

Scrutiny Reporting Back

Chorley Council's Annual Report on
Overview and Scrutiny

2022/23



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1. Membership of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2022/23



Councillor John Walker

Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2022/23



Councillor Roy Lees

Vice Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2022/23

Councillors:

- Sarah Ainsworth
- Hasina Khan
- Samir Khan
- James Nevett
- Aidy Riggott
- Kim Snape
- Jenny Whiffen
- Michelle Le Marinel
- Dedrah Moss
- Alan Platt
- Arjun Singh
- Ryan Towers

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

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had a busy year undertaking a varied and extensive work programme that featured two task group reviews. Councillor John Walker and Roy Lees were re-appointed Chair and Vice Chair respectively for the year. There were also several new members welcomed to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel, which consisted of six members and met five times monitored the business planning and performance of the council along with a focus on each of the Directorates in turn.

Over the year, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee observed the completion of the Select Move and Empty Properties Task Group.

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

- Quality of Housing Provided by Social Landlords
- Sustainable Public Transport

3. Challenging Performance

The Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel scrutinised the performance of the council with all monitoring information considered. Scrutinising performance is essential to ensure key details are examined, questioned and that consistency prevailed.

The panel for the 2022/23 consisted of:

- Councillor John Walker (Chair)
- Councillor Roy Lees (Vice Chair)
- Councillor Sarah Ainsworth
- Councillor Michelle Le Marinel
- Councillor Arjun Singh
- Councillor Kim Snape (replaced Councillor James Nevett December 2022)

Customer and Digital

The Customer and Digital portfolio covered Chorley's Neighbourhoods, Streetscene, and Waste Services Teams, in addition to the shared services of ICT and Customer Services. Three quarters of the corporate service level performance measures performed at or above target at the end of Quarter Four. Of the eight business plan projects, five were completed, and three were amber. The reason for the amber was due to challenges faced by ICT and customer services.

Good performance led to increased targets for street cleaning and ground maintenance. There were acknowledged issues with customer services and the contact centre, but efforts were underway to correct and improve.

Covid-19 did not result in a decrease in staff, but there were ongoing difficulties with recruitment, however 12 apprenticeships were created. Financially, the directorate had 1.6% variance in the budget.

Commercial and Property

The cost of living crisis, and increase cost of staffing, energy and construction caused considerable challenge and delays to the directorate. The financial position of the directorate was a concern with a 165% overspend. It was hoped that the Shared Services arrangement with South Ribble would assist with recruitment. It was noted that there was a concern that the council could face succession issues with the large number of staff at the start or the end of their careers.

A significant loss of income came from the delay with Tatton Gardens following the fire and subsequent fungal contamination. Income from car parks were down due to the continuation of the Covid charges, but a new car park strategy was due to be introduced.

Town centre and market footfall, in addition to visiting coaches started to indicate a return to normality following the pandemic. Voids on the covered market met the target. Actions were in place to collect outstanding rent.

Thirty-five projects were green, four amber and five rated red. Some of the red rated projects were due to the pandemic and implemented supportive measures.

Policy and Governance

The directorate covered five services, Communications and Visitor Economy, Finance, Governance, Transformation and Partnerships and Business Support.

The directorate had a variance in the budget of 0.6% equalling £33,000, and the overspend was due to the increase in the cost of utilities, the increase in audit fees and the pay award against the budgeted 2%. Half of the indicators were at or above target and better than Quarter 2 2021/22.

Work was ongoing with the Youth Zone and the Department for Work and Pensions to identify the barriers in place causing young people to not be in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).

All four of the Communications and Visitor Economy indicators were at or above targets. Two thirds of the finance performance indicators were at or better than target. 80% of Governance indicators were on or above target. Of the twelve indicators for Transformation and Partnership, eight were on or above target, one was within the 5% threshold and three were below target.

The percentage of shared services staff satisfied was below target and worse than Quarter 2 2021/22. It was understood that organisation change of any kind created uncertainty, roles were changed, and workplace culture adjusted. The council frequently held opportunities for feedback, discussion and offered support to staff.

Vacancies remained throughout the council, and the vacancy rate had decreased, but there were ongoing recruitment issues. Interim appointments were made to fill required roles.

The typical council employee worked on a hybrid basis with an average of two to three days a week in the office, but this was dependent on role and levels of productivity with management discretion. The council understood that there were advantages to office working, particularly for younger and more inexperienced staff, as training and mentoring was more successful in an office environment while surrounded by experience. The council also appreciated the appeal of flexibility and was aware that they were competing in a more

flexible labour market. The health and wellbeing of employees was taken seriously with a high value placed on employees maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

Communities

The directorate included Communities, Housing Solutions and Public Protection.

The directorate overspent £135,000 which was a 7.27% variance against the budget. This was due to the proposed pay award for 2022/23, an increase in the allocated amount towards Bed and Breakfasts, and an overall reduced income from the NHS and Lancashire Constabulary.

There were difficulties with recruitment and staffing capacity, but there was the recruitment of a Housing Standards Officer.

The performance indicators were reviewed, with positive performance related to percentage of families in B&B's for less than six weeks, and the percentage of positive outcomes in prevention and relief cases.

Planning and Development

Financially, there was an overspend of £37,346 due to the increased costs of professional fees, statutory notices, legal fees and staffing.

Covid witnessed the suspension of the pre-application advice service that was replaced with improvements made to the planning portal and supplementary guidance.

Staffing remained a challenge within the council, failed recruitment attempts required the use of agency staff. Efforts to train staff from within risked departure to the private sector.

As the Local Plan neared its conclusion and the process underway for the new one, there were fewer allocated housing sites. The council was negotiating with a developer to purchase a number of affordable homes in its role as a registered provider.

Of the three projects within the directorate, two were on target, with one slightly off track.

4. The Overview and Scrutiny Task Groups

Select Move – Chaired by Councillor June Molyneaux

The final report of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group – Select Move was presented to the Committee in October 2022. The Task Group was formed due to concerns that the recommendations made in the 2014 Task Group were no longer being adhered to.

Throughout the process, the Task Group engaged with Local Authorities within the partnership, users of Select Move via a survey, Registered Providers within the partnership, the Allocations Policy Consultant, the MP, the Select Move Coordinator and Officers within the Council.

The recommendations within the report were identified over the duration of the investigation, and it was hoped that the recommendations provide positive momentum and change within the partnership.

The first monitoring report to update Members of the progress of the recommendations will be due at the October Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Empty Properties – Chaired by Councillor Sarah Ainsworth

The final report of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group – Empty Properties was presented to the Committee in July. The Task Group formed as a result of the Overview and Scrutiny agenda setting workshop as the committee felt a task group would be more effective in building and developing understanding of long term empty properties in the borough instead of an officer report.

The task group engaged with various officers within the local authority and reached out to neighbouring authorities to compare and contrast figures.

The recommendations within the report were identified over the duration of the Task Group and hoped that the investigation, report and recommendations will enable a greater and more accessible understanding of long term empty properties in the borough.

The first monitoring report to update Members of the progress of the recommendations will be due at Committee in 2024.

5. Budget Scrutiny

At the time of the Scrutiny review, the budget deficit was reported to be £1.17m, and it was believed that the budget could be balanced without cuts to services or staffing. Significant income had been gained since the purchase of Market Walk in 2014, and there was optimism for Strawberry Fields and Strawberry Meadows, in addition to future investments.

The priorities of the council were considered during the creation of the budget.

There was long term uncertainty around the funding from central government, due to the decreased figure received and the increased costs and pressures.

Council tax and special expenses proposed to increase by 1.99%, at this figure, Chorley would have the second lowest rate of Council Tax in Lancashire.

6. Topics presented to the Committee

Chorley Leisure Company

Following a procurement exercise in 2019, the preferred bidder withdrew their bid due to the challenge caused by Covid. The decision was made for the council to take on the operation of the leisure facilities.

The Leisure Company was established in April 2021, and operation commenced August 2021. The entity was separate from the council and held its own objectives. The governance structure of the company included the board of directors made up from the Directors of Chorley Council. The position of Managing Director would be the Director of Commercial Services, but due to vacancy, the Director of Governance held this position.

Chorley Council was the sole shareholder in the Leisure Company, and the functions were fulfilled by the Executive Cabinet.

To deliver the objectives of the Leisure Company, a single year business plan was adopted to reflect the imminent priorities of the council.

The Leisure Company faced a challenge financially, despite this, to ensure accessibility and affordability for the community, the decision was made not increase the price of membership.

Following the single year business plan, a five-year business development strategy was to be introduced with the objective to become financially self-sustained. Surplus and profits would be reinvested into the company and facilities.

Turnover of staff was high, but this was not unusual for the leisure industry.

Renovations of Brinscall Baths was not yet underway, although £600,000 was allocated for work as additional surveys were required. All three of the Leisure Company buildings required investment and modernisation.

Crime and Disorder – Community Safety Partnership

Background information, the role and purpose of the Community Safety Partnership was shared. Key topics included youth anti-social behaviour and the actions, interventions and support available to alleviate the issues present.

There were good working relationships within the Partnership. The Inspector was happy for Members to reach out and report any concerns or issues. Resources were available to increase presence of PCSO's and Neighbourhood Officers, in addition to providing roadshow and engagement stalls as required.

Concern was raised with the proposed move of the police station from the Town Centre to Exton Lake Campus, however, there was consideration for a satellite office with Officers still stationed within the town centre.

Open Space, Sports and recreation Strategy

The Open Space, Sports and Recreation Strategy was approved by Executive Cabinet in 2021.

The presentation provided highlighted the scope and remit of the work that was undertaken with the programme in addition to the issues that caused delays, which were primarily due to sourcing and securing funding.

Locations were identified for five green bus stops in the borough, and funds were made available to repair the worst sections of towpaths in the Borough.

The urban wildflower corridors were highlighted, and it as reiterated that there was no risk of introducing invasive species or damaging the local ecology due to their location.

Period Poverty

The borough was said to have a good provision of products available. Students in school were offered a good supply, but there were noted additional opportunities to expand the scope and range, and was acknowledged that there were gaps in what was provided in council owned buildings for staff and visitors.

Only Morrisons provided free products. Provisions that were available were not localised within the town centre, but wide across the borough, and were provided by a range of charities and groups.

Cycling

Work was being completed to gain the views of cycling and promote the activity in the borough.

A consultation was completed to manage expectations and to sign post the councils needs to the County Council. 180 responses were received, and comments from social media were collated and included. The results of the consultation would be incorporated into the objectives going forward.

There was also interest in gaining an understanding into the cycling habits of staff, it was noted that the cycle pods at Bengal Street were not being used as much as desired.

Work was underway with Lancashire County Council to ensure that Chorley was well represented within the Lancashire Cycle and Walking Infrastructure Partnership, it was noted that District Councils were not eligible for active travel funds.

The forthcoming Local Plan was believed to contain an emphasis on walking and wheeling for new developments.

Updates from the Lancashire County Council's Health and Adult Services Scrutiny Committee

Over the course of the year, the Committee were periodically provided updates from the Lancashire County Council's Health and Adult Services Scrutiny Committee that was attended by Councillor Alex Hilton or Councillor Margaret France.

The Government directive was to build 40 new fit for purpose, and state of the art hospitals. Both the Royal Preston Hospital and Lancaster Royal Infirmary were identified as having aged infrastructure, increased maintenance costs and struggled to meet the demands of modern health care.

A shortlist of four options was published, and it was decided for two brand new hospitals to be built, one in Preston and one in Lancaster. It was estimated that construction would start in 2025 with plans to open in 2030.

Chorley Hospital was to continue to receive investment by Lancashire Teaching Hospital Trust and there were no plans to close Chorley Hospital.

The Social Care Reform that was announced in September 2021 and due to be introduced in October 2023 was now delayed to 2025.

Reforms considered to streamline the financial and needs assessment online and despite assurances, there were concerns that those with complex needs would be disadvantaged

Information around virtual wards was provided, their use, purpose, and eligibility.

The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to write to the Health and Adult Services Scrutiny Committee to request the addition of tender and procurement for the Integrated Care Boards to the work programme.

Monitoring Reports

Quality of Housing provided by Social Landlords

Member Learning Sessions had been held around housing issues. Work was undertaken with various housing providers in the borough to increase the uptake of disabled facilities grants. The County Council employed additional occupational therapists to work across Central Lancashire to ease the backlog caused by Covid 19. The Select Move Coordinator was in post at Chorley Borough Council to work with registered providers, the Steering Group and the partnership to progress improvements and assist with implementation of the Charter

The Good Homes Charter had been delayed due to the pandemic and new legislation.

Two recommendations had not progressed, and they were for a residents association and a social housing sector, it was believed that due to the delays caused by the pandemic, and with the placement of the Select Move Coordinator, the aims of both recommendations would be met.

Sustainable Public Transport

The final monitoring report observed that 18 of the recommendations were completed, five were in progress and a number were ongoing with the development of the new Local Plan, which would be monitored at the Local Plan Working Group and the Central Lancashire Strategic Planning joint Advisory Committee.

7. Conclusion and the Year Ahead

It had been an interesting year for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, scrutinising, reviewing, and exploring topics that were of interest and concern to Members and to the public.

The Committee is committed to working closely with Members, partners, Officers, and the Executive and will continue to challenge and hold the Executive to account while remaining a critical friend to ensure positive outcomes.

In the forthcoming municipal year, there will be four meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and four meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Panel.

A third of the Council is up for election in May 2023, four of the fourteen members of the Committee are either standing down or contesting their seats. There is to be a significant change to the Committee's Membership, with Councillor John Walker standing down after 25 years on the Council.

In late June, the Committee will partake in a workshop to draft the upcoming work programme, which will be presented and confirmed at the first Overview and Scrutiny Committee of the year.