

EXECUTIVE MEMBER ANNUAL REPORT – 2008/09

COUNCILLOR JOHN GILBERT, CABINET MEMBER WITH SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR

- INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND CUSTOMER SERVICES
- REVENUES AND BENEFITS
- HOMELESSNESS
- DEMOCRATIC SERVICES
- LEGAL AND LICENSING SERVICES
- COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CONSULTATION



1 INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF PORTFOLIO RESPONSIBILITIES

This portfolio contains a large range of unconnected responsibilities. Some of the reports consist simply of a list of achievements, but others need more in the way of explanation, so that it is difficult to present in an entirely coherent manner. All areas except Information Technology and Customer Services and Homelessness are new to me and it has needed a lot of hard work to get up to speed on the new topics.

This is the first time I have been involved in the LDLSP, for which I became chairman of the Valuing People Thematic Group (VPTG). The first year of the new organisation has been quite frenetic, with the need to plan projects and get bids for finance in before the end of the financial year. VTPG has been part of an application by the Lancashire Community Cohesion Group for The Resilient and Cohesive Communities theme, which has gained Beacon Partner status for the City Council.

2 CORPORATE PLAN PRIORITIES

Provide customer focused accessible services:

- *Progress the Access to Services programme by moving the customer facing element of more services into the new face to face centres.*
- *Reduce avoidable contact from citizens.*
- *Improve score against Equality Standard for Local Government.*

Develop a service culture that embraces transformational change:

- *Publish consistent, measurable service standards.*
- *Provide training for all customer facing staff.*
- *Co-locating staff from partner and voluntary organisations in our Customer Service Centres.*

Local communities have more influence and involvement in the way services are delivered:

- *Increase the Council's responsiveness to local concerns by improving consultation and communication procedures.*

3 EXECUTIVE MEMBERSHIP:

- Cabinet
- Canal Corridor Cabinet Liaison Group
- District Wide Tenants Cabinet Liaison Group
- Transport Cabinet Liaison Group
- Universities Cabinet Liaison Group (Chairman)

4 EXECUTIVE APPOINTMENTS TO OUTSIDE BODIES etc:

- Lancaster District Local Strategic Partnership Management Group
- Lancaster and District YMCA Management Board
- LSP Health and Wellbeing Thematic Group
- LSP Valuing People Thematic Group (Chairman)

5 PROGRESS MADE IN 2008/9:

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND CUSTOMER SERVICES

During the year Information and Customer Services have played a valuable role co-ordinating, planning and implementing IT and telephony systems for the benefit of all Council services and members. They have:

1. Expanded the services available in the face to face Customer Service Centres in Morecambe and Lancaster Town Halls. All types of homelessness and housing standard queries are now dealt with initially within the customer service centre in Morecambe, allowing a far better environment for those requiring the standard services. The new facilities provide a more efficient and comfortable experience for visitors, with the availability of private interview rooms for those wanting a more confidential discussion. The queue management system helps to ensure that customers have as short a wait as possible. The changes mean that staff from Health and Strategic Housing also have been moved into a more suitable and secure environment following a number of years in inadequate accommodation at Euston Road.
2. Answered over one hundred and thirty thousand phone calls for the Council's main switchboard (582000) and Streetscene phone numbers.
3. Procured, configured and installed a new way of staff accessing computer systems which will enable staff to hot desk efficiently from any Council site. Initially this system has been installed across Morecambe Town Hall and has allowed far more staff to be accommodated within the office space of Morecambe town Hall than was possible previously. The previous offices at Euston Road can now potentially be disposed of adding to the Council's capital receipts.
4. Procured, tested and installed a new modern telephone system currently rolled out to the whole of Morecambe Town Hall, White Lund etc This system allows officers to hot desk from any telephone extension and will support further homeworking and hot desking initiatives across the Council. Over one hundred staff been trained in the use of the new telephone system and the new hot desking system.
5. Replaced over a hundred and forty desktop computers and continued to upgrade the Council's infrastructure including upgrades of the network to allow faster

access to information for anywhere within the Council's buildings, expanded our investment in advanced storage and recovery systems, etc. Any redundant equipment is sent to be reused and recycled for community use by a not-for-profit organisation, our partners Furniture Matters.

6. Protected the City Council's computer network from over one million computer virus attacks and eight million spam emails - providing a high level of security for the Council's corporate systems despite ever increasing and more sophisticated attacks.
7. Developed further the Council website, usage of which continues to grow strongly – unique users have grown by more than 13% over the last twelve months and in the last twelve months there were 1.72 million page views.
8. Changed and strengthened computer security for every user of the Council network to allow the Council to join the secure national infrastructure. This will allow to Council to work with many national and regional organisations sharing sensitive information in a secure and managed manner.

REVENUES AND BENEFITS

1. Implemented a restructure of the Service that delivered efficiency savings which contributed to the council's achievement of its target for limiting the rise in Council Tax for 2008/9 to 4%.
2. Maintained a high performing benefits service with fewer resources than in 2007/8, demonstrating value for money improvements and cashable savings.
3. Benefits service retained its rating as "excellent" against self assessment of DWP Performance Standards and the new National Performance Indicators for payment of benefit claims and processing changes of circumstances.
4. Continued to improve partnership working with other agencies and stakeholders. CAB now have a presence in the City Council's customer services centres one day a week.
5. Continued to improve the customer experience by the provision of shortened claim forms and a range of easy to read Information Sheets; and developed literature in alternative languages.
6. Effectively implemented the introduction of the Local Housing Allowance and Empty Property Rate legislation.
7. Maintained improved collection rates from previous year for both NNDR & Council Tax and implemented more stringent recovery procedures for non payers.
8. Managed the procurement and implementation of a corporate document management system in Revenue Services, Planning Services, Council Housing, and Creditors.

HOMELESSNESS

1. The Homelessness service has exceeded the corporate plan, national indicator and business plan targets this year. The continued focus on prevention and partnership with voluntary sector organisations seems to be working well. However, we cannot be complacent as the current recession is already starting to have an impact on the workload of the homeless team. We are expecting a difficult

year for homelessness and targets will need to be set to take account of the current economic climate.

2. The Homelessness service has successfully established the Sanctuary Scheme, which aims to make it possible for victims and potential victims of domestic abuse to remain in their home and feel safe.
3. The Homelessness Strategy was approved in July 2008 following extensive consultation. DCLG have congratulated the Council on its strategic approach to homelessness including Member commitment and links with the LSP. However, they questioned whether the Council could deliver the Strategy based on its current level of resources allocated to homelessness. In response, a Senior Housing Advisory Officer post is to be created within that team from existing budgets.
4. A new contract for homeless prevention services has just replaced the old service level agreements with voluntary organisations. The Homeless Review identified a need for a more streamlined and targeted service and this resulted in a tender process for one single contract. YMCA/Signposts were awarded the contract and the Council is now looking forward to a productive relationship with them and improved outcomes for homeless and potentially homeless people in our district.

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

1. With no elections in 2008, the opportunity was taken to review and consolidate some of the new practices introduced for the 2007 elections, particularly around postal vote checking – improved ways of working should be in place for 2009 when the Service will be put to the test running 3 elections on 4th June – the European, County Council and the new Morecambe Parish across a large area of the District. The ‘threat’ of a General Election remains although not for 4th June it is hoped.
2. A new duty was placed on Local Authorities to promote elections and electoral registration; not only were additional promotional methods used but the Elections Officer was able to take full advantage of all grants available from central government for this purpose.
3. Time and effort has been put into the development of recording systems to provide the necessary evidence demanded to meet a range of new Electoral Commission performance indicators. Work has already begun to prepare for the 2009 elections which will impact on the capacity of the Service in other areas of work.
4. The Service and the Elections Officer in particular has been working with the Office of National Statistics to prepare for a census rehearsal in Lancaster which will take place in October 2009.
5. In Members Services, the review of civic events has continued, constantly striving to improve the impact of each event at the same time as reducing costs. Minor cuts have been made to the budget and Council has taken the decision to bring to an end its involvement in twinning and the international youth games.
6. A review of distribution and the supply of printed documents to Councillors is ongoing and this has resulted in a reduction in the working hours of the Mayoral attendant without affecting the service provided to the Mayor.
7. In Democratic Support there have been some staff changes in 2008, resulting in a few changes in responsibilities. Staff in this section and in Members Services

concentrated their efforts on moving Member Development a step further forward this year and successfully achieved *North West Charter Status* for the Council.

8. In conjunction with Information Services a review of laptop provision to Councillors has also been undertaken and should be completed shortly.
9. There has been continued progress with the use of technology in committee management. All Councillors now have computer access to committee documents and other information and work is ongoing to help Members make best use of this system. It will include encouraging Councillors and Officers to attend meetings with agenda downloaded onto their laptop rather than using a paper copy, hopefully with the result eventually that paper and printing costs can be even further reduced.
10. Development of the committee management system for internal administration has also continued and is now being used to monitor the implementation of decisions.
11. The process to reach a decision on the Morecambe Town Council petition was passed to the City Council by the Department of Local Government and the Communities during 2008 and a conclusion was finally reached. The Order has now been made and the elections to the new Council will be held on 4th June. Support from the service will continue up to and including their first Annual Council in the middle of June.

LEGAL AND LICENSING SERVICES

The Legal team has been at full strength and unchanged since November 2007. This has enabled the solicitors to develop good working relationships with the client services allocated to them. The routine day to day work includes debt collection, recovery of rent arrears, Council house sales and other property transactions, including sales and leases. Advice is routinely provided for Cabinet reports and Licensing, Planning and Appeals committees.

1. There have been a number of successful prosecutions throughout the course of the year, relating to a range of issues including smoking, dangerous dogs, failure to comply with a housing notice and breach of health and safety regulations. An appeal against the revocation of a taxi driver's licence was also successfully defended.
2. Legal advice has been given on all major regeneration and property projects, including the Canal Corridor, Chatsworth Gardens, Luneside East and Morecambe Football Club, as well as the Town Green Application in Lancaster South.
3. Local land charges have continued to maintain a high standard of services, returning most searches within five working days. However, the number of searches has reduced dramatically as a result of the current economic climate and the state of the housing market.
4. In Licensing, the Gambling Act 2005, implemented in 2007 has bedded in, but has raised some complex and difficult issues with regard to amusement and bingo halls, which have required significant input from the Licensing Manager.
5. Problem premises under the Licensing Act 2003 continue to be dealt with by a Multi Agency Licensing Team.

6. Taxi Liaison Groups have been developed to improve discussion between the main taxi companies, the police, the highway authority and the Council's licensing officers on matters of common interest.
7. A requirement has been introduced for all new applicants for driver licences to attend a training course at Lancaster and Morecambe College, and it is hoped that this will improve the level of service provided to the public.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CONSULTATION

1. Review of communications and marketing has led to the agreed principle of centralising all communications and marketing activity giving a budget target reduction of £41,000 for 2009/10.
2. Council generated publicity achieved an equivalent advertising rate, in the local papers alone, of almost £280,000, up £8,000 on the previous year. In total, 405 press releases were issued and 1,232 press enquiries were dealt with by the press office function. As well as contact from the local media the press office continues to be contacted by a range of other national newspapers, radio stations, periodicals and on-line news networks.
3. Already rated more highly than any other public sector press office in the district, this year's annual media survey saw a rise in satisfaction with the service.
4. Staff required to provide information to the media have been provided with bespoke training courses by the communications officer.
5. Members and officers have also taken part in media training this year.
6. Photography training has also been provided to increase coverage of council activities via the media and provide a source of quality images for use across all council marketing materials.
7. One of the most popular features of the City Council's website for the public is its provision of news.
8. A page has been designed for the council's website dedicated to students and has so far received 404 hits.
9. The *My Council* campaign was launched in October, with the specific aim of increasing customer awareness of what their council does and the value for money it provides for the, on average, £3.56, households pay per week. This has been particularly pertinent in these difficult financial times when budget cuts mean customers, more than ever, need to be aware of what they are getting for their money. Response has been positive and the campaign will be developed during 2009/10.
10. Three issues of *Your District Council Matters* go to every household in the district drawing in an income of approximately £6,000. This helped to bring the overall cost of the magazine to approximately 13p per household. The latest issue included recession busting advice and promoted a range of council services which would otherwise have had to be advertised via alternative routes. Demand for articles in the magazine from services and partners continues to outstrip the space available.

11. A new Council Tax leaflet, which incorporates an A-Z of Council services, has been produced this year.
12. The consultation officer has just completed her first year in post. As well as leading on the development and delivery of corporate consultations, such as the Employee Survey, the Place Survey and corporate priorities, she has also provided expert advice and support to over 25 council consultations, developed a new consultation policy and procedure, trained staff in use of the online consultation system and played an active role in the County Research Network Group.
13. A new approach to print and design is paying dividends with a more consistent standard of design, print and branding. Council policies regarding corporate identity have been strengthened, resulting in increased use of and appearance of the council's identity, making it clearer to customers who the provider is and raising the council's profile.
14. A change in postal delivery supplier has generated significant savings.
15. Internal communications have been very important for keeping staff informed about Fair Pay and Access to Services, with the intranet being the most efficient, as well as the staffs' preferred, medium.

6 CONCLUSION

Despite the difficult national economic situation and the need to make an even huger budgetary saving than usual, the services in my portfolio have still managed to make some improvements in their provision to members and the public. This is in no small measure due to the dedicated and enthusiastic contributions from all the officers, to whom I give my grateful thanks.

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