

EXECUTIVE MEMBER ANNUAL REPORT – 2008/09

COUNCILLOR DAVID KERR, CABINET MEMBER WITH SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR

- HOUSING STRATEGY AND PROVISION - EXCLUDING HOMELESSNESS
- ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH
- HUMAN RESOURCES
- SUPPORT FOR THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR



1 EXECUTIVE MEMBERSHIP:

- Cabinet
- Canal Corridor Cabinet Liaison Group
- Children and Young People Cabinet Liaison Group
- District Wide Tenants Cabinet Liaison Group (Chairman)
- Neighbourhood Management Cabinet Liaison Group

2 EXECUTIVE APPOINTMENTS TO OUTSIDE BODIES etc:

- Lancaster District Community Safety Strategy Group
- LSP Environment Thematic Group
- LSP Health and Wellbeing Thematic Group
- LSP Safety Thematic Group
- Morecambe Bay Tobacco Control Alliance

3 OVERVIEW OF PORTFOLIO RESPONSIBILITIES:

Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Housing Strategy and Provision – excluding homelessness

Environmental health

Human Resources

Support for the Voluntary Sector

CORPORATE PLAN PRIORITY OUTCOMES:

Contribute to health improvement and reduce health inequalities through both delivery of our own services and our work with partners:

- *Use the baseline year of Place Survey to track 10% difference in life expectancy between our most deprived ward and the least deprived ward.*

Reduce alcohol related violence and harm; reduce alcohol related anti-social behaviour:

- *Work with the Police, Primary Care Trust and other agencies within the Community Safety Partnership to address issues around alcohol related violence and harm in line with the Alcohol Related Harm Strategy*

Increase the provision of affordable housing:

- *Provide affordable housing in accordance with the Housing and Homelessness Strategies*

Reduce sickness absence

4 PROGRESS MADE DURING 2008/9

Human Resources

The major task for Human Resources (HR) during this year has once again been the Fair Pay project. Following the job evaluation process, moderation was completed, and the Service worked closely with Financial Services to develop a new pay and grading structure. Many possible structures were considered, resulting in possible options being considered by the Single Status Working Group, Joint Consultative Committee, and Personnel Committee and Cabinet. Once the preferred structure had been approved, employees were notified on the 26th February 2009 of their job evaluation results and proposed new pay and grading. The notification process involved a substantial amount of work for HR staff. The next stage in the process is to deal, internally, with any appeals. An appeals procedure has been agreed with the trade unions and approved by Personnel Committee.

In addition to the considerable workload demands of the Fair Pay project, the Service has continued to provide routine operational HR advice. In particular the Service has continued to support Services in reducing sickness absence, and the improvement made in previous years has been maintained. The Service has also provided HR support and advice for Williamson Park, and has provided a great deal of support for the proposed Regeneration restructuring.

The Service is also responsible for the corporate training plan, and the priority this year has been customer care training, which is being delivered to all staff throughout the Council. This has received excellent feedback.

Health and Strategic Housing

Environmental Health

The 3 year headstone safety project in Lancaster Cemetery has been completed successfully on target and within budget. The Headstones within this cemetery are now safe. The memorial safety team is to be continued (on a reduced staffing level) to undertake the testing and repair of memorials in all the other Council cemeteries and closed churchyards. Several improvements have taken place at Torrisholme Cemetery with the help of the friends group and our efforts have been rewarded with gaining a green flag award.

The service has taken part in the citizenship classes at 2 local schools concentrating on the environmental aspects of the Council's work. We have also taken part in several environment days giving pupils an opportunity to learn about subjects ranging from recycling and fly tipping to food and health and safety. These links with schools are a key part of our services contribution to the children and young people's agenda and build on our already successful home safety quiz and mission possible initiative.

New work in Carnforth and Galgate has provided a more detailed understanding of local air quality. Work has begun to prepare an air quality action plan for central Carnforth. A new air quality management area must be declared in Galgate and this

will lead to further assessment. Meanwhile work with other agencies to identify scope for tackling air quality in central Lancaster is continuing. Here it will be necessary to carry out feasibility studies on some of the medium and long-term transport solutions identified in the Faber Maunsell report. Proposals for a new air quality action plan for Lancaster are being considered by the Local Strategic Partnership, which has confirmed its support for a Local Air Quality Forum.

The food and health and safety activity achieved an award of “substantial” reassurance in a recent internal audit. This is the first time internal audit have been able to award any Council service this level of reassurance. The food safety service was also successful in obtaining grant monies to assist catering businesses comply with new regulations.

With the closure of Strategic Housing offices at Euston Road, a system of hot desking was introduced at Morecambe Town Hall. This project was completed relatively smoothly within 5 weeks thanks to the professionalism and hard work of our staff. The service is seeing the benefits of having all staff together in one building and the improved reception and interview areas at MTH provide excellent facilities for our customers.

The Gypsy and Traveller Cabinet Liaison group formed this year and has already started to provoke useful discussions on future provision for Gypsy and Travellers and has heard evidence from a national body about problems experienced by people living on private caravan sites.

All targets in the business plan have been met. The corporate plan target relating to dog related enforcement activities has been achieved this year.

Strategic Housing

Staff in Strategic Housing relocated from unsatisfactory office accommodation at Euston Road, Morecambe to Morecambe Town Hall in July 2008. The move was completed without any problems and whilst maintaining essential housing services for our customers – again only possible due to the efforts of dedicated staff. So far, we have not received any complaints from customers about moving away from the town centre location and in fact most customers report that the reception facilities and telephone answering service are much improved.

The targeted HMO project funded by the West end partnership ended on 31 March 2009. This was an immensely successful project targeting rogue landlords and improving some of the worst properties in the district. The Council worked with the police, the fire service and the local community on this project.

The housing standards team has failed to meet some of the business plan targets on improving the standards of accommodation due to a lack of capacity within this team. This problem will be exacerbated next year as the temporary funded west end HMO project came to an end in March 2009 and the funding for one post in this team is no longer available. In the absence of any funding to increase this team, a realignment of priorities has begun to match which statutory duties we can deliver with the resources available.

The disabled facilities grant service continues to face challenging times this year with the demand for this mandatory grant exceeding the available resources.

West End and Poulton Housing

The Council has been implementing its Housing Strategy by joining up a wide range of activities through its neighbourhood management, regeneration, and planning operations. It has continued to implement a capital programme in partnership with Housing Associations which overhaul and renew low quality accommodation in Poulton and the West End of Morecambe.

Through its regeneration activities, it has been dealing with the built environment which, when poor, exacerbates the effects of problem housing, and it has continued to work with the Homes and Communities Agency to bring forward a viable scheme for a housing exemplar in the West End. These activities have been supported by the emergence of the newly adopted Local Development Framework for the district which sets the scene for new housing growth and will steer investment into the most sustainable locations, and towards meeting the right needs for the district when the economic upturn occurs.

Council Housing Services

2008/2009 has been a challenging but productive year for Council Housing Services.

Asset Management Including Repairs and Maintenance

The independent stock condition survey has confirmed that we remain a high performer in relation to the Government's standards for Decent Homes. Since the previous stock condition survey the "decency" bar has been raised, and it is against these new higher standards that the latest stock condition survey has highlighted that only 1% of our housing stock does not meet the new Decency standard. Any necessary adjustments to our capital and planned maintenance programmes will be made to bring all the housing stock back into decency.

Approximately £3.5 million was committed to this years capital programme. All projects within the 2008/2009 programme have been let, and are scheduled for completion within the year.

The Service is seeking a partner to improve the delivery of the capital and planned maintenance programme. The exercise to identify a partner has had to be deferred, and the partnership working arrangements is to be re-tendered with a view to establishing the partnership from April 2010.

We continue to achieve good performance on responsive repairs but performance is not as good as we had hoped for. The Service had set challenging targets for 2008/2009 based on a very good performance out-turn in 2007/2008 but we have seen increasing demands for repairs, and also increasing volumes of work having to be undertaken prior to being able to relet properties.

The procurement of a maintenance partner will enable us to address some of these resource issues.

Tenant satisfaction with the repairs service has remained high. 98% of tenants who have had a repair undertaken have been satisfied with the completed repair.

Income Management

The current economic climate is having an effect on rent collection. The percentage of tenants getting into serious arrears has increased from 2.88% to 3.3%. However the overall collection rate remains high with the proportion of rent collected being 97.8% at the end of period Q3. This collection rate gives us a current ranking of 4th amongst 20 other housing providers in the NW.

To tackle the issue of increasing serious rent arrears the Service, alongside the CABs held three “Credit Crunch Roadshows” earlier in the year targeting the estates with the highest levels of rent arrears. The feedback from these “Roadshows” was very positive and further ones are planned. In addition the CABs have also expressed an interest in establishing a surgery within the council housing office at Cable Street.

The Service has also now signed up to “Possession Claims Online”. This means that we can make and manage our court applications online. This brings efficiency and savings in both time and money.

Allocation & Lettings

We currently have 1583 active application for housing on the housing register, and 491 tenants requesting a transfer. This year to date we have housed 300 households from the both the housing register and the transfer register. We are currently receiving approximately 40 new housing applications a month which is an increase on the situation last year. One of the things we are finding is that we a housing increasing numbers of vulnerable people with support needs.

Tenancy & Estate Management

This year saw the introduction of a new tenancy agreement. We wanted to make sure that the tenancy agreement is easy to read and to understand. We also wanted to make sure that the tenancy agreement clearly illustrates the rights and responsibilities of both tenants and those of the council. The agreement was introduced following extensive consultation and has been well received.

Tenancy and estate management work remains challenging and we have found that we have to take increasing action to tackle serious issues around breach of tenancies using the full toolkit of options open to us. Our Legal Services have been very supportive of us enabling us to find solutions to some very difficult situations. The Service is fully engaged with other agencies and plays a full part in the Community Safety Partnership including the Multi-Agency Partnership Team (MAPs), Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (the main aim of the MARAC is to support the highest risk victims of domestic abuse in their area) and the Prolific and other Priority Offenders Group (PPO).

Supported Housing

Through the changes brought about through Supporting People we are a provider of housing support and the support is commissioned by Lancashire Supporting People.

This year saw the Service being awarded a steady state contract to provide housing related support in our sheltered housing schemes, and also community alarms. We are also Lancashire County Council's preferred partner for providing telecare services within the district – telecare is an extended form of the community alarm service we already provide.

As part of a response to Supporting People and to provide a higher level of service to sheltered housing scheme tenants we have established a pilot where we have grouped three sheltered housing schemes where the scheme managers support each other and provide mutual cover when on leave providing a higher level of contact with tenants than we could previously support. Approval has been given to role out this concept across our sheltered housing schemes.

Tenant Involvement

2009 has seen the establishment by the Government of a new regulatory regime for social housing with the creation of the Tenant Services Agency (TSA). The TSA has been created to regulate the whole of the social housing sector and to ensure that tenants are at the heart of setting service standards. As part of the establishment of the TSA we have been chosen as a “path finding” authority in tenant involvement. This work will form part of something that is called a “National Conversation” that the TSA is undertaking to establish the new regulatory regime and standards for social housing.

Throughout this last year we have continued to improve the opportunities for involvement with tenants. August 2008 saw an event called the “Tenant’s Den” where we visited all our estates across the district to seek ideas for environmental improvements and small local projects. Shelter housing tenants were assisted in making a successful bid to Tesco and were awarded £1300 to purchase laptops for their schemes. This was done through an online grant finding package called “Grantfinder” which is being used to help all our tenant groups access funding. Other events that have been organised this year include a very successful tenants’ conference, we have had our annual garden competition which continues to attract a high number of entries, and we have also had two “chipping and neutering” events held jointly with Health & Strategic Housing and the RSPCA to promote responsible dog ownership.

Democratic Services – Grants to Voluntary Organisations – Activity In 2008/09

A total of 37 voluntary organisations were helped by the Council in 2008 with small grants from £100 to £500 which were used for a wide range of things – renovation of musical instruments for a Youth Band, a Christmas Party for pensioners, cricket equipment, training for helpers at a swimming club and monthly coffee mornings for the over 60’s to name but a few.

With regard to the larger grants, progress has been made during 2008 with identifying the relevant Service Heads to provide closer links with voluntary organisations funded by the City Council in an effort to improve the monitoring of Service Level Agreements and to ensure that SLAs are more closely aligned to the Council’s priority needs. The requirement to find last minute savings as part of this year’s budget exercise will be carried forward into a more considered review of funding levels and SLAs for the future.

5 CONCLUSION

Finally, in presenting my annual report, I wish to thank all employees in the service areas within my portfolio who have provided me with support throughout the year and who provide such a good service on behalf of the Council.

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