

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR REGENERATION & ENVIRONMENT

1. WINTER WEATHER IMPACT

1.1 Gritting

What is considered to be the worse weather for 30 years has impacted heavily on the Borough and across the country. Nationally there has been a shortage of rock salt for road gritting, and this has caused additional problems to those we normally have to cope with during wintry conditions.

Our salt stocks at the start of the recognised winter season in November were higher than last year's at 2700 tonnes, however these were soon depleted by the need for a considerable amount of gritting in December. The normal process of ordering salt as we use it on the highway have been met with much reduced supplies from Salt Union who have been inundated with orders countrywide resulting in ever dwindling stocks over the Christmas and New Year period. In the absence of the superior rock salt normally used, we purchased white salt and mixed this with aggregate and some rock salt in order to continue gritting operations. The Government intervened in the New Year to direct Salt Union's supplies on a priority basis and this has resulted in delivery of over 400 tonnes up to 14 January which is well short of our needs for our normal standards of winter maintenance. The result has been reduced salt bin filling and reduced spread rates for gritting purposes. Apart from the retail core of our town centres, footpaths throughout the borough were only cleared where specific requests had been submitted.

The staff in the Regeneration and Environment Department have worked tirelessly round the clock to try to keep the main road network open and deserve the Council's praise for their efforts. We will review our winter maintenance policy in order to be best prepared for future occurrences of this nature.

Also we can expect a major task of remedial work on the highways, as the frost and snow has caused major damage.

1.2 Refuse and Recycling

The weather conditions impacted severely on refuse and recycling collection services. Recent conditions were considered far too hazardous for crews to carry out their normal collection services and therefore there was the need to introduce twelve temporary collection points around the Borough which, although not ideal, were welcomed by residents and were well used. Near normal collections were resumed on 14 January however some back and side streets remained impassable for our refuse and Greenstar's recycling collection vehicles. We hope that this will not reduce the excellent progress we are making to encourage recycling.

1.3 Public Transport

The heavy snowfall experienced on Tuesday 5th January meant that bus operators' services were adversely affected and for a period of time from 9.00am until late afternoon all services were suspended. Transdev were able to offer limited services from Darwen to Blackburn, Blackburn to Hyndburn and Clitheroe using main roads from late afternoon.

In the ensuing period whilst main road services were quickly back on schedule, access to estates and the rural areas was extremely limited. However by Tuesday 12th January the majority of services were operating, although services to Bold Venture, Sunnyhurst and some rural areas were still affected.

Community Transport and Adult Social Services transport did not operate from Saturday 2nd January until it was determined, following daily risk assessments, that the footpaths were safe to enable passengers to access buses at the kerb side.

2. TOWN CENTRES UPDATE

2.1 Christmas

This years Christmas promotions and events have been deemed a big success by the public and traders alike. The lights switch-on events at both Blackburn and Darwen town centres proved popular with the crowds, with Chico drawing in one of the largest attendances ever seen at Darwen. Replacement new lights on School Street, the trees on top of the Market Hall, Bridge Street and column features gave a fantastic showing there. The town centre caretakers were kept very busy putting up 65 small Christmas trees on businesses around the town centre and requests for more are coming in already for next year. Darwen's temporary ice-rink also returned to the Market Square after its popularity in 2008 and was again a hit with families and young people. Darwen Market reported their best Christmas ever, particularly for food and other town centre traders similarly benefited from the increased number of people choosing to shop local, especially with the bad weather.

Blackburn's BIG wheel was very popular and over 15,000 people took a ride during the three weeks it was open, despite the cold weather and snow! Unlike its sister wheel that was located in Preston's Flag Market, the ticket price for Blackburn's wheel was reduced to just £1 to ensure that it was affordable to local residents. This was subsidized by funding from the North West Development Agency and all other costs were covered by the income generated from the attraction.

Despite the continued 'credit crunch' and bad weather, initial reports from traders in Blackburn indicate a prosperous Christmas for our town centres.

In Blackburn, big retailers in The Mall and Marks and Spencer reported very strong Christmas trading, up on last year. Similarly, the independents have fared well with reports of snow boosting local trade. Mercers on Darwen Street in particular reported an exceptionally good Christmas and New Year trading. Feedback from traders on the impact of the Christmas events and town centre promotions on town centre trade has also been very positive.

2.2 Markets

Negotiations are proceeding on the proposals for the Mall and the Market and it is hoped to report to Members on the outcome in February. This timetable has been communicated to traders and it is hoped that the future will soon become clear and that traders will be able to sign up to units in the modern facility that is being created for early 2011.

In the meantime, letting levels have continued to improve. On a number of Saturdays in this quarter Blackburn 3 Day Market has been fully let and a couple of extra casual stalls have had to be placed in the Avenue. Competition is now intense for prime stalls in the 3 Day. This was supported by special promotions over the Christmas period.

Darwen 3 Day Market and Market Hall are also 100% let. The new public toilets have been completed so efforts are now focussing on attracting new traders to the Annex. Around a dozen enquiries have been received about the new units which are currently being built into the front of the Market Hall.

2.3 Blackburn Town Centre Movement Strategy

I reported to Executive Board this month on the Blackburn Town Centre Movement Strategy. The various measures are needed to allow the economic growth and development of Blackburn Town Centre, as a thriving place to work, shop and visit, whilst at the same time encouraging people to make more sustainable travel choices. As expected, some of the specific changes are generating controversy, especially the closure of Railway Road to through traffic. I do not intend this to happen until we are comfortable that the traffic that is displaced will be reasonably able to use alternative routes.

3. PLANNING

I am pleased that there has been a significant improvement in the planning application process performance. For major planning applications, on average 70% are dealt with within the statutory 13 week period compared to 48% in 2008. The National target is 60%. The current volume of planning applications appears not to have dropped as dramatically compared to some other councils in the north west. So far this year volumes are only 8% down on 2008, and only 18% down overall compared to the height of the market in 2007. Staffing levels are being managed to reflect the current and expected volumes.

We are seeing some encouraging development activity, especially from house builders who are planning for the future despite the economic downturn. Other major development schemes that have been approved include the Youth Zone, the new PCT building on Barbara Castle Way, the new Blackburn town centre bus station, Pennine Reach major road improvement schemes, and the new headquarters for Euro Garages.

A new enforcement approach for tackling unsightly land and buildings is also being developed, aimed at tackling eyesores which are having a detrimental impact on the economic well being of the Borough. A strategy will be developed to prioritise action on the main gateways into the two towns and to support the Council's empty homes strategy. An ambitious level of activity is planned, involving the Neighbourhood Boards in developing local priorities for action.

I reported to Council Forum in November on the Local Development Framework Core Strategy. This will be the key strategy in setting out our place-shaping agenda to secure growth and regeneration in the Borough. A six-week public consultation took place before Christmas, and has thrown up no fundamental issues. The Core Strategy public examination will probably take place over the summer and then to be adopted in late 2010.

4. WORKLESSNESS

The latest figures for Jobseekers Allowance claimants tell us that 4,064 people claimed Jobseekers Allowance in the Borough in November. These figures show us that unemployment has now fallen by 229 people since last month.

The first Annual Report covering the activities of the Strategic Employment Group during 2008/09 is available and will be uploaded onto the Council's website or copies are available on request.

