

Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Local Government Reform Task and Finish Group

Final Report

Introduction

1. In early 2022, South Lakeland's Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a task group to look at South Lakeland's legacy and how it might inform the Local Government Reform process and the emergence of Westmorland and Furness Council. This report summarises the findings of the group and suggests some recommendations to be put forward to the shadow authority.
2. The task group was chaired by Councillor Wilson. The other task group members were Councillor Bell, Councillor Hodgson, Councillor Holmes, Councillor Jenkinson and Councillor Rathbone. The group met on 17th June to consider evidence assembled by officers and to make recommendations.
3. This report summarises the findings of the Task Force

Scope and Terms of Reference

4. The group was charged with looking at how SLDC in its final year can best influence the new shadow authority. Following early discussions, it decided that the most productive area on which to focus was on how the Council engages with communities through its work with Parish Councils, through its work through partnerships and through the locality based working practises introduced through Customer Connect.
5. The aims of the group were;
 - To ensure that good practise, positive culture and productive relationships in South Lakeland are identified and evidenced.
 - To ensure that the shadow authority has the opportunity to benefit from them.
 - To inform the shadow authority corporate planning process;
 - To inform the development of locality working by Westmorland and Furness Council.
6. For avoidance of doubt, this report is not concerned with
 - 1) Scrutiny of the Westmorland and Furness Shadow Authority
 - 2) Scrutiny of the Programme Office/Local Government Reform process
 - 3) The development of Overview and Scrutiny machinery and processes for Westmorland and Furness Council
 - 4) The Scrutiny Programme for Westmorland and Furness Council
7. This report is about **overview** not traditional scrutiny. South Lakeland District Council will not exist in less than nine months. So the approach of scrutiny, looking for areas for improvement and recommending changes to current practise is not appropriate here. Instead the group has looked at areas of good practise in how the Council engages with communities looking at how it engages with Parish Councils, how it uses community based partnerships to deliver on its ambitions and at some of the ways in which locality working through Customer Connect has transformed the way in which SLDC works with its communities.
8. It is also worth noting that the findings of this report are only part of the Council's legacy. Members will recall that Cabinet considered a report on the Council's legacy in February which

looked in detail at the Capital Programme, at the Council Plan and at the Corporate Policy Framework. That report made recommendations about areas which were likely to be completed by vesting day and matters which would need to be taken forward, including the Local Plan and the Climate Change Action Plan. There is also a separate legacy project initiative being co-ordinated by our Communications team. In addition, at every level, SLDC officers are deeply engaged in the Local Government Reform process across all themes and workstreams and feeding in their expert knowledge of good practise in South Lakeland across all workstreams.

Parish Councils

9. The backbone of the Council's engagement with local communities is the network of Parish Councils. South Lakeland is divided into 68 parishes. Of these, 5 are represented by town councils (Grange-over-Sands, Kendal, Kirkby Lonsdale, Ulverston and Windermere and Bowness, 52 by parish Councils and 11 of the smaller parishes by informal parish meetings. Parish and Town Councils vary enormously in size. Kendal Parish has a 2011 population of 28,500 and Ulverston 11,700, whilst some of the smallest have less than 100. They also vary significantly in area. Lakes Parish includes Ambleside, Grasmere and Langdale – an area of 13,488 ha whereas Milnthorpe is only 360 ha. Most of the larger parish and town councils are the successors of the councils which provided most local services before 1974. All parish and town councils are members of the Cumbria Association of Parish and Town Councils (CALC).
10. Parish boundaries are reviewed periodically through Community Governance reviews. These can look at issues such as whether there is scope to amalgamate parishes and how the parish network is likely to be affected by new development. Community Governance reviews can also propose the creation of new parish councils. Unlike South Lakeland and Eden, much of Barrow Borough does not have a parish or Town Council and a new Barrow Town Council is being proposed. This illustrates how important Parish and Town Councils will be when Westmorland and Furness Council comes into being –as community advocates and representatives and in delivering services.
11. Services provided directly by parish and town councils include parks, playgrounds and open spaces, sports facilities, public toilets, local information, public realm and planters. Many parishes have paid staff including clerks and project officers. Parish and Town Councils have an income stream through the parish precept on Council tax.

Parish Charter

12. The broad framework for relationships between Parishes and the Council was established by a Parish Charter signed by SLDC, Cumbria County Council and all Parish and Town Councils and parish meetings in South Lakeland and has been periodically reviewed.

Broadly this committed SLDC to recognising that Parish Councils

- Are a vital part of democratic local government, representing communities at the most local, 'grass roots' level.
 - Are there to address the most local needs and concerns of their communities.
 - Are the primary source of information about community aspirations and opinions.
13. Key commitments included
 - Meetings between SLDC and parishes at least annually

Appendix 1

- Attendance at Parish and Town Council meetings by relevant SLDC members (many members are also Parish or Town Council members in any event);
- Protocols on written and e-communication
- Provide relevant training to Parish Councils and clerks
- Include local council representatives on scrutiny and standards committees
- Capture parish information through community led plans
- Consult parishes on relevant plans, strategies and initiatives at the earliest possible stage and in line with a consultation protocol;
- Consult on all planning applications and local development documents (local plans)
- Support the preparation of parish plans (the protocol predated the introduction of neighbourhood plans under the Localism act.

14. Although the charter is somewhat dated, many of its principles remain valid and one issue for the new authority may be whether it wishes to develop a refreshed framework for engagement with Parish councils.

Community leadership and major issues

15. Parish and Town Councils are key consultees on many areas of Council activity and also implementation partners for key projects. Parish and Town Councils are consulted on all planning applications within their area and their views taken into account. They are also critical consultation partners providing local and community input into local plans, development briefs and other planning documents. One area where they have been critical is in assisting with community and stakeholder engagement workshops carried out when development briefs are prepared.
16. Parish and Town Councils also influence major projects and are key stakeholders. Examples include the role of Kendal Town Council in influencing the design of the Kendal flood defences, in participating in Kendal Futures and in leading on the implementation of the findings of the Kendal Citizen's Jury. Other examples include Ulverston Town Council in developing the place vision through the Borderlands initiative and securing the future of the Coronation Theatre, and Burton in Kendal Parish Council in influencing the Townscape Heritage Scheme.

Funding for Local Projects

17. South Lakeland has funded local projects in parishes from a number of sources. These include
- Local Improvement Projects (LIPS). These were funded from the Government's New Homes Bonus (which is now being scaled down). Five bidding rounds were held between 2013 and 2017 and more than £683,000 has been spent on 64 projects up and down the District including improvements to parks and playgrounds, community halls, new footpath links and local environmental schemes. New Homes Bonus funding was also used to fund small local projects initiated by Ward Members. It is worth noting that the decision to put New Homes Bonus into community projects was a discretionary one. Many councils chose to use their new homes bonus to contribute to general funding.
 - Community Infrastructure Levy Neighbourhood element. The Community Infrastructure Levy is a levy on new development in the South Lakeland Local Planning Area (outside the National Parks). A proportion (15% of the take from development within the Parish (25% if

the Parish has a neighbourhood plan). To date, nearly £600,000 has been passed to Parish and Town Councils to spend on local projects. Some examples of its use are Ulverston Town Council who are using CIL funding on a variety of projects. Burton in Kendal who have used theirs to contribute to environmental and heritage improvements. Kirkby Lonsdale have invested in CCTV, whilst Preston Richard are looking at improvements to playing fields and lighting.

Parish and Town Councils and Climate Change

18. Climate Change is at the heart of the Council's ambitions and Parish and Town Councils are critical to delivering on it and engaging local communities to . We have funded Cumbria Action For Sustainability to promote climate action at local level and promote Ambleside to Zero as a demonstration project. We have created a Climate Change Community Fund – a fund of £20,000 to fund climate change and biodiversity projects including community energy, biodiversity and a variety of other small projects. Other community initiatives include the Greening Campaign which provides access to a toolkit of measures for parishes to take to become low carbon communities. Finally, through providing funding for the pioneering Kendal Citizen's Jury approach, the Council is supporting local communities to articulate and develop their own ambitions and solutions for climate change.

Neighbourhood Plans

19. Under the Localism Act, Local Communities are able to prepare their own neighbourhood plans. These are effectively mini-local plans. They are prepared by Parish Councils, usually with the assistance of a consultant. They go through a similar process to a local plan including independent examination and if found to meet the necessary tests (including whether they are in general conformity with strategic policies), are subject to a referendum. If approved, they have the same status as local plans in decisions on planning applications. The District Council (or National Park Authority) has a duty to support and advise. There are three adopted neighbourhood plans in South Lakeland – Heversham and Hincaster, Grange-over-Sands and Coniston and a fourth is in preparation in Allithwaite and Cartmel. Neighbourhood plans are a good way in which local communities can shape development in their area and address very locally specific issues. For example Allithwaite and Cartmel are looking at ways in which their plan could introduce local restrictions on new second homes.

Assets of Community Value

20. Another localism power is for local communities to apply to the Council for the designation of assets of community value. An ACV can be land or buildings of existing or potential community value. The effect of an ACV is to ensure that if the asset is sold, there is a period of six months during which the community can raise funds to buy it. Assets of Community Value in South Lakeland currently include the Roxy Cinema in Ulverston, the Castle and Bridge Inns in Kendal and three woodlands in Rusland.

Local Area Partnerships

21. In the past, the Council has run a network of local area partnerships (LAP), essentially clusters of parish councils which met periodically, with relevant bodies and interest groups to discuss areas of common interest. There were eight of these. They were a useful conduit by which information could be shared with parish councils. The LAPs were discontinued following the introduction of locality working through Customer Connect (see below) but it may be worth consider whether

some form of parish grouping may be a means by which Westmorland and Furness can retain contact with its communities.

Local Resilience Partnerships

22. The Council supports local communities in setting up local resilience groups. There are currently 35 of these, most of which have a focus on flooding. These play a critical role in planning for emergencies at very local level. In many cases, SLDC ward members play a critical role in being the link between public agencies and local communities. Local resilience partnerships are a very good example of localism in action. They can tailor emergency planning measures to reflect very local circumstances with a level of knowledge that public agencies cannot have. Most importantly, they can have very local knowledge about vulnerable individuals.

Partnerships

23. South Lakeland works with many community based partnerships and has strong relationships with community groups and organisations which it uses to promote its vision and priorities and achieve its strategic objectives. The most important ones are the following
24. The South Lakeland Building Financial Resilience Partnership which includes many key players in the voluntary sector such as Age UK, CVS and Citizens Advice as well as SLDC housing and housing options, and benefits advice as well as representatives from the County Council and from the DWP. The partnership has been instrumental in taking forward the Council's strategic priority of reducing poverty. It has influenced the targeting of support for voluntary organisations and the establishment of a Poverty and Truth Commission. More recently the Partnership has been instrumental in the roll out of a Fairer South Lakeland Community Fund which is instrumental as part of the Council's response to the cost of living crisis.
25. The South Lakeland Equality and Diversity Partnership which is composed of interested representatives from the private, public and third sectors. All the equality strands are represented on the Steering Group. The Partnership promotes initiatives to tackle hate crime and increase interfaith dialogue, celebrates diversity and promotes cultural events around diversity. It has contributed to generally good community relations in South Lakeland, illustrated by South Lakeland's strong response to refugee crises from Kosovo to Syria to Ukraine.
26. The South Cumbria Community Safety Partnership which brings together organisations from the emergency services, public, private and voluntary sectors. They work together to reduce crime and provide reassurance to communities. This is particularly relevant as it brings together organisations in South Lakeland and Barrow, relationships which will be vital as the new authority develops its role to community safety. Although the lead on this has now passed to Barrow, South Lakeland was instrumental in revitalising the partnership.

Customer Connect

27. Finally, a key way in which the Council has transformed the way the Council engages with communities has been the customer connect programme which has completely transformed the way the Council conducts its business today, involving:

Appendix 1

- a) A redesigned organisational model that completely reconfigured the way the organisation worked, eliminating traditional silos, unlocking capacity and genuinely putting the customer first.
 - b) Re-designed business processes and customer journeys that would be as efficient as possible, delivering the best possible customer experience for both internal and external customers with more opportunities to self-serve in key areas - such as enquiries, reporting, making applications, and booking and paying for services.
 - c) A new technology platform that would provide end to end integration between a Customer Portal (My Account); Customer Contact Manager; Enterprise Geographical Information System; Electronic Document Management; Workflow; Mobile solutions; and back office applications – all enabling smoother, shorter processes, self-serve and more efficient ways of working. Customers would not be handled by multiple services around the council and insight and intelligence would be shared to provide ‘a single view of the customer’.
 - d) Aligned to this would be staff ways of working and a culture that develops through the introduction of more flexible ways of working, resulting in liberated staff with greater autonomy to support customers and the opportunity to develop their skills. The future operating model (FOM) provided a model of how the council would deliver services to customers and how the customer would interact with the council. It provided the rationale for how work would be undertaken and what types of roles were required to deliver the work.
28. A key element of Customer Connect is locality working. The locality team works across disciplines, across functions and across organisations with a focus on communities. Locality working has three main capabilities:
- to Inspect, gather information and undertake neighbourhood enforcement
 - to build relationships between the Council’s services, Ward Councillors and local communities
 - to enable community led projects And have the broad customer groupings:
29. The locality team works with the public, external organisations including Parish and Town Councils, ward councillors and other council officers. Effectively the locality team is the eyes and ears of the Council in its communities and it has proven its worth in the response to crises such as the Covid Pandemic and Storm Arwen. Locality working is at the heart of the Council’s engagement with communities.
30. Both locality and customer service teams are also critical in being a way in which issues experienced by customers and communities can be fed back to influence service delivery and strategy.

Conclusions and Recommendations

31. Strong community relations, a way of working which engages local communities, works with them and empowers them will be a key legacy of South Lakeland District Council.
32. Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to request that the shadow authority
 - i. maintain the South Lakeland tradition of working closely with communities and listening to communities in how it makes plans, implements projects and delivers services;
 - ii. maintain strong, productive and positive relationships with parish and town councils;
 - iii. help parish and town councils maintain and develop their community leadership role;
 - iv. look at an updated statement of the relationship between the Parish Councils and the unitary area and the promotion of parish groupings to assist with locality working;
 - v. Support and empower parish and town councils to build capacity and deliver more services locally;
 - vi. Support the establishment of parish or town councils where there are none;
 - vii. Support parish and town councils in learning from each other and, in consultation with CALC, CAFS and ACT encourage learning and knowledge transfer between Parish and Town Councils in South Lakeland, Eden and Barrow;
 - viii. Promote and support the identification of assets of community value;
 - ix. Take forward and develop important community based partnerships such as the Building Financial Resilience Partnership, the Equality and Diversity Partnership and the Community Safety Partnership;
 - x. Maintain and develop the principles of customer focussed service delivery and locality working.
33. South Lakeland has a strong track record of working with parishes, working with partners and being centred around the needs of its people. It is essential that this continues.