

A Community Leadership focus

Community leadership, Councillors engaging meaningfully with the people they represent and working in partnership with other agencies, is a key focus for this Council. This has been the case over a number of years and has resulted in the Council taking part in two Connecting with Communities programmes and successful Neighbourhood Management programmes. It has been identified, with partnership working, as one of the Council's four current corporate priorities.

A programme of training and support is being provided for Lancaster City Councillors to help them with this role but a full understanding of the needs and aspirations of local communities cannot be taught on a training course – it takes considerable time and effort on the part of each Elected Member. This is one of the lessons that the Council learnt from the Connecting with Communities programme in Skerton. The Council has stated that it wants its partnerships to produce tangible outcomes that benefit the citizens in the district. Again, effective partnership working takes time and energy and Councillor commitment. It is envisaged that the Total Family work which has emerged from the Skerton pilot, community safety and community cohesion work will be the foundation of this future work.

In addition to Community Leadership training and support in place as part of the Council's Member Development programme, which includes one-to-one needs analysis and the formation of individual Personal Development Plans, the Council has recently been confirmed as one of fifteen participants in the LGA's "Keep it REAL programme". The REAL (Responsive, Efficient, Accountable, Local) programme will provide support and development opportunities in community engagement and representative and participative democracy. It is intended that the Council will use the programme to focus on enhancing the role of Ward Councillors in the communities they serve, and increasing their capacity to become more visible, approachable, accessible, proactive and engaging.

The Council recognises that the major factor that determines an individual Councillor's workload is his or her own commitment. Repeatedly Choosing Community Leadership and Partnership Working as one of the Council's corporate priorities is an indication of the willingness of Lancaster City Councillors to give that commitment. If Council size were to reduce, there would be concerns that the ability to deliver on this important priority might be undermined by loss of capacity. It is important that the size of the Council is such as to ensure that Councillors are not over-burdened by formal Council business in addition to their ward work and role as Community Leaders.

A significant number of young Councillors (four teenagers) were elected to the Council in May 2011, many of whom work full time. The current make up of the Council is diverse, reflecting both genders, a wide range of age groups, those who work or study full and part time and those who are retired. The Council values this diversity and there is a concern that younger Members with heavy work and home commitments might be discouraged from standing again if wards were to be reduced from three to two Members or from two to one. It may result in fewer young people standing for election and a smaller Council composed mainly of retired people.

As Community Leaders, Lancaster City Councillors do their best to be accessible and responsive to the Parish Councils in their wards. Rural Councillors generally attend parish council meetings within their ward or serve on the Parish Council themselves. Whilst the Lancaster, Skerton and Heysham areas are not parished, Morecambe Town Council has 26 Members, ten of whom are also City Councillors.

How the business of the Council is managed

The decision making structure is designed to ensure the most efficient decision making processes. In the past, Cabinet has comprised ten members (including the Leader), but currently has eight members (including the Leader). This change was made on the basis of effective decision making, and is not influenced by the size of the Council. Non-key decisions are taken by individual Cabinet members, rather than Cabinet as a whole, and other executive functions are delegated to officers.

Many regulatory matters are delegated to officers. During the financial year 2010/11, of 950 planning decisions, 834 were taken by officers under delegated powers, and 126 (13.3%) by Committee. In the current financial year to date, 12.3% of planning decisions have been taken by Committee.

For Licensing, only a small minority of taxi driver/vehicle applications are considered by Committee, where the grant of an application would be contrary to the Committee's adopted policies, or where the circumstances are such that a licence is liable to be refused, suspended or revoked.

Planning Committee meets monthly, and Licensing on a 6-8 week cycle. These cycles are necessary to ensure that applications are dealt with in a timely manner.

With the current Committee sizes, there are 1.75 Cabinet/Committee places per member.

Some of the Council meetings are currently held in the daytime, some at 6pm. The start times of meetings are reviewed annually and changed where necessary to accommodate the needs of Members. As with any Council, there are Members who are available during the day and prefer to attend daytime meetings and those who work and would like all meetings to be in the evenings. The timetable is a compromise which allows a mix of start times agreed by Members.

There is no accurate information as to how many hours councillors spend on Council business. The 2010 National Census of Local Authority Councillors indicated that the average time for this Council was 16.2 hours per week. However, this was based on responses from only 23 of the 60 Councillors, and the survey was conducted prior to the 2011 elections. In the past the Independent Remuneration Panel has tried to obtain similar information, but found that it was difficult for Councillors to keep records, and also that there was no "average" time spent, with considerable variation between different Councillors.

Scrutiny and Outside Bodies

The Council has an unusually active overview and scrutiny function, an Overview and Scrutiny Committee and a Budget and Performance Panel. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee establishes Task Groups, of which there is currently only one, although in previous years a number of Task Groups have been active at any one time and have produced significant policy proposals which have changed the Council's priorities. Memberships of Task Groups are made up of any non-Cabinet members.

The Council makes 110 appointments to 62 outside bodies. 41 Councillors currently represent the Council on outside bodies.

Ten city councillors serve on a new body established by the County Council which meets three times per year, the Lancaster district “Three Tier Forum” so called because it includes the ten county councillors for the district plus a representative from the parish councils.

Four City Councillors are also County Councillors, and of these, two are also Parish/Town Councillors. A further 15 City Councillors are Parish Councillors. There are rarely conflicts of interest unless a decision has financial implications for the Councillor’s “other” council. Parish Councillors are able to serve on Planning Committee provided that they are able to demonstrate that they approach each application with an open mind.

Impact of the Localism Act 2011

The Localism Act set out a series of measures with the potential to achieve a substantial and lasting shift in power away from central government and towards local people. If that is to be achieved, local Councillors will have a vital role to play in their wards to lead and shape local decisions and utilise the new rights and powers for their communities. This Council recognises that and, as noted above, is equipping its Councillors to make the most of these new opportunities.

The partnership between the County Council and City Council has shifted some of the local decision-making and service provision to a more local level. Sometimes this is undertaken jointly by the County and City Council and, in some cases, delegated to the City Council.

The City Council is seen as the “Council” by local residents and members’ workloads reflect this.

There is no indication as yet that Parish Councils have an appetite for extending their areas of responsibility. Whilst it is clear that Morecambe Town Council has a number of ambitious projects in hand, these supplement rather than replace the work of the City Council. However, the links between Parish and Town Councils are strong and well-established, with many dual and even triple-hatted City Councillors, and this is an area which may be explored and developed in the future.

Conclusion

Whilst the business of the Council, scrutiny activities and representation on outside bodies could be reviewed to fit with a slightly smaller Council size, the Council is very concerned that a Council size of fewer than 60 Councillors would have a negative impact on both the Community Leadership work that it wishes to pursue and the diversity of the Council.