

Annual Report of the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services 2021 – 2022

Thank you to all our officers and councillors for your hard work over the last year to support residents, local businesses and organisations, and councillors.

Facilities management has had a particularly challenging time, in addressing the increase in health and safety work that has been needed through the pandemic, and huge shifts in how officers work and where officers work from, as well as supporting huge changes in the use of our buildings.

The **legal services** team supports the good governance of the Council, providing legal and procedural advice to Services in their operational activities, and to officers and members in the decision-making process.

Legal Services have been involved with projects undertaken by officers in all services in the Council and have played key roles in contract drafting and negotiation as well as providing advice on strategy, risk and statutory compliance. Most notably officers have been heavily involved with the Eden North project, the South Lancaster Growth Catalyst work and the incorporation of the Council's first Local Authority Trading Companies.

In supporting other services of the Council, Legal Services have again undertaken successful prosecutions for Anti-Social Behaviour and planning matters. The day-to-day legal work incorporating debt collection, rating cases, recovery of rent arrears, council house sales and other property transactions, including sales and leases, has continued, as has the provision of a local land charges service, and the licensing and information governance functions."

Democratic services have worked hard to take all of our meetings online, and then return us to face-to-face meetings, while also trying to meet the demand for ongoing streaming of meetings. This is currently in place for full council meetings and, subject to the installation of new equipment, cabinet will be able to be streamed in 22/23.

While we don't have scheduled elections in May 2022, the team has conducted nine (!) by elections across for both city and parish councils in the last year. Plans are underway for the finalisation and introduction of the measures within the *Elections Bill*, councillors have previously expressed concerns about the detrimental impact of voter ID laws on participation, and our team will work hard to minimise the number of people disenfranchised by these changes.

After a couple of quieter years, the Mayor is attending an increasing number of functions and plans are well underway for the next Mayoral year. As councillors will be aware, we submitted a competition entry for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Competition for a Lord Mayor.

Customer (resident) and Advice Services

As we emerge from the pandemic there have been significant changes in how our resident and advice services have been delivered, and as you would expect with any new system, some lumps and bumps. Our intention has always been to make the service more accessible to residents, so as concerns are raised about call wait times or confusion about when the team will be where, we take time to listen, understand and identify what improvements can be made. I expect to have options for changes in service delivery to discuss with councillors at the April full council meeting.

The resident and advice services team became the heart of our community hub when the pandemic struck and working with the community connectors and other teams have become a

vital part of our community engagement work, taking calls and being out in the community seven days a week. A service particularly appreciated by residents when bad weather hits the district. Other noteworthy additions to the service have included virtual appointments and house calls. Given the size and demography of our district, the willingness of the team to visit a resident in their home or another safe place, when the residents cannot access our services in other ways is much needed.

Governance

As I asked at the Committee System briefing, one question that has consistently troubled me over the last three years - is when does a decision made by councillors through formal means or actions agreed between the leader or a cabinet member in their portfolio area and officers get acted on? When first elected, I assumed the answer was every time. However, experience has taught me this isn't the case, and I think contributed to a culture within the council, where councillors feel they need to keep checking that policy has been followed or actions have been taken. To address this, we need officers to give clear assessments of when the city council does or doesn't have the resources or capacity to undertake new requests or past practices. To ensure officers can give this advice, officers need to be confident that their professional judgement is recognised, not necessarily accepted unquestioning, but never used to suggest that officers are trying to undermine councillors.

The constitution was significantly reviewed in the 2015 - 2019 council term, and so it is timely to reflect on how it has worked and whether it can be improved. Current suggestions include:

- recognising that every councillor has the right to ask questions and speak at cabinet - this was the routine practice at cabinet between 2019 and 2021, but not continued in 2021-2022
- formally establishing a shadow cabinet and automatically inviting them to cabinet and asking the remuneration panel to consider special responsibility allowances for these councillors
- having all committee minutes come to council - this is a practice followed at Lancashire County Council and gives committee chairs a chance to comment briefly on their work and for councillors to ask questions on the committee work
- a more structured briefing and scrutiny process, that would see all councillors (and possibly other stakeholders) briefed and able to ask questions on the work of each directorate and the progress being made against the priorities and strategies of the Core Plan2030, and with the agreement of our scrutiny committees, a follow-up scrutiny meeting to further consider matters arising from the briefing.
- enshrining that chairs and vice-chairs of all scrutiny committees must be councillors whose groups are not part of the administration and if we can work out how to draft it, include independents on those committees

Hopefully, this package could be funded and resourced by a couple of structural changes:

- merging Overview and Scrutiny and Budget and Performance into one larger committee - making it easier for independents and small groups outside the administration to be better briefed on the council's work and plans
- abolishing Business Committee and transferring its work back to the council in the main, with enquiry submissions being cleared by cabinet members in consultation with shadow cabinet members, and reported to the council as part of the leader's report

I'm looking forward to discussion at the committee system working group and the next full council on these and hopefully other ideas. Some measures do not need constitutional change and could

be enacted simply by councillors and officers agreeing that we want it to be done and that we have the resources and capacity to make it so. Where constitutional change is needed, I would hope to progress those just as fast as broad agreement allows.

An area where governance has struggled in the last year is the uncertainty of the Leader's delegations to portfolio holders. This is not a trivial issue, the leader's delegations provide guidance to cabinet members on the lines between their portfolios, guide officers on which cabinet member to speak to on different matters, facilitates accountability, and provides surety to the public and external stakeholders that cabinet members have the responsibilities they claim. The lack of clear delegations has caused uncertainty for cabinet members and officers, as well as damaging relationships between cabinet members. These are issues that haven't needed to linger for approximately five months, as they could have been fixed with one email at any time from the Leader.

Flood risk reduction

No one can promise you that they can stop flooding, but we can take steps to reduce flood risk and strengthen the resilience of our community and services when flooding does strike.

The City Council essentially has three streams of work that it progresses to try to reduce flood risk within the district:

- ***flood risk reduction schemes***, big schemes like Caton Road, but more often smaller schemes that protect a few homes or businesses or a street, cobbling together funding from a multitude of sources and support local communities to take what action they can. The slow progress of these schemes is a source of constant frustration and worry for many residents and business owners as it just doesn't make sense to them that the system allows them to flood again and again, when solutions are known. Fundamentally, this comes down to the Government stepping back from the idea that we work as a community to manage flood risk and increasing putting the onus on individual residents and organisations.
- ***planning*** - the national planning policy framework works against us in terms of flood risk reduction, in that its standard is that no more water should come off a site any faster after development than it did before development, which isn't very useful when there is already a problem. Increasingly, the council is trying to set a standard where developers understand that there is a need to hold and slow water wherever possible and particularly where there are known problems. These principles are part of our climate emergency review of the local plan.
- ***work with developers & landowners*** with the national planning system lagging on flooding, and the tendency of planning inspectors to not support additional local measures we need developers and landowners to understand how important it is to our residents and their purchasers that flood risk reduction work is undertaken wherever possible. A good example of this has been the work between the council as the landowner and Eccleston Homes as the developer, along with the South Lancaster Flood Action Group, the Lune Rivers Trust and the Environment Agency. As the landowner the council said, we won't sell unless you demonstrate that the development will hold and slow water. Eccleston Homes then worked with local experts and agencies to develop a proposal that demonstrated it would hold and slow water. We will need to keep a close eye on this project as it develops to ensure it delivers what we have been promised, and to ensure that other developers understand that this is the standard our district expects.

South Lancaster

South Lancaster remains a complex project with many actors, and coordinating those actors will be crucial to the success of the project, and this appears to be one of the emerging roles for the city council. We want affordable, accessible, sustainable and beautiful new homes to address the

housing need in our district supported by the right social infrastructure, but the county council is building a road it has a contract to build with Homes England and developers and landowners understandably want to see good returns for their investment and land. The difference in size between the county council and the city council does make some of this harder, the county council is used to just doing its own thing and not being particularly focused on community engagement, city councillors and officers are at every turn urging the county council to engage with residents and local groups and to understand that we are trying to develop a community and that every piece of the project must be designed and delivered with that outcome in mind. We are also reaching out to landowners and developers, particularly landowners to engage them in discussions about how their land contributes to the future of the district.

On a more technical note, Cabinet has adopted the JTP Masterplan as a foundation for work to develop the Area Action Plan and engagement with the community and other stakeholders is taking place on a regular basis. At this point the engagement is mostly advising key stakeholders of the process and building an understanding of the issues that need to be considered and addressed. The intention is to have a draft plan for consultation in the autumn of 2022, this document will need to be briefed to councillors and agreed by cabinet.

Plan2030

Plan2030 is intended to recognise the wealth of talent, innovation and expertise in the district, mobilising all of us to work in concert to achieve real change in areas most important to the district. For example, the City Council has a clear plan to reach net carbon zero by 2030, but as we are only a tiny fraction of the carbon emissions in the district if we are to respond robustly to the climate emergency, we need to support those earlier in their carbon journey and learn from those further along their journey than us, so we all make as much progress as we can.

Over the last three years in partnership with other organisations we've facilitated conversations that have included 100s, probably 1000s of people in discussions about the issues most important to them - some have been highly structured, like the People's Jury on the Climate Emergency, some have been more grassroots and open like the community conversations, and some have been conversations lead by other organisations where the council has listened to learn. If you or groups you know what to feed in your conversations then you can do that via a simple webform at https://keepconnected.lancaster.gov.uk/community-conversations-2/survey_tools/feedback-your-conversations

Working with other councils and authorities we've also realised that we need places where key stakeholders come together to build shared work, our cabinet advisory groups (as they start again after COVID) are one space for councillors and key stakeholders to have that conversation, but there are other key forums including the Anchor Collaborative led by the local NHS that we also hope to engage in this work.

We hope that Plan2030 will be presented to council early next year, before election season starts. Look out for opportunities to participate in community conversations, cabinet advisory groups, and please do feed in from other meetings you're attending.

Cllr Dr Erica Lewis
Cabinet Member for Corporate Services