

**FYLDE COUNCIL**

**CORPORATE PLAN 2016 - 2020**

**Statement-of-Dissent**

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## STATEMENT SUMMARY

The signatories to this Statement of Dissent, representing over 35% of Fylde councillors, wish it to be known that we are unable to support Fylde's Corporate Plan 2016 - 2020 as adopted by the Council on 8th February 2016.

The plan has insufficient democratic legitimacy to properly be described as a 'Corporate Plan.'

It is not corporate because it was not prepared corporately, and its absence of targets, timetables and resources mark it out as being a statement of aspirations rather than a plan.

It was prepared by a single political party, and is probably better described as a party manifesto.

It subsequently appeared on committee agendas - but was not introduced to committees as an item for debate or amendment. It was presented as an "*Information Item*"

The covering report on each committee agenda included the following statement: *'The information is being included on the agenda of every committee in the November cycle of meetings to ensure that all elected members are aware of the opportunity to provide comment, suggestion and seek clarification on the proposed Corporate Plan'*.

No information has been provided, and no cross-party debate has taken place, about the issues and options that formed the first draft of the Corporate Plan. These issues were briefed only to the majority party. Furthermore, although 'suggestions' for amendment on the draft were sought, the acceptance or rejection of those 'suggestions' was determined only by the majority party, in private meetings with officials.

We accept that governance is the right of the majority, but more than 35% of Fylde's democratically elected councillors - each of which hold an equal mandate from the electorate - have been denied their natural right to share in, and contribute to, the preparation of this high level document with strategic objectives and outcomes for the period 2016-2020.

This simply cannot be said to be a process that has delivered a corporate plan for Fylde.

At the Council meeting to approve the final version of the 'Corporate Plan' 35% of those present, voted against adopting the Corporate Plan and asked for their names to be recorded as having done so.

Because Councillors who are not members of the majority party have been denied knowledge of the issues and options that were proposed and considered as part of the process to devise the plan, we are thus unable to offer properly informed and reasoned arguments either to support or to disagree with what the majority party has set out as its plan for Fylde.

We believe the process to produce the plan was wrong.

It represents a failure of both natural justice and good governance, and it has failed to produce a plan that the whole of the Council can support.

We dissent from it.

## **Signatories / Councillor Names**

**Mark Bamforth** (*Fylde Ratepayers*)

**Jan Barker** (*Labour*)

**Keith Beckett** (*Independent*)

**Julie Brickles** (*Independent*)

**Maxine Chew** (*Independent*)

**Alan Clayton** (*Independent*)

**Peter Collins** (*Independent*)

**Tony Ford** (*Liberal Democrat*)

**Peter Hardy** (*Independent*)

**Paul Hayhurst** (*Non-Aligned*)

**Karen Henshaw** (*Liberal Democrat*)

**Roger Lloyd** (*Fylde Ratepayers*)

**Linda Nulty** (*Independent*)

**Liz Oades** (*Independent*)

**Louis Rigby** (*Independent*)

**Elaine Silverwood** (*Independent*)

**Heather Speak** (*Independent*)

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## **INTRODUCTION**

For several years, Fylde has produced a Corporate Plan.

Under the former Cabinet system of governance its preparation was restricted to the Cabinet members chosen by the Council Leader. The initial draft was prepared by Cabinet members advised by professional officers who would identify the key strategic responsibilities the Council had to deliver over the period of the plan, together with initiatives that were ongoing or already committed.

Cabinet members would then include strategic outcomes, and a draft Corporate Plan would be produced. The draft would go to the Cabinet meeting for recommendation to Full Council for adoption.

This process of information apartheid ensured that Cabinet members (all belonging to the majority party) received details of the issues and options relevant to consideration of the Corporate Plan, whilst those councillors who were not members of the Cabinet were not as well informed, and were not allowed to participate in the Cabinet's discussions of draft versions.

The perception that this process was neither transparent nor sufficiently democratic engendered public dissatisfaction. This in turn gave rise to the call for a return to the Committee system of governance via a petition and public referendum. The expectation was that, whatever the majority position of the council, all equally elected councillors should receive the same information; have equal opportunity to represent their electorate; contribute their experience and knowledge to whatever issues were being considered, and to have the right to speak and vote when decisions were taken.

Following a successful governance petition under the Localism Act, the public referendum voted to change the way Fylde council operated. It required Fylde to re-introduce the Committee system.

The Council has complied with its statutory requirement in this regard, but the way in which the Committee system is currently being allowed to be implemented is, increasingly, reflecting and moving toward the 'closed shop' decision-taking process of the former Cabinet system.

Patently, committee governance is not what the majority party (who strongly opposed and campaigned against the petition for a referendum) want, and the current direction of travel appears set on a course to circumvent the intent of that referendum.

The first demonstration of this direction was the Chairman's announcement in the November 15 Finance and Democracy Committee that the preparatory work for the Council's annual budget would be undertaken by a Working Group that was not politically balanced; whose agenda, minutes and meetings would not be in the public domain, and to which, councillors who were not members of the majority party would not be invited, and may not attend.

Given that the majority party has a clear overall majority and can easily outvote all other councillors, it is difficult to see why they believe it necessary to use such a device to exclude the involvement of other councillors from the budget preparation process - unless the intent was to prevent information about the issues and options being made available to other councillors, and thus restrict the ability of those other councillors to properly scrutinise, challenge, and test the proposals that the majority group advance.

We accept that the decision on the draft budget will be taken by Fylde's (politically balanced) Finance and Democracy Committee and it will pass from them as a recommendation to the Full Council but, without having had the benefit of officer briefings and explanations, and without having heard all the options available that have been presented to and discussed in the Working Group (from which many councillors have been excluded by a vote of the majority party) there will clearly be little opportunity for properly informed debate and scrutiny.

A similar approach has been adopted with Fylde's Corporate Plan.

## **THE PROCESS TO PRODUCE THE CORPORATE PLAN**

The OED defines 'corporate' as being something which is *'shared by all members of a group'*

But in this instance, the group that created the plan was not the full Council. It was a sub-set of the full Council - the Conservative councillors. They have been allowed to choose the way the plan was prepared without even being required to subject that preparation process to the scrutiny of debate in any committee or the council.

We support the principle of decisions taken by a majority vote. It is what proper democracy is about. But for that democracy to be healthy, there must exist the opportunity for informed and reasoned debate on proposals to be considered. It cannot be good governance or healthy democracy where, as here, there has been an abandonment of the process which should have ensured all elected councillors - not just the majority party - had equal opportunity to hear briefings, to debate issues and options, and to be aware of all the information provided by the Councils officers and others in pursuance of preparing important policy or strategy documents such as the Corporate Plan.

Since the change to a committee system, the former Cabinet's decision-taking role now vests in the Full Council or its committees, and we argue that the process to draft the plan under the Committee system should properly have been the responsibility of the relevant (politically balanced) committee, because it is they (or the full council) in whom decision-taking powers vest.

But this did not happen.

The Chief Executive has *said "...under the new committee [system] there is no cabinet so the draft was developed by the leading group, this was confirmed by the Chairman of the Environment Health and Housing Committee...when a member raised the question.*

*The officers provided advice on the initiatives that are ongoing or already committed e.g. sea defence work, accommodation project then the leading group discussed and drafted the proposal that has been circulated.*

*Under the new committee system there is no Cabinet meeting to consider the draft so it was proposed that it should be circulated to every committee for comment, input and feedback prior to the final proposal going to Full Council for approval, and that this was considered to be more inclusive and in the spirit of a committee system, allowing all elected members a chance to input ahead of a report to Full Council - therefore the Plan has not been set by officers it has been led by members and there is the opportunity for every member to input and shape the document."*

We do not agree that the process adopted is in the spirit of a committee system as the Chief Executive claims. The proper process would have been for committees to consider their areas of interest, to be briefed by officers on historic, current and future implications within those topics, and to have devised the Committee's recommendations to Council for inclusion in the Corporate Plan.

Furthermore, the signatories to this document remain dissatisfied that someone other than the Council presumed they had the authority to take a decision that allowed a single political party to draft the 'Corporate Plan' and that it should be provided to committees as an Information Item and not for debate /discussion and decision to form their own recommendations.

We do not agree that the process employed is even appropriate, let alone inclusive.

Nor do we believe it is what the people of Fylde voted for in the referendum. The question asked in the referendum was *'How would you like Fylde Council to be run? By a leader who is an elected councillor chosen by a vote of the other elected councillors. This is how the council is run now. [or] By one or more Committees made up of elected councillors. This would be a change from how the Council is run now'*

The expressed will of the Fylde electorate was for their council to be run by committees encompassing all shades of opinion.

Our dissatisfaction is further aggravated by the manner in which councillors outside the majority party were asked about the plan.

The Chief Executive's report placing the item on the committee agendas said *'The information is being included on the agenda of every committee in the November cycle of meetings to ensure that all elected members are aware of the opportunity to provide comment, suggestion and seek clarification on the proposed Corporate Plan'*.

That process does not allow for members outside the majority party to hear the briefings given by officers, nor does it equip us with the information to enable proper understanding; adequate scrutiny of proposals; or the development of balanced and properly reasoned arguments to agree or otherwise the draft as proposed.

Time and again this 'Information Item' was introduced by the (Conservative) chairmen who sought to minimise the committee's involvement it by advising committee members as follows:

- *"Don't forget, there's no voting on this, this is just to look at it...."* or
- *"Item x is the corporate plan, and it's simply for information only. OK?"* or
- *"We'll go on to the next item, and it's just an information item and that's the new Corporate Plan. That's just for information basically, and that will be submitted at the Council meeting in December. This is just for your information."*

It is not clear to us whether such introductory statements arose from ignorance or from intent, but the effect on non-Conservative committee members - especially when combined with the exclusion of briefing information to which they had been subjected - was to stifle proper scrutiny and debate of what the Conservative group had proposed.

## **EXAMPLES OF DUBIOUS PROPOSALS**

Fylde's officers decided to use an external consultant to advise and brief the majority party without involving other councillors in that process. Without being part of that process, it is difficult for councillors outside the majority party to understand exactly what the wording of the plan actually means. That said, the wording clearly does address some important issues that we believe would have benefited from consideration by the wider range of experience, ability and vision that that which is available from a single political party.

For example, we have concerns about the plan saying Fylde will *'assess the benefits of becoming a member of the Combined Authority'* when the disbenefits also need to be considered and evaluated.

Equally, we believe the proposal which commits the Council to *'Channel business rates funding opportunities to economic development'* before alternative needs or competing priorities are considered also ought to have received more scrutiny before such support was committed.

This is particularly so given the very large income reduction expected in Government grants, and the shortfall (which in Fylde's case is expected to be £700,000) that is widely expected to affect district councils when the County Council withdraws its financial support for waste recycling within the plan period.

Having strategically hypothecated business rate funding to economic development precludes its use to offset the income shortfall that will hit Fylde so hard.

## **MATTERS THAT HAVE BEEN OMITTED**

One of the most striking omissions is the procedural failure to seek the views of the public on the proposals before they were adopted. In reality this is the public's plan, and whilst the issues that underlie its drafting may have some basis in public opinion surveys, it cannot be extrapolated nor assumed from those surveys that the proposed actions will be supported by the community. The corporate plan should start with our residents and what is important to them. It should begin with what residents want, but without consulting the public there can be no certainty that it is.

The second most glaring omission is that it fails to take adequate timetabling and resourcing into account. There is no allocation or apportionment of resources to any of the actions proposed in the

plan. It has no measurable targets, no financial implications, and no predefined success criteria. It is not a plan, it is an aspiration, a leap of faith into the dark, and that cannot be a good approach to the highest level strategic document that the Council produces.

We also argue that the document is poorly set out. We would have preferred to see - and helped to shape - a plan process that addressed - for example:

- *The likely major strategic threats and opportunities over the plan period.*
- *An agreed mission.*
- *Our main priorities for the plan period.*
- *Funding and resourcing for the plan.*
- *Support for cross party principles in developing and operating the Committee system.*
- *The achievements, failures, and carry forwards for items from the previous plan.*
- *Goals and targets with resource allocations and measurable outcomes for this plan.*
- *The process by which we will measure and record the progress and impact of the plan.*

## **THE DECISION AT COUNCIL**

Introducing the item at Council, Councillor Susan Fazackerley noted this was the first corporate plan to be produced following the reintroduction of the Committee system at Fylde.

She said that under the former Cabinet system, the draft corporate plan was the result of the combined efforts of officers and Cabinet members, and the finished product would be adopted at the appropriate Cabinet meeting for recommendation to full council, where it would be approved. But under the new system, the initial draft was developed by the leading group with professional advice from officers. The initial draft was then circulated to all members, key partners, and several main employers with a two month window for comment. These comments were circulated to all members.

Any feedback had been considered by the leading group and some changes were made before the final draft was produced.

She said *"...despite some criticism of this system, I think it fair to say it has been far more inclusive than the previous process. Although the initial document was created by the leading group, the group who the electorate chose to spearhead the council for the next four years, every elected member has had several opportunities for input."*

Speaking to an amendment that would have seen Fylde receive, rather than adopt, the corporate plan, Cllr Elizabeth Oades said:

*"This document is not a corporate plan, it's a Conservative Party plan prepared by a single political party, and its contents do not, and cannot be said to, represent the spectrum of opinion that is the full Council, because the evidence on which it's based and the options available to be considered, were presented to, and debated by only one political party within the Council.*

*And indeed it wasn't even placed on Committee agendas as an item for debate, only for information.*

*No information was provided, no cross party debate took place on whatever issues and options might have been in earlier drafts of the plan, and it's not been offered for amendment to those outside the majority party."*

35% of Fylde's councillors - representing five different groups on the Council - voted not to adopt the plan and now signify their dissent from it.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Although the Chief Executive's covering report said: *"The Corporate Plan is developed through consultation and feedback with stakeholders based on the key strategic responsibilities of the*

*Council.*" more than a third of the elected councillors have been excluded from the process to prepare it.

As it presently stands, Fylde's 'Corporate Plan' is not a plan, it is a wish list.

Those who are not members of the majority party, and who were thus not invited to attend an 'away day' to debate and discuss the issues and produce the draft plan, have been denied their natural right to share in, and contribute to, the preparation of what Fylde's Chief Executive describes as a high level document with strategic objectives and outcomes for the period 2016-2020.

There is a clear need to work collectively to produce priorities supported by the whole council if Fylde is to produce a Corporate Plan that all can sign up to.

Any Corporate Plan can have no credibility if it is prepared and approved only by one part of the council, and this plan is neither corporate - because its preparation has not been shared by all members of the council - nor is it a plan, because the process to implement it; the resources it will require; and the outcomes that will be measured to assess its performance, are all unknown

It is therefore not a Corporate Plan that we can support.

## **Signatories / Councillor Names**

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