

Annual Report of the Leader of the Council 2021-22

I recognise the council year 2021-22 has been one of recovery, repair and refocusing. Officers and members picking up on previous responsibilities and projects have counted the cost of the delays and changes that were required for supporting the district so well through lockdown, recovery and the mass vaccination programme. As council leader I appreciate the effort it has taken, and in some areas continues to take, to achieve previous standards and the variable nature of progress across the directorates.

Establishment & achievement of council priorities & principles

The new Shared Administration retained continuity with the previous alliance on its priorities and principles through a helpful discussion meeting with officers which established commitment to the previous themes and outcomes and allowed us to make some minor improvements. This came to council in December 2021. The outcomes accepted in early 2020 continue to provide a powerful point of reference in decision-making. We took on an immediate imperative to create a balanced budget for 22/23 alongside a review of the projects we considered to reflect key priorities. The process resulted in a good outcome in terms of a budget that fitted our requirements but illustrated a need for greater financial information for members, presented in more flexible ways, as well as portfolio holders requiring more detailed understanding of underlying strategies, particularly in the regeneration area. Outcomes-based resourcing had been a priority from 2019/20 and with the support of previous CEO Kieran Keane this is now in place to tackle the structural deficit we face over the next 5 years. We are also in the process of strengthening the focus of quarterly monitoring and decision-making to reflect council priorities.

Our priorities in all areas will be covered by other portfolio holders but in terms of taking action on climate change, particular credit goes to Mark Davies team which was seriously affected by Covid but also established itself as a national leader on CO2 reduction. I pay tribute to Cllr Frea, working alongside them whose knowledge and commitment in the area are also nationally recognised.

Community engagement including community connectors

During the worst of Covid the level of community engagement achieved over Teams and Zoom was very high. Community connectors have continued to build on this work through establishing the use of the Keep Connected website and working alongside Clare Muir from the NHS to build our community conversations into a wider system of community engagement fed back to decisionmakers across the public and third sector. The community conversation programme has restarted; planned conversations are designed to reflect community concerns and draw in hitherto unheard voices such as young people. Community Connectors continue to engage with a very large number of individuals and organisations across the district to enable events and support funding applications. The Community Connectors role as catalysts for community engagement is developing and, as portfolio holder, I expect to present more analysis of its role later in the year.

Community Safety Partnership

CSP meets quarterly to receive data on crime, review local initiatives and decide on funding applications. I was elected as Chair in September 2021. The committee supported the PSPO process completed in December and the setting up of a Community Alcohol Partnership in response to concerns on hospital admissions.

There is strong support for the CSP adopting local priorities relating to antisocial behaviour and violence against women and girls. The Community Safety Partnership presented its report to Overview and Scrutiny in the annual crime and disorder meeting in December 2021. The partnership is working on ways to improve its joint working and become more responsive to local circumstances.

Human Resources and Fair Work charter

Human Resources has faced severe difficulties over the last three years in terms of both staffing and leadership. Those officers who have managed through this time deserve credit for their resilience. The appointment of an excellent interim HR Lead in September 2021 resolved long-standing difficulties: administrative support is in place and business partners are able to support departments; policies are being listed for review and proper communication is once more in place with union representatives. The newly recruited HR lead is working on a range of issues. The Fair Work Charter member group, ably led by Cllr Wood, supported by officers, has referred the charter on to Personnel Committee for inclusion within its work programme and agreed to pursue closer work with the Morecambe Bay Anchor Collaborative Charter on its key work and employer elements.

As leader I should like to thank all officers and members for their loyalty, hard work and ingenuity in the face of the myriad of challenges we have faced over the last year and can see will face us in future. Neither time nor circumstances is on our side in terms of our core priorities; what we do have is commitment, kindness and amazing talent. It will see us through.

Cllr Caroline Jackson
Leader of the Council