



LANCASTER
CITY COUNCIL

Promoting City, Coast & Countryside

COUNCIL MEETING

**Wednesday, 23 April 2025 - 6.00
p.m.**

Morecambe Town Hall

Lancaster City Council welcomes members of the public to attend meetings. However, space in the public gallery is limited to 30 seats due to Fire Regulations. The seats are allocated on a first come, first served basis and no standing is permitted. Meetings are livestreamed please click [HERE](#) to watch using MS Teams. Please contact Democratic Support via email democracy@lancaster.gov.uk if you wish to register to speak or ask a question at this meeting. The deadline to register is 12pm on Wednesday 16 April

Mark Davies,
Chief Executive,
Town Hall,
Dalton Square,
LANCASTER,
LA1 1PJ



LANCASTER CITY COUNCIL

Promoting City, Coast & Countryside

Sir/Madam,

You are hereby summoned to attend a meeting of the Lancaster City Council to be held in the Town Hall, Morecambe on Wednesday, 23 April 2025 commencing at 6.00 p.m. for the following purposes:

1. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

2. **MINUTES**

To receive as a correct record the Minutes of the Meeting of the City Council held on 12 March 2025 (previously circulated).

3. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

To receive declarations by Councillors of interests in respect of items on this Agenda.

Councillors are reminded that, in accordance with the Localism Act 2011, they are required to declare any disclosable pecuniary interests which have not already been declared in the Council's Register of Interests. (It is a criminal offence not to declare a disclosable pecuniary interest either in the Register or at the meeting).

Whilst not a legal requirement, in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 9 and in the interests of clarity and transparency, Councillors should declare any disclosable pecuniary interests which they have already declared in the Register, at this point in the meeting.

In accordance with Part B Section 2 of the Code Of Conduct, Councillors are required to declare the existence and nature of any other interests as defined in paragraphs 8(1) or 9(2) of the Code of Conduct.

4. **ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS**

5. **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

To receive any announcements which may be submitted by the Mayor or Chief Executive.

6. **QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 11**

To receive questions in accordance with the provisions of Council Procedure Rules 11.1 and 11.3 which require members of the public to give at least 3 days' notice in writing of questions to a Member of Cabinet or Committee Chairman.

7. **PETITIONS AND ADDRESSES**

To receive any petitions and/or addresses from members of the public which have been notified to the Chief Executive in accordance with the Council's Constitution.

8. **LEADER'S REPORT** (Pages 5 - 9)

To receive the Cabinet Leader's report on proceedings since the last meeting of Council.

9. **MAYOR'S ANNUAL REPORT** (Pages 10 - 13)

To receive the annual report of the Mayor.

10. **CABINET ANNUAL REPORT** (Pages 14 - 57)

To receive the Cabinet's Annual Report containing the Business Progress Reports of the Leader and each Cabinet Member in accordance with Part 2, Section 4 of the Council's Constitution [paragraphs 3.1 (j) and 5.1(m)].

The reports of individual Cabinet Members are included in this agenda and will be presented at the meeting:

Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Housing and Homelessness.
Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Communities, Well-Being and Partnerships.
Climate Action.
Corporate Services.
Environmental Services.
Finance and Property. (Published 11 April 2025)
Lancaster Regeneration and Local Economy. (Published 11 April 2025)
Morecambe Regeneration and Local Economy.
Planning.

11. **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT** (Pages 58 - 69)

To receive the Annual Report of Overview and Scrutiny.

12. **AUDIT COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT** (Pages 70 - 76)

To receive the Annual Report of the Audit Committee.

Published 11 April 2025

13. **DELOITTE EXTERNAL AUDITORS ANNUAL REPORT FINANCIAL YEARS 2020-21 TO 2022-23** (Pages 77 - 98)

Report of Audit Committee.

MOTIONS ON NOTICE

14. **MOTION ON NOTICE TO AMEND THE CONSTITUTION TO ENCOURAGE NON-CABINET GROUPS HOLDING SCRUTINY CHAIR POSITIONS** (Pages 99 - 101)

To consider a motion on notice submitted by Councillor Jason Wood and seconded by

Councillors Joanne Ainscough, Louise Belcher, Phillip Black, Colin Hartley and Jean Parr.

OTHER BUSINESS

15. APPOINTMENTS AND CHANGES TO COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Group Administrators to report any changes to Committee Membership.

16. QUESTIONS UNDER COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 12

To receive questions in accordance with the provisions of Council Procedure Rules 12.2 and 12.4 which require a Member to give at least 3 working days' notice, in writing, of the question to the Chief Executive.



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Chief Executive

Town Hall,
Dalton Square,
LANCASTER,
LA1 1PJ

Published on, 10 April 2025.



Leader's Report

23 April 2025

Report of the Leader of the Council

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To present the Leader's report to Council.

This report is public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To receive the report of the Leader of Council.

REPORT

1.0 Cabinet

- 1.1 No meetings of Cabinet have occurred since the last Leader's Report. The next scheduled meeting will take place on 15 April 2025, after the publication of Council agenda.

2.0 Decisions required to be taken urgently.

- 2.1 No urgent Cabinet decisions have been taken since the last Leader's Report

3.0 Leader's Comments

- 3.1 I preface this report by marking the death of Peter Williamson district councillor 2007-2019 and leader of the Conservative group. He was a hard-working councillor and always engaged with the business of meetings. Some of us will remember his wry humour and his budgets, always properly checked with officers and presented to Full Council with the words, "I know you won't take any notice of this but .."
- 3.2 This month has been very busy as ever and includes some significant strides forward in our operation as a council deeply committed to partnerships and partnership working.

Local Government Re-organisation

- 3.3 All fifteen authorities within Lancashire signed one joint letter to MHCLG regarding Local Government Re-organisation. Chief Executives are to be thanked for the drafting and all leaders showed significant willingness to be flexible in order to achieve a unanimous voice. This month we have met with Ribble Valley and Preston to discuss the possibilities in unitarisation. Preston have declared an intention to be part of a unitary in this configuration. The Chief Executive and I have also met with the new leader of Ribble Valley separately.
- 3.4 I attended LGA Councillors' Forum where Minister McMahon answered questions. I was pleased that, in answer to a question from me, the minister said he was looking for flexible, innovative answers to the problems of local government. District leaders in Lancashire are similarly concerned that we provide "the right services at the right levels" as we look at the overall re-organisation plans.
- 3.5 The new Lancashire County Combined Authority has met for the first time with two district leaders in attendance but without voting rights. The Lancashire District Leaders' Constitution was accepted with minor amendments.

City Council Priorities

- 3.6 Senior Leadership Team have met jointly with Cabinet to map, review and align draft priorities within the outcomes of the Council Plan. The meeting was extremely useful in reviewing how much is intended happen over the next two years, despite the uncertainties introduced by LGR. Work continues to map draft resources, timelines and outcomes. Fit for the Future joint working groups are being revised to ensure coverage of key projects and efficiencies and step down those that are now conducting business as usual. Further joint meetings are now being scheduled at six weekly intervals.

Eden Project

- 3.7 There has been welcome renewed activity by all parties involved with Eden Project Morecambe. The first Community Conversation for 2025 was held at the Winter Gardens show casing the extent of the Morecambe Bay Curriculum work hosted by Lancaster University. City council officers and Si Bellamy attended to present progress and answer questions. Since then
- 3.8 Eden has taken a significant step in appointing John Pye as Project Director and Lancashire County Council transport officers are leading on the detailed plans to accommodate visitors arriving by road and rail. The recent all member briefing provided councillors with more detailed information and opportunity for questions.

Funds and Economic Growth Plans

- 3.9 The Lancashire Economic Growth Plan consultation has drawn a detailed response from the city council, filling county council in on some of the missing aspects in its presentation of our district. A joint cabinet and senior leadership team meeting considered a draft Economic Strategy for the district and concluded that more work needed to be done to express our commitment to inclusive growth and community wealth. The consultants will be returning next month.
- 3.10 Unfortunately, both the UKSPF funding for this year and the Household Support Fund are delayed in arriving with the district and in the case of HSF7 significantly reduced. Money from the Household Support Fund goes both directly to support those on low wages and benefits for household goods and bills but also to Food Clubs – currently we only have notice of six months of funding.

Assets and Development

- 3.11 Progress has been made in developing plans for the Ryelands House site including soft marketing to ascertain any commercial interest and detailed work towards possible community use. With the expert help of MIAA our auditors, the GreenBook case for funding Skerton site alongside Mainway, is being brought together. Government has recently announced funding for social housing to be brought forward in June. A Fit for the Future group has been meeting to discuss the future of Williamson Park café following the storm damage. There is a consultant's report expected shortly to look at options to replace the café. Rapid plans have been put into action to provide cabins for sales of food and drink in the park along with signage and social media to keep visitors informed. Thanks to all the officers involved.

Cabinet meetings

- 3.12 Cabinet has been briefed on the need to revise the timetable and costings for the Local Plan following the revisions to the NPPF. More detail is available in the portfolio holder's report. The Risk Register was presented with additional risk recognised to recruitment and delivery of services as a result of LGR, alongside risks to the implementation of the waste strategy. Cabinet also considered the revised Enforcement Policy which links usefully to a priority concern about responding to fly-tipping and littering.

Partnership achievements

- 3.13 In a brave move, Jo Wilkinson Chief Officer for Housing and Property, invited an officer from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government to come and visit our social housing and see how we had responded to the 2023 Social Housing Regulation Act. After two days of visiting housing, meeting officers and tenants, observing meetings and engaging with our records and systems, the MHCLG officer expressed himself as very impressed by the immense progress we had made over two years and the excellent evidence

that we are a tenant-led service. He was keen to maintain the dialogue with Lancaster in the future.

- 3.14 The official launch of the Full Fibre Network took place on 14th March at White Lund depot with a group of partner organisations involved in the design and construction, including Tony Doyle from Blackpool council. The next step will be the installation of the sustainable data centre at Salt Ayre. All credit to officers and portfolio holder Tim Hamilton-Cox for having the vision to carry this through.
- 3.15 The Lancaster District Strategic Partnership met to consider the role of arts and culture in the economy and life of the district and ways to support and maintain the sector in the face of reductions in funding and LGR. Lancaster Arts Partnership and the city council will continue to explore ways to access Arts Council Place Partnership funding.
- 3.16 Most recently, through David Wood of Promenade Music, we have expressed our support for Lancashire Music Association and the work it does in this area.

Local events

- 3.17 I have been pleased to represent the city council at a number of enjoyable events this month including: the International Film Festival, the Storey Makers exhibition, the Judges Lodgings talk by Lela Harris on Defiance, Dignity and Agency in Art, the LEAP Recycled Fashion Show, a small Covid Reflection Day ceremony and the first civic commissioners meeting for the Poverty Truth Commission.

Caroline Jackson

4.0 Decisions

The following decisions were scheduled to be considered by Cabinet on 15 April 2025

Corporate Enforcement Policy
Publication of an updated Local Plan Preparation Timetable
Projects and Performance: Q3 2024-25
Strategic Risk Register Management

No Officer Delegated Key Decisions have been taken since the last Leader's report.

The following Individual Cabinet Member Decisions have been taken since the last Leader's report.

ICMD 22	SPARK Grant Funding Proposal: Morecambe to Heysham Battery Train Scheme Feasibility Study.	Published on 05.03.25 Taken by: Cllr Gina Dowding
ICMD 23	UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Grant Award. Theme: Healthy, Safe and Inclusive Communities and Thriving Places.	Published on 25.03.25 Taken by: Cllr Martin Bottoms
ICMD 25	UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Grant Award. Theme: Healthy, Safe and Inclusive Communities.	Published on 20.03.25 Taken by: Cllr Peter Jackson
ICMD 26	Procurement of Food Waste Vehicles for Segregated Food Waste Collection.	Published on 21.03.25 Taken by: Cllr Paul Hart

Background Papers

None.

The Mayoral Team of 2024-2025's annual report

Wow, what a year it's been! It has been a complete honour to be able to represent Lancaster District at events throughout the year, meeting people from many different charities, local organisations and schools and seeing all the good there is in our community. We are so lucky to live in such an amazing city and have the most beautiful district around us and the best bit about being Mayor is being able to celebrate all of this. There are way too many to list, but I would like to thank each and every organisation for inviting us to your events.

The most heartwarming experiences have been meeting the young people and the staff from the King's Trust. To see the young people standing up and giving their final presentations about their journeys on the programme has brought me to tears more than once, hearing how the programme has changed their lives. I have also particularly loved meeting and getting to know some of the refugees and asylum seekers who live in our district, at various events.

It's been wonderful to celebrate the Polish Community in our district, and build relationships with our friends from Lublin, one of Lancaster's twin cities. Last year we met representatives from Lublin in Williamson Park, where I was presented with a medal of the Union of Lublin on behalf of the City of Lancaster in recognition of the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Lublin and Lancaster partnership (twinning) agreement. I also attended the 20th anniversary celebration of The Polish School, at Morecambe Bay Academy – the children who attend were so proud of their wonderful Saturday school.

Another highlight of the year has been spending time at many events with the fabulous High Sherrif of Lancashire, Helen Bingley - she's been an inspiration to us all.

I have attended several commemoration events including the Holocaust Memorial Service, D-Day Anniversary events, Remembrance Sunday, and will attend VE Day commemoration events on May 8th. It's been a pleasure to meet and get to know many Veterans and learn more about the support offered to Veterans in our community.

The Mayoral team was honoured to host the Slavery Family Trees Project in the Mayor's Parlour. We had a wonderful launch event with children from local schools, who heard all about the exhibition from those involved with the project. Visitors to the Town Hall have been able to see the exhibition about how the prominent families of Lancaster in the 18th century were all involved in the Transatlantic Slave Trade in one way or another.

It's been absolutely amazing to work with Citizens Advice North Lancashire on the Music With The Mayor project. Over the year we've hosted or attended 16 different music events of varying genre, to celebrate the local music scene and to raise vital funds for the charity. I'm incredibly proud to be able to say that we've raised over £30,000. A couple of the highlights from the MWTM has been an evening at Lancaster Castle where the Patterers sang ballads about previous inhabitants of the castle. Another highlight was when Lancaster District CVS and North Lancashire Citizen Advice staff had a dance off at the Christmas disco – it was hilarious and very hard to judge the winner! I'd like to give enormous thanks to all the local bands, the production teams, (and in

particular BaccyJ n Folio Productions), the venues, and everybody who's helped us throughout the year to raise so much money – it has been a highly successful blast!

Other fundraising events have been me doing the 12 dips of Christmas where I raised over £3000 for Cancer Research, a 'Blood on the Clocktower' games in the Lancaster Town Hall Council Chamber for Smile for ME and a sponsored walk up Clougha to raise money for CancerCare – as both charities are very close to my heart.

I wouldn't have been able to have got through this year without the support from some absolutely amazing people, Jon - my consort and husband, Hamish - my son and deputy mayor and Sam - my friends and assistant deputy mayor. Between us we've managed to attend well over 100 events throughout the year celebrating the diverse community in our district. A million thanks to all three of them.

I'd also like to thank everyone in democratic services for their support over the year, but in particular Chris the Beadle. His support and friendship have meant a lot to me this past year and I certainly wouldn't have been able to get through the year without him - thank you Chris.

The main bit of advice I'd like to give Margaret starting your year as mayor is 'watch out, your cheeks are going to ache from smiling so much'. I wish you a wonderful year.

Cllr Abi Mills – Mayor of Lancaster 2024-2025

Over my year as Lancaster City Council's Deputy Mayor, I have had the privilege of meeting so many of the wonderful people across the district and many from across Lancashire.

It seemed to have fallen to me to take on, alongside the Assistant Deputy Mayor, a number of the events and functions from further afield. It has been extremely interesting to learn about the districts across our county and some of the hard-working charities that work across Lancashire, especially the Abaseen Foundation - who's Chief Executive is our former High Sherrif, Helen Bingley OBE. The foundation, based in Lancashire, works across Northern Pakistan to improve the lives of so many through projects including building hospitals, schools, sports facilities just to mention a few.

Through these events across Lancashire, I have been able to meet the Mayors and dignitaries from all of the other districts and organisations, it has been an eye-opening experience to learn so much about our neighbours across the County, how their councils work and what they all get up to.

One of the parts of the role I have enjoyed the most is meeting children and staff from all of the schools across Lancaster District and beyond. I had the privilege of watching the school production of Jacob's Technicolour Dreamcoat at Caton Primary School. Abi and I were also able to watch the year 6 production at the very primary school I went to, Bowerham Community Primary School - in the hall where 12 years ago I had acted in my own year 6 production. It wasn't just my primary school that I was able to return to, my high school, Lancaster Royal Grammar School, also kindly invited myself and Abi to a series of their events, including the yearly school award ceremony. It was finally nice to be on the stage for Speech Day. In returning to my old

schools, I was able to talk with many of my old teachers, reminiscing about my days at school and talking about what I have been doing since.

Lancaster Grand Prix was another highlight of my year where I got to wave the start flag of one of the races, I was able to talk in depth with the organisers and gain a greater understanding of their work.

Throughout the year I have chaired all but three of the full council meetings. This experience has certainly provided me with a great deal of experience in chairing, it was a daunting task at first, but I believe I have learned to manage the chamber quite well, with some very helpful support, and learnt some useful skills.

I would like to thank all of the Democratic Services staff who have helped me in my role over the last year, the support and assistance has been invaluable. I would also like to thank all the people I have met and spoken to over the year across all the events I have attended, you have made the year unforgettable. I would like to thank all the Councillors who have helped and supported me in the role, particularly Roger Dennison, who I have spent many events alongside and Sam Riches, my great Assistant Deputy Mayor for being there when I couldn't and doing such a great job throughout the year.

I am sure you can all understand that this last year has been very difficult for myself and the Mayor, and I would not have got through it so smoothly without all the help and support of everyone around me, especially my mum, the Mayor, who I know at the start of the year had no idea of what we had ahead of us. Thank you, Abi, for the opportunity you have given me and the support along the way.

Cllr Hamish Mills – Deputy Mayor of Lancaster

I am very conscious of the difficult circumstances that led to the creation of the post of Assistant Deputy Mayor, and I would like to thank the elected members of Lancaster City Council who took the bold step of agreeing to change the Council's Constitution in order to enable the post to be established. I'd particularly like to thank Cllr Hamish Mills, who selected me as his Assistant, and Chris Clifford, the Mayor's Beadle: they have both been very generous in their support of me as I did my best to carry out this new role. Other council officers have also gone above and beyond in enabling me to play a meaningful role in the Mayoral team - Jenny Kay, Stephen Metcalfe and Phil Abel deserve special mention. Above all, I'd like to thank Cllr Abi Mills, whose ambition and vision for her mayoral year has been maintained through all her health challenges. I know that she has worked very hard to shepherd her energy so that she can use it to best effect, and it has been a privilege to play a small part in enabling so many mayoral invitations and obligations to be fulfilled during her term of office.

Since my appointment as Assistant Deputy Mayor in July 2024 I have represented Lancaster City Council, and the district more generally, at a wide range of events, and there are more to come. I have attended events for charities, community groups and voluntary organisations, and I have found that the presence of the Mayor's representative is really valued as it demonstrates an official recognition of the vital part played by these organisations in our city and its district. Notable highlights were the beautiful service of Nine Lessons and Carols held in aid of St John's Hospice in a packed Priory church, the AGM of the Samaritans held in a Morecambe

hotel, and a Christmas party for service users and their families of a local care agency, held in Slyne-with-Hest.

It has been a particular pleasure to meet Richard Brock on two occasions - at the regimental dinner following the Duke of Lancaster Regimental Remembrance Service at Blackburn Cathedral, and more recently at an event held at St John's Hospice to mark their achievement of 'Veteran Friendly' status. Richard is a delightful man and also a genuine local hero - now in his 101st year, this native of Bolton-le-Sands is one of the last remaining veterans of D-Day and he graced the cover of *Radio Times* for Armistice Day in 2024. Richard is a recipient of the Legion d'Honneur, the highest award made by France, it was a privilege to be photographed (by Chris Clifford) with Richard with all his medals proudly displayed. I am awaiting a copy of Richard's memoirs, and hope that the Mayor's Office will be able to ensure that a copy is made available for future generations alongside the official regalia and ceremonial treasures that pertain to the ancient office of Mayor of Lancaster.

Cllr Sam Riches, the Assistant Deputy Mayor

Annual Report Leader of the council – Caroline Jackson

As far as possible this report reflects matters for the year 2024-2025.

Local Government Re-organisation (LGR) – principal spokesperson report

Since Autumn 2024 I have been involved in the Lancashire District Leaders meetings which have mainly covered the advent of the County Combined Authority and the requirements of LGR. I have also represented Lancaster district at the North West Regional meetings covering developments in Adult Care, Looked After Children and Developing AI. District Leaders in Lancashire have achieved unanimity in facing the Government requirements for unitarisation despite serious challenges and with Chief Executives were instrumental in responding to the 21 March deadline as part of a united 15 authority response. Throughout the process I have maintained the point that we are not against unitarisation, we recognise the difficulties within the local government system that central government wishes to address and wish to respond flexibly and innovatively but our role is to ensure that whatever future we agree to represents the best result for all our district and fits into an overall positive future for Lancashire.

I have chaired our internal cross-party Task Group on LGR and with Mark Davies have met with individual district leaders from Preston, Wyre and Ribble Valley to discuss the issues and possibilities arising from the situation. I have also been part of the national LGA Task and Finish Group on Devolution and Local Government Re-organisation and profited from the wider views and commissioned work they are doing on the changes to responsibilities and the financial side of recent unitarisation.

Following the May election, we expect a hectic period of work on preparing a submission for the government November deadline that is likely to involve both me and the Chief Executive as well as possibly other officers. Councillors will recognise that this will undoubtedly impact us, as with all councils, in reducing the short-term capacity available for other elements of council business.

Priorities and Principles

The Council Plan has now been in place since January 2024 and its principles are well embedded in the work of the council, both officers and members. The budget process took account of the council plan in allocating resources and cabinet has recently established specific priorities to be discussed and aligned with Senior Leadership team. More detailed outcomes and timelines are currently being developed into a coherent plan that will also inform and be informed by our Fit For The Future joint working groups. The bi-weekly OBR coordination meetings and the quarterly performance reports are providing regular monitoring points.

Communications

As resources become more squeezed and the state of local councils is more often in the news, communications is becoming an essential factor in managing local relationships, helping resident expectations and ensuring people feel involved and valued by the city council. The Communications team has undergone a number of changes over the last two years and has partially embedded developments suggested by the LGA one day visit in 2023. The report below indicates the powerful work that is going on and will be developed over the coming year.

Over the past 12 months, Lancaster City Council's Communications Team has played a pivotal role in promoting the council and its services both externally and internally.

Areas of responsibility include:

- Media relations - managing a number of high-profile issues proactively (issuing of press releases and statements), organising media briefings, and working with councillors and officers to respond to media enquiries.
 - Examples include: the snap General Election, the future of Frontierland, former Skerton High site and Mainway, Eden Project Morecambe, the budget and Fit for the Future.
- Enquiries: Beyond Radio, Lancaster Guardian, Daily Mail, The Express, The FT, Computer Weekly, The Telegraph, Arts Professional, Lancashire Business View and many more.
- Website as primary communications tool, providing service information allowing our communities to 'do business' through its digital portals and to pay for services.
 - Over the last 12 months the website has seen 346k unique visitors, with a total of 2.3million page views. Further development work is planned in 2025/26.
- Social media is increasingly important so over the last 12 months the Communications Team has launched a Tiktok channel to capitalise on short form video, reaching an audience of 93k with a total of 107,169 video views.
- A Nextdoor channel has had 58,452 impressions over the last 12 months. Facebook continues to be strong the corporate page (@lancastercc) has had a total reach of 1.7million post impressions, with 134,527 video views. Instagram: a total of 117,154 post impressions and total reach of 88,47, The council currently maintains a Twitter/X account and is also on Linked-in to communicate with the business community.
- Filming enquiries – we are working closely with Creative England to showcase the district very successfully

In addition to The Bay, now on its fifth series, shows filmed in the district over the last 12 months that the Communications Team have helped to facilitate include the One

Show, Lazarus (Netflix production to be aired in 2025), 22 Kids and Counting, Four in a Bed, and a TNT Sports documentary.

Internal communications

Internal communications: Communications Team publishes a weekly newsletter with a variety of features including corporate information and news from services, and the intranet also continues to be developed. The team also supports colleagues from other services to run internal events such as the annual staff conference.

Eden Project Morecambe

During 2024-2025 the Eden Project has had to take time to work on the full business case with consultants to submit to a new government and on the establishment of match funding. The Full Business Case for Eden was submitted to Government in August 2024 and gained its approval. This led to the awarding of the full £50 million of Levelling Up Funds for the project in November 2025.

Since November the securing of funding has enabled work to progress on detailed designs with the appointment of WSP and the architects Grimshaws. The Eden team has been well aware of the need to establish itself within Morecambe and has gone through the recruitment process for a new Project Director who will start and be based in Morecambe from May 2025.

The Community Conversations have recommenced with several hundred people attending. The latest focused on the achievement of the Morecambe Bay Curriculum supported by Lancaster University and was held at the Winter Gardens in March 2025 with over 350 people attending. Meanwhile the workstreams associated with Eden have been progressing detailed work particularly transport, led by Lancashire County Council and community.

I now have a regular meeting with the Chair of Eden Trustees and we are expecting the sponsor group meetings between ourselves, Eden and Lancaster University to recommence this summer. Both key funders and MHCLG are very positive about current progress. Final designs and programme will be revealed in the summer as Eden moves into the delivery phase under Project Director John Pye. Given that we are moving towards the capital build attention will switch to ensure wider outcomes are achieved such as social value, supply chain and supporting local businesses.

Annual Housing portfolio holder report – Caroline Jackson

The past year in Housing has been a time of significant change and development in all areas. Housing officers at all levels have been challenged and stretched in what they have been asked to do. My thanks extends to all of them as they continue to grapple with new regulations, new requirements and new relationships whilst contending with everything from enthusiastic appreciation to debilitating criticism. The leadership in Housing has been stretched by its own inspiring level of ambition, so special thanks to Jo Wilkinson and all team members particularly Sharon Parkinson, Fiona McLeod, Kathy Beaton, Pete Linsley and Andrew Whittaker.

This report is of necessity a snapshot of the work being done in the area of Housing. More detailed information on HRA can be found in the budget reports to Cabinet and Full Council.

Progress with Social Housing Regulation Act

The council housing team have continued to focus on Regulatory changes in preparation for a forthcoming inspection. Their success is reflected in the increased tenant satisfaction measure scores across the board. The work with Tenant Voice has reflected rapid progress towards becoming a tenant led service. There has been continued focus on tenant engagement with the production of first scrutiny report into Repairs and Maintenance, establishment of Building Safety Resident Engagement group and updated Tenant Voice Strategy.

The Council Housing Advisory Group has met regularly to survey the five consumer standards areas and provide data scrutiny. In particular, the scrutiny of our housing stock had reached 86% of homes by Quarter 3 a good percentage but revealing the extent of problems presented by the age of our houses. Progress on updating and retrofitting homes to a higher thermal efficiency level is a priority and we made a successful Warm Homes grant funding application as part of Liverpool City Region to decarbonise 100 homes.

Repairs spend has exceeded budget in several quarters this year due especially to damp and mould concerns – reflecting a national problem as repairs services are spending around 60% more than in previous years across the country. The service has increased its efficiency in responding rapidly to issues in advance of the introduction of Awaab's Law. However, despite investment the service has been subject to a number of disrepair claims, again a national problem.

Complaints relating to repairs and to anti-social behaviour are areas of focus reflected in the TSM. The former are often linked to our outdated communication system and progress continues to introduce a comprehensive digitalised system that will allow tenants and officers to track problems efficiently. The new ASB team has been a successful resource in working with tenants to resolve issues more quickly and effectively and the analysis of both complaints and ASB issues is a useful learning point for teams Across Housing. The team working with tenants on rent collection continue to be one of the most successful in the country with income support gained for tenants of £31,000 in the first half of this year. The voids turnaround time has increased slightly to 25 days but is being reduced and should be viewed within the context of sector average standard relet times being double what ours are.

Our commitment to maintaining the importance of council housing and council housing services has been made clear in signing up as a signatory alongside over 100 other Councils to Southwark Councils 'The Future of Council Housing' report.

A recent visit from an MHCLG officer confirmed the rapid, visible progress the housing team have made over the last eighteen months and complimented the team on their dedication to creating a genuinely tenant-led service.

New social and affordable housing

We have continued work on maximising use of existing stock and available land by gaining planning permission for four units on Hastings Rd. At Alder Grove we are in the very final stages of development with residents expected to move into the highly energy efficient properties at the beginning of the new year. The previous community room is now being redeveloped to provide an additional flat.

On the Skerton site we were successful in the planning application for one hundred apartment homes and thirty-five terraced houses all to sit within HRA and the site has been cleared using Brownfield Release Funding. Currently the Mainway Green Book business case for the project is nearing completion. Homes England funding has been announced to open in the summer and we are already working with Homes England in anticipation of a bid. We have had two meetings with our MPs, Cat Smith and Lizzi Collinge to increase their appreciation of the sector and the need for funding for increasing and updating stock of council and affordable housing in the area. Work on the Coopers Field site in the Canal Quarter had temporarily halted last year but will now go ahead to provide a hundred and twenty new dwellings including both shared ownership, affordable and council housing. The Nelson Street site is now proceeding towards development by a registered provider, which will also provide further affordable housing.

Housing Standards, Empty Homes and refugee accommodation

In the area of Housing Standards the Selective Landlord Licensing process came to a conclusion without a recommendation to proceed due to lack of evidence. However, the process improved relationships with landlords and the Landlords Forum is now supporting better communication on landlord responsibilities including preparing for the Renters Rights Act introduction later this year. The Housing Taskforce has looked particularly at supporting families and tenants needing low-cost rental accommodation. Empty homes has also been an important issue and the Empty Homes strategy and action plan has been renewed this year.

A new Homes Strategy is required for the new Local Plan and this is commencing with a Condition Survey of private housing stock which will allow us to work on the issue of HMO numbers and gaining funding for further retrofitting and improvement work.

The Green skills group continues to meet involving local construction companies and training organisations to work together to improve the availability of skilled workforce in this area.

Work on community-led housing with not for profit organisations is in progress with support for Lapwing housing which has now successfully acquired a property and for the Senior Co-Housing scheme.

Lancaster continues effective support for refugees and asylum seekers housed by SERCO or within the private or affordable housing. County council funding is administered by us through third sector organisations ensures drop ins can provide practical and legal support and initial language learning. A successful Local Authority Housing Fund application secured grant funding to purchase 4 properties to support temporary accommodation reduction and resettlement housing. We are expecting a further small number of Afghan families to come to Lancaster as a result of government moves to end hotel accommodation.

Homelessness/temporary accommodation

The increasing number of Section 21 evictions over the previous year led to a steep increase in temporary accommodation costs similar to that experienced in authorities across the country. However, this year has seen a budget saving of around £300,00 against our B+B budget due to better management of homeless households, quicker turn round in acquiring suitable rental properties and using some of our own empty properties. We are using hotel accommodation as little as possible and for short term needs, though problems with finding suitable larger family accommodation continue. Staff recruitment has been very difficult and the service has operated with three or more vacancies across the year putting pressure particularly on the speed with which homelessness cases could be assessed. Two recently recruited new members of staff to support administration and team leadership are beginning to turn this round. All credit to Sharon Parkinson who despite a broken collarbone was back to work in days rather than weeks.

The Homelessness Strategy was reviewed last year and the action plan continues to focus on improving prevention by work with partners in health and advice services. The Allocations Policy was reviewed and approved by Cabinet. Work on improving the Choice Based Lettings procedures has increased digitalisation to remove paper-based procedures and the Housing List has been completely renewed.

The Homelessness Advisory Group and Forum have recommenced meetings with particular reference to supporting street homeless. Numbers have slowly increased to between ten and fifteen over the last two years. Calico operates an experienced support service for us, but we are seeking further suitable accommodation and opportunity to put Housing First in place.

Taking the Lead in the Housing sector

The HIA continues to be an outstanding service recognised across Lancashire for its efficiency and independent approach to accessing funding to keep people living independently in their homes. This year HIA have developed a dedicated in-house Occupational Therapy service which has very much improved time taken to initiate improvements and has delivered around £2.4m in Disabled Facility Grants in residents' homes.

Alder Grove has benefited from using modern methods construction to increase the speed and thermal efficiency through off-site construction. It has also provided an opportunity for local firms to be involved in this as the first building in the north of England to be constructed in this way.

We are happy to report residents from Mellishaw Park have now all moved back on site and are impressed with the new accommodation they helped to design.

Overall, the previous year has been highly successful in all areas. Where difficulties are evident it is clear that data is available, scrutiny is applied, and steps are being taken to remedy deficiencies. Budgets are very tight and the need to manage costs is appreciated throughout the service. Housing is a service area we are rightly proud of as an authority and congratulations go to everyone who works within it.

ANNUAL REPORT – COMMUNITIES, PARTNERSHIPS and HEALTH and WELLBEING PORTFOLIO

Councillor Peter Jackson

This is wide ranging and varied portfolio with many strands of activity but strongly focussed on partnership working for the good of our communities. I will report under several headings, but much of the work done under those headings interlinks as we develop and facilitate partnership working.

1. SALT AYRE LEISURE CENTRE

Members will know that it has been a difficult year for SALC. Early in the year senior members of staff at the centre left the council's employ for disciplinary reasons. This both left weaknesses in centre management and challenges around staff morale.

A new membership experience manager is now in place and indications from the final quarter of the year are positive, with Gym membership numbers above the level of the previous year at 3452 (3409). Here are a few of the many positive comments in our feedback.

"The centre is truly a community hub. The whole ethos is one of diversity, accommodating the needs of all groups"

"Staff friendly and welcoming. Class availability suits my needs. The centre is always clean"

"Great classes always happy staff and great instructors. Spa is great as well"

"Everything superb from staff to facilities. I swim often and feel welcome as soon as I walk in the door. Excellent standards. Even café food fantastic"

Marketing and outreach have improved. Two "Les Mills" (a workout programme) intro events were well received (90% excellent in feedback) resulting in increased class attendances and SALC being awarded Les Mills "Club of the Month".

Outreach at the International Women's Day event in Williamson Park was successful, and SALC's profile on Instagram is growing rapidly.

The Salt Ayre Cycling Association has complained long and hard about the condition of the road cycling circuit, but thanks to hard work by the public realm teams cleaning the surface and clearing some trees their feedback is also now very positive. A new service level agreement with SACA will soon be in place. The same process with the athletics facilities and the athletics club is getting underway.

This fourth quarter also saw the resolution of our claim for a VAT refund, with a payment of over £350,000 being received – thanks finance team!!

Centre income is below target but above previous year, and as we continue to fill vacancies for swimming teachers, spa therapists and other front-line staff, the targets set for the coming year should be achievable.

Work to bring the data centre to Salt Ayre is ongoing, physical work can start as soon as the legal framework is resolved. Medium term, heat from the data centre will deliver cost savings, and plans are also in formation to increase renewable generation and add battery storage. The potential for savings on energy costs could play a big part in eliminating SALC's financial deficit.

It is important not to look only at the financial performance of Salt Ayre. SALC works with the NHS on healthy weight initiatives, offers facilities and classes to people with disabilities, and

makes a real difference to the overall health and wellbeing of our district. We cannot quantify the social value of the centre in money, but it is very real.

2. LANCASTER DISTRICT STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

The partnership was signed on August 19th. The founding partners are Council, Lancaster University, University of Cumbria, Lancaster and Morecambe College, Lancaster District Chamber of Commerce, UHMBT, Lancaster District CVS, Lancaster District Arts Partnership. It provides a strategic opportunity for partners to consider opportunities for collaborations in several areas.

LDSP meets quarterly, discussions have included how to achieve the targets in our Local Area Energy Plan and Climate and Nature Strategy, the development of community conversation tools through a project at Lancaster University and strengthening the Arts and Culture infrastructure and visibility of our district. This partnership is at an early stage, member organisations are developing the links and ideas which will produce tangible results.

3. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Community Connectors team is now working with our Strategic Policy and partnerships team led by Daniel Clarke. They have provided very detailed information on their work this year which I am happy to provide in full on request from members. For this report, here are the edited highlights.

Holiday Activity Fund this year provided 15,288 places to 3655 children at a cost of £441k

Household Support Fund. Our customer services team deliver this funding, which is provided by Government, over £1 million has been distributed, 2196 applications were received, 1328 were awarded. Our wonderful network of food charities was supported with £288k of funding, reaching 4631 households. Support is also given for utilities, food, housing costs, white goods and flooring.

In addition, applicants are referred at their choice to Citizens Advice who offer help with debt management and benefits advice.

The communities team works with our Food Justice Partnership to support our food banks and clubs. Main achievements from this year are the establishment, with community partners, of the Carnforth Food Club. Support for Egg Cup in a financial crisis, a newly announced restructuring of Egg Cup is expected to deliver sustainability. The Food Justice Partnership is in the process of becoming a charity.

Jamie Murphy from our team chairs the Food Futures partnership, which promotes community growing projects. This partnership holds a Food Places silver award, and this coming year will be campaigning to win gold!

Other projects are many – Refugee Cricket project, Lancaster Young Peoples Foundation, participating in distribution of charity funding from the Walney Island Fund, Pots of Possibility and the Lancaster Community Fund.

Supporting Communities together and the Festival of Culture.

4. UKSPF and REPF

I lead Cabinet's decision making on UKSPF and REPF funding. It is a challenge to allocate funding when demand so far outstrips supply. In the past year £3.6 million of UKSPF money was distributed and spent, and a further £391k of REPF (rural) funding also spent. Too many great projects to mention, but to take you to the northern tip of our district for a moment, the Fraser Hall in Cowan

Bridge used a REPF grant of £24,000 to install solar PV on the roof, with battery storage and a remote-control system, as well as improving its kitchen facilities. The result is an improved facility for the village and a more sustainable financial model going forward.

Funding for this year is reduced, the UKSPF element is already allocated, the REPF process is not yet underway.

5. COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP

I took over as chair of the CSP in August 2025. The partnership to which Police, Fire and Rescue, Education, Health, BID, Housing, Youth Offending Team, County representatives and many others are invited, meets quarterly. It receives detailed reports from Police Analysts about offending in our district, feedback from Partners about specific events, and discusses emerging threats. Partnership priorities are Anti-Social behaviour, Domestic Violence. It also liaises with the office of the Police and Crime Commissioner and applies for funding when the commissioner makes money available for various initiatives. A current concern is the dangerous use of ebikes and escooters in our pedestrianised spaces, and a consultation on extending our Public Space Protection orders to cover this issue will be launched soon.

A Safe and Secure meeting in November brought together Lancaster City Centre stakeholders to address issues of rough sleeping, begging, ASB, street drinking and shoplifting. A successful event leading to effective actions by partners.

6. LANCASTER HEALTH AND WELLBEING PARTNERSHIP

This partnership, chaired by Yak Patel of Lancaster CVS, involves Strategic Health leads, GP surgeries and our Integrated Care Communities, also representatives of County Council services, Housing, Active Lancashire and Citizens Advice. Priorities identified are Adult Mental Health, Suicide Prevention, Early intervention with Children and young people in priority wards and Community resilience. A recent highlight is the “Help is Close” mental health campaign developed by Sarah Baines of the Lancaster ICC. There is currently funding for a smoking cessation project, and an early intervention campaign in relation to Adult Social Care. Excellent cross disciplinary work at grassroots level between health and housing partners is also noteworthy.

7. YORKSHIRE DALES NATIONAL PARK

I represent Council on the Park Authority and serve on its Finance and Resources Committee. Despite reduced funding from a primarily urban focussed government, the park continues to deliver initiatives in improving access for less physically able users such as “Miles without Stiles” and Multiuser routes, it operates visitor centres and car parks and currently its farm advisors distribute funding under the FIPL (Farming in Protected Landscapes) scheme. It is the planning authority for the park area. As with all local authorities, the park is being asked to do more, especially around biodiversity and access in this case, but with less finance from Government.

8. FRONTIERLAND PROJECT BOARD

I chair this board with effect from November 24. The process of developing a project with possible developer partners is ongoing based on the established council development priorities for the site. Of course, this is commercially sensitive and confidential.

9. PUBLIC FUNERALS & COMMUNITY HEALTH

Perhaps I could have chosen to end on a more cheerful note. Our Community Health Manager, Mark Woodhead, takes referrals from the Coroner, the RLI, Residential Homes and next of kin, where a death occurs, and a public funeral may be needed. In 15 of the 43 enquiries next of kin were found and no public funeral occurred. 28 public funerals were delivered, 10 wholly at our cost, and we are recovering costs from the deceased's estate where possible.

The Community Health element of this role involves early intervention to help vulnerable households with situations, often around waste and hoarding, which have got on top of the residents. Council is also often the first point of contact where more difficult vulnerabilities are found, and multi-agency work is initiated to support and safeguard the most vulnerable residents or households.

In conclusion

The work I have been describing has brought me into contact with many council officers. They have invariably been helpful and responsive to my questions, and I am consistently impressed by their professionalism, skills and good humour. I also come into regular contact with our voluntary sector, and members will know that we are blessed with many determined and capable workers running our brilliant charities and voluntary organisations. I believe our council's commitment to partnering with the VCSFE sector as well as all other stakeholders in our district is delivering real benefits for our residents.

Annual Report 2024/25

Gina Dowding - Cabinet Member for Climate Action

1. Introduction

I would like to put on record my thanks to our very small and committed climate team who have worked extremely hard to achieve another encouraging year of progress regarding the City Council's journey to net zero, and its wider work to mitigate and adapt to the challenges that are presented by climate breakdown.

2. Climate Emergency Review of the Local Plan

One of the highlights of the year has been the long-anticipated adoption of the Climate Emergency Review of the Local Plan at January's Council Meeting. Members will recall the significant delays in reaching the adoption stage, predominantly caused by the Planning Inspectorate's stance regarding energy efficiency standards. Thankfully, after a sustained period of challenge by our Officers and Members, our proposed policies have survived and are now in force and being used to determine planning applications within the district. This raises the bar in terms of appropriate challenge to the development industry and will help deliver truly sustainable buildings that provide a higher quality of life for residents.

In June 2024 the City Council won the Net Zero Category at the prestigious Local Government Chronicle Awards. The judges noted:

"Lancaster City Council's (LCC's) Climate Emergency Local Plan Review (CELPR) was the first of its kind in the country to partially review a Local Plan focusing purely on reassessing planning policies in terms of addressing climate adaption and mitigation. It's road towards adoption has not been straightforward with central government's inconsistency of interpretation of national guidance resulting in LCC having to be inventive in its engagement methods and applying a continued and persistent level of tenacity and determination not commonly seen in the plan making process."

Further recognition of the progress and contribution that the Council is making on climate matters is evident in the nominations for Municipal Journal (MJ) Awards 2025. The Council has been shortlisted in the 'Leadership in responding to the climate emergency' category, and also in the 'Rising Star' category for the work of Susanna dart, the Council's Principal Climate Policy Officer.

3. Influencing National Policy

The adoption of the CELPR not only set a benchmark for all new development in the district, but our officers are still influencing national policy. A change of national focus from carbon reduction, towards energy use intensity (which requires that houses are constructed to require less energy to run) is considered necessary. The benefits of this alternative approach is that it would not only alleviate some of the pressures surrounding limited grid capacity, but would also simultaneously lead to a reduction in carbon emissions and significantly reduced energy running costs for our residents. In November 2024 our officers were invited by Lord Ravensdale to discuss this issue in the House of Lords, which illustrates the high standing that this Council has acquired on climate matters.

4. Local Area Energy Plan

In October 2024 the Cabinet approved the Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP), which establishes a vision for decarbonising the district by 2040 (i.e. beyond the City Council's own 2030 target). The LAEP, which has been produced with Energy Systems Catapult and utilised UK Shared Prosperity Funding, sets out the scale of investment (from all parties) that is necessary to deliver a net zero transition whilst also benefitting the local economy. It identifies the scale of domestic fabric upgrades (retrofitting) that will be required; the challenges around the installation of low carbon heating via heat pumps; the potential for the increased rollout of electric vehicle charging points; greater opportunities for generating renewable energy locally from solar PV and onshore wind; and the importance of investment in the electricity network to ensure that there is sufficient capacity for the rapid growth of low carbon technologies.

The process was intensive and involved key stakeholders across the energy sector. Ongoing support and collaboration will be necessary as the LAEP moves towards the implementation stages.

5. Climate and Nature Strategy

A new local Climate and Nature Strategy (CaNS), funded by UK Shared Prosperity Funding to support the work of our officers, is due to be published shortly. The CaNS aims to address the climate and ecological emergencies and forge a more resilient future for our district with overarching document will set out our roadmap, case studies and actions to support the district in ensuring a liveable and vibrant future for people and the planet. The team have held many stakeholder sessions including with the public, and re-engaging with the people's jury, in the process to date.

The CaNS will bring together many of the current action plans that exist across the district within the public sector, private and not-for-profit sectors and other partners to create a joined-up strategy to aid cooperation across multiple sectors, reaching beyond the council to ensure we can holistically affect change together. There will be more to share with Members, stakeholders and our residents regarding the CaNS very soon.

6. Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme

In Spring 2024 the Council learned that it has again been successful in bidding for funding to decarbonise three more council-owned sites, namely Williamson Park, The Storey and CityLab.

The fund, issued by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and delivered by Salix Finance, aims to support public sector facilities in reducing carbon impacts and, longer term, reduce running costs. More efficient air source heat pumps are proposed to replace gas boilers, whilst new systems to monitor, control and optimise energy consumption are also proposed. At The Storey, much-needed secondary glazing and upgraded insulation also forms part of the package of measures.

The project team is continuing to make arrangements for the submission of the necessary permissions and heritage consents. Whilst there can be no guarantee that permission will be granted, and noting the need for the council to provide match funding, the imperative to safeguard the future of these buildings and reduce our long term operational costs are notable considerations in the decision-making process.

7. Renewable Energy Projects

In the last 12 months the Council was successful in obtaining planning permission for the construction of a solar farm and associated infrastructure at Burrow Beck, Scotforth. At the time of compiling this report, a second application to vary some of the approved planning conditions is due to be considered by the Planning Regulatory Committee.

The Team have also secured Prior Approval (consent) for the installation of roof-mounted solar panels at 1 Southgate, White Lund (also known as the Gateway Building). Both schemes are expected to be delivered during the next 12 months.

8. Local Sustainable Transport

Our officers have more recently been invited to be involved in collaboration with colleagues at the County Council (i.e. the transport authority) regarding the potential for bus-related improvements around the congested Lancaster City Centre gyratory system. It is hoped that outcomes from these sessions will begin to deliver the suite of transport improvements that the local highway authority are required to deliver as part of the Bay Gateway Development Consent Order (i.e. the permission for the road), and build on some of the previous work that both Councils had taken forward on the City Centre Movement Strategy.

9. Climate solutions focussed businesses

I have represented the Council at a couple of inspiring events organised by some of our burgeoning micro, small and medium-sized businesses operating in the climate solutions sector in this district. Most recently the ElecTech (Electronics Technology) Innovation Cluster Annual event demonstrated the success of this dynamic sector (involved in the development, manufacturing, repair and servicing of electronic and electrical hardware crucial for modern technology) in economic impact and job creation in our district.

10. Looking Ahead

At the end of this year, the Council's Cabinet will receive a report setting out progress in reaching the net zero target (for the Council's own emissions) by 2030. This will become an annual report for Cabinet and will be prepared up until and including December 2030.

A number of the projects listed in this year's Annual Report are entering critical stages, particularly those that require physical works and it will be a challenging year of delivery. I am heartened by the willingness of all of the Council's services to engage in the learning and good practice necessary for climate mitigation and adaptation and in the sustained progress made by the Council led by the climate team. This, together with the evidenced eagerness of residents, businesses and other organisations to assist in the urgent need to reduce our dependency on fossil fuels and in the recovery of nature offers much encouragement.

Corporate Services portfolio – Annual Report April 2024

Cllr Sally Maddocks

My report will cover both Cllr Wood's time as Portfolio Holder from May 2024 to November 2024 and mine from November 2024 to April 2025.

My focus is, and always has been, the residents and businesses of the Lancaster District, our distinct heritage and our unique natural environment. I wish to address the issues we all face in this perpetually changing era standing together with my fellow councillors, staff, outside agencies, residents and businesses. I am guided by stand by our council values of a kind and considerate council and by the Nolan Principles of Public Life.

I would like to thank all the staff and Members of Lancaster City Council who have worked hard to improve our District under unprecedented trying circumstances. You have all helped me in your own fields of expertise to understand my portfolio more quickly than I had anticipated, so thank you for me too.

I would like to thank Cllr Wood for his work in areas of this portfolio and in particular, I am grateful for his professional knowledge on the Fair Work Charter which will be one of the key parts of the emerging economic strategy.

My portfolio has responsibility for:

- Strategic Enforcement
- Facilities Management (Operational),
- Legal Services,
- Governance
- Procurement
- Strategic Licensing
- Democratic Services (Democratic Support, Civic, Mayoral & Elections),
- Customer and Advice Services,
- Fair Work Charter,
- Equalities and Diversity
- Animal Licencing and welfare
- Complaints – Lead Member for Complaints (now a statutory role)
- Human Resources
- Governance and Artificial Intelligence
- Member Development
- Strategic overview of disability provision

Strategic Enforcement

This is a new role developed in response to the public repeatedly emphasising the importance of a clean and green District with a backdrop of a low number of actual penalty notices, fines for fly tipping, dog fouling along with the many statutory functions of Environmental Health, Licensing and Planning.

This piece of work has now started with the development of a Corporate Enforcement Strategy – this will have been presented to Cabinet by the time this comes to Council. The strategy sets out a number of principles and actions that will be standard in all our approaches to enforcement so that residents and businesses know what to expect from us and why, when and how action will be taken.

There is much potential in developing our district visitor offer and creating more jobs and wealth within the district . the benefits of a clean and green environment are beneficial to health and wellbeing . So, on the surface , this priority seems simple but the benefits it will bring are manifold and most importantly of all , our residents and businesses think it is of prime importance.

A cross service working group of officers and members will be meeting this month toto explore different approaches to enforcing against people who are making our district both dirty and disappointing to visitors.

It is not an easy time to take cases to court due to the significant backlog of cases and the complexities of organising court rotas. But this should not stop us taking legal action if it is in the public interest and it is reasonable to think that we will get the necessary outcome.

Facilities Management (Operational)

There has been a significant improvement in cleanliness at Lancaster Bus Station due to active contract management. We have had significant progress with stakeholder engagement; there is now established a quarterly stakeholder meeting which has improved communication and general management, and helped deliver improved security and staff safety, reduced ASB. We have new bus-bay signage, clarity around Health and Safety and Maintenance reporting, reduced downtime for automatic bus-bay doors and resurfacing of the taxi rank surface, that was managed in conjunction with Licencing to reduce disruption , although lessons were learnt for next time

We improved our working environment considerably - a programme of refit and renovation works have been completed across corporate and commercial properties including G29 and G5 at Lancaster Town Hall and CityLab Reception.

Facilities Management were a key stakeholder in the delivery of the new White Lund Depot office building, with a lead role fitting out the kitchen, office and meeting room spaces. (note from Portfolio Holder – They are gorgeous)

Facilities Management processes and procedures developed to underpin operations and help develop and instil a 'plan, do, check, act' culture within the service. FM policy/operational strategy is now being developed and will be delivered in 25/26.

Our Facilities Manager is in the final year of Facilities & Built Asset Management Degree Apprentice / Certified Institute of Workplace and Facilities Management (IWFM) qualification. Our Facilities Supervisor has started IWFM level 4 apprentice programme.

Governance and AI

This is a facet of my portfolio that I am yet to explore as I have only just been given responsibility for this

Legal Services

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 continue to be involved with projects undertaken by officers in all services in the Council and have played key roles in procurement, contract drafting and negotiation as well as providing advice on strategy, risk and statutory compliance.

Most notably officers have been heavily involved with getting services prepared for the Procurement Act 2023 and the substantial changes this piece of legislation has brought and will bring. This has been a considerable undertaking.

The Procurement Act 2023 is now live and we have made changes to the procurement process, templates and guidance.

The Contract Procedure Rules have also been updated to reflect the new procurement requirements, adopted by Audit Committee in January, and incorporated into the Council's Constitution.

Next steps to include adoption by Cabinet of a revised Procurement Strategy which must have regard to the National Procurement Policy Statement which sets out the Government's strategic priorities for public procurement and how public procurement can support delivery of the Government's priorities of growth , reducing anti social behaviour and developing a cleaner energy supply

The day-to-day legal work incorporating enforcement, 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 information governance functions.

Strategic Licensing

The annual report relating to Taxi/PH matters was reported to Licensing Committee March 2025 Agenda for Licensing Committee

Currently there are 895 active Taxi/PH related licences in the District, the Licensing service are responsible for the administration, compliance and enforcement associated within the relevant licensing regime and legislation for each one of those licences.

The digitalisation of the Licensing Service is ongoing. There has been a 100% channel shift, all Taxi/PH applications and submission of documents are now completed online. Monthly digital drop-in sessions are being held to support licence holders through the renewal process. Feedback from the trade is overall very positive. Taxi/PH related licences were prioritised as part of the digitalisation project, next step is to bring Licensing Act (Premises/personal/TEN) applications online and automate annual fee payments/reminders.

Taxi and Private Hire Liaison Group has a proactive and engaged membership, including Officers, elected members and trade representatives. There is an application process to join the Liaison Group and an intervention available from the Portfolio Holder, should there be any conflict.

Licensing Fees were reviewed in 2024 and the review for the coming financial year ongoing, new fees will be in place by the end of April 2025.

We are in the process of an updated Statement of Licensing Policy – Licensing Act (5-year statutory policy) sets out expectation of applicants for premises/personal and temporary event notices.

Licensing Committee brought in a change to the constitution, whereby Licensing applications that have agreed additional conditions are agreed at an Officer level, thus saving Officer, member and applicant time.

Temporary Licences were introduced by the Licencing Committee and clear Guidance for Officers/Service Users was given on when a temporary PH/HC/Dual licence will be granted.

There were Compliance Checks on Private Hire Operators following amendments to licence conditions and results reported to Licensing Committee.

The Pavement Licence Policy was updated to reflect permanent regime, including new fee structure which accurately reflect administration and monitoring of applicants and licence holders.

Licensing Committee made updates to the taxi policy of the prescribed roof-signs becoming optional, as this had become a source of frustration to the trade and a distraction for us all.

There was a premises update and there are 628 currently active. including bars/restaurants, late night refreshment premises and entertainment spaces. Issued 275 temporary event notices and 170 personal licences.

Accessibility/Availability of wheelchair vehicles – Following a mystery shopping exercise and audit of mandatory wheelchair accessible vehicles , Members made changes to Public Hire Operator conditions making it clear that for every 10 vehicles for hire there must be one Wheelchair accessible vehicle

Democratic Support, Civic , Elections and Councillor Development

Livestreaming of Council meetings continues and Cabinet meetings are now also livestreamed.

A drop in session for Councillors to assist with using laptops and IT was held in March and Council Business Committee are working on the development of a Councillor Development Strategy to set out the aims and topics to be covered in training and development for the 2025/26 year. This will include Corporate Plan work to explore the links between the staff's work plans, performance management and the Corporate Plan

Officers supported a cross party working group created by Council to look at the issue of Local Government Reorganisation. The group met several times to agree the interim letter to the Minister in March and will continue to meet as the process moves forward to the formal submission to Government later this year.

Support was ongoing for the activities of both Overview and Scrutiny bodies and is covered in the Overview and Scrutiny report elsewhere on this agenda.

A pre-scrutiny protocol has been developed and agreed by Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny in April 2025.

One of the civic highlights of the year was a Royal visit. On 17 December, we welcomed His Royal Highness Prince Richard, Duke of Gloucester, to Lancaster, as part of the rededication of our war memorial 100 years after it was first unveiled for remembrance and honour for those who served.

Staff from across the council helped to ensure that the event ran smoothly as The Duke visited Lancaster City Museum and the Town Hall and Ashton Hall.

On Sunday 3 March a Covid day of reflection was held to remember the people who died during the pandemic.

The City Council took over organisation of the Holocaust Memorial event in the Garden of Remembrance on 30 January 2025, which was well attended.

The civic events ran alongside a programme of Mayoral events which the Mayor will report on in her annual report to Council

Two major elections were successfully delivered in 2024. The Police and Crime Commissioner election took place in May, and the UK Parliamentary General Election took place in July. The PCC election was a scheduled election that was well planned for, but the UKPGE was called at very short notice and much earlier in the year than was anticipated. It was a test of the new constituency boundary arrangements that served to provide some logistical and staffing challenges, especially in the areas taken on in Cumbria. In total, over 1,200 job roles were filled across the two elections.

The Register of Electors was revised and republished in December 2024 after a canvass of all properties in the district. Following a national data matching exercise and an initial write out, a team of 25 canvassers then visited all properties who had not engaged with us. Over 14,000 properties had failed to respond at the point when canvassers hit doorsteps.

May 2025 sees the delivery of elections for Lancashire County Council. Mark Davies, our Chief Executive, is appointed a Deputy Returning Officer to deliver the election on behalf of Mark Wynne, the Chief Executive and Returning Officer at Lancashire County Council.

The Election Manager has been elected Deputy Chair of the Association of Electoral Administrators. This is a national body representing election professionals in the UK that has over 2000 members. After a year as Deputy Chair, Lisa will become Chair of the Association in 2026, then Immediate Past Chair in 2027.

Customer Services

In April 2024 we merged the central corporate and Council Housing Customer Services teams and embarked on a cross-training programme to upskill our staff and thus increase the performance of our service. Since the merger we have answered 8% more calls and the wait time has decreased by 80 seconds.

Greater flexibility created by this merge has allowed us to increase the opening times of both Town Halls to 9:00-16:30 daily.

We have supported with another successful year of Garden Waste Subscriptions. To date 31st March over 20,000 subscriptions have been received.

We invested more in our resilience against incidents of customer facing conflict. We adopted a new reporting process, arranged conflict handling training for our staff and

made informed adjustments to our risk assessments. This will now be a facet of the corporate complaints policy.

Our Fit For The Future digitalisation programme continues to deliver 80% channel shift.

Complaints.

The Portfolio Holder is Lead member for Complaints , which is a statutory position and has a relationship with the Ombudsman in terms of reporting of the annual self assessment .

In March 2025 we rolled out a new Complaints process across the whole authority via the Granicus platform. This centralised process will track complaint handling times and improve consistency.

We delivered training sessions throughout February and March to introduce staff to the new process. CS staff continue to provide daily support.

Our Complaints Sharepoint page has been updated with a variety of revised material on our policy and best practice.

The new process also provides greater scope for quality control. CS have been actively involved in providing feedback on customer letters.

The Portfolio holder meets with the Chief Officer for complaints once a quarter to review the trends and numbers. It is a work in progress but it is pleasing to see that each complaint is seen as an opportunity for the Council to learn and improve.

Equalities and Diversity and Disability

An Equalities and Diversity strategy is to be launched soon following a desktop scoping exercise and staff co-creation

Disability passports are widely in use

We have refreshed the Equality strategy. An engagement plan is currently being finalised to include linked workstreams to review current practices and areas for improvement.

We are working with the disability champion and portfolio holder on improving life for elected members who are disabled

We are working with licencing committee and taxi liaison group to develop improved taxi provision for disabled people

Animal Licensing and Welfare

This year the Animal Welfare Inspectors have dealt with a slight decrease in the number of complaints received overall, however there have been far more complex cases which are always time consuming, gathering evidence.

	2023/24	2024/25
Fouling	81	93
Dog attacks	92	110
Strays	227	236
Dog Welfare	189	171
Animal Welfare	32	18

The issue around dogs continues to be a sensitive one and this was best highlighted in a case that involved the kennelling and eventual rehoming of a litter of 11 puppies and 4 dogs from a vulnerable individual.

With the service no longer able to fund a dedicated Enforcement Officer there is limited opportunity to carry out fouling surveillance, which is a frustration to the team and the public. **See Enforcement Above**

Following specific complaints from Nether Kellet and Slyne with Hest Parish Council's, Caton Ward Councillor's and "Friends of Sunny Slopes", we have been working with them to highlight fouling issues and to highlight potential offenders.

A lot of the work around animal welfare would traditionally have been picked up by RSPCA, but since Covid their charitable donations have reduced significantly, meaning they have less officers available to deal with cases.

LCC work very closely with RSPCA and this year they have been one of only two LA's that have been invited to pilot a Local Operational Agreement, to establish a framework for collaboration and cooperation in matters related to animal welfare within our District. This will enable us to have access to more resources (legal expertise, accommodation and veterinary funding) from the RSPCA in recognition of the work we are currently doing in partnership with them.

As appointed Inspectors under the Animal Welfare Act the Animal Welfare Inspectors have the power to suspend a licence or revoke a licence which can be appealed to a first-tier tribunal and not Licensing Committee. It continues to be a disappointment that many businesses are operating (particularly breeding) without a licence, but the team have limited capacity to deal with these cases, relying on strong evidence from complainants to justify further investigation.

This year there have been 4 suspensions resulting in 2 revocations and 3 licence applications refused, it has also included full inspections or interim inspections for the following licences:

Selling animals as pets	5
Boarding for cats and dogs (kennels or home boarding)	38

Hiring Out Horses	4
Dog breeding	14
Keeping animals for exhibition	2
Dangerous wild animals	0
Zoo Licence	1

Human Resources

A new approach has been launched for the staff survey and focus groups underway

The Staff engagement event has been newly refreshed – Connecting Colleagues

There is a new recording system for the annual conversation and a relaunch of the Annual Conversation emphasising the importance of it within the delivery of the corporate plan and thereby improving life in our district.

There is continued investment in leadership and development and ILM training underway

Coaching training has started and a formal qualifications course is due to start

Aspiring leaders programme is now offering a college programme, DCN Network, Tri-Sector challenge as upcoming development opportunities

There is a new service planning approach to re-inforce the link between staff , Service and Corporate Plan

There is a new Recruitment Strategy and start of a piece of work on vacancies.

Wellbeing Strategy continues to be implemented and is proving to be an important part of retaining good staff.

From 01 April 2024-31 March 2025

- 170 Leavers (Inc Casuals)
- 4,378.86 total days lost due to sickness
- 33 employees referred to physio
- 13 employees referred to in person counselling

Casework

April 2024 – March 2025

66 Long-term sickness cases

29 Disciplinary Investigations

10 Grievances

14 Flexible working requests

2 Performance management cases

6 Probation cases

Fair Work Charter (moving to Regeneration)

Second version has been developed focussing on the wider benefits of the Charter such as well being.

A FWC steering group to be established, facilitated in the Regeneration Service, to complement the emerging and bespoke Economic Strategy. Members to include Cllr Wood because of his expertise.

Annual Report. Environment and Place. 9th April 2025.

I want to say first something that's often said last. Thank you to all the staff for all the work you do, often showing dedication above and beyond. The staff who are out on the front line in the most difficult circumstances. Maybe clearing things like fly tips and litter, with all the horrible things they sometimes must deal with. Lots of examples from the past, like the gas explosion in Heysham a few years ago. There's the more recent example of the fire at Supa Skips. The one that impressed me this year was the minute- by-minute email commentary of Kirsty Banks-Lyon as the last big storm was breaking over us. Great communications.

We all know the Environment Portfolio is big, but for anyone who takes this job the first real surprise is the diversity of it. My able predecessor did warn me about this but its only on first contact that the reality hits home. I mention Councillor Ainscough to give her credit and not share blame. I have continued every initiative that she put in motion because all of them have merit.

The department impinges on every aspect of every resident's life, both in the house and outside it.

If you're dealing with refuse, we have rules, if your neighbour keeps lighting fires when your washings out, you send us a message. If you find a wasps nest, the same. Fancy a walk in the park? Our staff make that possible.

Don't feel well after eating out? You might need us.

I haven't even got to bins, litter, fly tips, recycling and checking on the ships at Heysham. And there's plenty more.

So, what has the department achieved this year?

Our green spaces are a primary resource for our residents. Their condition is a vital indicator of how well our Public Realm team are performing. A huge amount of work has been carried out in these places, including the following:

Greaves Park, Ryelands Park, Rylands Estate, Scotch Quarry, Regents Park, Miss Whalley's Field, Storey Gardens, The Roods, Winchester Field and Nature Area, Happy Mount Park, Bay Cottage, Lune Bank Gardens, Palatine, Sycamore Play Park, Green Ayre, Barley Cop Woods.

This is far from the complete list but just a tiny fraction of the total list of Green Spaces where work has taken place.

Our green spaces have benefited from section 106 funding, which is levied on developers to mitigate the impact of new developments on local infrastructure and community services.

This is the list of S106 funding secured since April 2024

- Lucy Brook – **£35,000**
- St Georges Quay - **£20,000**
- Bondgate Dolphinholme - **£89,397.75**
- Oakmere Development - **£10,708.16**
- Middleton Playing Fields - **£55,609.50**
- Middleton Pump Track - **£14,780.00**
- Total** **£225,000**

Lancaster has five Green Flag Parks. **In Morecambe we have Happy Mount Park, Regent Park, and Torrisholme Cemetery, and in Lancaster, Williamson Park and Ryelands Park.** Green Flags are not awarded without meeting strict criteria, and constant work is involved to maintain them.

But for me Alexandra Park in the West End of Morecambe is the current crown jewel. Everyone should go and see it. It looks fabulous.

Tennis Court Funding through the LTA

Working in partnership with LTA we have secured funding to refurbish two tennis venues to a total of over £79,000 helping ensure that quality facilities are available for the local community. The venues being renovated are: 3 courts at Palatine Recreation Ground and 1 court at Happy Mount Park. We have committed to work with the LTA to deliver a range of activity across the park sites. This will include weekly organised free park tennis sessions for all ages, playing for all levels and experience, and where equipment is provided, meaning that people will not need someone to play with or their own racket. Local Tennis Leagues will also provide friendly, sociable opportunities to get active through local competition. Courts will open around April/May 2025 to include gated access and online booking system.

The new White Lund Depot is built and working. We should all get an understanding of the range of tasks Environment undertakes. I encourage every Councillor to book a tour.

GWS. Delivering the requirements of the national waste strategy is the priority for our waste and recycling teams both here and in every Council. Final proposals will be brought forward in due course.

A successful trial of HVO fuel has been done. This fuel is made from vegetable oil rather than mineral oil. This will cost an extra £155,000 p.a. if we use it. Important to note that it doesn't just reduce Co2 emissions by around 85%, it also reduces particulate emissions by around 50%. It's my view that with these vehicles constantly in use all over our area, we have a duty of care to our residents to use the new fuel. I hope others agree.

The AQAP was approved by Defra in December 2024. If we're going to have a plan of this sort, we shouldn't be using ordinary diesel in our vehicles.

But there is a proviso here. A very recent BBC investigation alleges that much HVO is not made from waste vegetable oil but virgin palm oil, which causes deforestation. We need to know the truth before making the switch.

The new 26 tonne vehicles will have electric bin lifts and solar panels on the roof. This will save fuel, further reduce emissions and noise pollution.

The 12 tonne food waste vehicles have integrated bin lifts because electric operation isn't an option now.

The bin sensor technology is now installed in most litter bins. This is reducing mileage substantially because the bins can be checked remotely.

We've dealt with 3,127 fly tip reports with two teams covering the whole of the Lancaster City District of 567 sq. km. But these teams are often given other duties as well.

The amalgamation of Lancashire County's Love Clean Streets reporting software with Lancaster's Granicus reporting software is moving along. I hope that it will be fit for a trial in about a month to six weeks from now.

I anticipate an increase in the number of reports of all types that we will have to deal with in future because the newly integrated reporting software will be much easier to use.

We've dealt with 126 graffiti incidents.

3 asbestos incidents.

2774 pest control incidents.

We've deployed an electric Addex street vacuum in Lancaster in the last few weeks. It's a big improvement.

I want another of these machines for Morecambe and negotiations are under way.

MOU

Although the MoU with Morecambe Town Council hasn't been finalised or signed yet I have high hopes for it. The two councils need to help each other much more and I'm confident we can do this.

But the list of tasks Environment and Place has responsibility for is much more extensive than can told here in the Chamber. Please contact me if information is required on any matter that I have failed to mention.

Paul Hart.

Prologue

- 1) 'Local government reorganisation will be a "distraction"; and the upcoming Spending Review offers no grounds for optimism.' So said Professor Tony Travers, professor in practice and Associate Dean at the LSE School of Public Policy during a Public Accounts Committee inquiry into local government financial sustainability (3 April).
- 2) From the best value report into the operation of the now defunct Northamptonshire CC after it had been the first council, in 2018, to issue a s.114 notice for nearly two decades: 'In local government there is no substitute for doing boring really well. Only when you have a solid foundation can you innovate.' Local government commissioner Max Caller's observation is repeated from last year's report.

Portfolio responsibilities are:

'Strategic Control of Financial Resources

Treasury Management

Audit and Risk Register

Financial Services

Revenues and Benefits

Property and Assets (Commercial and Investment; and Municipal from November 2024)

ICT'

Strategic Control of Financial Resources

The 24/25 budget included increases in key income lines and a significant forecast increase in the value of its share of business rates revenues on larger properties. Income has under-performed against the budget overall but despite this, at Q3, the General Fund was forecast to report a surplus of £494k at year-end. At budget council in February, members approved a balanced revenue budget without recourse to use of reserves. The forecast deficit in 26/27 was forecast to be £4.5m a year ago and is now £2.6m, but rises to £4.7m in 27/28. Accordingly, the Outcomes-Based Resourcing process faces significant challenge to achieve a balanced budget by then, but it has been expanded in scope congruent with the scale of that challenge.

The Medium-Term Financial Strategy presented to budget council in February remains the councillors' essential guide to the scale of the financial challenge facing the council and the assumptions being made to define it.

As Professor Travers suggested, the spending review, combined with other changes to 're-allocate' resources between local authorities in a zero-sum game means that some councils will get a bit more funding and some councils will get less. In the final financial settlement in February, government introduced a 'recovery grant' as a first instalment of a determined switch of resources to those councils most in need, as it defines need. Lancaster city council received £603k out of a core spending power settlement of £20.31m. The latest data from the Index of Multiple Deprivation is from January 2019 and placed the district 112/319 councils (as there were then), ie at the 35th percentile of the deprivation distribution. Collectively we need to ensure that the council's voice is heard in decisions over re-

allocation of funding and that the council's level of need, evidenced in the 2019 data, is proportionately reflected in how government redistributes funding.

On top of this, Government announced during the year that councils would be subject to a business rates 'reset' in 26/27. Its consultation on the reset launched on 8th April. The consultation says:

'1.3.6. The government intends to deliver a 'full' reset from 2026-27. Under a full reset, all growth accumulated to date [from 2013] is potentially subject to redistribution across the sector for the forthcoming reset period.'

The redistribution **'is crucial to this government's aims to ensure funding is targeted where it is needed most and restoring the balance between aligning funding with need and rewarding business rates growth.'**

Just under a half of the council's business rates growth since 2013 (calculated before the impact of closure of Heysham 1) has been from the renewable energy disregard. One positive from the consultation is where it says that,

'Business rates growth generated within designated areas, such as Freeports, Enterprise Zones and Investment Zones, will be exempt in line with current policy, **as will amounts retained locally under eligible renewable energy schemes.**'

At a House of Commons public accounts committee hearing on 3rd April, the permanent secretary at MHCLG assured the committee that 'transitional' arrangements would be put in place to spread the impact of changes for those councils affected adversely.

Maintenance of a robust reserves position is key to managing the increased (indeed ratcheted up) degree of funding uncertainty as well as the prospective costs inherent in local government reorganisation. Usable reserves are expected to be around £24m at the financial year-end. Together with a judicious approach to asset management, the council retains a reasonable degree of financial resilience.

Treasury management

The treasury report approved at budget council in Feb. '24 again assumed substantial new external borrowing which, again, has not been realised because of excellent cashflow management and relatively modest net capital expenditure forecast to out-turn at £6.5m. The consequent saving in interest, as well as interest earned on cash balances being higher than budgeted, has contributed more than £1.1m to the year-end forecast out-turn.

Optimising the use of the council's cash balances through the flow and ebb of the financial year is a perhaps under-recognised operation of the council and it is at this point I thank Shona and Zak, the officers in charge of this function since last summer's retirement of Elaine.

Exchequer services

A further essential 'back office' function is exchequer services. Dorret and her team paid 25,600 creditor invoices over the year, with 89% by number paid in line with the prompt payment code of within 30 days, representing 98% of the value of invoices.

The team continues to identify efficiencies and make improvements. For example, the processing of bulk monthly and annual invoices for Pest Control contracts and Market invoices has been automated, making significant savings in staff time and accuracy. And the team has Implemented 11 of 12 recommendations from the internal audit of income management.

Audit and Risk Register

The National Audit Office (NAO) provides this commentary on the right to object to a council's annual statement of accounts.

'You do not have to pay directly for exercising your rights. However, any resulting costs incurred by the authority (which can on occasion be very large) form part of its running costs. Therefore, indirectly, local residents pay for the cost of you exercising your rights through their council tax. Please bear this in mind if the issue of concern could be dealt with in a more proportionate way...'

The council's accounts have been subject to repeated objection in relation to development of Luneside East in the previous two decades and Deloitte, the external auditors (up to, but not including, 23/24), has charged the council over £48k to deal with the objections and the process has extended even further the time to conclude annual accounts. The cost to the council in legal and officer time has been much higher. The NAO guidance refers to how electors should 'use your rights responsibly.'

From 23/24 there is a very significant increase in the cost of annual external audit to £193k. All councils are bearing a similar increase as it is argued that low audit fees have compromised timeliness and effectiveness of the external audit process.

The chair of audit will be reporting in detail on the excellent work of both the committee and internal audit contractors, MIAA. I attend audit committee where possible and am continually impressed by the necessarily exacting process of internal audit.

As I see it, the regular reporting of the risk register, and the judgements that it informs, continues to be one of the (albeit necessary) stand-out achievements of the council over the last three years and credit is due to the officers who have made it so, notably Paul Thompson and Claire Dubelbeis.

Financial Services

Well done to Paul, Kips and the whole Finance team for exemplifying Max Caller's wisdom. This is a selection of achievements that I'd like to highlight from the past year.

- Key policies and manuals, including the council's financial procedure rules which had been last updated in 2014, have been refreshed .
- The CFO's conscious approach to succession planning and trying to 'grow our own' saw the appointment of 2 new trainee accountants (alongside an existing trainee) who have started on their professional qualification journey to ensure the service's future capability.
- Quarterly monitoring information has been circulated to Cabinet and B&PP members within one month of the quarter-end date.
- Danielle is to be congratulated for successfully reclaiming VAT in respect of output tax on leisure services totalling over £0.350M; and she also updated the council's VAT procedures (as any businessperson will know, an unenviable but necessary task).

Finally, thanks to Becca for illuminating the finer points of Council Housing finances to Caroline and me prior on a number of occasions.

Revenues and Benefits

The Preston city council-hosted shared service was established in 2011 and continues to provide a very responsive and pro-active service.

Key outcomes for the year include:

- The Business Rates Team achieved an in-year collection rate of 98.9% against a target of 98%. The team was also audited and received a substantial assurance rating.
- The collection rate on council tax remained edged slightly upwards to 94.2% but is below median for a district authority. As the following bullet points make clear, there is a programme of work in train to improve the collection rate.
- Nearly 1000 council tax arrears cases were messaged via SMS, email, or voice message, including cases where reminders were due or small balances were outstanding. Payments exceeding £50,000 were received as a result. This innovation reduces printing and postage costs as it negates the need to send reminders, where payments are made.
- Council tax automation software was procured during the year and will be introduced from April 2025. This will deliver a fast and efficient service to taxpayers reporting changes of address, setting up direct debits, and applying for or cancelling single person discounts. This will enable staff to focus on higher value work such as debt recovery or assisting vulnerable customers.
- The number of days taken to process new Housing Benefit claims was reduced to an average of 19.62 days (target 25) and the average time to process change events was reduced to 7.84 days (target 10 days). The former statistic places the service comfortably above median using the most recent benchmarking data.

- The shared service Corporate Fraud Team continued to work with Lancaster's Council Housing service on housing tenancy fraud. The team undertook residency checks, financial background checks and sources of funding for right to buy applications. They prevented four defective right to buy applications. These properties would have been sold at a total discount of £194,520 and now remain in the authority's housing stock.
- The service continues to try to persuade billpayers to switch to e-billing. I would again ask members to set an example in this respect.

ICT operations

As I said last year, we cannot under-estimate the role played in the background to enable so much in the council to function without a second thought – and to come to the rescue when we do have cause to think. Well done to the team, which is in the process of restructure of roles to improve further collaborative working with other local authorities and to effect continued service improvement – especially to aid digitalisation. And special thanks to Tony Doyle of Blackpool BC for his strategic input to this council's ICT operation. It is a case study of intra-council collaboration.

Main headlines:

- Completion of the Local Full Fibre Network approved by full council in late 2022. The project has come in ~£200K under budget, with White Lund Depot and both Morecambe and Lancaster police stations now using the network. The city council alone has started saving around £50K/year in data line costs. With the bulk of the capital expended with local companies TNP and its main sub-contractor B4RN, this is its own case study of community wealth-building and the creation of a cooperatively-owned foundational economy asset. Detailed design of the associated data centre/exchange at Salt Ayre has continued and capital funding was approved in February subject to a final cabinet report on the business case.
- The LGA organised and invigilated a business continuity exercise early in 2025 centred around a hypothetical cyber security incident at the city council.
- In connection with cyber security, ICT has supported the completion of Service Resilience Plans.
- ICT has also supported the digitisation of the Licensing service, with taxi and private hire applications now being received online.
- The service has managed the roll-out of corporate display/information screens across the authority to improve staff communication and engagement.
- And it has also supported the roll-out of interactive display screens to multiple Council-owned and private sites across the district as part of the UKSPF-funded Digital Tourism project.

Property and Assets

Over the past twelve months there has been continued significant progress from a compliance, stock knowledge, and asset and estate improvement perspective. Well done to a brilliant, hard-working team led by chief officer Jo. We presented a summary of the

information provided by the comprehensive stock condition reports in to both commercial and municipal property to Overview and Scrutiny committee in October 2024. The stock condition reports have served to identify future liabilities and to help drive better decision-making. They inform the programme of revenue and capital repairs approved at budget council.

The OBR asset group has regularly met throughout the year to keep focus on progress and I would like to pay tribute to the officers (and cabinet colleagues) who have contributed to what I consider to be a highly effective working group.

Property and Assets (Commercial and Investment)

The headline occupancy level of the commercial property estate was 89.6% (as at end of March). This represents a reduction over the previous year. However, the comparison does not take into account the large fire-damaged unit at the Gateway building which was previously classed as unavailable and so not counted in the 23/24 data. The council is currently in various stages of negotiation re. new lettings at a significant number of properties which will see a return to higher reported occupancy levels.

Recruitment to the new post of commercial property manager in September has resulted in an estates improvement plan which provides an impressive framework for managing the commercial estate in the future.

Other key headlines:

- The highest value investment project (by some margin) has been the works to the Gateway building roof and elevations. At the end of the financial year those works were nearing completion, whilst negotiations to lease the empty unit fire-damaged unit are in progress.
- On 31st March, the sale of Palatine Hall completed. Other lower value asset sales are still going through legal process.
- The Council is continuing to engage with a prospective community-led interest in the grade II listed Ryelands House building, whilst market-testing the property.
- Net income is under budget for the year: the above-mentioned unit at the Gateway building on White Lund was vacant; the administration of the tenant at 17-21, Penny St has continued; as has the business rates liability at Hilmore Way. In all three cases it is expected that the revenue situation will improve in 25/26.

Property and Assets (Municipal)

Key headlines are:

- Significant progress has been made with improvements to front-line staff facilities at White Lund depot: new office, and welfare facilities were handed over in January 2025. Well done to the team, especially Charity, for delivering the project and within the £1.8m capital allocation.
- Addressing the closure of Williamson Park café following storm damage in January is the focus of a working group which is centred around implementing alternative

short-term provision and longer-term resolution – not just of the café and toilets but of the plainly inadequate staff facilities at the park.

- Energy costs are currently below what was/is budgeted but February's budget council approved the appointment of a dedicated energy officer to drive down energy usage and costs further given the total energy budget is over £1.6m.
- Opportunities to increase commercial use of municipal properties have been actioned and more are being sought.

Annual Portfolio Report Regeneration, Parking and Skills

It has been another busy year for the regeneration, parking and skills portfolio.

To keep this report succinct, I will cover off the points in bullets under the key work area headings below.

- Lancaster City Centre Parking Strategy
 - The consultation on a draft Parking Strategy for the City Centre closed in June 2024.
 - The consultation lasted several months and included several sessions with key stakeholders and wide public consultation. There was a significant level of responses
 - This led to an interim position being established at Cabinet in October 2024 with a commitment to meet a target of between 1,400 and 1,500 spaces being provided and to develop a programme of projects to ensure that level is maintained
 - A draft project plan has been developed with many projects being taken forward to deliver. Including real time car counting technology for Lancaster car parks where tenders have been received back for the work
- Re-Imagining the Museums
 - Following the reductions in service provision for the museums a museum service review was commenced in Summer 2024.
 - The service review benefited from Heritage Lottery Fund and plays a crucial role in creating a vision for the museums for the future
 - The work is nearing completion and provides a review of the service as well as options for future development of the museums with a Cabinet paper due on this at the end of Summer
 - The annual impact report for our museums is due out in the next few weeks so please do keep an eye out for it
- Canal Quarter
 - Work has continued engaging with various land owners, Lancaster BID and the two theatres to deliver regeneration of the Canal Quarter
 - Following the tendering for a development partner for the Nelson Street site we announced in February 2025 that South Lakes Housing and Tyson Construction have been chosen as the preferred development partner for the site. This development will work in tandem with the delivery of the Parking Strategy

- District Economic Strategy
 - Recognising the importance of having a vision and set of priorities for the future economy of the Borough, work has commenced on a new District Economic Strategy with stakeholder sessions being held during March 2025. A draft Strategy is in preparation and will be consulted upon in draft form once complete
- Business and Skills Support
 - The UKSPF funded project has been running for the past 18 months and concluded at the end of March 2025
 - The service has provided a significant contribution to supporting local businesses and people over this period
 - A number of large events have been hosted by the team too such as a Business Support Fair and Jobs Fairs
 - The team has also started a new Work-Well programme aimed at ensuring people can either remain fit and in work or get fit to work. This is part of a national pilot and will be running through to March 2026
- Lancaster Charter Market and Assembly Rooms
 - Lancaster Charter Market continues to perform well with very little pitches available. During 2024 and early 2025 a number of new stalls have started trading
 - The Assembly Rooms likewise is full and trades very well with a wide range of stalls in the building
- Lancaster Heritage Action Zone
 - The Lancaster HAZ programme came largely to a close at the end of March 2024
 - During the remainder of 2024 work did continue to deliver Public Realm improvements on St Leonards Gate outside the Grand Theatre
 - Work has also continued with the refurbishment of 1 Lodge Street working with the Lancaster Musicians Coop. This has been funded by the City, UKSPF and the Governments Community Ownership Fund

We all often forget that politics is very much about co-operation and team work. This has been really apparent in many of the work areas we've been taking forward. On this note I do need to say a big thank you to our officers for all their hard work and of course fellow councillors for their input, in particular the previous portfolio holders Cllr. Parr and Cllr. Potter.

Nick Wilkinson

Portfolio holder for Regeneration, Parking and Skills

Annual report 2024/2025

Regeneration and local economy

Councillor Martin Bottoms

It is important to recognise the work done by Councillor Catherine Potter during this period

Sustainability and regeneration

Frontierland

Redevelopment of the Frontierland site is a key priority and during 2024 a new Project Board was set up to oversee the development of the site. In October 2024 a Developer Day was held in Morecambe when over 20 regional and national developers attended the site with further publicity using Place North West. This led to the launch of a procurement exercise to seek a preferred development partner. The first stage of that procurement concluded at the end of January 2025 and bids are currently being assessed to go through to the next stage.

Morecambe Regeneration and Investment Strategy

Working jointly with the County Council a new strategy looking at Central Morecambe has been commissioned. Tetrattek, WSP and 31Ten have been appointed to produce the new strategy. The work will also look at transport and parking issues and provide ambitions for public realm. It is anticipated a draft strategy will be released in the Summer of 2025 for future consultation

Centenary House

Good progress has been made with the Brownfield Land Release Funded work. The property has had some structural repairs, asbestos removed, waste clearance and soft-strip demolition to reveal the structure. A series of surveys and assessments are underway that includes, timber, managing water ingress in the basement and invasive structural tests to concrete and steel. These results will inform the next phase of work

Heysham Gateway

Working jointly with the County Council, work has continued to agree a scheme to bring forward development of this important site with a view to seeking a developer and submitting a planning application.

Our Future Coast

This is a regional project covering all Councils surrounding the Irish sea, aimed at community resilience to flooding. A number of events were held around natural methods for coastal defences as well as particular projects at Jenny Browns Point and Hest Bank.

Arts and Culture at the Storey

Diverse Event Programming

This year, The Storey has continued to offer a dynamic mix of events, engaging both the local community and visitors. We hosted a total of 8 Open Mic nights, providing a platform for local performers, alongside 12 editions of "Stories at The Storey", which captivated audiences with storytelling sessions. We also saw a fun and competitive atmosphere at 8 Storey Quiz Nights, and relaxed afternoons with 12 Jazz Trio performances.

Gallery Exhibitions

Our commitment to the arts was demonstrated through 11 unique gallery exhibitions, showcasing both emerging and established artists. Additionally, 20 exhibitions benefitted from free exhibition space in the Thomas Storey Gallery, allowing for more diverse and varied creative expressions throughout the year from and for the community.

Weddings and Special Events

The Storey was a cherished venue for personal celebrations, with three weddings held there, along with hosting one grand ball and two Music with the Mayor events. The spaces were transformed for those events, providing a memorable and elegant atmosphere for all attendees.

Community Engagement & Learning

Staff have enjoyed bringing art and culture to the public, with 14 Litfest events, which included readings, workshops, and discussions. The 24 Lancaster University Lectures engaged academics and students in meaningful conversations, while 7 LUL Explore sessions offered creative learning opportunities. The 7 Zen Retreats promoted well-being and mindfulness for those seeking balance in their busy lives.

Free Public Events

The Council's ongoing dedication to accessibility and community participation was seen in the free events, including the vibrant Light Up Lancaster, the energetic Lancaster Music Festival (the largest to date), which brought together diverse cultural elements for all to enjoy. Local youth charity E2M benefitted with supported room hire to deliver their programme for the young people of the district.

The Auditorium's Musical Impact

29 bands and performers were welcomed to perform in The Auditorium, continuing The Storey's legacy as a hub for music and cultural expression.

Café Success

The Printroom Café & Bar has been a great success, exceeding its income target and serving 31,600 shots of coffee!

Attendance Growth

16,000 people attended events at The Storey this year, a testament to the venue's growing reputation and community engagement.

Arts and Culture at Lancaster Town Hall and The Ashton Hall

Major Events

LTH has once again been a key venue for high-profile events, including ten large events that have brought together audiences from far and wide. Notably, the BBC New Comedy Awards attracted top-tier comedians, while Nish Kumar's performance was a major highlight. Most recently the Council hosted the most successful event in the venue's history with Frank Turner which brought in the largest bar income in one night of £10,880.

Orchestral and Choral Performances

4 orchestra/choir performances were hosted, including some of the most celebrated classical music groups in the UK, enriching the cultural offerings of Lancaster.

Collaborative Projects

An new partnership venture with The Dukes will bring a series of performances that bridge community and theatre arts. We also have relationships building with nationally recognised promoters – notably From The Fields, so exciting things are to come.

Enhanced Venue and Audience Experience

This year key improvements have been made, such as rebranding the stairwells, to enhance the venue's aesthetic appeal. Additionally, audience capacity has been increased, allowing for the hosting of larger events to meet growing demand. Capital investment has been secured to improve the technical infrastructure of the venue to include event lighting and sound. This should further increase the venue's appeal in the community of artists and promoters.

Event Impact

The venue has hosted numerous major events, including two Beer Festivals, an ABBA Gold Tribute Concert, three Balls, Chinese New Year celebrations, Lune Day Festival and five Lancaster Big Sing performances. The Festival of Culture was another significant addition to the programme of events, showcasing diverse performances and cultural celebrations.

Weddings and Celebrations

Lancaster Town Hall continues to be a preferred choice for memorable events, hosting nine weddings this year.

Attendance

A total of 17,152 people attended events at Lancaster Town Hall this year, reinforcing its position as a key cultural venue in the city.

Arts and Culture at The Platform

High Ticket Sales

The Platform has once again proven its appeal, with over 13,000 tickets sold this year across a variety of performances, showcasing its strong audience base.

Community and Arts Engagement

The venue hosted 127 community events that have brought people together including five major festivals and markets, the highly popular Vintage by the Sea and Comic Con, attracting diverse crowds. Additionally, 73 shows and events were held, offering a broad range of entertainment and artistic experiences.

Expanding Partnerships and Offerings

The Platform partnered with Ticketmaster to ensure a more seamless ticketing experience for audiences. Furthermore, the venue welcomed a new brewery procurement, adding a local touch to the venue's offerings.

Audience and Sales Growth

11,000 pints were sold in the Platform this year, demonstrating strong beverage sales. Efforts to increase audience capacity have also paid off, allowing the venue to host larger crowds and create a more vibrant atmosphere.

Overall Reflection and Next Steps

This year has been marked by strong community engagement, an expanded and diverse offering of events, and strategic collaborations that have further cemented the Council's venues as hubs of culture in Lancaster. Hosting a variety of events across arts, culture, music, and community programming, there has been impressive growth in audience attendance and event diversity. Looking ahead, it is hoped to continue building on these achievements by expanding our programming, increasing community outreach, and continuing to innovate in the way we offer cultural experiences to the people of Lancaster.

Festivals and Events

There was a good programme of events which had an excellent economic impact. Light up Lancaster brought in an estimated £1.7M whilst Vintage by the Sea brought in over £3M to the local economy. With over 100 events throughout the year, festivals and events played an important role in both the local economy and health and wellbeing in the district.

The only major event missing was Catch the Wind. All three authorities are contributing to a kite festival returning in 2025.

Unfortunately, this year three of the big festivals will not take place, however we do have new or replacement events to help plug the gap. It is hoped the five main events will all return next year and I will work closely with the organisers to give the best possibility for this to happen.

The Winter Gardens will also be hosting events this year before a full season of events in 2026,

Tourism

The UKSPF digital transformation screen project was completed following the OBR objectives to close our VICs and transform our digital visitor offer, making information more accessible.

To date, there are 15 interactive digital tourism touch screens located throughout the district. The locations consist of visitor destination sites such as Lancaster Castle and Morecambe prom; high tourism footfall areas such as Williamson Park and Carnforth Visitor Centre; and transport and community hubs such as Lancaster train station and both Town Halls.

Since the launch of the digital screens, there have been more than 10,000 clicks searching for information with more than 1.7 million exposures with images and information about the district.

We have increased our leaflet print sites and tourism partnerships to more than 100 locations throughout the district providing the most up to date and relevant information to visitors and the local community.

The latest STREAM figures (2023) show we had 6.96 million visitors bringing £597M to the local economy. Both showed an increase from the previous year.

Annual Report 2024/25

Cabinet Member for Planning

Council – 23 April 2025

I would like to start by thanking Councillor Jean Parr who held this portfolio until December and oversaw many of the year's achievements. Thanks Jean. I would also like to thank Mark Cassidy for his help and calm, steady hard work to achieve such an excellent service. I feel privileged to be Cabinet Member for planning for Lancaster.

1. National Context

The most significant changes for many years in the planning and building control happened during 2024/2025! The Government has set out the clear aim to speed up the planning system and deliver economic growth. The legislative change has included a new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF); Amended National Planning Practice Guidance; a new Planning and Infrastructure Bill; an overhaul of the Local Plan system; and continued reform of national Building Control, including changes to the Building Regulations. In the context of the challenges of uncertain local government reorganisation, this is a very challenging agenda for all of us!

2. Local Planning

A major achievement this year has been the long-anticipated adoption of the Climate Emergency Review of the Local Plan. My colleague, the Cabinet Member for Climate Action, will address this further in her Annual Report. We are proud that the Lancaster District now benefits from a Local Plan that requires the development industry to deliver high-performance, sustainable buildings that will reduce heating bills for our future residents. Thank you to all the officers in the Local plan team who have worked so hard and refused to take 'no' for an answer, persisting through to a successful outcome.

However, as you know, we had already had to begin work on a new Local Plan to respond to the lack of housing land in the District, along with updating other issues. The very tight timescale we had hoped to follow under the 'old' Local Plan system has now been upended by Local Plan reforms which now force us down a different path! A new timescale of 30 months for preparing a Local Plan, with checks at different stages has now been introduced. At the time of compiling this report it is anticipated that a revised Local Development Scheme (i.e. the Local Plan Timetable) will have been presented to Cabinet in April 2025. Encouragingly, the Council is making good progress on preparing the evidence base for the new Local Plan and a number of documents have been added to the Council's Local Plan Review Hub, which is available online.

In addition to an expedited plan-making process, the reforms have also changed the standard method for calculating local housing need as part of the Government's objective to deliver 1.5m homes in the current parliament. This method gives us a numerical target as a starting point when considering housing requirement in the Local Plan which will mean that more houses need to be built during the next Local Plan period. There have already been two 'Call for Sites' processes (one of which is ongoing), which present an opportunity for

landowners, developers and individuals to suggest areas for potential future development. These sites are yet to assessed in the light of revised national policies (including changes to Green Belt policy) and local constraints.

The local planning authority has also continued to offer support to those areas that have Neighbourhood Planning aspirations. Halton with Aughton is the latest Parish Council to advance to statutory public consultation stage, whilst Scotforth Parish Council continue to make good progress at pre-submission consultation stage at the time that this Annual Report was being prepared. Areas that already benefit from adopted Neighbourhood Plans include Wennington, Wray-with-Botton, Aldcliffe-with-Stodday, Carnforth, Caton-with-Littledale and Slyne-with-Hest.

There has also been significant work during the year regarding Conservation Area Appraisals. At the time of compiling this Report, Conservation Area Appraisals for Over Kellet and for Yealand Conyers & Yealand Redmayne are ongoing. Thank you to the Conservation team for their thorough work on these.

3. Planning Applications and Appeals

The most-recently published Government figures for the assessment period for speed of decision-making (i.e. one year, up to September 2024) for Lancaster reveals the following data:

	Lancaster (% determined in agreed time)	% Threshold for Government Intervention
Speed of Major Decisions	94%	60%
Speed of Non- Major Decisions	91.5%	70%

The Government measures the quality of decision-making by calculating the number of refused applications that are subsequently overturned at appeal. The most recent published assessment period for quality of decision-making was January 2022 to December 2023, and it revealed the following data:

	Lancaster (% overturned on appeal)	% Threshold for Government Intervention
Quality of Major Decisions	2.4%	10%
Quality of Non- Major Decisions	0.7%	10%

Both tables indicate that this Council continues to maintain decision-making at a high level. Many thanks to all the Development Management team for their hard work in keeping up these standards whilst absorbing all the changes coming their way. Particular thanks are due to Mark Jackson for his able management of this team and his excellent service to the Planning Committee. We will be very sorry to see him go but wish him all the best. We are also very sorry to lose Kate Henry whose service particularly on appeals will be sorely missed.

Whilst the Service has had an excellent appeals record this year, the recent appeal decision for Sea View Drive at Slyne with Hest (appeal allowed) is indicative of how seriously the Government are taking the need for housing delivery in the context of national policy changes to the Green Belt, including the introduction of the Grey Belt designation. A Green Belt Review as part of the Local Plan process and supported by Government funding will shortly commence.

4. Planning Enforcement

At the start of the municipal year, national planning enforcement legislation changed. Previously, the maximum period to take enforcement action varied between 4 and 10 years, depending upon whether the breach of planning control involved physical development or changes of use of land. Since 25 April 2024, any breach of planning regulations must be able to demonstrate 10 continuous, uninterrupted years to be regarded as being immune from planning enforcement action. This is welcome.

The enforcement year has been dominated by some high-profile planning enforcement cases which have taken up significant officer time, including the need for lengthy solicitor/barrister support in respect of court proceedings. The backlog in the national justice system (in terms of securing a timely court date), continues to be a regular reason for delay and source of considerable frustration.

Nationally, the volume of Notices served by local authorities has declined during the last 10 years. It is unlikely that this is because of any fall in the volume of enforcement investigations, but it is instead more likely to be indicative of a challenging national recruitment and retention picture for enforcement officers, coupled with difficulties in securing court dates. As an example, the volume of enforcement notices served in England in total during 2014/15 was 5,007, compared with 3,941 in 2023/24. There have been corresponding falls in respect of the service of all other similar Notices in England over the decade.

However, the Government's statistics for enforcement action in Lancashire for the assessment year ending September 2024 indicates that Lancaster served the most Planning Enforcement Notices and the most Planning Contravention Notices (see table, below).

	Enforcement Notices Issued	Stop Notices Served	Temporary Stop Notices Served	Planning Contravention Notices Served	Breach of Condition Notices Served	Total Notice Activity
Lancaster	28	0	1	37	2	68
B-w-D	3	2	7	17	8	37
Pendle	20	0	0	0	9	29
Blackpool	19	0	0	0	0	19
Rossendale	7	1	8	0	1	17
W Lancs	13	0	1	0	2	16
R Valley	7	0	2	3	1	13
Wyre	10	0	0	0	2	12
Chorley	7	0	1	0	0	8
Preston	4	0	0	1	1	6
Hyndburn	3	0	0	3	0	6
Fylde	1	0	0	0	1	2
S Ribble	0	0	0	0	2	2
Burnley	0	0	0	0	0	0

Despite a high caseload, all planning enforcement investigations are now assessed in accordance with the Council's approved Local Planning Enforcement Plan (2024). This includes a flowchart which explains how the local planning authority decides whether it is expedient to take planning enforcement action. This has added further consistency to the process of planning enforcement assessment and decision-making. My thanks go to the whole Enforcement team in carrying out the painstaking and often frustrating work they carry out.

5 Building Control

The changes to the national Building Control system during 2024 have been significant. The Building Safety Act (2022) across England aims to improve safety and bolster professional competency amongst private and public sector building control bodies. A new, single construction regulator (the Building Safety Regulator, BSR) is now responsible for building safety. The Council's Building Control Service is delivered in partnership with Capita. A next working day site inspections service and plan-checking are offered. It has been another positive year where the Team have secured work with some high-profile local housing developers, as well as continuing to deliver work for public sector institutions (e.g. local education providers and health authorities).

The volume of buildings that are defined as 'dangerous' (as per the Building Act) and warranting Building Control intervention appears to increase year on year. There is usually a surge of work following storm damage. The team have worked to good effect in removing dangers under the appropriate powers where necessary. The Government intends to introduce the Building Safety Levy in Autumn 2025, which is anticipated to raise significant funds for building remediation across the country. They have also indicated that they will review the building control regime in its entirety, and the Approved Document suite of statutory guidance (the 'Building Regulations'). The team is prepared for these changes and have been attending the relevant briefings with the Ministry and Health and Safety Executive.

Thanks go to the Building Control service ably managed by Mark Potts.

5. Looking Ahead

2025/26 will see the local planning authority trigger the formal start of the 30-month Local Plan process. It is also anticipated to receive a significant volume of housing applications as developers respond to the planning reforms laid down by Government. And finally, there will be further changes to the Building Control regime that will require all councils to adopt new working practices. It is set to be another very busy 12 months.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

ANNUAL REPORT 2024/5



Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has overall responsibility for the performance of all Scrutiny functions (under the Local Government Act 2000) on behalf of the City Council.

Budget and Performance Panel

The Budget and Performance Panel has specific responsibility for providing overview and scrutiny to issues regarding the City Council's performance, budget and financial issues.

Holding Cabinet Members to Account

Overview and Scrutiny Members continue to hold Cabinet Members to account. This takes place through the Call-in process and considering items of business at scrutiny meetings and also through arranging for Cabinet Members to come to meetings to discuss issues and developments within Cabinet portfolios.

COMMUNITY SAFETY

Each year a Community Safety meeting is arranged. This meeting took place in November 2024.

This year the Chair welcomed Sergeant Lindsay Brown, Lancashire Constabulary, Alex Kinch, the Council's Chief Officer - People and Policy and the Kirsty Banks-Lyon, the Resilience and Community Safety Officer, to the meeting.



The Committee was given an update on current projects being undertaken by the Lancaster District Community Safety Partnership (CSP), the future developments for 2024/2025 and how the current priorities were being tackled with joint working by the partners of the CSP.

The current priorities for Lancaster CSP were;

- Anti-Social Behaviour
- Violence
- Road Safety and
- Suicide Prevention.

Lancaster District Public Space Protection Orders (PSPO's) had been renewed in October 2024 and were valid until October 2027.



As part of a district wide consultation other issues had been raised regarding the use of E-Scooters and E-bikes and this would form part of a further consultation in early 2025.

It was reported that the Lancaster District continued to be a safe place in which to live, work and explore. Members asked a number of questions regarding the CSP's work.

It was suggested that it would be useful if the Committee was given regular updates from the CSP throughout the year.



SCRUTINY PROTOCOL

The Committee received a number of reports throughout the year on the Scrutiny Protocol. The most recent being at the meeting in April 2025.

At the meeting the Committee was asked to consider the introduction of a Cabinet – Scrutiny Protocol.

Similar arrangements are in place in other authorities with the aim of assisting both Cabinet and Scrutiny to work together more effectively for the good of the district.

At a meeting, held in September 2023, the Committee was provided with a report and a copy of the Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities. After considering the report the Committee has agreed the following:

- (1) That the Pre-Scrutiny Champion meets informally with Democratic Support Officers to consider the Forthcoming Key Decisions on a regular basis.
- (2) That the Committee consider a draft Protocol in the new Municipal Year.

Due to a change in Cabinet Member, this had taken a little longer than anticipated, however the current Cabinet Member with particular responsibility for Corporate Services, Councillor Maddocks, attended the meeting of this Committee in January 2025 to provide an update and receive comments from the Committee regarding elements they would wish to see in the protocol.

At that meeting, the Committee put forward the following requests to the Cabinet Member:

- That Cabinet papers are circulated to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at the

same time as for Cabinet before Cabinet briefings. If the Committee wish to receive a briefing on any of the Cabinet items, this would be requested and arranged before the Cabinet meeting the following week to allow any comments or concerns to be shared with Cabinet. This replaced the request for briefings for every Cabinet meeting for the Committee in order to save officer time and resources. This involves the building in of safeguards to mitigate risks around the sharing of sensitive information with Scrutiny members.

- That a list of key initiatives for the forthcoming 12 months be shared with both Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (as opposed to a list of forthcoming Key Decisions for the next 12 months).
- That, as part of the consultation process, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be consulted on all major projects as a matter of course to enable pre-decision scrutiny.

The Committee was provided with a draft Protocol which addressed the first point. The second and third points above are not covered in the protocol.

Regarding the list of key initiatives for the forthcoming twelve months, Councillor Maddocks advised that Cabinet had recently met to discuss priorities and work initiatives and updated the Committee in this regard.

Regarding Overview and Scrutiny being consulted on all major projects, the Committee was advised that project boards are set up for all major projects and Scrutiny members make up the memberships.



LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION PLANNING PEER REVIEW CHALLENGE – UPDATE

At the September meeting the Committee received its fourth update report following Lancaster City Council's Peer Challenge in November 2022 that had been requested by the City Council and co-ordinated by the Local Government Association (LGA), working with the national Planning Advisory Service.

It was reported that during 2024 progress in most of the outstanding workstreams had continued and concluded however some workstreams had been superseded by the recommendations of the Corporate Peer Challenge. Members were advised that immediately prior to the previous Update Report, the Planning Advisory Service Team revisited Lancaster to assess the progress the Council had made. The formal feedback was generally positive with comments being on a comprehensive action plan being developed and significant progress being made across all of the recommendations. The Committee considered the outstanding issues and how the Committee would review the final few workstreams.

HEALTH SCRUTINY

At May's meeting of the Committee Karen Kyle, Integrated Care Director and Heather Woodhouse, Integrated Place Leader - North Lancashire provided a presentation regarding the Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB - Current Model of the Healthcare System.

Members of the Committee asked a number of questions regarding GP practices and their Governance arrangements, Health Watch, information on health events, n-compass – providing a wide range of advice and a wide range of specialist support services designed to help carers, corporate services being centralised, the need to explore variances of need in different areas, channels of communication and increased collaboration. It was noted that

the ambition was to have details of the whole system flow by the end of March 2025.

The Chair, on behalf of the Committee, thanked Karen Kyle and Heather Woodhouse for their informative presentation and requested that the Committee be informed of various developments, set out in the presentation slides, at a meeting of the Committee to be scheduled for May 2025.

ALLOTMENT REVIEW

At the November 2024 meeting the Committee welcomed Will Griffith, Chief Officer - Environment and Place and Anna Clayton and Deborah Simmonds from Food Futures – LESS, to the meeting. A presentation was provided on the recent Review of the district's allotments.

The review had been funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and had reviewed the 24 allotment sites in the District of which the City Council owned 15, with 980 plots over the 24 sites. An online questionnaire had been used to gain feedback from plot holders, committee members/management and also those on waiting lists for an allotment along with site visits, interviews, focus groups and community events. The outcome of the review was a great appreciation of allotments and the value they hold for those who have one in terms of wellbeing and mental health benefits. There was a common theme emerging from the review which was the lack of funds for maintenance on the City Council owned allotments.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee welcomed the report, noted the recommendations and urges exploration of the different models of allotments to encourage the district's allotments to come together to work in a more co-operative manner and independently.



DRAFT CORPORATE ENFORCEMENT POLICY

At the February 2025 meeting the Committee welcomed Will Griffith, Chief Officer – Environment and Place.

The Committee received an overview of the Draft Corporate Enforcement Policy which had recently been updated. It was reported that the policy was an overarching policy which applied to all the Council's Services that have enforcement duties.

Members were advised that, in deciding on the most appropriate course of action, officers would have regard to the principles set out in the Enforcement Policy and the need to maintain a balance between enforcement and other activities, including inspection, advice and education. This would also be conducted in a manner which was proportionate, accountable, consistent and transparent.

The Committee asked a number of questions regarding the draft Policy and it was suggested that it would be useful to have links to the individual service enforcement policies provided on the internet in this overarching draft Policy.

BUSINESS SUPPORT AND ECONOMIC STRATEGY UPDATE

Also at the February 2025 meeting the Jonathan Noad, Chief Officer – Sustainable Growth gave the Committee an update on the City Council's Economic Development function.

The Economic Development function of the City Council has changed considerably over the past two years as the service moved from a centrally funded model to being funded externally. In October 2023 the old Economic Development service was replaced by a new Busi-

ness Support service focusing on a UKSPF funded project.

This current programme was due to end in March 2025 but there was a potential extension to March 2026 in discussion.

As part of the programme the City Council had secured funding to provide a Business and Skills Support Service which included the employment of an Economy and Skills Manager and 2 Project Officers.

Members were advised that the purpose of the project was to provide a strategic co-ordination, facilitation and enabling role, working in partnership with local businesses, communities and education and skills providers to ensure the delivery of the outputs and outcomes of UKSPF and the City Council. Since October 2023 the project had achieved significant outputs and outcomes.

As the project was nearing its end, discussions were ongoing about an extension to March 2026 alongside the Work Well Programme. The Work Well Programme is an early intervention work and health support and assessment service, providing holistic support to overcome health-related barriers to employment, and a single, joined-up gateway to other support services.

The Committee was advised that the Economic Development Strategy, which was included in the Committee's Work Programme, was currently being drafted. The draft Strategy would be considered by the Committee once it was complete.

Members asked a number of questions regarding Eden, the new Strategic Authority and the need to encourage young entrepreneurs within the district.

OTHER ISSUES CONSIDERED BY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

LITTER BIN MONITORING



At the January 2025 meeting the Committee was given an update on bin monitoring. Innovative sensor technology was being introduced which provided real time data collection which enhanced decision making for waste collection routes. This in turn optimised waste management operations reducing waste collection costs.

A trial had taken place in Heysham which had seen collections drop almost 75% which meant operatives could be moved on to other tasks around the district.

The Committee was told that that 519 sensors had been installed in bins to date but unfortunately, almost half the Council's bin stock were not suitable for sensor installation. A capital request was being prepared to replace these bins.

This new technology, which used algorithms to collect data, was being analysed and provided a dashboard of information.

It was suggested it would be useful for the Committee to consider the Dashboard at a future meeting.

FLY TIPPING

Also at the January 2025 meeting the Committee considered Fly Tipping.

Members were reminded of the work that had been undertaken with Keep Britain Tidy to tackle Fly Tipping in the district that had been reported to the Committee at previous meetings.

The Council had worked closely with Keep Britain Tidy to produce a draft Strategy. The Committee noted that, within the district, a large proportion of Fly Tipping reports were concentrated on just 34 streets in 4 wards and these had been targeted by the Keep Britain Tidy Project previously reported.



A Strategy, which was underpinned by an operational action plan, would focus on these high reporting areas and produce Key Performance Indicators to monitor progress.

The Committee also discussed how Fly Tipping had been tackled in the project and how enforcement was not seen to be the solution. Where Fly Tipping was most prevalent, in the most deprived areas of the district, it was felt incentives coupled with education would be a better way forward.

OTHER ISSUES CONSIDERED BY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

DILAPIDATED BUILDINGS

In September 2024 the Committee welcomed Councillor David Whitaker to the meeting who had raised the issue of dilapidated buildings with Scrutiny. Councillor Whitaker was invited to speak to the Committee as he had raised this issue and in particular the impact on the West End of Morecambe.

The Committee received an overview of the current enforcement powers the City Council had to deal with dilapidated buildings. These included Town and County Planning Act, a Section 215 Notice, which could be served on the owners of a building to improve the visual amenity of the building and under the Buildings Act, Section 77, 78 and 79 Notices which dealt with buildings that were deemed to be dangerous.

Members went on to discuss how the City Council could tackle this issue in a joint service manner and also the work of the West End Millions scheme. It was felt this should be explored. Subsequently this issue was referred to the Property Assets Working Group to look into further.

TENANT SATISFACTION MEASURES

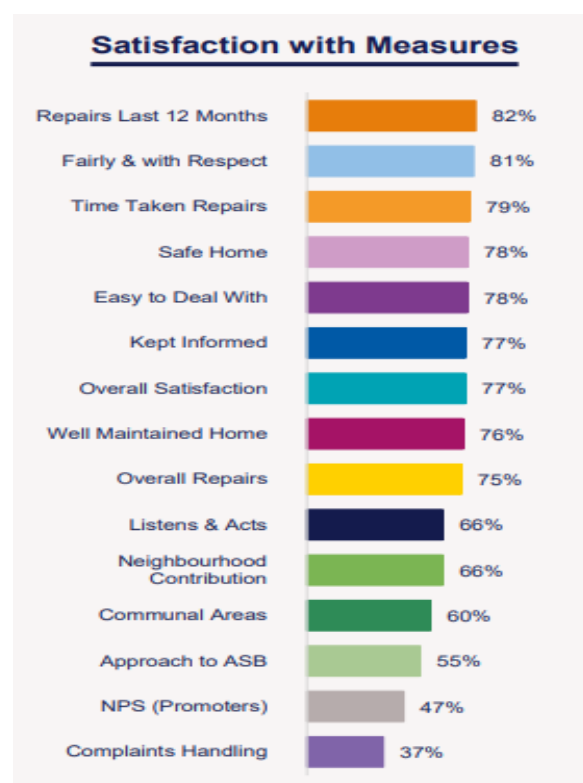
At the January 2025 meeting The Chair welcomed Councillor Caroline Jackson as Leader of the Council and also Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing and Homelessness, Joanne Wilkinson, the Chief Officer - Housing and Property, and Peter Linsley the Council Housing Manager to the meeting.

Members were reminded that all registered social housing providers were now required to submit and publish data about their performance alongside the outcome of a tenant satisfaction survey each year. This information would be used to assess how housing providers across the UK are performing and to aid robust scrutiny of services.

The Committee considered the results of the recent Tenant Satisfaction Survey that had been undertaken between August and September 2024. The survey revealed that the overall satisfaction rate had improved by 5% now standing at 77% with improvements on all measures being seen. Benchmarking data from the company undertaking the surveys put Lancaster in the top quartile of providers.

It was reported that repairs to Council housing were a key driver of satisfaction and this had improved by 8% from last year as a result of a range of improvements implemented and providing a safe home was up to 78%.

Members were advised that Officers had noted key areas of improvement to focus on over the coming year. These were in relation to communication, complaints handling, communal areas and antisocial behaviour. It was reported that an action plan to address these issues would be produced. It was suggested that this could be considered by the Committee at a future meeting as well as the Complaint Annual Report.



BUDGET AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Throughout the year the Panel has undertaken scrutiny on various reports including quarterly, Treasury Management Mid-Year Reviews, Outturn and MTFS.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance and Resources has attended meetings throughout the year to present reports and answer questions from the Panel. A number of other Cabinet Members attended the two meetings of the Panel regarding the budget, including the Annual Stakeholder meeting in January 2025.

TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

The Treasury Management Strategy (TMS) for 2025/26, which included the Annual Investment Strategy, was presented to the Panel in February 2025. The Mid-Year Review had also been submitted for scrutiny to the Panel in December 2024. The Panel considered and noted the Strategy.

BUDGET CONSULTATION

In January 2025 the Panel received a presentation from Councillor Tim Hamilton-Cox, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance and Property. He provided an update on the Council's budget strategy for 2025/26 and financial outlook up to 2029/30. Specifically the report considered Council Tax Proposals for 2025/26. The report put forward a balanced budget for 2025/26 with no need to call on reserves.

However, the forecasts clearly highlighted potential annual and cumulative budget deficits over the next 5 years and the

position the City Council faces. Members asked a number of questions relating to the structural deficit, Heysham Power Station and Council Tax.

Later in January Councillor Hamilton-Cox presented the report to the Annual Stakeholder meeting which allows stakeholder to provide their feedback on the budget proposals.

Members asked a number of questions which Councillor Hamilton-Cox responded to.

The Panel went on to request a report and information to be provided to the Panel regarding any ways being considered and proposals as part of the Fit for the Future project to generate income and realise income, subject to the Chief Officer – Resources/Section 151 Officer liaising with the Chief Executive to ensure that the documentation is available for scrutiny.

STRATEGIC RISK REGISTER

In September 2024 and December 2024 the Panel received reports on the Strategic Risk Register/Management.

The Panel considered the risk register and asked questions on a number of specific risks.

The Panel requested that the Risk Management Guidance be shared with the Panel and that the effectiveness of the mitigating factors be increased to reduce the likelihood of risk.

CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2023/24—2032/33—CAPITAL STRATEGY

In February 2025 the Panel considered Cabinet's final budget proposals in order that

the Council can approve a General Fund Capital Programme for 2025/26 to 2034/35 and a Capital Strategy 2025/26 as required by regulation.

The report addressed the actions required to complete the budget setting process for its Capital Programme and Capital Strategy. The Panel noted the report.

PRIORITIES AND PROJECTS & PERFORMANCE

Throughout the year the Panel received updates on the delivery of the City Council's priorities and ongoing projects and performance.

The Panel asked a number of questions relating to priorities on saving money via staff vacancies and the impact on existing staff wellbeing, concerns over the HRA Capital Programme for Mainway and income shortfalls at Salt Ayre Leisure Centre.

The Panel also raised questioning on projects regarding HR issues, homelessness, the full fibre network, Williamson Park Café, White Lund Depot, UKSPF and a lack of reporting and the Government's future allocation to the fund.

SHORTFALL OF INCOME AT SALT AYRE LEISURE CENTRE

In February 2025 the Panel welcomed Councillor Peter Jackson, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member with responsibility for Communities, Well-Being and Partnerships, who provided an update on the shortfall of Income at Salt Ayre Leisure Centre. Councillor Jackson was thanked for this attendance.

TASK AND WORKING GROUPS

NEIGHBOURHOOD MANAGEMENT INFORMAL TASK GROUP

The Neighbourhood Management Informal Task Group had its first meeting in February 2025. As per the Terms of Reference of the Group, agreed by Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Group is tasked to;

- Consider how we provide Public Realm and related services in the District and if we are achieving the best with what we have got.
- Investigate the current Public Realm offer - Street scene, street lighting, graffiti – and the County Council/City Council responsibilities.
- Consider the current Public Realm Agreement.

At the first meeting the Group considered the current position of neighbourhood management and the aims of the Group. They went on to discuss the methodology for evidence gathering and the way forward.

The second meeting of the Group was held on 31st March 2025, with the next meeting arranged for May 2025.

PROPERTY ASSETS WORKING GROUP

At the October 2024 meeting of Overview and Scrutiny members agreed to create the Property Assets Working Group. The membership is made up from interested Members of the Committee. Following a presentation provided to the Committee on the Stock Condition Survey the Group is to report back to the Committee on the issues that scrutiny Members require more information on. The first meeting of this Group was on 10th March 2025.

TACKLING OBESITY INFORMAL TASK GROUP

The Tackling Obesity Informal Task Group has been scoped and, with agreement of the Committee, will commence work upon the completion of the Neighbourhood Management Informal Task Group.

PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY

Pre-Scrutiny is the process mainly based on Cabinet reports and the study of the City Council's published 'Key Decisions' contained in the List of Forthcoming Key Decisions. The List is made available at each meeting. With this information the Overview and Scrutiny Committee can select issues that add value and may consider before a decision is taken.

This process can help to add value to decisions at the pre-decision stage, can widen consultation to include Non-Executive Councillors and it can also help to minimise the use of Call-in.

The Committee's Pre-Scrutiny Champion is Councillor Martin Gawith.

Overview and Scrutiny welcomes the opportunity to submit a response during the consultation phase of a decision.

OUTSIDE BODIES

At the request of Council the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has made the following appointments to outside bodies.

Representatives are asked to report back, if necessary, to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the work of these bodies.

OUTSIDE BODY	OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MEMBERSHIP
Homelessness Forum	Councillor Chris Hanna
Lancaster, Morecambe and District Fairtrade Group	Councillor Abi Mills/from November 2024 Councillor Maria Deery

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Budget and Performance Panel would like to thank the following for their contribution to the Scrutiny process during 2024/25:

- Cabinet Members who have appeared before Overview and Scrutiny bodies;
- Representatives from organisations, which have delivered presentations and provided information to the Committee/Panel this year;
- Officers who have attended meetings and participated in the work of scrutiny.

COUNCIL

Audit Committee Annual Report 2024/25

23 April 2025

Report of the Audit Committee Chairman

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To inform the Council of the current position on issues being dealt with by the Audit Committee.

This report is public.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report details the work undertaken by the Audit Committee since it was last reported to Council on the 24 April 2024

1.2 The Terms of Reference of the committee are set out in Part 3, Section 8 of the Council's Constitution. The scope of its activity is summed up in the statement of purpose:

The audit committee is a key component of Lancaster City Council's corporate governance. It provides an independent high-level focus on the audit, assurance and reporting arrangements that underpin good governance and financial standards.

The purpose of an audit committee is to provide those charged with governance, independent assurance of the adequacy of the risk management framework and the internal control environment. It provides independent review of Lancaster City Council's governance, risk management and control frameworks and oversees the financial reporting and annual governance processes. It oversees internal and external audit, helping to ensure efficient and effective assurance arrangements are in place."

2.0 AUDIT COMMITTEE MEETINGS

2.1 The Audit Committee (the Committee) has met several times during the financial year 2024/25 and covered significant areas such as

- Statement of Accounts
- Effectiveness of Risk Management Framework
- Effectiveness of Internal Control Environment
- Counter Fraud & Corruption
- Annual Governance Statement

2.2 A link to the website for further details on the reports and minutes is included here:
[Browse meetings - Audit Committee - Lancaster City Council](#)

3.0 STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS

- 3.1 Council will be aware of the significant ongoing issues within the Public Sector Audit regime and the Government's proposals to clear the backlog of unaudited Statement of Accounts that has built up over recent years. In the case of this Council, it applied to the Statement of Accounts for 2019/20, 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23.
- 3.2 The Government set out various 'backstop' dates by which Councils are required to publish the outstanding financial statements. These dates are as set out in the table below, with progress against achieving these deadlines included.

Financial Years Statements	Audit Backstop Deadline	Achieved
All years up to and including 2022/23	13 December 2024	Yes
2023/24	28 February 2025	No
2024/25	27 February 2026	N/A
2025/26	31 January 2027	N/A
2026/27	30 November 2027	N/A
2027/28	30 November 2028	N/A

Outstanding Audit Opinions

2019/20 & 2020/21

- 3.3 The Audit of the 2019/20 & 2020/21 Statement of Accounts has now been concluded, and the auditors issued **unmodified opinions** for each year 5th December & 12th December 2024, respectively. A copy of the audited financial statements were published on the Council's ahead of the 13th of December 2024 backstop deadline.

2021/22 & 2022/23

- 3.4 The Audit of the 2021/22 & 2022/23 Statement of Accounts has now been concluded and in line with the backstop arrangements the auditors issued a **disclaimed opinions** for each year 12th December 2024. A copy of the audited financial statements were published on the Council's ahead of the 13th of December 2024 backstop deadline.

- 3.5 The s151 Officer would like to inform Council that the issuing of a disclaimed opinion attributable to the backstop date does not indicate significant financial reporting or financial management issues. Deloitte's Annual Audit Report for the Financial Years 2020/21 to 2022/23 is presented elsewhere on this agenda and includes the External Auditors assessment of the Council's arrangements to secure Value for Money for the use of its resources.

2023/24

- 3.6 KPMG have been appointed as the Council's External Auditors for the 5-year period 2023/24 to 2028/29. As previously reported the delays in issuing the audit opinions and addressing the objection to the prior year's financial statements have impacted their ability to undertake work on the 2023/24. Similar to previous years audits a backstop date of 28th February 2025 was provided to issue an audit opinion. Regrettably **we did not achieve this deadline**, and a note has been published on the Council's website [Statement of Accounts - Lancaster City Council](#)

- 3.7 The s151 Officer advised Members that given the volume of work outstanding from previous years and the changes to the backstop dates that required both Deloitte and KPMG needing significant officer support over the same period (December – February) it was always going to be a challenge to achieve the 28th of February deadline. The s151 Officers priority was to focus on finalising the outstanding audit work, enabling Deloitte to issue their audit opinions and on delivering the Council's statutory requirements such as:

- General Fund & HRA budgets
- 10 Year Capital Programme
- Capital & Treasury Management Strategies
- Medium Term Financial Strategy
- Quarterly Monitoring Reports
- Technical issues including IFRS 16 transitions and VAT.

- 3.8 To reassure Members there are no financial consequences to the Council for not achieving the backstop date. MHCLG have published a list of all of the bodies on their website and we are 1 of 58 other public sector bodies, including 18 other District Councils who did not meet the 28th of February 2025 backstop date.

[Addressing the local audit backlog in England: Non-compliance lists - GOV.UK February 2025 - audit opinion data - PSAA](#)

- 3.9 There is only 1 non-material item currently outstanding although a number of queries have been submitted after the backstop deadline, which are being dealt with. It is expected that KPMG will issue a disclaimed opinion shortly.

Outstanding Objections to the Financial Statements

- 3.10 Members will be aware of longstanding objections to the Councils Financial Statements and the impact on both the Audit Opinions and Certification. The following paragraphs provide detail of the current position and any matters currently outstanding.

2019/20

- 3.11 The objection the 2019/20 Financial Statements was concluded 17th June 2021, and the audit certificate issued.

2020/21 to 2022/23

- 3.12 The outcome of the objections were formally communicated to the objector by Deloitte 25th February 2025. The communication outlined in detail the External Auditors considerations and conclusion against each of the 34 objections and confirms that for a number of reasons **none** of the objections have been upheld.

- 3.13 Section 28 (3) (b) of the Local Audit & Accountability Act 2014 allows the objector 21 days from the date of receipt to appeal against the decision to the court. It is understood that the objector has communicated his desire to exercise this right to Deloitte. Members should note there is no right of appeal against the decision not to issue a report in the Public Interest.

- 3.14 Until the issue of the objections is finally resolved the External Auditor will not be able to issue the Audit Certificate and formally close the 2020/21 to 2022/23 audits.

- 3.15 Deloitte have advised that based on the time incurred and the cost of external legal advice, their proposed fee for the objection is **£48,191** to cover the 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23. This is below their previous estimates, but Members should note that this cost excludes a considerable amount Council officer time and external legal costs, with the true cost of the objection far exceeding this amount. The fee for the objection will be disclosed within the 2024/25 Statement of Accounts.

2023/24

- 3.16 Members will recall that similar to previous years the 2023/24 Financial Statements are subject to ongoing objections by a local Council Taxpayer. The objections appear to be similar in nature and to assist KPMG they have been cross referenced to those from previous years and the findings from Deloitte.

- 3.17 KPMG will need to form their own view on the validity of the objections which may well result in the Council incurring additional fees. It will also impact on their ability to issue the audit certificate and conclude the 2023/24 audit.

4.0 EFFECTIVENESS OF RISK MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

- 4.1 The Audit Committee is responsible for the ongoing review of the Council's risk management framework. It looks at how the Council applies its principles, approach and processes to the identification, assessment, and management of risks. An initial review of the Council's Risk Management arrangements was undertaken in July 2022 by the Council's Internal Auditors who identified that there was no or very limited central operational or strategic risk management oversight processes in operation.
- 4.2 Since the review, the Council's Risk Management Strategy & Policy has been updated several times and approved by the Committee. The latest updated Risk Management Policy was considered and approved at its meeting 20th March 2024 [Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 20th March 2024, 6.00 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#). All of the recommendations have been completed, a further review has been completed, providing substantial assurance reflecting the excellent on-going work in this area.
- 4.3 The Council's Strategic Risk register is considered on a quarterly basis by Cabinet prior to scrutiny by both the Audit Committee and Budget & Performance Panel.

5.0 EFFECTIVENESS INTERNAL CONTROL ENVIRONMENT

- 5.1 To enable the Committee to consider the effectiveness of the Council's Internal Control Environment it obtains assurance from a variety of sources, as outlined below.

Internal Audit Risk Based Plan and Ongoing Monitoring

- 5.2 The Internal Audit Plan defines the scope and reasoning behind the approach being adopted. Overall, the objectives are:
- to fulfil Internal Audit's own statutory obligations.
 - to provide assurance, support, and advice to Chief Officers on matters under their control; to support the s151 Officer's statutory obligations to maintain an adequate and effective audit of the Council's accounting records and its systems of internal control.
 - to assist the Audit Committee in gaining independent assurance on the Council's risk management, governance, and control arrangements.
 - to report compliance with the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards (PSIAS); and
 - to contribute to the development of Council corporate standards
- 5.3 The Plan is mapped to the Council's strategic objectives and risks and is reviewed as part of the risk assessment process to ensure that it remains focused on the Council's key risks and challenges and adds value. It was approved by Audit Committee 20th March 2024 [Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 20th March 2024, 6.00 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)
- 5.4 A separate report is presented to each Audit Committee detailing progress against the agreed plans and highlighting key messages for Audit Committee attention.

Overall Head of Internal Audit Opinion

- 5.5 The Accounts and Audit Regulations, require Internal Audit to form an opinion on the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's internal control environment. This includes consideration of any significant risk or governance issues and control failures that have been identified throughout the year. In arriving at an opinion, the Head of Internal Audit will give consideration to.
- An assessment of the design and operation of the underpinning strategic governance, risk management arrangements and supporting processes.
 - An assessment of the range of individual assurances arising from risk-based internal audit assignments that have been reported throughout the period. This assessment has taken account the relative materiality of systems reviewed and management's progress in respect of addressing control weaknesses identified.
 - An assessment of the Council's response to Internal Audit recommendations, and the extent to which they have been implemented.

- 5.6 The 2023/24 Head of Internal Audit Opinion was presented to Audit Committee 22nd May 2024 [Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 22nd May 2024, 6.00 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#). Work to deliver the 2024/25 Audit Plan is still on-going with the Head of Internal Audit Opinion to be presented at the Audit Committee at its meeting 21st May 2025.

6.0 COUNTER FRAUD & CORRUPTION

- 6.1 In addition to the responsibilities previously noted the Committee's terms of reference place responsibility to "monitor counter fraud, actions and resources and review the assessment of fraud risks and potential harm to the Council from fraud and corruption". In order to enable the Committee to discharge this responsibility it has oversight and approval for key anti-fraud and corruption policies such as:

- Anti-Fraud, Corruption and Bribery Policy,
- Money Laundering,
- Sanctions Policy,
- Contract Procedure Rules, and
- Financial Procedure Rules

- 6.2 At various points the year the Committee has considered and approved each of these policies.

Anti-Fraud, Corruption and Bribery, Money Laundering, & Sanctions Policies

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 19th March 2025, 6.00 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

Contract Procedure Rules

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Thursday, 30th January 2025, 6.00 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

Financial Procedure Rules

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 27th November 2024, 6.00 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

- 6.3 The Council also operates a shared Corporate Enquiry Team with Preston City and Fylde Borough Council. The Team provide the Committee with both a Business Plan and an Annual Report in respect of its work in areas such as

- Right to Buy
- Housing Benefits
- Housing Tenancy
- Council Tax Support
- Single Person Discount
- Employee fraud

Audit Committee reviewed the extent and outcome of counter fraud work during the 2023/24

financial year 27th November 2024.

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 27th November 2024, 6.00 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

- 6.4 Although outside of the Committee's remit, the Council has a wide range of established policies which sit alongside and compliment the counter fraud and corruption framework, including.

- Raising Concerns Policy
- Officers and Members Codes of Conduct.

7.0 ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT

- 7.1 All Councils are required to review their governance arrangements at least once a year. Preparation and publication of an Annual Governance Statement (AGS) in accordance with the CIPFA / Solace Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework (2016) (the Framework) fulfils this requirement.
- 7.2 The AGS enables the Council to explain to the community, service users, taxpayers, and other stakeholders its governance arrangements and how the controls it has in place manage risks of failure in delivering its outcomes. The Council is required to prepare an AGS, which is published alongside the Statement of Accounts.
- 7.3 Although not devised by the Audit Committee it has responsibility for oversight of key areas as outlined in this report that support the AGS and is required to consider its content prior to signed by the Leader and Chief Executive for inclusion in the Statement of Accounts
- 7.4 In preparation for the 2023/24 Statement of Accounts, the Councils AGS was reviewed by the Audit Committee at its meeting 31st July 2024 [Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 31st July 2024, 6.00 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#). Progress against any improvement areas are presented to the Committee.
- 7.5 Work to deliver the 2024/25 AGS is still on-going, it will however be presented at the Audit Committee at its meeting 21st May 2025.

8.0 CONCLUSION

- 8.1 The organisation and operation of the Audit Committee is an integral element of public accountability and governance. It plays a key role in regard to the integrity of the Council's financial information, its system of internal controls, and the legal and ethical conduct of management and employees. It has over the year delivered effectively against its terms of reference and provided assurance and challenge across key areas.
- 8.2 The work of the Audit Committee is considered as part of the External Auditor's annual value for money conclusion which has been reported to Council as part of the Annual Audit Report elsewhere on this agenda, with no significant weaknesses noted.
- 8.3 Over the next 12 months, the Audit Committee will be focusing on addressing the areas identified in the Internal Audit Annual Report. I would particularly like to maintain the momentum in respect of embedding Risk Management within Lancaster City Council, as an integral part of strategic and operational management, and to properly inform risk based Internal Audit planning. I would also like to conclude the mapping of the full suite of Council Policies and their review timetable.
- 8.4 I would like to take this opportunity to thank each member of the Audit Committee and also, each and every elected member and Council officer who has assisted in providing effective

systems of corporate governance and internal control and have continued to make an important contribution to the standing and achievements of the Council.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

(including Health & Safety, Equality & Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Sustainability and Rural Proofing):

None directly arising from this report.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

None directly arising from this report.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

None directly arising from this report.

OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS, such as Human Resources, Information Services, Property, Open Spaces

None directly arising from this report.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The s151 Officer has been consulted and has no additional comments.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no further comments.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

[Browse meetings - Audit Committee - Lancaster City Council](#)

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COUNCIL

External Auditors Annual Report Financial Years 2020-21 to 2022-23

23 April 2025

Report of Audit Committee

PURPOSE OF REPORT
<p>To provide Council with the External Auditors Annual Audit Report for the financial years 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23, issued by Deloitte's, noting that no significant weaknesses were identified in respect of the Value for Money assessment categories.</p>
<p>This report is public.</p>

RECOMMENDATIONS

- That the Council considers the Annual Audit Report for the financial years 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23, issued by the Council's former External Auditors, Deloitte's noting that no significant weaknesses were identified in respect of the Value for Money assessment categories.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Council's External Auditors are required to complete a Value for Money (VfM) assessment as part of the audit of the accounts. The National Audit Office (NAO) Code of Practice regulations set out how the auditor is required to report whether an authority has put in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. The Audit Committee considered the Annual Audit Report at its meeting on 19th March 2025 and has referred it to Council for noting ahead of publication on the Council's website.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1. Under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and 2020 National Audit Office Code of Audit Practice, Auditors are required to carry out a value for money audit in line with the NAO code.
- 2.2. The Value for Money report includes the auditor's assessment of VfM arrangements against three required reporting criteria:
- **Financial Sustainability:** How the Council plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services
 - **Governance:** How the Council ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks
 - **Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness:** How the Council uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services

- 2.3 In 2020 the External Auditor requirements around VfM assessment moved away from a binary qualified/ unqualified conclusion. It now includes more substantial commentary against each of these three areas and reports on the arrangements put in place by the Council to deliver VfM.
- 2.4 The purpose of preparing and issuing Annual Audit Reports is to communicate to the Council and key external stakeholders, including members of the public, the key issues arising from the Auditors' work, which they consider should be brought to the attention of the Council. To enable this, it is a requirement that the report be presented to Council for consideration and published on the Council's website alongside the audited Statement of Accounts.
- 2.5 Council Members will be aware there has been several ongoing issues within the Public Sector Audit Regime which has severely impacted the audit of the Councils Statement of Accounts for 2019/20, 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23. In order to address this failure within the system, Government introduced a number of arrangements including the use of disclaimed audit opinions and the establishment of "backstop" dates by which all outstanding audits should be concluded
- 2.6 Details of these arrangements have been previously presented to the Audit Committee as part of the Chief Finance Officers Statement of Accounts Update reports, with the current position presented within the Chair of the Audit Committee's annual report elsewhere on this agenda. However, a fundamental requirement of the backstop provisions is the completion of the VfM conclusion.
- 2.7 This is the last report prepared by Deloitte, with the Councils External Auditor changing to KPMG from 2023/24. As noted within the Chair of the Audit Committee's Annual Report the audit of the 2023/24 financial statements is still on going. Once concluded the Annual Audit Report 2023/24 will be considered by Audit Committee before being presented to Council.

3.0 SUMMARY FINDINGS 2020/21 TO 2022/23

- 3.1 The External Auditors can make a number of recommendations which are classified into a hierarchy of levels:
- Statutory Recommendations – Actions which should be taken where significant weaknesses are identified with arrangements. These are made under Schedule 7 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and require discussion at Full Council and a public response.
 - Key Recommendations – Actions which should be taken by the Council where significant weaknesses are identified within arrangements.
 - Improvement Recommendations – Actions which should improve arrangements in place but are not a result of identifying significant weaknesses in the Council's arrangements
- 3.2 The Value for Money report is included within the Auditor's Annual Report attached at **Appendix A**. Summary details of the Risk Assessment and Conclusions for the applicable years is copied in table 1 below.

Table 1 Summary Findings

Financial Year	Risk Assessment	Conclusion
2020/21	No risk of significant weakness	No significant weakness identified
2021/22	No risk of significant weakness	No significant weakness identified
2022/23	No risk of significant weakness	No significant weakness identified

- 3.3 The report includes a small number of improvement recommendations many of which the Council has already actioned and will continue to implement over the coming year. An action plan detailing managements response, action owners and dates are included at **Appendix B**

4.0 DETAILS OF CONSULTATION

- 4.1 No formal consultation is required; however, the Annual Audit Report was presented to Audit Committee 19th March 2025.

5.0 OPTIONS AND OPTIONS ANALYSIS

- 5.1 As the report is for noting no alternative options are put forward, but Council could make supplementary commentary regarding any matters arising.

6.0 CONCLUSION

- 6.1. Deloitte's conclusion of the Council's Value for Money assessment is included in the Auditor's Annual Report attached at **Appendix A**.
- 6.2. The Council accepts the findings that no significant weaknesses have been found in respect of financial sustainability, governance or improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
- 9.3. The Council accepts recommendations made to continually improve its value for money practices which will be reported back to Audit Committee in subsequent external audit reviews.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

(including Health & Safety, Equality & Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Sustainability and Rural Proofing):

No implications directly arising.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

The basic requirement for the Council to prepare accounts is set out in section 3 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. The detailed requirements are set out in the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015. The External Auditor is required to publish an annual commentary on value for money arrangements as part of the auditor's annual report. This is to comply with the requirements of the 2020 Code of Audit Practice and Auditor Guidance Note 3.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The scale audit fee for 2018/19 to 2022/23 (£44,950) was set by Public Sector Audit Appointments Ltd (PSAA) and was previously approved by the Audit Committee. Unfortunately, the scale fee does not include the additional work required under the change in standards for the years 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23. An additional amount of £14,000 in total for the three years has been agreed, which recognises that this was performed as one single piece of work

OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS, such as Human Resources, Information Services, Property, Open Spaces

No implications directly arising.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The s151 Officer has assisted in authoring this report and his comments are reflected within it.

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Councils' Constitution provides that the Audit Committee is responsible for the provision of independent assurance of the adequacy of the risk management framework and the associated control environment. The Terms of Reference of the Audit Committee require it to provide an independent assurance of the risk management framework and the associated control environment. Noting and commenting upon the Annual Audit Letter before it is considered by Full Council is an important part of this assurance

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Statement of Accounts 2019/20 – 2023/24

<http://www.lancaster.gov.uk/the-council-and-democracy/budgets-and-spending/statement-of-accounts>

Statement of Accounts Updates

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 27th November 2024, 6.00 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 31st July 2024, 6.00 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 22nd May 2024, 6.00 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 20th March 2024, 6.00 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 22nd November 2023, 6.00 p.m.](#)

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 26th July 2023, 6.00 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 24th May 2023, 6.10 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 22nd March 2023, 6.10 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 23rd November 2022, 6.10 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 25th May 2022, 6.10 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 23rd March 2022, 6.10 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

[Agenda for Audit Committee on Wednesday, 24th November 2021, 6.10 p.m. - Lancaster City Council](#)

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Lancaster City Council

Auditor's Annual Report for the years 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23
February 2024

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Auditor's Annual Report

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Key Messages

Audit report on the financial statements

2020/21	We issued an unqualified opinion on the Council's financial statements on 12 December 2024. The certificate for this year has not been issued as a result of an outstanding objection. We will certify completion of our audit once the objection has been addressed.
2021/22 and 2022/23	We issued audit reports with a disclaimer of opinion on the 2021/22 and 2022/23 financial statements on 12 December 2024, in accordance with the national 'backstop' provisions established by the Accounts and Audit (Amendment) Regulations 2024, and National Audit Office's Code of Audit Practice. Our opinions reported material known misstatements in respect of: 1) the pension membership data used in the 31 March 2022 statement of accounts was not updated for the results of the 31 March 2022 triennial valuation; 2) the pension asset included in the 31 March 2023 statement of accounts has not been capped or considered whether the total value is recognisable; and 3) the pension asset included in the 31 March 2023 statement of accounts, any recognisable asset should be included in the assets section of the balance sheet as opposed to the liability section. The certificate for these years have not been issued as a result of an outstanding objection. We will certify completion of our audits once these objections have been addressed.

The Council's arrangements to secure Value for Money in the use of resources

Financial year	Risk assessment	Conclusion
2020/21	No risk of significant weakness	No significant weaknesses identified
2021/22	No risk of significant weakness	No significant weaknesses identified
2022/23	No risk of significant weakness	No significant weaknesses identified

Purpose of this report

Our Auditor's Annual Report presents our commentary on Lancaster City Council's ('the Council') arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources ('Value for Money', 'VfM'), for the years ended 31 March 2021, 31 March 2022 and 31 March 2023.

We prepared this report in accordance with the National Audit Office's ("NAO") 2024 Code of Audit Practice, and its supporting Local Audit Reset and Recovery Implementation Guidance, and Auditor Guidance Notes ('AGNs'). These are available from the NAO website. This report fulfils the requirements of the Accounts and Audit Regulations for an Annual Audit Letter.

Our VfM commentary is based on our assessment of the adequacy of the arrangements the Council has put in place. The extent of our work is determined by our risk assessment, and whether we have identified any risks of significant weakness in arrangements. The commentary does not consider the adequacy of every arrangement the Council has in place, nor does it provide positive assurance that the Council is delivering, or its services represent, value for money.

We have not identified any significant weaknesses in the Council's VfM arrangements, and so have not reported any recommendations in respect of significant weaknesses. We have included in appendix 3 observations and recommendations from our work.

Explanation of the backstop arrangements and disclaimers of opinion

There is a significant backlog in the publication of audited accounts of local authorities in England. National bodies have been working together to address the backlog, as summarised in the Financial Reporting Council's accessible guide to the overall programme of work, [Local Audit Backlog - Rebuilding Assurance](#).

The government has introduced a legislative backstop date by which local authorities must publish their final accounts, including the audit report, even if the financial statement audit is not yet complete. For financial years up to 2022/23, the backstop date is 13 December 2024. The Financial Reporting Council has published an accessible guide to the overall programme of work to recover the backlog of local authority audits.

The backstop date limited the time available to complete our financial statement audit, and obtain sufficient, appropriate audit evidence to form an opinion for the financial years 2021/22 and 2022/23. These limitations are significant and pervasive in extent, and auditing standards therefore require us to issue a disclaimer of opinion in our audit reports for the financial years 2021/22 and 2022/23.

Auditor's work on Value for Money arrangements

The Section 151 Officer and the Council are responsible for putting in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources. This includes taking properly informed decisions and managing key operational and financial risks so that they can deliver their objectives and safeguard public money.






The Council is required to annually review the effectiveness of the system of internal control, including VfM arrangements, and report upon this as part of their Annual Governance Statement.

Under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014, we are required to be satisfied that proper arrangements have been made to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources. The National Audit Office's Code of Audit Practice sets out three reporting criteria for the auditor to consider. Under the backstop provisions, the areas to consider in respect of these criteria have been amended, and we are not required to report against 'improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness'.

Financial Sustainability	<i>How the body plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services</i>
Governance	<i>How the body ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks</i>
Improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness	<i>How the body uses information about its costs and performance to improve the way it manages and delivers its services</i>

In this report, we set out the findings from the work we have undertaken. Where we have found significant weaknesses in arrangements, we make recommendations so that the Council can consider them and set out how it plans to make improvements. We have not identified any significant weaknesses in arrangements. In planning and performing our work, we consider the arrangements that we expect bodies to have in place, and potential indicators of risks of significant weaknesses in those arrangements. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been changes in nationally led processes, changes in expectations around Council's arrangements, and events occurring outside of the Council's control, which affect the relevance of some of these indicators. We have still considered whether these indicators are present, but have considered them in the context of the circumstances of 2020/21 and 2021/22 in assessing whether they are indicative of a risk of significant weakness in those years.

We performed a range of procedures to inform our VfM commentary, including:

-  Interviews with key stakeholders within the organisation primarily the section 151 officer.
-  Review of Council and committee reports and attendance at audit committee meetings.
-  Reviewing reports from third parties including internal audit.
-  Considering the findings from our audit work on the financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2021.
-  Review of the Council's Annual Governance Statement.

VfM arrangements: Financial Sustainability

Approach and considerations

We have considered how the Council plans and manages its resources to ensure it can continue to deliver its services, including:

- How the Council ensures it identifies all the significant financial pressures that are relevant to its short and medium-term plans and builds these into them;
- How the Council plans to bridge its funding gaps and identifies achievable savings;
- How the Council plans finances to support the sustainable delivery of services in accordance with strategic and statutory priorities; and
- How the Council identifies and manages risks to financial resilience, including challenge of the assumptions underlying its plans.

Commentary

The table below shows the Council's financial performance for each of the years covered by this report.

£'000	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
(Surplus) / Deficit on provision of services	4,713	11,559	4,831
Cash and cash equivalents	25,100	43,775	24,251
Usable reserves	48,427	43,875	36,242
Net assets	157,907	185,662	293,079
Increase / (decrease) in General Fund	2,447	(1,776)	5,645
Increase / (decrease) in General Fund earmarked reserves	10,317	(2,784)	(9,778)

The Council has a series of policies and strategies which governs its operations. These include the budget and policy framework which include the treasury management and reserves strategy.

The Council has a Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) which is refreshed at least annually. In January 2023 it published its Council Plan 2024 – 2027, which is underpinned by four principles, four themes and twenty four ambitions for the Council. The Council has commenced a two phase programme considering outcome based resourcing (OBR) and then making the Council fit for the future (FFTF). This programme considers the budgets assigned to each area and how they align to the ambitions of the Council. The MTFS articulates the expected reduction to budgets and the measures that the council is exploring, which is consistent with the information provided as part of the approval of the budget. We recommend that when the Council is making decisions throughout the year that the longer term impact of this decision and any wider impact on the MTFS is presented to members when decisions are being made to promote transparent decision making (Recommendation 1).

VfM arrangements: Financial Sustainability (continued)

Commentary

The Council has an established annual financing planning process in order to develop the annual budget, which is approved at Council in February annually. The Council's annual planning process and process around identification of significant pressures was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We saw evidence that the Council adapted its arrangements to respond and the revised approach was in line with our expectation in the operating environment during 2020/21. As part of the budget and MTFS preparation there is consultation with stakeholder groups where feedback is sought and incorporated into revised budgets and MTFS. The Council as part of its budget preparation includes a "perfect storm" scenario where it assumes all downside scenarios occur and then the associated impact on the general fund balance. As part of this the Council considers whether it has sufficient balances to meet all these risks in the short term.

The Council has identified the need to make savings both now and in the future. As part of the budget preparation it presents the identified savings and any gaps for the following year and the subsequent three years. As the Council has included in its forecast that it anticipates consuming reserves, it is important that it continues to report on any changes to the budget, identifies early any opportunity for savings, tracks where savings are realised and reports on this to the appropriate levels within the Council. Additionally, any decisions that are taken with an impact on finance should have the budgetary and reserves implications clearly detailed (Recommendation 2). The Council has also over the budgets for the period 2020/21 to 2023/24 increased its General Fund minimum balances from £2.5m to £5m.

The Council is a relatively high cost authority when compared to its CIPFA nearest neighbours and we recommend that the Council critically considers opportunities to make savings in areas where they appear to be an outlier (Recommendation 3).

The Council performs horizon scanning and considers the impact on the MTFS and budget. One of the identified risks is in relation to the nuclear power station and the uncertainty over any unplanned outages and ultimately any decommissioning and closure, due to the substantial value of non-domestic rates obtained from the power station whilst it is in operation. As part of the MTFS the Council models the pessimistic scenario and this is then updated as and when there are any changes to planned decommissioning dates. We understand that these dates based on the latest information in December 2024 are 2027 and 2028 respectively. The Council prepares formal quarterly reporting which includes reporting on performance, projects and also resources. This is underpinned by budget meetings between service accountants, budget holders and the Chief Executive where significant variances to budget are discussed as well as forward looking changes to policies or regulatory changes which may impact on year-end outturn or future periods. Outside of this, the Council considers changes to national guidance / policies, such as the change in PWLB criteria during 2020/21, and the associated impact on projects.

VfM arrangements: Governance

Approach and considerations

We have considered how the Council ensures that it makes informed decisions and properly manages its risks, including:

- How the body monitors and assesses risk and how the body gains assurance over the effective operation of internal controls, including arrangements to prevent and detect fraud;
- How the body ensures effective processes and systems are in place to ensure budgetary control; to communicate relevant, accurate and timely management information (including non-financial information); supports its statutory financial reporting requirements; and ensures corrective action is taken where needed, including in relation to significant partnerships; and
- How the body ensures it makes properly informed decisions, supported by appropriate evidence and allowing for challenge and transparency. This includes arrangements for effective challenge from the audit committee.

Commentary

The Council has a series of policies covering internal controls, including a whistleblowing and anti-money laundering policy. These policies are available on the Council's website. The Audit Committee is responsible for approving the annual internal audit plan and receives updates at Committee meetings throughout the year.

Management have detailed in their Annual Governance Statements covering the financial periods 2017/18 – 2021/22 that risk management is an area requiring a greater degree of embedding within the Council. This has been widely discussed at Cabinet, Council and Audit Committee meetings and the Council has taken steps to report and monitor risks within the organisation. During FY22/23 the Council have established a corporate project in relation to risk management to embed and establish the process for risk management. As the Council moves through this corporate project on risk management, we recommend that there is a regular review on the reporting undertaken and the processes and systems developed to ensure that they meet the needs of the various users / stakeholders (Recommendation 4).

The Council has two shared service arrangements in relation to revenue and benefits and the corporate enquiry team. These arrangements have in place since 2011 and 2015 respectively. Both of these arrangements ended on 30 June 2021, with Cabinet approving the extension of these arrangements formally on 13 July 2021. We recommend that where services are delivered under a shared service arrangement that the new contracts are approved in advance of the previous arrangements expiring (Recommendation 5).

VfM arrangements: Governance (continued)

Commentary

The Council has an Internal Audit Function to provide independent, objective assurance to enhance the controls in the organisation. The internal audit opinions for the years ended 31 March 2021, 2022 and 2023 were adequate, limited and moderate respectively. The Council until 31 March 2021 operated a shared arrangement with Wyre Borough Council for the provision of internal audit. This was supplemented by the Council via contracting arrangements with Lancashire County Council, Mersey Internal Audit Agency and Fylde Borough Council, along with activity being undertaken internally within the Council in order to be able to form an Head of Internal Audit opinion. When the arrangement ceased on 31 March 2021, the Council was without an internal audit function for six months prior to the appointment of Mersey Internal Audit Agency to fulfil the internal audit role. Internal audit have provided as part of their opinion areas of improvement and we recommend that management continues to ensure that the changes to the control environment are culturally embedded within the Council, and that the Council continues to consider the use of internal audit within the organisation. The Council should also ensure that it is performing root cause analysis of any control recommendations and then embedding this more widely throughout the organisation (Recommendation 6).

We have observed that the finance function is relatively small and therefore there is a degree of reliance on key team members. We understand from management that the Council has reviewed the capacity in the finance team and during 2024 has hired a number of trainee accountants. We recommend that the Council routinely reviews the capacity of the finance team to ensure that it is able to adequately support the Council in the delivery of the MTFS (Recommendation 7).

The Council adapted its arrangements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this included temporary management structures, revision of the scheme of delegation and the establishment of a Financial Resilience Group.

Members are invited to training sessions based on a schedule prepared by the Council. The training covers areas such as “what the budget does” / “the statement of accounts”. The Council has an appropriate blend of Councillors reflecting the political make up of the Council. The Council should consider the training needs of members annually and whether there are appropriate financial skills in order to challenge management on key financial assumptions and whether any additional training should be provided (Recommendation 8).

Purpose of our report and responsibility statement

What we report

Our report fulfils our obligations under the Code of Audit Practice to issue an Auditor's Annual Report that includes our commentary on arrangements to secure value for money, and recommendations in respect of identified significant weaknesses in the Council's arrangements.

What we don't report

Our audit was not designed to identify all matters that may be relevant to the Council.

Also, there will be further information you need to discharge your governance responsibilities, such as matters reported on by management or by other specialist advisers.

Finally, our views on internal controls and business risk assessment should not be taken as comprehensive or as an opinion on effectiveness since they have been based solely on the audit procedures performed under the Code of Audit Practice.

The scope of our work

Our observations are developed in the context of our audit work.

We described the scope of our work in our reports to the Audit Committee.

Use of this report

This report has been prepared for the Council, as a body, and we therefore accept responsibility to you alone for its contents. We accept no duty, responsibility or liability to any other parties, since this report has not been prepared, and is not intended, for any other purpose.

Deloitte LLP

Newcastle Upon Tyne | 19 February 2025

Appendix 1: Council's responsibilities

Public bodies spending taxpayers' money are accountable for their stewardship of the resources entrusted to them. They should account properly for their use of resources and manage themselves well so that the public can be confident.

Financial statements are the main way in which local public bodies account for how they use their resources. Local public bodies are required to prepare and publish financial statements setting out their financial performance for the year. To do this, bodies need to maintain proper accounting records and ensure they have effective systems of internal control.

All local public bodies are responsible for putting in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness from their resources. This includes taking properly informed decisions and managing key operational and financial risks so that they can deliver their objectives and safeguard public money. Local public bodies report on their arrangements, and the effectiveness with which the arrangements are operating, as part of their annual governance statement.

The Chief Financial Officer, as Section 151 Officer of the Council, is responsible for the preparation of the Council's Statement of Accounts in accordance with proper practices as set out in the CIPFA/LASAAC Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting. In preparing the Statement of Accounts the Chief Financial Officer is required to select suitable accounting policies and make judgements and estimates that are reasonable and prudent. The Chief Financial Officer is required to confirm that the Statement of Accounts, taken as a whole, is fair, balanced, and understandable, and provides the information necessary for tax payers, regulators and stakeholders to assess the Council's performance, business model and strategy.

The Chief Financial Officer is required to comply with the CIPFA Code of Practice and prepare the financial statements on a going concern basis, unless the Council is informed of the intention for dissolution without transfer of services or function to another entity. In applying the going concern basis of accounting, the Chief Financial Officer has applied the 'continuing provision of services' approach set out in the CIPFA code of practice as it is anticipated that the services the Council provides will continue into the future.

The Chief Financial Officer and Council are responsible for putting in place proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of the Council's resources, for ensuring that the use of public funds complies with the relevant legislation, delegated authorities and guidance, for safeguarding the assets of the Council, and for taking reasonable steps for the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities.

The Accounts and Audit (Amendment) Regulations 2024 establish a backstop date by which the Council is required to publish its Statement of Accounts (other than in specific circumstances).

Appendix 2: Auditor's responsibilities

Auditor's responsibilities relating to the Council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources

We are required under the Code of Audit Practice and the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 to satisfy ourselves that the Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources.

We are not required to consider, nor have we considered, whether all aspects of the Council's arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources are operating effectively.

We undertake our work in accordance with the Code of Audit Practice, having regard to the guidance, published by the Comptroller & Auditor General in November 2024, as to whether the Council has proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources. Under the 2024 Code of Audit Practice, our work for 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23 has only considered arrangements in respect of two reporting criteria (financial sustainability and governance), in line with the national requirements for audits affected by the backstop arrangements.

The Comptroller & Auditor General has determined that under the Code of Audit Practice, we discharge this responsibility by reporting by exception if we have reported to the Council a significant weakness in arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources for the year. Other findings from our work, including our commentary on the Council's arrangements, are reported in our Auditor's Annual Report.

Auditor's responsibilities for the audit of the financial statements

The objective of an audit is to obtain reasonable assurance about whether the financial statements as a whole are free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error, and to issue an auditor's report that includes our opinion. Reasonable assurance is a high level of assurance but is not a guarantee that an audit conducted in accordance with ISAs (UK) will always detect a material misstatement when it exists. Misstatements can arise from fraud or error and are considered material if, individually or in the aggregate, they could reasonably be expected to influence the economic decisions of users taken on the basis of these financial statements.

Where it is not possible to complete the audit of the financial statements by the relevant "backstop" date established by the Accounts and Audit (Amendment) Regulations 2024, the auditor is required to issue an audit opinion with a limitation of scope or with a disclaimer of opinion (depending on the extent of assurance it is possible to obtain by that date).

A description of our responsibilities for the audit of the financial statements is located on the FRC's website at:

www.frc.org.uk/auditorsresponsibilities.

Auditor's other responsibilities

We are also required to report to you if we exercise any of our additional reporting powers under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 to:

- make a written recommendation to the Council, copied to the Secretary of State;
- make a referral to the Secretary of State if we believe that the Council or an officer of the Council is: about to make, or has made, a decision which involves or would involve the Council incurring unlawful expenditure; or about to take, or has begun to take a course of action which, if pursued to its conclusion, would be unlawful and likely to cause a loss or deficiency; or
- issue a report in the public interest.

Appendix 3: Recommendation summary

Throughout our report we have included areas of improvement, which do not represent a significant weakness. We have summarised these below:

Number	Area	Recommendation
1	Financial sustainability	The Council should ensure that when it is making decisions throughout the year, that the longer term impact of decisions and any wider impact on the MTFS is considered and presented to members to promote transparent decision making.
2	Financial sustainability	The Council should report on any changes to the budget, identify early any opportunity for savings, tracks where savings are realised and report on this to the appropriate levels within the Council. Additionally, any decisions that are taken with an impact on finance should have the budgetary and reserves implications clearly detailed
3	Financial sustainability	The Council should critically consider the opportunities to make savings in areas where they appear to be an outlier in the CIPFA nearest neighbour benchmarking data.
4	Governance	As the Council moves through the corporate project on risk management, it should regularly review the reporting undertaken and the processes and systems developed to ensure that they meet the needs of the various users / stakeholders.
5	Governance	The Council should maintain a forward register of expiry dates on contracts and ensures that there is timely review and approval of new contracts where appropriate to ensure a consistency of service and that contracts are renewed prior to their expiry.
6	Governance	Management should continue to ensure that the changes to the control environment are culturally embedded throughout the Council, and that the Council continues to consider the use of internal audit within the organisation. The Council should also ensure that it is performing root cause analysis of any control recommendations and then embedding these more widely within the organisation where appropriate.
7	Governance	The Council should routinely review the capacity of the finance team to ensure that it is able to adequately support the council in the delivery of the MTFS.
8	Governance	The Council should consider whether there are appropriate financial skills in order to challenge management on key financial assumptions and whether any additional training should be provided.

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Annual Audit Report Action Plan

APPENDIX B

Number	Area	Recommendation	Management Actions, Owners & Action Dates
1	Financial sustainability	The Council should ensure that when it is making decisions throughout the year, that the longer-term impact of decisions and any wider impact on the MTFS is considered and presented to members to promote transparent decision making.	<p><u>Accepted</u> All Council reports provide the financial implications of any decision. In addition, there are comments from both the s151 Officer and Monitoring Officer. However, based on the materiality of the financial impact there is potential to expand these comments to reference items such as the impact on the ongoing deficit, reserve balances etc.</p> <p><u>Owner</u> Chief Finance Officer</p> <p><u>Action Date</u> Q1 2025/26</p>
2	Financial sustainability	The Council should report on any changes to the budget, identify early any opportunity for savings, tracks where savings are realised and report on this to the appropriate levels within the Council. Additionally, any decisions that are taken with an impact on finance should have the budgetary and reserves implications clearly detailed	<p><u>Accepted</u> Changes to the budget and progress against savings targets are reported as part of the Council's Delivering our Priorities (DoP) quarterly monitoring cycle. As noted above based on the materiality of the financial impact there is potential to expand these comments to reference items such as the impact on the ongoing deficit, reserve balances etc.</p> <p><u>Owner</u> Chief Finance Officer</p> <p><u>Action Date</u> Q1 2025/26</p>

3	Financial sustainability	The Council should critically consider the opportunities to make savings in areas where they appear to be an outlier in the CIPFA nearest neighbour benchmarking data.	<p><u>Accepted</u> The Council does make use of benchmark data; however, it is not consistently applied throughout all services. A significant area for the Fit for the Future (FftF) is the increased use of benchmarking data, it will not be limited to CIPFA and will include other appropriate organisations such as Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) and the Local Government Association (LGA).</p> <p><u>Owner</u> Chief Finance Officer</p> <p><u>Action Date</u> To be developed throughout 2025/26</p>
4	Governance	As the Council moves through the corporate project on risk management, it should regularly review the reporting undertaken and the processes and systems developed to ensure that they meet the needs of the various users / stakeholders.	<p><u>Accepted</u> Whilst the Council has made significant strides forward in regard to risk management it accepts there is more to do if it is to embed risk management throughout the Council and its services</p> <p><u>Owner</u> Chief Officer People & Policy</p> <p><u>Action Date</u> Progress to be maintained throughout 2025/26</p>

5	Governance	The Council should maintain a forward register of expiry dates on contracts and ensures that there is timely review and approval of new contracts where appropriate to ensure a consistency of service and that contracts are renewed prior to their expiry.	<p><u>Accepted</u> As part of the on-going work within Procurement the existing central contracts register has been updated. However, the Council does recognise the importance of contract management and work is currently underway to improve this area.</p> <p><u>Owner</u> Chief Officer Governance</p> <p><u>Action Date</u> Progress to be maintained throughout 2025/26</p>
6	Governance	Management should continue to ensure that the changes to the control environment are culturally embedded throughout the Council, and that the Council continues to consider the use of internal audit within the organisation. The Council should also ensure that it is performing root cause analysis of any control recommendations and then embedding these more widely within the organisation where appropriate.	<p><u>Accepted</u> The position that led to a gap in Internal Audit provision was very much an isolated incident and Internal Audit is an integral and fundamental part of the Council's control environment. Where there has been evidence of control issues, external reviews have been undertaken to ensure an objective approach in examining the cause and also identifying solutions</p> <p><u>Owner</u> Senior Leadership team</p> <p><u>Action Date</u> Progress to be maintained throughout 2025/26</p>

7	Governance	The Council should routinely review the capacity of the finance team to ensure that it is able to adequately support the council in the delivery of the MTFS.	<p><u>Accepted</u></p> <p>For several reasons the finance team has run below capacity for a number of years. However, we have been successful in recruiting 3 accountancy apprentices and a senior accountant. Whilst it will take time for the individuals to develop resilience has been built within the team.</p> <p><u>Owner</u> Chief Finance Officer</p> <p><u>Action Date</u> Progress to be maintained throughout 2025/26</p>
8	Governance	The Council should consider whether there are appropriate financial skills in order to challenge management on key financial assumptions and whether any additional training should be provided.	<p><u>Accepted</u></p> <p>Members training needs are considered throughout the year and whilst key financial assumptions can be technical in nature training has been provided for Members in areas such as, general economic outlook, treasury management, capital accounting, risk management etc</p> <p><u>Owner</u> Chief Finance Officer & Chief Officer Governance</p> <p><u>Action Date</u> Progress to be maintained throughout 2025/26</p>

BRIEFING NOTE

Motion on notice to amend the Constitution to encourage non-Cabinet groups holding Scrutiny Chair positions

Proposed by: Cllr Jason Wood

Seconded by: Cllrs Phillip Black, Colin Hartley, Jean Parr, Louise Belcher, Joanne Ainscough.

Preamble:

This proposed amendment to the Constitution below is intended to encourage opposition groups to nominate and hold Scrutiny Chairs. Scrutiny plays an important role in being a critical friend to any administration. The Local Government Association (LGA) describes this 'critical friend' role as being necessary "... for scrutiny to be effective ... identifying where decisions could be improved and how to prevent mistakes being made or repeated. Scrutiny is, by its nature, political; that is, it is driven by politicians whose insights are a fundamental part of scrutiny's work to review decisions which are themselves political and may be politically contentious."

Where political groups who are actively involved in the executive by holding portfolios on the Cabinet, public perception may question this 'critical friend' role and perhaps ask if Scrutiny in practice at Lancaster is Cabinet groups marking their own homework.

Public perception should have full confidence in our formal scrutiny processes.

Proposal:

To amend the Constitution Part 2, 2.5 clauses 9 and 10 to take effect from annual business Council on 12 May 2025

To ADD to both clauses 9 and 10:

"The Chair shall not be a member of any political group which has Councillors on the Cabinet (except where no nominations from non-Cabinet groups are received)."

The current clauses currently state:

"9 Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Composition: Nine Councillors in political balance.

Members of the Committee shall not be members of the Cabinet.

The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be appointed by Council annually. However, only non-Cabinet Councillors are entitled to vote for the Chair.

The Chair and Vice Chair shall not be members of the largest political group which has Councillors on the Cabinet.

10 Budget and Performance Panel

Composition: Nine Councillors in political balance.

Members of the Committee shall not be members of the Cabinet.
The Chair of Budget and Performance Panel will be appointed by Council annually. Only non-Cabinet members are entitled to vote for the Chair.

The Chair and Vice Chair shall not be members of the largest political group which has Councillors on the Cabinet. “

If the amendment is approved by Council, these clauses will then read ...

“9 Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Composition: Nine Councillors in political balance.

Members of the Committee shall not be members of the Cabinet.
The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be appointed by Council annually. However, only non-Cabinet Councillors are entitled to vote for the Chair.

The Chair and Vice Chair shall not be members of the largest political group which has Councillors on the Cabinet.

The Chair shall not be a member of any political group which has Councillors on the Cabinet (except where no nominations from non-Cabinet groups are received).

10 Budget and Performance Panel

Composition: Nine Councillors in political balance.

Members of the Committee shall not be members of the Cabinet.
The Chair of Budget and Performance Panel will be appointed by Council annually. Only non-Cabinet members are entitled to vote for the Chair.

The Chair and Vice Chair shall not be members of the largest political group which has Councillors on the Cabinet.

The Chair shall not be a member of any political group which has Councillors on the Cabinet (except where no nominations from non-Cabinet groups are received).”

OFFICER BRIEFING NOTE

The Local Government Act 2000 introduced a new political governance system for councils in England and Wales, requiring them to have a separate ‘executive’ in the form of a leader, or elected mayor, and cabinet. To provide a counterweight to this, the Act also introduced the concept of ‘overview and scrutiny,’ whereby every council with an executive governance structure is required to have an overview and scrutiny committee. This enables the rest of the council to scrutinise the decisions and policies of the executive, issuing reports and recommendations informed by evidence and understanding of the needs of local communities.

Scrutiny is an essential part of ensuring that local government remains transparent, accountable, and open— resulting in improved public policies, services and outcomes. Councils that operate under executive governance arrangements are required by law to have an overview and scrutiny committee. This must be composed to reflect the political proportions of the council as a whole and members of the council's executive **may not** sit on the overview and scrutiny committee

While there are political proportionality requirements that must be met, the selection of the chair and other committee members is for each authority to decide for itself.

The chair of a scrutiny committee should seek to provide, through strong leadership, a good environment for the constructive challenge of decision-makers. They should foster discussion and encourage all concerned stakeholders to be involved in the process, while ensuring that all opinions are expressed in a constructive manner that contributes to the intended outcomes of the process. Statutory guidance says the chair should possess the ability to lead and build a sense of teamwork and consensus among committee members.

The chair is also responsible for ensuring that the scrutiny process – within and outside the context of formal committee meetings – is managed in a way that creates a fair and balanced environment, keeping the scrutiny process free from political point scoring and allowing for the effective scrutiny of all evidence that is produced.

Amendments to the Constitution will be made by the Monitoring Officer should this motion be passed.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS
The s151 Officer has been consulted and has no further comments to add
MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS
The Monitoring Officer has drafted this note