

State of the Borough 2007 – FINAL

This is my second annual State of the Borough speech.

Last year we had it during Annual Council, but that is essentially a ceremonial event where perhaps long speeches are out of place!

I feel it is this Budget setting Council, kicking off the work we will be doing in the forthcoming year, which provides a more appropriate opportunity to reflect on the past year, take stock, and look forward to the next 12 months.

Despite this speech only covering the last 9 months, there is as much as ever for us to celebrate as a Council – so it is still going to be a long speech!

And we can be optimistic and confident that we can build on the real and significant improvements we have already achieved.

Rossendale is a vibrant borough.

With access to major centres and beautiful countryside on our doorstep it is a great place to live, work and visit. Our towns and villages have a strong sense of identity and we have an industrial heritage to be proud of.

Local people are passionate about their community and want the best.

And whilst we may not always be able to agree on the best way forward it is a credit to everyone in Rossendale and our democratic system that we can have a lively debate about the key issues.

We may be a small council but we have big ambitions – both for ourselves as a Council and for our borough.

Over the past four years, since our last CPA inspection in 2003, the Council has transformed itself and we will continue this process of improvement for as long as it is necessary for us to become not just a bog-standard Council but one of the best.

At this point I want to formally place on record my thanks to Carolyn and her team of officers and all the staff who have done so much to turn the Council's fortunes round.

And thanks are also due to fellow Councillors, of all parties and no parties, for their hard work and commitment to the borough.

Our improvement journey has been difficult and demanding, but our staff and members have risen to the challenge with a phenomenal level of hard work, dedication, determination and enthusiasm.

And our efforts are finally being recognised by Whitehall, with praise from the Local Government Minister, Phil Woolas and the promised lighter touch supervision in the future.

I now want to review some of the key achievements from the past year within each of the Council's key priorities.

High quality customer service

Our 230 staff and 36 councilors provide around 100 services to 66,000 local people. As a Council, there is no greater reward than to know that we are serving local people well.

During 2006 we have continued deliver our customer services strategy putting customer service at the heart of everything we do.

As promised our One Stop Shop has transformed the way we treat our customers and a recent survey shows that 96.3% of visitors are satisfied with it.

In its first full year it has helped 29,500 visitors and we are now looking at delivering more services through the One Stop Shop.

The other major customer service improvement has been our £12.6m partnership with Capita.

The *Partnership Director of Capita, Judith Keech, has gone on record to say that:*

“What shone out was the enthusiasm, drive and determination of the Council to improve its services for local people.”

Through the partnership we have a new dedicated helpline with longer opening hours to help people with queries about Council Tax, Benefits and Business Rates.

Other highlights during the last 9 months include:

- The reopening of our fabulous new, £1.3m Civic Hall in Whitworth – being managed for us by the Community Leisure Association of Whitworth
- Improved online payment facilities on the Council's website
- A 12 month improvement plan for the Planning Department
- Continuing to have the best website in East Lancashire
- Getting our most senior officers and myself out onto the 'shop floor' to experience the front-line delivery as part of a 'back to the floor' programme.
- Improvements in the time taken to process major planning applications

Thanks to Cllr Janet Farquharson for delivering these improvements working as a team with Helen Lockwood, Andrew Buckle and the rest of Customer Services and E-Government.

A cleaner and greener borough

Environmental services are our highest profile services and their importance is recognised in our proposed Clean and Green priority for next year.

During the last 9 months we have invested a further £286,000 in waste management services, resulting in a new fleet of more reliable vehicles, fully digitised collection rounds with satellite tracking of vehicles and a better recycling service.

This extra investment has reduced the number of missed bins from 0.3% to less than 0.09% of the 1.5m bins collected each year - a threefold improvement.

Our investment in Neighborhood Environmental Action Teams has also paid dividends with the NEAT Teams achieving a high level of public recognition and satisfaction. We will build on this through the recent appointment of two new NEAT Team managers.

Littering is a perennial problem but we have significantly reduced the amount of litter by redirecting resources to street cleaning and through new Town Centre Caretakers. BVPI 199a which measure littering has shown a threefold improvement over the past 12 months.

Our recycling performance has also continued to improve - up from 22% to 24% of total waste - a 46% rise since 2004, resulting in us having to collect 5% less general refuse going to landfill.

There have been many other Environmental highlights during the last 9 months and the following list gives a flavor of improvements we are making:

- Reintroduction of 'manual' street cleaning
- New pooper scooper machine to clean up dog dirt
- Weekly summer purges on grot-spots result in 11 areas being cleaned up.
- Encouraging staff from McDonalds and Little Chef to help with litter picking in Rising Bridge
- £15,000 Woodland Grant Scheme secured for Thorn Bank in Bacup
- A new, £52,000, purpose built playground at Gordon Street in Bacup.
- Signing the Nottingham Declaration to tackle climate change.

And it is in light of our recent decision to sign up to the Nottingham Declaration on Climate Change that I am able to announce that the decision has been made to replace the Mayor's car with a hybrid vehicle capable of running on battery power and petrol.

We will be taking delivery of the new Lexus shortly and I am led to believe that we will be one of the first Council's in the Country to use a hybrid vehicle as a Mayoral Car.

And the Audit Commission have now recognised our achievements with their environmental services inspection rating us as 'fair' with 'promising' prospects for improvement.

Cllr Judith Driver and Carole Todd have been working closely together to bring us these improvements.

Regeneration

Regeneration is the key to the borough's future.

Housing, the economy, the environment and our communities will all benefit from the regeneration work that the Council is supporting.

In Bacup, Stacksteads and Britannia the Housing Market Renewal Initiative has now helped to refurbish 279 properties in the Stacksteads area. During 2007 we will begin to shift the focus of work into other parts of the renewal area including Bacup.

Former council house tenants are also continuing to see improvements in their living conditions following the successful stock transfer which unlocked £40m of new investment for new kitchens, bathrooms, double glazing and new heating systems.

As most of the housing in the borough is privately owned and we have a vibrant private rented sector we must seek to influence housing standards in the private sector.

We have continued to develop our relationship with local landlords through the regular Landlords Forum's and through it, we have delivered accident prevention work on Fire Safety in the home.

We have also used our section 215 powers to encourage property owners to improve the appearance of run down empty houses and properties – with some remarkable transformations achieved already.

And as a further incentive to maximise the use of the borough's precious housing resources we will be reducing the Council Tax discounts given to the owners of second homes and empty homes - to encourage better use of the borough's housing.

These are the achievements that we presented to the Audit Commission in our recent Strategic Housing Inspection and I am lead to believe that we will have some good news on the Housing Inspection next month.

Cllr Bill Challinor has been leading from the front with many of these issues.

Health and Wellbeing

Health and wellbeing is another of our newly proposed corporate priorities for the forthcoming year because people's health and wellbeing are fundamental to a good quality of life.

Over the past 9 months we have been working harder to influence health outcomes in the borough.

We are pleased that along with other councils in the area we have forced the Government to review the proposals for the reorganisation of maternity services.

As a Council we are opposed to any changes which will have a detrimental effect on the health care provided for people in Rossendale and we will be carefully monitoring the decision to concentrate emergency services in Blackburn.

As community leaders we have a key part to play in helping to shape the provision of new community health facilities in Rossendale. We must grasp this opportunity and everyone in the borough must unite in order to win the investment that is needed.

The Council's Environmental Health service also has its role to play in delivering good health and wellbeing in the borough.

For example, in the Autumn, council staff went into local schools to talk about the importance of health and safety issues to pupils who were about to find a job or do work experience.

And I am encouraged by the number of local food businesses signing up to the Council's Confidence in Catering scheme which promotes excellence in food hygiene and safety.

This health promotion work must continue.

Getting more people involved in sport and leisure activities is a key driver of better health outcomes.

Three years ago we took the decision to establish the Rossendale Leisure Trust. Our decision to establish the trust has proved to be right with 54,000 additional visits to their facilities each year and the latest survey showing good levels of customer satisfaction.

This demonstrates that our capacity building approach, working with partners, will deliver the improvements we want to see.

I would like to draw particular attention to the work Cllr Gladys Sandiford has put in to this agenda and to Cllr David Hancock's contribution – though I do think he took his research a bit too far!

Promoting Rossendale

During 2006 we stepped up our tourism and promotional work in an effort to get more people to visit the borough.

We want people to realise the potential of Rossendale for tourism, leisure and commercial investment and to appreciate the excellent quality of life we can offer.

Our efforts have centered around building up a 'visit Rossendale' brand.

Last summer we launched www.visitrossendale.co.uk – our first ever tourism website. The site provides information about a wide range of local visitor attractions and all the key information that visitors require.

We also used the new website to engage with local tourism providers - publishing 'Ten Top Tip's for Tourism in the Valley' to help local providers boost their attractiveness.

We followed this up with a range of initiatives including free bus travel between Rawtenstall Station and the town centre for people arriving by train and promoting the first ever South Pennine Walking Festival with three walks taking place in Rossendale.

We are now working with Brighter Business Solutions to deliver the next stages of the 'Visit Rossendale' tourism promotion campaign.

Community Safety

Community Safety is a key area of work for the Council and an important component in our desire to promote Rossendale as a place to live, work and visit.

Through the borough's Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, which I have the privilege of chairing, the Council has developed excellent working relationships with the police and other community safety partners to deliver a 14.7% reduction in crime – making this one of the safest borough's in Lancashire.

Moreover, in last summer's Living and Working in East Lancashire Survey, two thirds of the respondents from Rossendale said that they felt safe in their neighbourhood – up 13% from the 2004 result.

The three new Community Support Officers that we agreed to fund last year are now in place and already having a positive impact. I met with them last week and was very impressed with their commitment and enthusiasm.

As a Council we have a big role to play in tackling anti-social behavior. For example during the last 9 months we have:

- Piloted an out-of-hours noise service until 2am at weekends.
- Seized hi-fi equipment from noisy neighbors and prosecuted those who make their neighbours lives a misery
- Used the borough's Parking Attendants to help cut crime
- Introduced an outdoor drinking ban in Bacup following the success of previous schemes in Haslingden and Rawtenstall.

As we look ahead into 2007 we must continue to support our partners and continue to use the powers we have to tackle anti-social behaviour.

Engaging with our communities

As a Council it is important for us to actively engage with our communities and support the efforts of our community and voluntary sectors. And as Councillors it is vital that we have the right skills and experience to provide effective community representation and leadership.

I am delighted with some of the work that has taken place over the last 9 months to help us engage more effectively. For example we have:

- Made it easier for people to register to vote with a new FREEPHONE registration service.
- Listened to local people about health issues and demonstrated community leadership with important contributions about the future provision of services.
- Introduced new, beefed-up scrutiny arrangements to assist the Council in policy development, improve performance and examine in detail the issues that concern local people.
- Established a Highways Task Group to investigate the state of the borough's roads and highways infrastructure and identify potential improvements.
- Lobbied the government to get £75,000 more for disabled people in the borough
- Set out how local people can become more involved in planning issues through our new 'Statement of Community Involvement'
- Supported Edenfield and District Community Association in their bid for a new Community Centre.
- Backed a new policy to improve community cohesion, reduce discrimination and bring people together in Rossendale.
- Donated spare IT equipment and spare office furniture to local schools and voluntary and community groups such as Mencap, local credit unions and Rossendale Valley Football Club.
- Worked with Stacksteads and Riverside Park group to facilitate plans for a new Family Resource Centre.
- Helped the LSP to become the only one of its type in the country to get the highest possible 'green light' rating.

Cllr Darryl Smith has had a huge impact on these issues in his short time, so far, on the Cabinet.

We could not have delivered this without the work that has been done on Member Development which has become one of the Council's strengths and compares favorably with any other council in the country.

During 2006, our 36 Councillors undertook a total of 785 hours of development activity, helping us to become better and more effective.

As a result, we are proud to have achieved the North West Member Development Charter and a commendation for Member Development in the MJ 2006 Local Government Awards.

This work will continue during 2007 as we implement our new Member Development Strategy – our most ambitious package of training and development ever.

The member development work has helped us to become more effectively engaged with our local communities and I am grateful for Cllr Janet Graham's work with this.

I am particularly pleased with the work that has been done to engage with young people.

Once again we had an excellent Local Democracy Week event with about 230 young people taking part in a question time debate with local councilors and others. Taking questions in this chamber is a piece of cake compared with that!

We have also introduced the borough's first mini mayor – 10-year-old Katie Smith who has become a fantastic ambassador for young people in the borough.

And through working with a wide range of partners we have given young people on the Staghills estate the opportunity to have their own Youth Shelter.

This has all taken place within the context of a Children and Young Persons' Strategy which has also delivered new Multi-User Games Areas in Edgeside, Stacksteads and Whitworth.

So thanks to Brian Essex – our Young People's Champion – for his valuable input.

But older people haven't been left out.

We are currently drawing up the borough's first ever Older People's Strategy which will seek to improve service and representation for older people and ensure that their skills and talents are harnessed for the benefit of the whole community.

Cllr Jeff Cheetham has been very active in developing this strategy as part of his role as Older People's Champion.

These achievements demonstrate that the Council is firmly rooted in the community we serve.

Our new Community Engagement and Involvement Strategy will build on the work that has already been done and ensure that we continue to involve local people in the borough's future.

Delivering value for money and high performing services

As a Council it is crucial that we demonstrate excellent value for money for the £4.46 per week paid by that the typical Council Tax payer.

One of the aims of this administration is to lower the burden on Council Tax payers.

However, this is challenging to say the least, when some of the cost pressures we are dealing with in local government mean that we have to increase some budgets by more than twice the rate of inflation, just to stand still.

Nevertheless, we have set out a medium term financial strategy to aim to limit Council Tax rises to no more than 3% and ideally to achieve Council Tax rises that are below the rate of inflation.

This will reduce, in real terms, the burden on local people, whilst ensuring that we can invest in priority services, whilst raising our performance and improving efficiency.

We achieved this last year with one of the lowest Council Tax rises nationally and I hope that we can do this again despite the additional financial burdens placed on us by central government.

And our services have continued to improve. For the third year running more than 60% of our Best Value Performance Indicators saw absolute improvement, resulting in fewer indicators in the worst quartile of performance and an increase in those 'above average'.

For example these are some of the BVPI's which have improved during the last 12 months. These are all things which directly affect people's lives or cut the cost to the Council Tax payer.

- BV126 Domestic burglaries per 1,000 households - **FALLING**
- BV127a Violent Crime per 1,000 Population - **FALLING**
- BV127b Robberies per 1,000 Population - **FALLING**
- BV128 Vehicle crimes per 1,000 population - **FALLING**
- BV12 Working Days Lost Due to Sickness Absence - **FALLING**
- BV156 Buildings Accessible to People with a Disability - **RISING**
- BV170a&b Visits to and Use of museums & galleries - **RISING**
- BV183a Length of stay in temporary accommodation (B&B) - **FALLING**
- BV64 Vacant private sector dwellings returned into occupation or demolished - **RISING**
- BV76a Housing Benefits Security number of claimants visited - **RISING**
- BV76c Housing Benefits Security number of fraud investigations - **RISING**
- BV76d Housing Benefits Security number of prosecutions & sanctions - **RISING**
- BV78a Speed of processing new Housing and Council Tax Benefit claims – **FASTER**
- BV78b Speed of processing a changes of circumstances for Benefits – **FASTER**
- BV79a Accuracy of processing Housing and Council Tax Benefit claims - **IMPROVING**
- BV79b(i) Percentage of Recoverable Benefit Overpayments Recovered - **RISING**
- BV79b(ii) Benefit overpayments recovered as a % of the total amount outstanding – **RISING**
- BV109a Major applications determined in 13 weeks - **RISING**
- BV109c 'Other' Planning Applications determined within guidelines - **RISING**
- BV82a(i) % of Household Waste Recycled - **RISING**
- BV82a(ii) Tonnes of Household Waste Recycled - **RISING**
- BV82b(ii) Tonnes of household waste composted – **RISING**

In the past 12 months we have achieved efficiency savings of more than £½m, exceeding the Government target by 70% and meaning that more money can be reinvested into priority services and keeping Council Tax down.

For example, at the end of last year we saved thousands of pounds on ICT equipment through a reverse e-auction. And we are now saving £40,000 a year by delivering our pest control services in partnership with Rochdale and Bury Councils.

Through prudent spending like this our reserves have now been replenished to a reasonable level of £646K at the end of 2005/06 compared to nil reserves in March 2003!

And the Council will save about £250k per year in future years now that we are effectively free of long term debt following the successful stock transfer to Green Vale Homes.

These improvements have been recognised by the Audit Commission in their Use of Resources inspection which shows continuing improvement and the Government has awarded our Capital Strategy the highest possible grade.

Looking ahead

I want to conclude by looking ahead to some of the key developments that we can look forward to in the next 12 months and to introduce what I hope will be the budget priorities that we will agree tonight.

But before I say anything more about the budget I want to mention our Investors in People bid and our forthcoming CPA inspection - as these are two crucial tests of our progress that we will face in the next 12 months.

Following the excellent work done by Human Resources in gaining the Investors in People award for their department we are now aiming to get the award for the Council as whole in recognition of our on-going commitment to developing our staff.

Our staff are our most important resource and it is right that we should continue to invest in them to deliver the Council's priorities now and in the future.

Our Investors on People assessment in March will lead nicely into our most important challenge this year - our CPA re-assessment.

I firmly believe that the outcome of this will show that the Council is performing significantly better than it was during the previous inspection – anything less than this will be a travesty.

As you have seen from the CPA self assessment, which is also on the agenda tonight, we now have more than enough evidence to demonstrate the remarkable transformation that this Council has gone through and the journey we have traveled.

As a Council we have been preparing for this for the least three years and now is the time for us to stand up and be counted, be proud of what we have achieved and show the inspectors how much we have improved.

And it is the budget that we agree tonight that will provide the funding to achieve our new priorities and allow us to demonstrate that we have the resources to match our ambitions.

But before I introduce our budget proposals I want to congratulate and thank Phil Seddon, George Graham and the rest of the Finance Team for their hard work in preparing all the budget information and reports for us tonight.

Special thanks too for Cllrs Michael Ormerod and Brian Essex for their work.

I am pleased that once again there has been an opportunity for the wider community to find out about the draft budget proposals and to let us know what they think are high priorities and what is less important. This extra level of consultation and scrutiny does enable the Council to have greater confidence that the budget that is finally agreed has widespread support in the borough.

I am also pleased to once again be proposing a budget for Rossendale which keeps the Borough's element of the Council Tax rise below the rate of inflation and below 3%. This has only been achieved through our strong focus on delivering value for money services and through the delivery of efficiency savings significantly in excess of the government's targets.

So we are proposing a budget that will enable us to achieve our new corporate priorities.

It is a budget that will enable us to look forward to further customer service improvements delivered through a new customer access strategy and by providing more services through the One Stop Shop.

Our partnership with Capita will deliver faster processing of Council Tax and Housing Benefit payments and benefit recipients will be able to receive payments directly into their bank accounts.

Alongside this change we will also be working with people without bank accounts to help them set up basic bank accounts helping them access many more services and address a key element of financial exclusion.

In the next 12 months, our planning service will improve with, the investment of £70,000 in a new computer system to help achieve faster decisions on planning applications and better information provided to people applying for planning permission.

We will also be investing £130,000 in delivering the improvement plan for this service and in particular putting in place the planning framework which will help secure the Borough's future.

Regeneration will continue across the borough with a planning application being submitted for the New Valley Centre and Elevate funded regeneration in Bacup.

Working with both the County Council and Regional Development Agency we will be funding the Rossendale Regeneration Delivery Team to ensure we complete these developments and secure further regeneration projects across the Valley.

We will continue to build on the work already done to promote tourism and we will provide extra resources to the Local Strategic Partnership to help deliver joined up services and build on the partnership's 'Green' status.

And work will soon begin on 20 new affordable homes to be built in Newchurch following a successful bid for £670,000 of Housing Corporation resources.

We will also continue to support our partners and the Supporting People Team at the County Council in bidding for further Housing Corporation resources for extra care housing in the Valley.

During 2007/08 we will begin to deliver our recently adopted Affordable Homes Strategy encouraging housing associations and private sector house builders to work together to help provide 350 additional 'affordable' homes for the borough.

Changes to the Council Tax system, coupled with our stronger approach to using our enforcement powers will begin to reduce the number of empty properties in the borough and help to increase the supply of affordable housing.

Through the innovative way we have agreed to recycle the proceeds of the sale of former council houses it is estimated that up to £3m will be available for affordable homes in Rossendale over the next 10 years as a result of Stock Transfer.

In Streetscene and Livability, extra staff for the NEAT Teams will help in the battle against crime and grime with new powers and resources being used as effectively as possible.

The NEAT Teams are central to delivering our approach to neighbourhood working which will be rolled out over the coming year. We are backing this with resources to deliver small scale local improvements across the Borough such as alleygating and bin stores so that this approach can really begin to make a difference.

A second 'Hit' Team will help to clear up flytipping, littering and other environmental nuisances more quickly. And Town Centre Caretakers will continue to look after the interest of the borough's towns and ensure they are attractive for residents and visitors.

Following the completion of our Open Spaces review of the borough's parks, playgrounds, cemeteries, and playing fields, I am looking forward to working with the Friends of Whitaker Park to put together a funding bid for improvements at the park, with the aim of securing Green Flag status for one of the Borough's gems.

But improvements to our parks and open spaces will not just rely on external funding as we have allocated additional resources in our budget proposals to address a backlog of investment in these valuable facilities.

And love it or loath it, we will be unveiling East Lancashire's flagship Panopticon, the Halo, which brings £540,000 of regeneration funding with it and will attract more visitors to the area. The Halo has already been chosen as one of the six major landmark projects for the "Marketing the North to the World" campaign.

As part of our commitment to local decision making our Area Forums will be provided with £20,000 to spend on addressing local issues.

Health will be a priority for us during 2007/08 with approximately £100,000 being spent on delivering a healthy business scheme and additional support for people with mental health problems.

This work will see us beginning to work more closely and cooperatively with the major employers in the Borough - an area where our approach to partnership has not previously been as successful as we would wish.

And we will be at the forefront of implementing a Smoke Free Rossendale, and have allocated resources to ensure that we can work with business to implement this new legislation effectively and secure the health benefits the smoking ban is intended to deliver.

All in all, it will be another busy year for the Council, building on what we have achieved so far and facing up to new challenges for the future, whilst continuing to strive for excellence.

As we have shown, the last nine months have marked another important part of our improvement journey. And whilst we have still not reached our final destination, we remain determined to get there.

Because our most important achievement will be to give the people of Rossendale a Council to be proud of, which delivers high quality, value for money services, and to create a thriving borough where people want to live, work and visit, in other words a cracking place to live.

This is our vision for Rossendale Alive.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to move the revisions to the Medium Term Financial Strategy, the Revenue Budget and Capital Programme, and our newly updated corporate priorities – I commend them to the Council.