



CORPORATE PPB ANNUAL REPORT

The year 2021-22 has seen a change back to the new normal, the end of Covid restrictions, and reliance on a common sense approach to dealing with the virus. However it is important to remember the diligence of Council employees in keeping the systems running that support and protect our residents throughout the Pandemic.

This year we have continued to monitor the Performance of the Financial Services Department and appreciated their efficiency in maximising Council tax collection and also the implementation of the various Government business support schemes and the Breathing Space scheme which gives people a chance repay their debts. I would like to thank the team for taking us through a line by line audit of the directorate accounts that fall under the remit of Corporate Services, this is a necessity due to the stringent cuts of 12 years to finance the Council has had to deal with. The External funding Team continues to be successful and in the year 20/21 secured over £12 Million for the Council, public sector partners, the voluntary and the private sector.

The PPB decided to run a topic group on the Discretionary Scheme which has run for 9 years and made some minor adjustments but they are impressed with how the officers operate the scheme in a fair and humane fashion.

The ICT Department continues to modernise and improve data and communication facilities across all areas, making the business even more efficient and accessible to our residents. The data storage and protection team have spent many challenging months transferring those pieces of information that can be digitised onto the ICT system; those can't have been stored securely.

The Health and Safety team worked diligently throughout the pandemic ensuring all the necessary and legal requirements with regard to ensuring community and employee health and safety were met - this enabled services to our community to proceed.

The Widnes Market management team continue to make the market an important part of the shopping offered to the people of the Borough. To accomplish this they have introduced several new facilities and services, a changing places facility, a nursing room/quiet space, multi-faith prayer room, water bottle refill point, student trading days and creative competitions. In addition, they are currently working on themed Sunday Market trading days.

The Property Services Department continues to invest in the structure of the market to make sure it remains fit for purpose. They are also busy organising the the development of the Moor Lane Leisure Centre, the Mersey Gateway Handback sites ,the decarbonisation of the Stadium and maintenance programmes across the Borough. Through its carbon reduction programmes, the Council have reduced the carbon footprint by a total of 43%.

The Legal Services team works hard to keep the Council on a firm legal basis which given the many challenges and complications put forward is a difficult task to undertake. We have an effective Corporate Complaints team that allows us to learn from mistakes or errors we make but protects us from dubious challenges. The Electoral registration services team works efficiently providing a service that ensures voters can take part in the democratic process with the minimum of inconvenience. Members services team ensure councillors are effective in their duties with the provision of training courses and have the equipment to fulfil their role in the community.

Finally I would like to thank the members of the Board for the support they have given me throughout the year and in particular, Mark Reaney and Ian Leivesley for their advice and guidance over the years and the Committee services team for providing such excellent support.

- Councillor Bob Gilligan – Chair, Corporate Policy & Performance Board

MEMBERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITIES

During 2021/22, the Board comprised of eleven Councillors – R. Gilligan (Chair), G Philbin (Vice Chair), N Hutchinson, P Lloyd-Jones, A Lowe, N Plumpton-Walsh, G Stockton, A Teeling, S Thornton, K Wainwright and A Wall.

The late Councillor H Howard had also been an extremely valued member of the Board and had very sadly passed away during the municipal year.

The Board is responsible for scrutinising performance and formulating policy in relation to Resources, HR and Training, ICT, Property, Democratic Services, Legal Services, Communications and Marketing, Stadium, Civic Catering, Procurement, Corporate Complaints and Area Forums. The Board also has responsibility for monitoring the performance of the reporting departments which during the last year have been Legal and Democratic Services including Communications and Marketing, Human Resources, Financial Services, ICT and Support Services and the Policy and Performance Divisions.

REVIEW OF THE YEAR

The full Board met four times during the year, with all of the meetings taking place in person again. Set out below are some of the main initiatives upon which it has worked during that time.

BREATHING SPACE

At the June meeting, the Board considered a report of the Strategic Director Enterprise, Community and Resources, which provided information on the Breathing Space process which came into effect on 4th May 2021. It provided Council debtors with legal protections to ensure that creditors pause recovery and enforcement action for a period of up to 60 days.

There were two types of breathing space: a standard breathing space and a mental health crisis breathing space.

- A standard breathing space is available to anyone with problem debt. It provided legal protections from creditor action for up to 60 days. The protections include pausing most enforcement action and contact from creditors and freezing most interest and charges on their debts.
- A mental health crisis breathing space was only available to someone who received mental health crisis treatment and it had some stronger protections. It lasts as long as the person's mental health crisis treatment, plus 30 days (no matter how long the crisis treatment lasts).

Members noted information on:

- Debt-advice providers;
- The insolvency service;
- Applying for a standard breathing space and eligibility;
- Applying for a mental health crisis breathing space and eligibility;
- Qualifying and excluded debts; and
- The Councils role throughout the process and the next steps when a breathing space ends.

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CORPORATE COMPLAINTS

The November meeting considered an analysis of Corporate Complaints received during the 2020/21 financial year.

The report outlined the two stage procedure to deal with corporate complaints; a corporate complaints trend analysis from 2012 to 2021; the nature of those complaints received; and outcomes.

In addition, the report also provided a summary on complaints and queries that had been received by the Local Government Ombudsman during 2020/21.

It was noted that the Ombudsman had made 17 decisions during the year and upheld 6 complaints.

DISCRETIONARY SUPPORT SCHEME, DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS & UNIVERSAL CREDIT

In November, the Board received a comprehensive report providing updates on the Discretionary Support Scheme (DSS), Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) and Universal Credit (UC).

DSS was now in its ninth year of operation and during 2020/21, 610 awards were made totalling £170,554. Full details of funding and expenditure were outlined in the report.

In respect of DHP, Members were advised that in 2020/21 grant funding of £527,810 was received and actual expenditure totalled £527,810 representing 1,645 awards.

In addition, Members received an update on UC. As at August 2021 there were 15,960 Halton residents claiming UC.

The Board asked the Topic Group to consider the eligibility criteria for DSS in a number of areas, and the January meeting considered the findings of the group, and made recommendations for 2 changes, which were agreed.

ENERGY / CARBON REDUCTION

In November, the Board considered a report which provided an update on related activities aimed at reducing the Council's impact on the environment and CO2 emissions. The Council started to measure its baseline for carbon emissions in 2006/7, emissions stood at 26338 tonnes of CO2. For 2020/21, the overall emissions had reduced to 9770 tonnes, a further reduction of 13.9%. To date, since 2008, the Council had reduced its carbon footprint by a total of 43%. The report highlighted the key figures for this year across each Council sector and provided an update on the following initiatives:

- street lighting LED programme;
- roof top solar on Council buildings and biomass boilers at Brookvale Leisure Centre and Norton Priory;
- solar farm on the former St Michael's Golf Course;
- public Sector Decarbonisation Fund;
- transport projects; and the Council's Climate Change Action Plan

PERFORMANCE ISSUES DURING THE COURSE OF THE YEAR

The Board considered in detail the performance of the reporting departments. Issues which were overseen during the year included:

- Accident statistics
- Markets
- School catering and the operation of the Stadium

WORK PROGRAMME 2021/22

During 2021/22, the Board retained the expanded Topic Group which oversaw the operation of the Council's Discretionary Support Scheme and included scrutiny of Universal Credit. The Board agreed that additional topic groups would be established when the need arose.