

Scrutiny Reporting Back

Chorley Council's Annual Report on Overview and Scrutiny in 2008/09



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1. FOREWORD



Councillor Dennis Edgerley
Chair and Vice-Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Alan Cain
Member of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

In 2008 whilst finding the Council excellent overall, the CPA assessors had some concerns about Chorley's scrutiny function:

"Scrutiny is not yet fully effective, which undermines its role in challenging the executive and holding it to account. In implementing improvements to the scrutiny function the Council needs to ensure that:

- *all scrutiny members are clear about what is required in the role, and are given any necessary development to enhance their contribution; and*
- *participation in all scrutiny activity - including task-and-finish groups - follows good practice in seeking to achieve political balance in its membership."*

This year we have been embedding the new scrutiny structure and had some excellent review topics which have engaged Members, challenged some of our partners and resulted in some very worthwhile outcomes. Our performance role has challenged the Executive Cabinet on some key topics and our financial scrutiny has enabled us to input into both the budget process and the treasury management strategy. We have made significant progress towards addressing the Audit Commission's comments during the CPA and in their Annual Audit and Inspection Letter dated March 2009 they say:

“ The overview and scrutiny function has been strengthened. Task and finish groups identify opportunities to enhance service quality and governance arrangements in relation to, for example, Streetscene and Chorley Community Housing.”

We are convinced that a politically balanced overview and scrutiny committee supported by interested committed and engaged task group members has shown itself this year to be the way forward for Chorley.

The year concluded with an interactive review of the year looking at the role of members through current scrutiny arrangements; at the challenge that scrutiny has brought to the authority and looked with great enthusiasm ahead to some of the issues we would like to tackle in 2009/10.

2. THE YEAR AHEAD

Our review of the 2008/09 scrutiny year gave us some real food for thought. Some key messages from that review were:

- The current structure is working well, most Members think its an improvement with some very good task group reviews this year.
- Most Members think there has been some very effective challenges to the Executive Cabinet this year but would like to see more Executive Members (rather than Officers) being challenged at scrutiny meetings.
- Although we have started to challenge partners there is more we could do and some suggestions for reviews in 2009/10 should address this.
- Enthusiastic Members and a topic of direct interest or concern to Members or their constituents came out as the best drivers to effective task group reviews.

Topics which came forward for review in 2009/10 are many and varied but two key themes are:

- Lancashire County Council Highways – funding/performance
- Town Centre Regeneration and prosperity/vacant shop premises

3. KEY MESSAGES FROM SCRUTINY REVIEWS IN 2008/09

Chorley Community Housing

This review was to look at whether Chorley Community Housing was delivering on the promises made to tenants as part of the transfer after the first twelve months of the Housing Stock Transfer from Chorley Council.

The review, including hearing evidence from representatives of a number of residents associations showed that generally residents were happy with the service provided by Chorley Community Housing (CCH) although CCH did need to do further work with contractors to monitor their performance. A number of areas were identified where operational performance could be improved. However key concerns related to the inadequacy of current performance monitoring systems and the lack of progress in delivering affordable housing targets. Recommendations were made to strengthen monitoring systems which would enable councillors to better hold CCH to account in delivering its affordable housing targets.

Streetscene

The aim of the Streetscene review was to address public concern about the cleanliness of street's looking at existing maintenance schedules for street cleaning, emptying litter bins, sweepers, tree pruning and grass cutting. The review looked at current arrangements, the need for improvements in service delivery, barriers to changing service delivery and work with parishes. A long list of recommendations was produced towards improving service delivery.

Consultation with Parish Councils on issues in parished areas and with the Equality Forum on any barriers there may be to effective service delivery, provided valuable feedback. Neighbourhood working is also contributing to improved performance on streetscene issues.

The Executive has received both final reports on these two reviews and Overview and Scrutiny Committee is now eager to see their response.

Chorley Partnership

The review of Chorley Partnership, our LSP, isn't quite complete. Overall the review has increased Members understanding of the work of the LSP and answered questions about funding allocations. There are a number of strands to the review but recommendations are emerging in two key areas - firstly a recommendation that the LSP funds one or two larger projects with greater impact rather than a longer list of small projects and secondly that reducing alcohol harm related statistics for the Borough should be the key objective in one of those larger projects. The Group are keen to see some time of youth intervention project contribute to this and are looking at Alcohol Designation Orders.

Housing Allocations Policy

The short review of the new housing allocations policy during its consultation period resulted in Members feeling that customers wouldn't lose out under the policy and that it would be easier to understand and have greater transparency. It also identified this as an area which all members should understand and recommended it for a member learning session.

Joint Scrutiny of Affordable Housing with South Ribble and Preston

Undertaking a joint scrutiny review has resulted in significant learning. It has sometimes been difficult to make progress and drive this review forward with three Councils each researching different elements, sharing information and comparing good practice. However after more than 12 months, recommendations on affordable housing are emerging in a number of areas - maximising housing corporation grant; social rented as against shared ownership; land availability; affordability in the private sector; empty properties and housing standards; layout and design issues and use of S106 funding. The review has involved discussions with Register Social Landlords and other relevant partners.

4. OUR CHALLENGE TO THE EXECUTIVE

The following areas are Executive Cabinet items we have considered at scrutiny and made recommendations in 2008/09.

- Climate Change Strategy
- Growth Point
- Merged Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership
- Chorley Town Centre Audit and Design Strategy
- Council's Investment process and deposit in Landsbank
- Neighbourhoods Directorate Restructure
- Strategic Housing Issues

5. CHALLENGING PERFORMANCE

Scrutiny has an important role in monitoring the Council's performance and takes its role seriously resulting in a number of challenges leading to reviews. Quarterly monitoring of

- Directorate Business Plans and Performance Indicators.
- Project activity under the Corporate Strategy; and
- Chorley Partnership, including projects being run by the partnership.

Directors are questioned on areas of underperformance and issues of concern. The Streetscene, CCH and Chorley Partnership Reviews are all as a direct result of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's performance monitoring.

6. FINANCIAL SCRUTINY

As well as scrutinising the Executive's budget proposals and considering the Council's capital and revenue budget monitoring proposals, the Executive Member (Resources) has attended scrutiny meetings at the Committee's request to answer questions about the Council's investment processes and the 2009/10 draft budget and Lancashire County Council Officers have answered questions on the funding of Concessionary Travel.

7. ASSESSING THE YEAR

2008/09 has been a productive year for scrutiny resulting in some key recommendations on topics which fully engaged Councillors. Challenges ahead are to continue to scrutinise area of interest to Councillors and their constituents; 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 our residents in Chorley.