

Report of Scrutiny Committee

1. This report summarises the business considered at the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 12 October 2021.

Peer Challenge 2021

2. The Leader of the Council presented a report on the recent Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Challenge and subsequent Action Plan.
3. We welcomed the outcome of the Peer Review but questioned what was meant by 'embed', which was used frequently in the report. In response, we were advised that this meant ensuring that every area of the authority worked in the same way
4. We queried how success of the Action Plan would be measured and were advised that this would be monitored and reported quarterly with performance updates provided to the Scrutiny Budget and Performance Panel, which we welcomed.
5. We sought clarification as to whether phases one and two of shared services had now been delivered and it was confirmed that phase two work on a shared revenues and benefits department and shared customer services was still ongoing and that formal discussions on further development were being held with members at Chorley Council.
6. Challenges in cultural change were acknowledged but assurances were provided that staff feedback is regularly surveyed. It was agreed that the results of the employee survey would be made available to the committee once available and that examples of best practice adopted across both South Ribble and Chorley Councils as a result of shared services would be presented to a future Shared Services Joint Committee.
7. We also suggested that recommendation 3, which related to a Programme Plan for the delivery of future work and political priorities, be strengthened to ensure capacity and delivery of corporate projects.
8. Assurances were provided that the Council had several influences to aid in closing the budget gap within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy as mentioned at recommendation 4 in the report, such as strategic reserves.
9. We also welcomed commitment to involving all members in the interim review of the My Neighbourhood Community Hubs and were pleased to hear that the LGA had commended the council on the work of the Hubs.
10. We queried what was meant by 'political engagement' as mentioned in recommendation 4 and challenges in cross-party working and relations and a need for all parties to work better together for the good of the community were acknowledged.
11. The possibility of a review of the council's Scrutiny function was mentioned in recommendation 8 but we emphasised that an annual self-assessment is undertaken by the committee.
12. We welcomed clarification that any review into the Scrutiny function would be undertaken by the committee and would assess best practice and effectiveness.
13. We thanked the Leader of the Council and the Shared Services Lead – Transformation and Partnerships for their attendance.

Update of new Leisure Company and future Leisure Projects

14. The Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing, the Director of Commercial and the Assistant Director of Projects and Development presented an update on the recently-established Council-owned South Ribble Leisure Company.
15. We were interested to learn how the process of bringing the management of leisure centres in-house had gone and what the benefits of this had been. In response, it was advised that the process had been successful and allowed the council to be 'hands-on' in the development of leisure centres in the borough.
16. We acknowledged that the company had only been established 6 weeks prior and that a more detailed account of progress would be available for future meetings of the Scrutiny Committee.
17. We also noted the impact of the changes on leisure centre staff and queried what support was in place for them. Staff were consulted through engagement sessions, on-site meetings and union representatives.
18. We queried the difference in service seen by customers and were advised that a marketing plan had been devised with a new app and website established and marketing campaigns due to commence at optimum times, such as the New Year.
19. We sought clarification as to where responsibility for the leisure centres lay, as the report was listed under both Directors of Commercial and Communities. It was explained that responsibility for leisure provisions lay within the Communities directorate and the responsibility for the leisure company and day-to-day organisation fell within the Commercial directorate.
20. We welcomed an offer to recirculate the decision-making matrix and governance structure of the Leisure Strategic Partnership Board and Company to members.
21. We also sought further explanation as to the role of the management accountant and were advised that this position was specially dedicated to the leisure centres and was a new post within the council's shared services with Chorley Council. An external auditor would also be commissioned to review the leisure centres' finances.
22. We requested that the report be made more user-friendly and welcomed the offer to inform future reports with the information desired.
23. We discussed the possibility of updates on the management of leisure centres being a standing item on the Scrutiny Committee agenda but it was agreed that this would be provided on a quarterly basis.
24. We thanked the Cabinet Member and Directors for their attendance.

Worden Hall Progress Update

25. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Assets, the Director of Commercial and the Shared Services Lead – Development and Business presented an update on progress of the Worden Hall project.

26. We noted that it was an exciting time for the development, with works ongoing and booking enquiries already being received, and welcomed confirmation that the project remained on-track for completion by the Platinum Jubilee Leyland Festival in 2022.
27. We also welcomed a commitment to arranging a site visit to Worden Hall following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. This was undertaken on 12 October.
28. We questioned the Cabinet Member's confidence in keeping to the budget of the project and were assured in response that contingencies of £250,000 had been incorporated into the budget in the event of unforeseen circumstances.
29. We were also keen to learn how the Council's climate change ambitions had been incorporated into the project. Some difficulty in this was recognised due to the building's Listed Building status but members were informed that a new and more-efficient heating system and new windows would be installed to cut emissions.
30. We acknowledged the national shortage of materials in the construction industry but were informed that the Council was working with the building contractors to ensure access to and supply of necessary materials.
31. We thanked the Cabinet Member, Director and Shared Services Lead for their attendance.

Urgent Decisions

32. We received a report which outlined a number of urgent decisions taken since 21 July 2021 in accordance with urgency procedures outlined in the Council's Constitution.
33. We noted that 7 urgent decisions had been submitted during this period.
34. We expressed some concern over the number of urgent decisions taken, given that these were not subject to call-in and therefore ineligible to be considered by the Scrutiny Committee.
35. We were assured that a legitimate process had been followed in the approval of these decisions but asked that the Executive uses this procedure sparingly in future.

Recommendation(s)

That Council note the report.

Councillor David Howarth
Chair of Scrutiny Committee
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