

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 to 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.