



## **CORPORATE PPB ANNUAL REPORT**

Following 14 years of underfunding and austerity cuts from the Conservative government which has left the Council with a huge budget deficit, we are no longer able to maintain Current service levels and must make savings by reducing costs. A major burden is the high cost of employing agency staff to keep essential services running. To resolve this problem the Transformation team is embarking on a programme to improve the Council's appeal to potential employees to show we are a good place to work, with career opportunities and good working conditions, thereby encouraging staff to join and stay.

The Health and Safety team contribute to this by making sure staff are appropriately equipped and work in a safe environment.

It is of crucial importance that our financial services continue to operate efficiently in the collection of Council tax and business rates and the management of financial systems to reduce the cost and maintain service provision.

The benefits division is operating the Discretionary Support and Household Support schemes in an efficient manner to ensure all those residents that are entitled to these benefits receive them as well as operating the Housing Benefit and Localisation of Council Tax schemes.

The I.T Department is making as many services as possible accessible digitally for residents reducing the costs for them and improving the Council's efficiency and reducing costs. The One Stop shops continue to be available for those without access to the internet.

The Property Services Department are working to make sure accommodation space is effectively used to reduce unnecessary costs and provide a safe environment for staff to work in. Also, a strategy is being developed to decide accommodation arrangements for future needs. It is important to reduce energy costs so great effort is put in the installing LED lighting which also reduces the Carbon burden, and the new Leisure centre will use solar power and air source heat pumps to reduce energy costs. Widnes markets team despite difficult trading conditions in the retail sector continue to provide an interesting environment and economic shopping venue for residents. The DCBL stadium staff are working hard to

provide a venue for sporting events and the provision of a top class facility where weddings and family celebrations can be held.

Working behind the scenes is the Legal Services Department who provide legal support to all off the council's operations. This is particularly important in dealing with Social Services matters which can be very complicated and the complexity of some major planning developments.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my Vice Chair Ged Philbin for his support throughout the year and his diligence in chairing the Appeals Panel, the members of the P.P.B for their hard work and commitment during the year, and my lead officer Mark Reaney and the member services team for supporting the board's work.

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

## **MEMBERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

During 2024/25, the Board comprised of eleven Councillors – R. Gilligan (Chair), G Philbin (Vice Chair), S Davidson, V Hill, N Hutchinson, R Leck, G Logan, A Lowe, K McDonough, N Plumpton-Walsh, and S Thornton.

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, and Corporate Complaints. The Board also has responsibility for monitoring the performance of the reporting departments which during the last year have been Legal and Democratic Services, Human Resources, Financial Services, ICT and Support Services and the Policy and Performance Division.

## **REVIEW OF THE YEAR**

The full Board met four times during the year. Set out below are some of the main initiatives upon which it has worked during that time.

## **SCHOOL MEALS SERVICE – CESSATION OF SERVICE**

At the September meeting, the Board received a report from the Executive Director, Environment and Regeneration which provided

an update on the current status on the cessation of the schools meals service provided by the Council.

In February 2023, the Council agreed to remove the provision of the schools meals service. Schools were allowed up to two financial years to either procure an alternative provider or opt to offer an in-house provision.

The report outlined the support that had been offered to schools. An open day was held in April 2024, which allowed providers who had expressed an interest, an opportunity to showcase their services. Schools were invited to attend DfE training sessions to assist them with a catering procurement package. To date, several schools had engaged with the DfE.

The Board was advised that to date, the Council's School Meals Service was still providing catering for 27 of the 47 schools. 14 schools had given notice to terminate their contract before 1 January 2025. 13 schools were still to confirm their new catering arrangements by 31 March 2025. Members of the Board would be provided with a list of these schools, for information.

Of those schools that had progressed alternative arrangements, 15 school had chosen Orian Solutions, 5 had chosen Edsentials Catering Services and 2 had chosen Mellors Catering Solutions.

Members were reassured that the School Meals Management Team would work with the 13 outstanding schools and contact them again early in the Autumn Term to establish their intentions. Any school that did not provide a transfer date by 1 October 2024 would be issued with a termination letter with effect from 31 March 2025.

Following discussions and arising questions from Board Members, it was confirmed that:

- Any school that did not make any necessary arrangements by the deadline, would have to employ in-house catering staff; and
- Schools and their Governing Bodies were responsible for ensuring that school meals were provided for their pupils.

## **WIDNES MARKET**

Also in September, the Board received a report from the Executive Director, Environment and Regeneration, which provided an update on Widnes Market, following the implementation of the Business Plan, which had been endorsed by the Board in November

2022. The report also informed the Board of a change in the management structure at the market, with effect from June 2024.

Members were reminded that the Business Plan identified the priorities and actions to be undertaken by the Market Management Team to ensure the market remained a successful trading environment for the future. It included five main themes and the report provided an update on how these had progressed.

Members also noted that with effect from June 2024, the management and responsibilities of Widnes Market had transferred to the Communities and Greenspace Department. It had previously sat within the Economy, Enterprise and Property Department.

The following information was provided following discussions and arising questions from Members:

- The market had seen a slight decline in footfall following the introduction of car parking charges;
- Although opportunities had been explored to hold an Artisan market, there had been little interest from companies; and
- Officers agreed to explore WiFi opportunities.

### **ICT PROGRAMME UPDATE**

The Board received a report at the January meeting from the Director of ICT and Support Services which provided an update on the department's programme of work.

The report outlined the different workstreams of the programme which included delivery of Microsoft365; Customer Journey Transformation; the Business Analysis Programme and Artificial Intelligence (AI) and details of each were described in the report. These were big projects but once completed they would bring many benefits, including cost savings.

Digital poverty was quite high in Halton and so the One Stop Shops remained an essential aspect of the front door into the Council for many, with increased footfall along with violent incidents and abuse experienced by staff. Approximately 428,000 cases were dealt with each year in the One Stop Shops.

Members were advised that the programme of work would also link to the partnership with NHS led Halton Health Hubs. Options were being explored to increase the number of Council services within the locations bringing services into the community on a face-to-face basis. Digital poverty meant that not all interactions could be digital.

Members of the Board scrutinised the report and the following additional information was provided in response to questions:

- with regards to AI, as owners of information, the Council would be responsible for any breach of data. However, a lot of AI was a base of knowledge and the type of AI the Council would hold would be kept onsite;
- there were in-house opportunities for AI, although it would be a big piece of work to analyse the data;
- it was suggested that digital poverty and those with literacy problems could be frustrated with new systems, however, it was noted that 80% of people contacted the Council via mobile phones and access would be tailored to mobile access.

### **COUNCIL WIDE SPENDING AS AT 30 NOVEMBER 2024**

Also in January, the Board received a copy of a report, which was presented to the Council's Executive Board on 16 January 2025. The report outlined the Council's overall revenue and capital spending position as at 30 November 2024, together with the latest 2024/25 outturn forecast. The report also described the reasons for key variances from budget.

The Executive Board had requested that a copy of the report be shared with each Policy and Performance Board for information, to ensure that all Members had a full appreciation of the Councilwide financial position, in addition to their specific areas of responsibility.

### **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
- Market
- School catering and the operation of the Stadium

### **WORK PROGRAMME 2024/25**

During 2024/25, the Board retained the expanded Topic Group which oversaw the operation of the Council's Discretionary Support Scheme and included scrutiny of Universal Credit. In addition, a Topic Group also scrutinised the work of the Transformation Programme. The Board agreed that further topic groups would be established when the need arose.