

Scrutiny Reporting Back

Chorley Council's Annual Report on Overview and Scrutiny in 2015/16



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1. MEMBERSHIP OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2015/16



Councillor John Walker
Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2015/16



Councillor Hasina Khan
Vice Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2015/16

Councillors Aaron Beaver, Eric Bell, Paul Clark, Margaret France, Mark Jarnell, Margaret Lees, Matthew Lynch, June Molyneaux, Greg Morgan, Alistair Morwood, Debra Platt and Kim Snape

2 INTRODUCTION BY THE CHAIR AND VICE CHAIR OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has had another busy year undertaking a varied and extensive Work Programme and two Task Group reviews. Councillor John Walker was appointed Chair of the Committee for another year and Councillor Hasina Khan was welcomed as Vice Chair. There were also several new members welcomed to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. As the year came to a close, the Committee said goodbye to Lesley-Ann Fenton, Director of Customer and Advice Services who retired in April 2016, she had taken a lead director role in the work of the Committee for a number of years. Other changes included Cathryn Filbin replacing Dianne Scambler, Democratic and Members Services Officer as support officer to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel, consisting of six members met quarterly to monitor the Council's Business Plan performance, along with a focus on a number of different service issues.

This year the Overview and Scrutiny Committee established Task Groups to undertake two reviews–

- The Single Front Office
- Staff Sickness Absence

The Committee continued to receive six monthly monitoring reports following the Executive's response on the implementation of outcomes and measure success from past scrutiny reviews:

Select Move Review - reducing the waiting list was a desired objective of the review and this had been achieved. The implementation of the majority of recommendations required the willingness and cooperation of partners, particularly the Registered Providers of Social Housing (RPs).

Adoption of Estates - the Committee was made aware of adoptions of estates which had been fully and partly complete. However, a number of factors resulted in progress not being made as anticipated against some recommendations which included internal staffing issues and Lancashire County Council not being able to provide pre-application and transport related advice. Members of the Committee had welcomed the progress made but raised concern about the length of time it was taking from some areas to be adopted. The Committee welcomed the fact that there was willingness from all parties involved to work together to progress adoptions of estates faster.

CCTV Provision and Infrastructure – following a procurement exercise undertaken in 2015 a contractor was appointed to carry out the necessary upgrade due to be delivered within three years. Recent progress had focussed on the relocation and equipping of the monitoring suite at Chorley Police Station, and by the end of 2016 it is envisaged that the majority of CCTV camera heads would have been replaced with upgrade units. In addition, the upgrade was seeking to utilise low cost wi-fi camera communication and this has been achieved where sight lines and connectivity allowed.

Neighbourhood Working – the majority of the recommendations had either been implemented or were in the process of being implemented. However, the recommendation that the Council explore with the Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector (VCFS) as to how the VCFS could use resources provided by the Council to improve networking, needed to be progressed.

Public Transport Issues in Chorley – the Task Group presented the groups findings and drew the Overview and Scrutiny Committee attention to the 15 recommendations that would highlight to the Executive the importance of considering all transport needs for its residents when undertaking all relevant Council projects as good transport links were extremely important for both residents of the borough and visitors to Chorley.

3 CHALLENGING PERFORMANCE

The Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel 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 the dedicated resources 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 Performance Panel for 2015/16 consisted of the following membership -

Councillor John Walker (Chair)

Councillor Hasina Khan (Vice Chair)

Councillor Paul Clark

Councillor June Molyneux

Councillor Alistair Morwood

Councillor Debra Platt

The Panel met four times within the last twelve months, considering the Council's Corporate Strategy, key projects and monitoring, and the Council's Organisational Improvement Plan that captured all the directorate and service level business improvement plans.

Each meeting also considered an additional performance focus, where the Panel looked at particular areas of concern or poor performance, with the relevant Executive Member being invited to attend.

3.1 TIME CREDITS

(Councillor Beverley Murray, Executive Member (Community Services) was in attendance)

Members of the Panel were reminded that the Time Credits initiative was a three year programme funded by the Council as a positive and proactive means of encouraging and developing a volunteer culture to benefit local communities.

In the first year the focus was on existing groups to build up the service and encourage already established organisations to sign up. Year two concentrated on embedding the process into service delivery, and encouraging new organisations and volunteers to engage. Although growth had slowed in the second year, performance had consistently been good and exceeded targets, particularly when compared to the national scheme with Chorley being notably higher. It was reported that 72% of Chorley Time Credit volunteers gave their time up at least once a week.

It was explained that there was an element of trust when awarding the Time Credits. However, checks had been put in place to stop abuse of the system, with the Council auditing the hours that volunteers claim to have worked with the organisations. In addition, the spend uptake was also monitored.

The Panel felt that all elected members should be encouraged to take an active part in the scheme, and to help promote engagement within their neighbourhoods. To this end a Member Learning Session was delivered the purpose of which was to inform members about Chorley Time Credits and the benefits to the community and those individuals taking part who not only were rewarded for their time but had also developed their own life skills.

3.2 DELIVERY OF THE PLAY, OPEN SPACE AND PLAYING PITCH STRATEGY

(Councillor Beverley Murray, Executive Member (Community Services) was in attendance)

The Executive Cabinet had approved and formally adopted the Play, Open Space and Playing Pitch Strategy 2013-2018 in September 2014. The Strategy detailed a five year action plan to protect, manage, enhance and secure sites as well as identifying where there were deficiencies and future priorities.

The Strategy highlighted sites that were both low quality and low value. It was reported that almost £1 million pounds collected from S106 payments had been identified to support the strategy although the majority of this fund had been allocated to specific projects. Most of the Strategy would be funded by future development in the borough as well as Council and external funding.

Through discussion about the absence of bowling-green provision, members of the Panel were informed that bowling greens had not been included with the strategy as they were mainly privately owned. However, there had been an acceptance for the Council to do more and officers would be asked to work with existing clubs to prevent closure and produce a register of bowling facilities.

Members of the Panel also discussed allotment provision across the borough and the amount of work that had been undertaken to address the demand. The Panel welcomed the fact that Chorley was one of the top performing providers of allotments in Lancashire.

3.3 PLANNING CONTEXT

(Councillor Paul Walmsley, Executive Member (Public Protection) was in attendance at the meeting)

The Panel received a report on planning performance and an overview of the different types of planning applications that the Council processed. It was highlighted that the Scheme of Delegation with the Council's Constitution was a major factor in the amount of applications that had to be determined by the Development Control Committee. A few years ago, in response to the number of developments being built on garden land across the borough, the constitution was changed so that applications for developments of three houses above required approval by the Development Control Committee. This was in contrast to other authorities which dealt with those types of applications under delegated powers. However, there was a consensus between members and officer that there was scope for the 'Scheme of Delegation' to be reviewed. This would ease the large volume of applications referred to the Development Control Committee for determination; it would also result in a cost saving for the Council and increase efficiencies.

In addition, it had been reported that advice issued by the government within the National Planning Guidance on S106, had meant that delegated powers to officers to determine applications of one or two dwellings had been removed adding to the increase of applications being referred to Development Control Committee.

The performance of the Planning Service was also scrutinised, with members of the Panel being informed that statistics stated that at the end of 2014/15 figures, for 'major' applications were above target. For 'minor' and 'other' applications were off track but within threshold. This pattern continued into the first quarter of 2015/16 figures, for 'major' applications which remained excellent. However, the performance for 'minor' and 'other' applications were 5% off target. As a result, an action plan had been prepared setting out all the issues and action to be taken to improve performance.

3.4 WELFARE REFORMS

(Councillor Graham Dunn, Executive Member (Customer and Advice Services) was in attendance)

It had been reported that the Council was in a good place for dealing with the continuing changes that the reform had brought. The work that the authority was undertaking went beyond any statutory requirements and had incurred some additional costs that the Council were committed to providing to ensure that the support work was being carried out was cost effective. It was expected that around 330 people would be affected by further welfare reform changes with average losses of £2,576 per annum. Those cuts would affect families already on a low income, and who may end up presenting themselves to the Council in the future for support.

A Welfare Reform Partnership had been created which included representatives from local registered providers, Department for Work and Pensions and third sector organisations along with officers from the Council. It would be responsible for contributing to the delivery of the Welfare

Reform Action Plan that has been developed to mitigate the impact of the initial welfare reform changes.

The action plan identified four areas for focus as the main challenges identified for the authority -

- Tackling worklessness and removing barriers to employment
- Promoting social and financial inclusion
- Promoting digital inclusion
- Creating and sustaining affordable homes

3.5 TOWN CENTRE

(Councillor Alistair Bradley, Executive Leader and Executive Member (Economic Development and Partnerships) and Councillor Danny Gee, Chair of the Town Centre Team were in attendance)

The Panel was informed that the majority of key indicators for the town centre were performing above target at the end of quarter 3, 2015/16 (December 2015). Performance for floor space improved/created and vacant town centre floor space was excellent. The percentage occupancy of the covered market had decreased slightly compared to last year (95.7% against almost full occupancy of 99% for 2014/15) but remained above the target of 95%.

Performance of Market Walk across September, October and November 2015, had been comparable to previous years. However, there had been a significant increase in footfall in December 2015 of 13.5%, which was likely to be a result of a successful programme of creative marketing and PR over the Christmas period.

Since coming under Council management in 2015, Market Walk had continued to generate revenue above anticipated levels and provided an additional income stream for the Council. A recent management report highlighted one vacant unit out of 35 which equates to 97% occupancy. The Committee was informed of the initiatives undertaken by the Council to improve the aesthetics of Market Walk and town centre. It was reported that rent arrears totalled approximately £25,000, which equated to an average of just over 5 days of late payments. The Panel was reassured that none of the tenants were in arrears due to hardship; it was more because of internal workings of the bigger companies as to when they make their payments.

The Panel were informed that the Council was making £150,000 more than the £1 million per annum anticipated.

It was also highlighted that a number of retailers/landlords with premises located towards the Pall Mall side of Market Street had successfully secured Council grants to make improvements to shop floor and shop fronts. This has improved the look and feel of that part of Market Street substantially. It is reported that the night-time economy has also increased without any interventions from the Council.

Discussion at the meeting also included details of where tenants are making strides to improve their area of the town centre and other areas that require substantial investment by Lancashire County Council for highways repairs. The Committee was also informed of the consultation processes used to ascertain what residents and shoppers of Chorley wanted in the town centre.

4 Key Messages from Scrutiny Task Groups

4.1 Single Front Office – Chaired by Councillor Alistair Morwood

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested this review following the decision by the Council for the creation of a Single Front Office. The Council needed to ensure that it was able to respond to continued changes and challenges in delivering high quality services against a backdrop of drastically reduced resources and increased demand, the creation of a single front office had therefore become crucial. The proposals built on the Council's Customer Access Strategy already

implemented by the authority that would lead to significant changes in staffing arrangements and service delivery.

The Task Group felt that although the Single Front Office was only part way through its implementation, at the time the review took place, it had already demonstrated improved efficiencies and impacted on productivity. The Task Group supported the continued development, implementation of and migration to accessible services online.

The Executive Cabinet was asked to consider the following recommendations:

- So that members got a better understanding of what the Council was trying to achieve, the Task Group recommended a the Single Front Office as a topic for a future Member Learning Session, and that the training be made available to parish/town councils.
- For the Council to continue to engage with those residents who need additional support to access services online and that online tutorials be made available for residents to help them make effective use of the My Account system.
- That the dialogue on the My Account system be improved at the necessary stages, to provide better information to residents regarding assurances on the status of jobs and the transfer of requests to other partner organisations.
- That the process for requesting the addition of an asset to the Council's Asset Register, be better promoted to residents using the My Account system.
- That an option be considered on the My Account system that will allow customers to enter service request details when that specific option is not available to select.
- That a 'suggestion box' be considered on the My Account system that will allow customers to feedback and promote ownership of the system by the residents of the borough.
- That the Task Group supports the Council's review of all its correspondence with the aim of improving this method of communication to its residents and details of how to register on the My Account system be incorporated into its design.
- For the Council to explore ways to improve the process of customer call backs by officers across the authority.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will receive the Executive Cabinet's response to the review in July 2016.

4.2 Staff Sickness Absence – Chaired by Councillor John Walker

Chorley Council had historically performed well in terms of attendance management, particularly in 2011/12 which saw the least number of days lost per employee (5.44) compared with other local authorities in the North West. Despite this, and a solid health and wellbeing and attendance management policy, unprecedented sickness absence figures have been recorded in December 2015 for both short-term and long-term absences. In response to this increase, a Task Group was formed to investigate the reasons for the increase in absence and to ascertain if there was a pattern that could be identified to those absences. The Task Group also wanted to gain an understanding of what employees felt about the Council's sickness policy and how it is implemented. The Task Group received both written and verbal information from the Council's Human Resources and Occupational Development team as well as representatives from Unison and the Staff Matters meeting.

Once the Task Group had reviewed all the information, they felt satisfied that the reported increase in the level of sickness absence for 2015/16 did not suggest any underlying cause for concern. The

Task Group also felt that the Council's current Sickness Absence Policy and approach to both short and long term staff sickness absence was fair and proportionate to manage staff sickness effectively. The range of health and wellbeing initiatives and interventions available to employees to help maintain a healthy workforce was also welcomed.

It was acknowledged that a lot of work has taken place to reassure employees that the Sickness Absence Policy was there to help and support employees suffering short or long term sickness absences. However, as employees were not surveyed about their experience of how the policy was implemented for them, there was no data available to identify any issues or possible improvements. Questions were also raised about the benchmarked figure that was based on the previous years' figures which, in the Task Group's opinion, was very low. It was felt that a more realistic benchmarking figure should come from data available prior to the policy being implemented.

The Task Group was encouraged that reports from those employees who had been through the processes generally felt supported. However, it was accepted that employees may consider the Staff Sickness Absence Policy relating to the trigger points somewhat harsh, especially to those employees who have previously had very few instances of sickness absence, although these concerns were unsubstantiated. It also became apparent that employees' experience of the Staff Absence Sickness Policy varied quite significantly depending on how the policy was implemented by managers. The Task Group agreed it was important to have a consistent approach throughout the Council.

The Executive Committee was asked to consider the following recommendations:

- Employees to complete a survey, a minimum of three weeks following their return to work after a period of absence to provide feedback to HR on their experience of the application of the Sickness Absence Policy.
- Managers to receive refresher training on applying the Sickness Absence Policy to ensure a consistent approach across the Council.
- Review the wording in the letter that employees receive when the Sickness Absence Policy is triggered.
- To review the current performance measure for sickness absence monitoring and establish a range of measures using figures prior to the policy being introduced when compared with current information.

5 CRIME AND DISORDER: PCSO DEPLOYMENT IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICING ARENA

This year the scrutiny for crime and disorder focused on PCSO deployment within Chorley. Members of the Committee were given the background to the current funding arrangements for PCSO's and made aware of the financial constraints being placed on Lancashire Constabulary. As a result of those constraints a review of PCSO numbers across Lancashire had been undertaken based on risk, and threat.

The outcome of the recent restructure of PCSOs resulted in the number of PCSO's for Chorley would be reduced to 19 from 21. Of that number, eight had been deployed to deal with early action intervention initiatives. They would be responsible for delivering the majority of projects and initiatives including working with schools, working with vulnerable callers and the cadet system all of which was previously the responsibility of all the PCSOs. The Committee was informed that by having a dedicated team dealing with early intervention work, allowed more consistency in approach while continuing to link in with neighbourhood officers. The change also allowed the remaining PCSOs to concentrate on working in their neighbourhood and being more visible to the community.

The Committee was informed that each of the neighbourhood areas had been indexed based on risk, threat and vulnerability. This calculation determined how many PCSOs would be allocated to each neighbourhood. The majority of incidents which occur would still be attended by PCSOs for that area. However, if the PCSO was not available or if it is felt the situation would be better attended by a different PCSO who was more specialised, a deployment would be made accordingly. It was acknowledged that from time to time resources may need to be increased in an area based on risk and threat. Although this meant taking some PCSOs away from their beat, the Committee was reassured that it would not be for more than one day at a time.

The Committee was reassured that all money provided by the residents of Chorley was being spent in Chorley. It was reported that in previous years, any days lost due to vacancies or staff sickness of PCSOs had resulted in the Council receiving a refund of monies or a reduction for the following year for the difference. However, in the last two years, there had been no overall loss.

The Committee was informed about the recruitment process. Any PCSO vacancies would be filled once the new recruits have completed the necessary training. Discussion also led to the value of PACT meetings, and the need for PCSOs to be more visible in their neighbourhood area, which could also include them attending community events and parish/town council meetings.

6 CHALLENGING THE EXECUTIVE

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

The following areas are additional areas that the Overview and Scrutiny considered in 2015/16 –

- Waste Contract update
- Unrecoverable Council Debts

7 CALL IN OF AN EXECUTIVE DECISION – COMMUNITY ACTION PLANS

(Councillor Alistair Bradley, Executive Leader and Executive Members (Economic Development and Partnerships) and Councillor Beverley Murray, Executive Member (Community Services) were in attendance)

The Committee considered a call-in request regarding the decision made by the Executive Cabinet on 18 February 2016 in relation to Community Action Plans.

The application was made on the grounds that the Community Action Plans, overall, failed to be consistent in its approach or fairness. It also stated that the Community Action Plan for Astley Village had missed an opportunity to make a serious impact on the community and the lives of individuals in the area. The proposed Action Plan/Proposals for resources was sufficient to make a real impact on long standing issues.

The Executive Member (Community Services) reminded the Committee that this was the first year that the Action Plans had been piloted and it had been important that each area was allowed to develop them in different ways to see what worked best. The process would be reviewed to find out how successful the pilot was and what lessons could be learnt for the future.

In conclusion, the Committee was satisfied with the explanation put forward in the development of the Action Plans and the call-in request was dismissed.

8 FINANCIAL SCRUTINY

The Executive Member (Resources) attended the meeting to give an overview of the draft budget proposals for 2016/17. It included a forecast for the following two years to 2018/19 and presented

relevant proposals in respect of potential investment in the Council's Corporate Strategy priorities in 2016/17 that would increase draft budget resilience in the longer term, providing funding to support the transitional period of the fundamental service review being undertaken by Lancashire County Council, along with information about the budget consultation.

This was the fourth consecutive year that Council Tax would not be increased. Due to the successful implementation of the MTFs, budget efficiency savings totalling £0.214m had been applied to achieve a balanced budget position for 2016/17. This had mainly been achieved by the Council entering into a Business Rates Retention Pooling agreement within Lancashire effective from 1 April 2016.

In addition, contributions to the New Investment Packages for 2016/17, totalling £2.845m for both Revenue and Capital projects and the New Homes Bonus provided an opportunity for the Council to invest in other areas to protect public services within the borough and increase financial resilience, given the revolutionary funding changes ahead.

A budget of £0.500m was to be made available for the next two years to assist in the transactional period public services currently provided for and funded by Lancashire County Council and a £0.500m provision per annum to increase General Balances to mitigate against the financial risk of a core grant income shift to 100% local taxation sources. £0.603m was also available to be used to invest in projects that would provide income streams to the Council. In regards to potential investment proposals; funding had been achieved by not building all the New Homes Bonus income received since 2013/14 into the base budget. An approach taken to enable the Council flexibility and resilience in order to address the volatile and variable nature of future core funding which continued to be under review by central government. The latest round of projects will bring the total new investment on the Council's corporate priorities to £12.008m since 2013/14.

Consultation on the proposed budget focused on obtaining feedback in key areas in order to help prioritise activity. It had also highlighted the impact of a reduction in Council funds and asked for residents' views on the proposed budget, the result of which were analysed and published for consideration as part of the budget finalisation.

The Committee asked a variety of questions which included the reasoning behind not reducing the forecast for Market Walk Extension in light of the reduction of units available, and the 3% overspend in respect of Chorley Flower Show and what lessons had been learnt for the future.

9 CONCLUSION AND THE YEAR AHEAD

2015/16 had been an interesting year for scrutiny, resulting in some key recommendations on topics of concern to members and the public. Challenges ahead are to continue to scrutinise areas of interest for members and their constituents; to follow up on the implementations of scrutiny recommendations, to work more effectively with our partners on scrutiny and to 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 four meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel. This year Councillor John Walker, as Chair of the Committee will be joined by Councillor Roy Lees as Vice Chair as well as some new members to the Committee.

The topic for the first Task Group has already been agreed and will be on the subject of Child Sexual Exploitation and Safeguarding Issues.