There was some delay in payments due to housing benefits but was expected to be rectified. During the winter, the Cotswold facilities were used by the Winter Watch Service to shelter people from the streets. The reopening of Primrose Gardens and its facilities was at a slower and more cautious pace due to the vulnerabilities of residents.

Alker Lane was renamed Strawberry Meadows and was one of four corporate strategy projects. 60% of the units had been let. Strawberry Fields was expected to break even for the first time. It was originally conceived as hotdesking space, it was repurposed to create more fixed offices in response to the rise of Covid – 19 hybrid and home working.

£1,000,000 invested in Bengal Street, and the Tatton Care Scheme on track to be completed and opened throughout 2022 and 2023. The Whittle GP Surgery and community centre was due to open 17 March 2022.

4 Key Messages from Scrutiny Task Groups

Select Move – Chaired by Councillor June Molyneaux.

The task group was established in December 2021, has so far met 4 times and utilised hybrid functionality holding meetings in the Council Chamber, and using Microsoft Teams with a wide variety of stakeholders to build a base of evidence. Stakeholders included:

- Rachel Stewart - Housing Solutions Manager (Homes and Housing)
- Peter Gabbott – Chorley Council Executive Member
- Jennifer Mullin – Director (Communities)
- Suzanne Ravenscroft – South Ribble Borough Council's Housing Options Team Leader
- John Cameron – Preston City Council's Senior Housing Advisory Officer
- Councillor Nweeda Khan – Preston City Council's Cabinet Member for Communities and Social Justice.
- Dean Wall – Jigsaw Homes
- Ivan Wright – Jigsaw Homes
- Stephen Spencer – Progress Group

Upcoming meetings will involve

- Sir Lindsay Hoyle (MP for Chorley)

- Chorley Council Select Move Coordinator
- Councillor Matthew Lynch
- Results of 2500 surveyed users of Select Move

The task group has yet to conclude, three more meetings to take place over the summer of 2022, with the final report expected at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee 6 October 2022, before going to Executive Cabinet.

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 throughout the year.

Grass Cutting and Verge Update

In March 2022, we welcomed Councillor Adrian Lowe – Executive Member Customer and Streetscene Services and Asim Khan – Director of Customer and Digital to provide an update on grass cutting, mini meadows and wildlife corridors.

In response to growing awareness and concern for green issues, the council established mini meadows and wildlife corridors across the borough in April 2020. There were currently 53 wildflower meadows, with a total of 16,000 wildflower bulbs planted in the last two years.

In areas not designated as a wildlife corridor or mini meadow, grass cutting was every three weeks from April to October, weather dependant.

In 2021/22:

- There was a 40% reduction in grass related service requests totalling 127, in 2016/17 there were 304.
- 4 complaints were received about ground maintenance, grass cutting or the wildlife corridors.
- 722 general enquiries were made, 6 related to, or referred to grass cutting or the operation of the wildlife corridors
- An analysis of comments made on social media about the wildlife corridors or mini meadows revealed that 115 were complimentary and 29 were complaints.

We believed that the mini meadows and wildlife corridors were a great opportunity for ongoing community engagement, and that they demonstrated tangible efforts of the council's adherence to its Green Agenda.

6 Budget Scrutiny

In January 2022 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 2022/23.

Funding had continued to decrease from 2016, the council received a 12-month retention notice, which included the Business Rate and New Homes Bonus.

The income stream was just over £14 million and was projected to be £12.5 million in 2023 and £12.6 million in 2024. Income was generated through investment sites such as Market Walk, Primrose Gardens, Strawberry Meadows, and logistic House. Future sites included Tatton Gardens and the Whittle Health Hub.

The deficit for the year would be £2.2 million, that would increase to £4 million in 2023 and £4.3 million in 2024. Through efficiency savings, and investment revenue, there had been a reduction in the deficit by £281,000 for this year, £1.9m in 2023 and £2.2 in 2024.

Council Tax was proposed to be increased by 1.99%, the assumption for the fair Funding Review was a 2% rise in Council Tax per year. With the 1.99% rise, Chorley would have the second lowest rate of Band D Council Tax in the County.

The investment priorities for 2022/23 included £1.5 million revenue investment and over £40 million in capital investment. The investment sought to support the local economy, the council's priorities and local communities.

The investment package provided a broad overview that matched residents' priorities. The council considered the future and understood the risks with investment. The General Reserve fund contained £4 million, which was to rise to £4.4 million. The Equalisation Reserve, which was in place to protect against any potential downturn equalled £1.2 million. The budget was believed to be balanced finely between resident interest and fiscal responsibility.

The council received £1.6 million in un-ringfenced grants, originally planned towards Covid-19 support, but was put aside due to additional Covid-19 ringfenced support funding.

The leisure centre had a budget of £600,000 the running costs were previously overestimated and was expected to break even. The confidence for profitability was high.

The council continued to seek financial returns on its assets in both the short and long term. Covid-19 had changed the approach and attitude to work, and with the continuation of hybrid working, ongoing consideration was given for the council's owned premises and spaces.

7. Other Topics Considered

Chorley Council's Response to Covid-19

We welcomed Chris Sinnott, Deputy Chief Executive as he highlighted the efforts of the council during the Covid-19 pandemic. Programmes were developed and actioned to ensure the most vulnerable residents had the support they needed.

Over 3000 households were supported by the council and volunteers. 4700 calls were made to those on the shielding list and 1100 food parcels were delivered. Many residents reported a positive change in their perception of the council.

The council was involved significantly with the Lancashire Resilience Forum (LRF). A partnership made up of organisations that worked together to prepare and respond to emergencies in Lancashire. The LRF involved the emergency services, local authorities, health agencies, environmental agency, voluntary groups, transport providers, utility providers and local businesses.

The initial priority was to ensure the safety of staff and to ensure services were running effectively. Democratic Services ensured that Councillors were kept up to date and that their work could continue safely.

Businesses in the borough were significantly impacted by Covid-19. Over £40 million was processed in grants, with 4000 businesses being directly supported. Over 70 businesses attended webinars, and 40 booked appointments with advisors to receive help and support.

A new team was established and was one of the first to take on the Zero Covid-19 Programme. The team took on the role of track and trace with a 95% success rate which was far greater than the national average. The team assisted the local primary care network with the roll out of lateral flow testing and the vaccination bus.

The pandemic caused performance indicators to slip, there was an observed increase in 16- and 17-year olds not in employment, education, or training (NEET). A rise in reported mental health and emotional wellbeing concerns.

The council started a phased return to the workplace from 19 July 2021, although uncertainty remained with restrictions, an emphasis was placed on ensuring supporting staff to maintain their safety, flexibility, and balance within the organisation.

Chorley had high levels of vaccination, but the more deprived areas such as Chorley East had fallen behind.

First Aid at Chorley Council

We welcomed, Chris Moister, Director of Governance who presented information related to first aid at the council. We learned about the health and safety regulations in place at the council, and the provisions required, the numbers of staff first aid trained, and the monitoring of staff undertaking the training, the location of first aid kits and automated external defibrillators (AED's) and how the impact of Covid-19 impacted risk management for the staff at the council.

We believed that it would be beneficial for first aid information to be incorporated within the new Member induction and that frequent first aid information could be disseminated through IntheKnow, IntheBoro and through Member Learning Sessions.

Select Move Review

We welcomed Jennifer Mullin, Director of Communities to present a verbal update at our request relating to Select Move.

We understood that Select Move is a partnership that involved Chorley Council, Preston City Council, South Ribble Borough Council, and a large number of social landlords. In March 2021, Chorley took the Chair of the partnership. Progress was planned around three aspects.

- Upgrading the current system
- Coordination of the partnership
- Adjusting tiers and costings.

It was believed that during the pandemic, the user experience of Select Move had deteriorated. We were disappointed with the lack of a written report, and there were issues highlighted by residents that included the lack of photographs on properties that resulted in residents placing blind bids on properties, in addition to difficulties communicating with partners of Select Move.

Following the item, we decided to explore Select Move as a Task Group and build upon work completed by a previous Task Group from 2014. The Task Group commenced in December 2021.

Community Safety Partnership

We welcomed Irene Elwell, Public Protection Team Leader, and Chief Inspector Chris Abbott of Lancashire Police and they provided us an overview of the Community Safety Partnership. The Partnership was made up of Chorley Council, South Ribble Borough

Council, Lancashire County Council, registered social landlords, drug and alcohol services, the Citizens Advice Bureau as well as volunteer, community, and faith groups.

For two years, resources had been allocated to the pandemic response. Prevent work had been completed, in addition to schemes that aimed to reduce knife crime and antisocial behaviour. It was acknowledged that during the pandemic, the Partnership had become reactive rather than proactive.

A new three-year Lancashire Strategic Assessment explored the impact of crime on community safety. In efforts to strengthen the Partnership, the Responsibility Authorities Group had been re-established to meet twice a year.

A monthly priorities meeting had been formed which was to feature a report that identified and analysed the hotspots of crime and antisocial behaviour. One of the first priorities was to develop an action plan for serious and organised crime referrals. Fixed items on the agenda included safeguarding and Prevent.

Operation Edge was ongoing to reduce knife crime and anti-social behaviour. The JJ Effect had been expanded into Chorley and South Ribble's secondary schools. The programme, in cooperation with the police provided support and education to young people with a focus on knife crime, grooming and criminal exploitation.

Operation Night Guardian was underway to combat violence against women, with plain clothed officers in premises.

Lancashire Talking continued in areas that lacked perceived police visibility.

There had been an overall decrease in the reports of crime and antisocial behaviour in Chorley, however, it was noted that every instance of crime should be reported to build and strengthen cases.

The four-person Rural Task Group was praised for its effectiveness in recovering stolen plant and farming equipment.

Magistrates and Transport

Irene Elwell provided a verbal update from the Director Communities in response to a query we raised at a previous Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The council did not have significant involvement with supporting residents to attend magistrates' courts since the closure of the Chorley Magistrate Court. However, it was noted that support was offered by the Court Service. The council did provide support to Community Transport Services such as Dial-a-Ride, but we raised that Dial-a-Ride was used primarily by elderly residents to access their day to day activity, and that the service had difficulty in recruiting drivers.

Updates on the Lancashire County Council Health Scrutiny Meeting

As the council's representative on Lancashire County Council's Health Scrutiny Steering Group, Councillor Alex Hilton, with substitute Councillor Margaret France, provided regular updates to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee throughout the year.

Over the course of the year we heard of plans to significantly change the operation of the local NHS, with the discontinuing of 'Our Health Our Care' in favour of 'Integrated Care Systems'. The goal was to counteract the slow and competitive nature of NHS Foundation Trusts and private sector providers and instead, encourage collaboration with each other

and the third sector – voluntary and community groups. Covid-19 was acknowledged to have an impact on the rollout of the programme.

We learnt that Chorley's Emergency Department did not open on time due to recruitment difficulties, and by March 2022, plans to close the A&E Department were withdrawn and was open 12 hours a day from 8am – 8pm.

A significant amount of information was shared in relation to Covid-19 which included key statistics of cases, spread and measures taken to combat Covid-19 locally. Which included the outlines of winter preparations, organising, promoting, and undertaking widescale testing and vaccinations.

We learnt that the new Health Infrastructure Plan 2 was in development although the process before implementation would be considerable.

Members raised an interest in the creation of a twice-yearly committee to explore health in partnership with South Ribble.

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. There are challenges ahead to face in the aftermath of Covid-19, but the Committee will continue to scrutinise areas of interest and importance for Members and their constituents and to follow up on the implementations of scrutiny recommendations.

We need to work effectively with our partners, and continue to challenge the Executive while remaining a critical friend to provide 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 2022/23.

A third of the council is up for election in May 2022, with six out fourteen contesting their seats, there could be changes to the committee membership. The draft work programme will be considered prior to the first meeting of the Committee in July. This includes the monitoring of previous inquiry recommendations and potential future topics.