

Report to:

Council

Agenda
Item

11(i)(b)

Meeting Date: 6 January 2015

Public/Private*: Public

Title: **Community Overview and Scrutiny Chairman's Report – Councillor
Rob Burns**

Are you sitting comfortably?

These words conjure up images, at least to those of us of a certain vintage, of cosy winter afternoons nestled round the coal fire with an iced bun and a glass of lemonade, enraptured by the day's story from 'Listen With Mother' on the wireless.

It's hard to imagine anything much more different from that than sitting round the stark tables in the courtroom setting of the Flensburg Room, cautiously sipping a cup of Civic Centre coffee for no good reason other than it's warm, whilst indulging in yet more soul searching discussions on how we can continue, metaphorically, to feed the five thousand with just a few loaves and fishes!

But yet it is a process we have become particularly adept at and it is a tribute to all Members and Officers that from such scenarios, so much remarkable positivity emerges. I have been privileged to be part of that process this year and thank all my colleagues, Members and Officers, who have been unstintingly supportive and patiently indulged my occasional diversions from the straight and narrow.

And the winner is.....

Business Plans! Can't live with them, can't live without them! This time it was the turn of the award winning Cumbria Large Visitor Attraction of the Year, Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, to present theirs to the last meeting of COSP on 25th November.

Tullie House has earned a place of real affection and pride in the hearts of residents of the City (14,000 of whom have Tullie Cards) and more than 253,000 visitors were recorded last year, 32% of them by locals. For the record the rest were as follows: 21% from Cumbria and Borders; 40% from the UK outside of the North West and 7% from overseas.

It was good to hear the representatives say that they had a positive and robust relationship with Members and Officers of the Council and while clearly, they didn't exactly welcome the proposed reductions in their grant, they were bullish about their ability to withstand them.

They have an enviable record in obtaining grants from a variety of funding sources, enabled largely by the reputation they have built up, not only as an institution at the heart of their community, but as an organisation at the forefront of national innovation and achievement. A successful partnership with the Local Authority is essential to maintaining that.

There was some discussion about the future of the Tullie Card in the light of the Trust's proposals to introduce a new Membership Scheme, but re-assurances were given that there were no plans to withdraw this most valued access route to the arts for all residents and certainly not without consultation with the Council and residents.

The Business Plan gave members of the panel a tantalising glimpse of some exciting prospects on the horizon and despite some potentially stormy seas ahead, the robust inventiveness of the Plan should avoid any possibility of the good ship Tullie running aground any time soon.

Nobody ever tells me anything.....

When organising events was part of my job, it wasn't unusual for people attending them to complain, 'I didn't know this was on'. 'So how come you're here then?' was usually my stock reply.

It's curious, how differently people receive, understand and retain information and this has been highlighted again in the recent survey carried out by the Member Involvement Working Group, asking Members about their perceived level of involvement in the decision and policy making processes of the Council.

At the time of writing this report, the results of the survey have not yet been fully collated, but it is plain from even a cursory glance through the 40 responses, that although we all have access to the same information and opportunities, not all of us register that information in the same way or indeed recognise the opportunities as they are presented to us, with half of us saying we do not feel fully informed or engaged or involved.

Clearly that is an issue for concern, because if all the residents of the city are to be represented fairly, then each elected Member should feel equally enabled and empowered to do so. If Councillors are not empowered, how then can we carry out our duty to engage with and empower the electorate?

At present, in the words of the reggae icon and Civil Rights activist Johnny Nash, 'There are more questions than answers'. Let's hope that, as the Working Group attempts to unravel the causes and repackage the solutions, we do not have to report back in the final words of the same song, 'The more we find out, the less we know!'

Bah humbug!

In this, the season renowned for wise men, it seems appropriate enough to quote the one who said, 'We are often more careful with our money than our principles'. It was a quotation brought to mind during the recent discussions about future budget proposals, where it is again evident that as Councillors, we find ourselves wrestling with both our

personal and political principles as we seek to shave yet more key services to the bone, often in areas of service that we hold to be sacred cows.

It is an oft rendered cry from Members that none of us came into politics to cut services, but it is an inevitable truth that as a result of harsh economic times and the particular political dogma which currently prevails nationally, we find ourselves in the difficult position of compromising many of those values we hold dear.

I am aware that there is a feeling that the halcyon days of local government as a public service are disappearing. Some would say 'good riddance'. I am not one of them. I think it's a shame that discussions, at practically all levels, now start from a 'how much will it cost?' rather than a 'how will it benefit residents?' base.

For instance, at a time when the role of local government should be to enable the growth of community capacity and resilience, COSP found itself recently having to discuss issues such as the possible reduction of vital core funding to organisations like Community Centres.

I detest the mantra 'more for less' in the same way that I am irritated by people who say they will 'give it 110%'. Both are clearly nonsense and I think that it is sad that we feel obliged to accept the dubious morality of implementing policies that inflict more poverty and prudence on the poor, in order to support the reckless rapacity of the rich.

It is a matter of individual conscience I guess, as to whether or not any compromise is acceptable, but it is also a political reality and so we struggle to make the best fist we can of it and I believe that the budget proposals placed before the last meeting of COSP are a prudent and imaginative response to the circumstances we find ourselves facing.

It seems that society hasn't changed very much in this respect in the past 100 years despite the best, or worst, efforts of politicians, for when listening recently to my wind up MP 3 player, I heard an old 1920's Music Hall favourite by Billy Bennett, the Billy Bragg of his day –

'It's the same the whole world over, it's the poor wot gets the blame,
It's the rich wot gets the pleasure, isn't it a bloomin' shame'

Where will it all end? Vive le revolution!

It's probably fair to say at this point that I probably don't speak for all my colleagues on COSP on this issue!

Our dwindling financial resources also remind me of another saying, frequently used by my dad when I asked him for a raise in my pocket money.

'That money talks, I'll not deny;

I heard it once....it said 'goodbye'

It's as easy as ABC

Whoever invented that phrase quite clearly had never been introduced to the principles of **Asset Based Community Development** which, as part of the COSP workplan, a group of cross party Members has been investigating.

Background papers explaining ABCD state that it is a strategy for sustainable community driven development which builds on the assets that are already found in communities and helps mobilise those communities to link micro assets to the macro environment, thereby ensuring that citizen centred, 'inside out' organisations become key to community engagement.

Helping people to help themselves used to seem like such a simple idea and hopefully will be so again once the Working Group has unravelled the mysteries of this new approach!

'tis the season to be jolly

On the face of it, it would seem that there's precious little to be jolly about in Local Government these days, but scratch beneath the surface of the past 12 months and we find many things to gladden the heart, thanks to Carlisle City Council interventions.

For instance this year, just at COSP meetings, we have considered issues such as the following;

- some great community events, from the Pageant and Music City to the Fireshow
- the start of the work to build the new Arts Centre
- the first sod being cut on the site of the new community campus in Harraby
- increasing numbers of 'affordable' houses being built
- a reduction in the number of regular 'rough sleepers' in the city, as well as a 78% reduction in homeless acceptances
- improved on-line accessibility for customer service.

At the risk of sounding like I've swallowed the Oxford Book of Quotations, here's another which I discovered in the 'Sailing Today' magazine (available in all good dentist's waiting rooms);

'The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails'.

This Council has adjusted its sails and consequently remains on course to deliver positive outcomes for the people of our city, despite gloomy forecasts.

Thanks go to all staff who, despite at times I'm sure, feeling that they were swimming against the tide, helped make these things happen.

On reflection, maybe I was too hasty earlier. Maybe the revolution has already begun.

Maybe next year will see even more progress. Oh no we won't! Oh yes we will! etc etc.

A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.