

Annual Report of the Leader of the Council 2022-2023

This municipal year has marked a time of significant difficulty, with effects of Covid, still felt, coupled with the cost-of-living crisis and the housing of both asylum-seekers and those fleeing war in Ukraine having strong impact in this district. However, it has also seen far-reaching change and progress particularly in the award-winning decarbonisation of council assets and activity, in creating high level partnerships both district and county wide and, of course, in gaining government Levelling Up funding for the Eden project.

I would like to record my appreciation and thanks to our Chief Executive, Mark Davies who has achieved an incredible amount in his first year, and to senior officers who have worked so hard alongside portfolio holders to bring about change and improvement to the benefit of residents in Lancaster district. The genuine and ready support of group leaders and deputies across the shared administration has also been crucial. Working across five political groups is an unusual situation and I thank them for the time they have given with their members to ensuring that decisions with long term importance went ahead smoothly.

Achievement of council priorities & principles

The principles and priorities established in Plan 2030 and expressed through the council corporate plan have continued to guide the activity of cabinet. With officer support, a priority list of activities relating to the plan was drawn up in 2021-22 and all actions have been achieved or are funded and to start imminently. The cabinet has met informally each week to review progress, work on current issues and establish common views. I have also met weekly with Shared Administration group leaders. Members have given each other commitment and support across group divides in order to achieve common priorities.

The cost-of-living crisis and the effect of energy price increases seriously undermined the budget set 2021-22 and threatened the achievement of key priorities such as the continued work on Canal Quarter, our Housing ambitions and progress with Frontierland. These difficulties have been approached with flexibility and determination: outside funding has been gained and we have altered both timelines and elements of the programmes to ensure their affordability. The key element reported on last year, of establishing Outcome Based Resourcing, has been essential in providing the information and open discussion of how resources are related to priorities. The final budget for 2021-22 will unfortunately have to draw on reserves but, due to prompt and informed officer action, will be little more than half a million as opposed to the threatened £2-3 million when costs were estimated in summer 2022.

As a result of the financial pressures the decisions made in order to produce a balanced budget in 2022-3 were always going to be painful. All cabinet members were heavily involved alongside officers in creating a budget that saved £2 million on estimates. The process was new and intensive, looking in detail across all service and assets. Cabinet took the decision to engage the public, stakeholders, the press and all members to a greater extent than usual which was certainly successful though predictably, community members objected to cuts to discretionary spend but the ensuing dialogue helped shape our way of reducing spending to retain the highly valued elements.

Representing Lancaster District: principal spokesperson

I have attended all monthly district leader and Lancashire leader meetings representing the concerns of the district. Plan 2050 has made some progress, creating very high-level statements across eight key areas and a booklet launched on Lancashire Day in London. I have chaired the Environment group for Plan 2050 and am one of the lead members on the Transport group. I am also districts' representative on the officers' Lancashire

Decarbonisation group. I along with other district leaders have made very strong representation that we want action, particularly rapid action on climate change. Districts are creating their own agendas – Lancaster/Blackpool officers hosted a successful meeting with three districts recently regarding the use of data centre heat.

The city council is continuing to develop the work initiated with Exeter City Futures last year. Two high level meetings have taken place with stakeholders and the climate crisis agreed to be one key priority for joint action. This presents exciting possibilities to be taken up by the next administration.

Human Resources

Last year's report recorded the serious difficulties that had arisen in this area before the appointment of the interim lead who re-established administrative support and better staffing levels. Since the appointment of Alex Kinch in March 2022 as lead, there has been very significant progress in all areas. Recruitment has taken place at both administrative and Business Support Partner level to allow Human Resources to provide a comprehensive service to other departments. Regular and productive monthly meetings are held with unions as well as quarterly Joint Consultative Council meetings of members and unions. A full review and engagement with staff on Values has been carried out creating a new agreed set of Values for the council as a whole. The Performance Management system, whereby staff have regular and productive discussions with line managers over their roles and career needs, has been reviewed and rewritten and training has been organised for line managers. Many staff policies were out of date: the process of reviewing, updating and rewriting where necessary is now well under way. Line managers now have easy online access to the documents and policies they need to support their work with staff. Personnel committee has met regularly and been involved in discussing and approving all elements as well as being well-supported in recent recruitment to posts at senior level. In addition, HR has been an invaluable partner in both the recent senior management restructure and in supporting the OBR process with understanding the implications for staff of our decisions over resourcing for 2023-4.

Community Safety Partnership

The partnership has become more active over 2021-22, re-establishing face to face meetings last summer. One special meeting was called to support Operation Brassica when Anti-Social Behaviour levels in both Morecambe and Lancaster rose significantly. The Panel has recently reviewed operation in regard to the ASB priority and set up single issue interim meetings to keep partners informed and co-ordinated. I have initiated a request for CSPs across Lancashire to meet together because there is currently no sharing of good practice. Government has given the Serious Violence Reduction responsibility to CSPs which is a serious challenge to all panels because they have very little resource to carry out activities. My thanks to our district resource: Kirstie Banks-Lyon who does an amazing job in supporting the CSP alongside her other responsibilities.

Cllr Caroline Jackson
Leader of the Council

April 2023