

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR REGENERATION

EMPLOYMENT ISSUES

Unemployment is starting to increase in the borough. In January the number of residents claiming Job Seeker's Allowance was 4,314, in June it was at its lowest at 3,657 and in September it increased to 3,680.

Work Clubs have now been set up in each of our neighbourhood areas ahead of government proposals. Feedback from residents is positive and demonstrates to us that they are needed to support individuals into work.

The Work Programme will replace the majority of existing welfare to work programmes. It is designed to be a single integrated package of support providing personalised help for everyone who finds themselves out of work regardless of the benefit they claim from April 2011. The government are looking to a small number of prime contractors to hold multi million pound contracts who will in turn sub contract some of the work to specialist providers. We are working with potential prime contractors and introducing them to local organisations who may wish to be sub contractors, especially those who are currently funded through the Working Neighbourhoods Fund.

Government have announced that they will introduce a new Enterprise Allowance to offer people who are out of work and entering self-employment a weekly payment linked to the value of their benefit for a period of up to six months. This is helpful and we want to encourage enterprise and self employment.

Retailers in the Mall are recruiting for new stores opening by Christmas these include Peacocks, Pandora, Deichmann Shoes, H&M and USC. Recruitment support has been offered to Pretec and BGlobal who have recruited local residents. We are continuing to work with other expanding and new companies in the borough.

TAXI TESTING REGIME

At the request of the trade, and with support of members, a focus group has been set up to look at the current testing standards. The group will include members of the trade and officers from Public Protection and the MOT station.

Also the mandatory knowledge test that each new driver must undertake and pass prior to being licensed is being overhauled and changed to a group exam, it is hoped that this will be better use of resources and will streamline the procedure for the drivers.

Following complaints from drivers regarding plying for hire, Public Protection Officers have committed to a high profile/high visibility enforcement campaign on the town centre streets on the weekend evenings from 10.00 pm until 3.00 am in the run up to Christmas.

MARKETS

The main fit-out contract started on 18th October 2010; costs are expected to be within budget. The opening date for the new market remains 5th March 2010. Significant work remains in finalising tenants' fit-out requirements and promoting the existing Market as well as seeking further food traders for the new Market. Meanwhile for the existing Markets vacant possession strategy is well advanced with only a small number of traders now remaining that haven't signed new contracted out leases. We are now making sure that ongoing trade is supported before the March shut-down.

FEILDEN STREET CAR PARK

The car park provides 520 spaces on four floors with opening hours from 7.00 am to 11.00 pm Monday to Saturday and 9.00 am to 6.00 pm Sunday. Since its opening in May, usage has steadily increased. In addition to the existing daily college contract users, weekly records indicate an increase from 258 users in the week commencing 12 June to 683 during 13 - 19 September. Most customers are weekday users with an average of 140 per day (plus the 20 college) and a peak to date of 215. Weekend use is still light with less than 30 parkers on Sundays. Overall average length of stay for ticket purchasers is 3 hours 40 minutes.

Current usage is less than needed to achieve income targets. Two additional aspects of the park help improve its financial performance. First, the relocation of the parking attendants from the Mill Hill unit into the Feilden Street office and the corresponding reduction in their operating costs; and second, the two ground floor retail units with potential rental income going to the car parking budget.

Since the fees were first set, there has been a national slump in car parking revenue in town centres and many new parks have begun fees as low as £3.00 for a full day's parking. During August, the Mall also reduced their charges. As a result of these factors, a new fee structure has been agreed. These fees will be significantly lower with a stay of up to 8 hours costing as little as £3.00. This move is considered to be well timed to hit the winter shopping peaks during November and December and will significantly increase usage of the park. It will also mitigate against parking pressure, which will be encountered in other town centre locations such as the market rooftop car park, Jubilee House and Starkie Street.

CATHEDRAL QUARTER

A visit by Robert Napier, Chairman of the Homes and Communities Agency took place on the afternoon of the 14th October. The event was hosted jointly by the Council and the Cathedral and started with a presentation on the Cathedral Quarter and an introduction on the Youthzone project by Andrew Graham, Chief Executive of Graham and Brown and Chairman of the Youthzone Board. Robert was then shown around the Cathedral Quarter area

and specifically a site visit to the Youthzone. A presentation on HMR and other HCA activities in the borough rounded off the visit. He commented on what an impressive town Blackburn was, was very supportive of the partnership working on the Cathedral Quarter Scheme and very impressed with the Youthzone project.

TOWN CENTRE HIGHWAYS WORKS

Montague Street/Feilden Street: The main construction works regarding the widening of Montague Street are being progressed now that the many uncharted Statutory Undertakers services problems have been resolved. The scheme is due for completion in early December and will improve access to the orbital route at Feilden Street.

Larkhill/Barbara Castle Way: The scheme to improve traffic flows and introduce bus priority measures at this junction is now under construction on site with substantial completion due by mid December.

Preston New Road/ Barbara Castle Way: The lengthening of the west bound right turning lane from the orbital route into Preston New Road is being undertaken as an element of the works at Larkhill with substantial completion in mid December.

King William Street: A £1.3 million European funded scheme to improve the public realm and support the improvement of town centre shopping has been approved. After final design reviews and tendering, start on site is expected February 2011 after the busy Christmas period with completion Autumn 2011.

WINTER MAINTENANCE

Bearing in mind the severity of the last two winters, whilst we are currently at the maximum capacity of the salt barn, further contingency orders have already been placed with our main supplier for deliveries in December and with a second supplier for delivery in January.

All gritting routes have been reviewed in light of experience from last winter season. A new GIS tracker system has been installed in the Winter Maintenance fleet. This will cut down fuel usage and mileage costs as well as allowing future planning of more efficient routes.

BRIDGEWORKS WATERY LANE

Work has commenced on site on the scheme to strengthen a weak bridge over the River Darwen together with the strengthening of a length of weak culvert on a tributary stream. Current works are being undertaken under traffic signal control but the main works require the full closure of Watery lane from the 15th November through to March 2011.

A MERRY BLACKBURN AND DARWEN FESTIVE PROGRAMME 2010

Plans for this year's festive activity in Blackburn and Darwen town centres are well underway. In Blackburn, the Christmas lights switch on event kick's off the festive season) in style on Thursday 18th November. Hosted by Rock FM, the event will bring family fun, festive activities and performances to King William Street from 6.00 pm. Special celebrity guest will be announced closer to the date. The event also sees the start of the town's late night shopping, extended until 9.00 pm this year. Darwen's lights switch on follows on 20th November from 4pm, with The Bee Radio and X Factor duo Same Difference. A series of festive Fairs and Markets are planned for both towns to complement existing offer and encourage a more festive atmosphere.

In Blackburn the festive season continues throughout December with the return of the BIG wheel on King William Street, the Winter Express, a festive land-train that will provide free rides around the town centre, and a programme of weekend street entertainment including baubles and Christmas puds on roller-skates and a giant snowman. Santa's Grotto will be located in the Markets at weekends along with free craft activities for children.

The annual children's lantern procession and Blackburn Cathedral fireworks will take place on Wednesday 15th December from 6pm and this year will coincide with late night shopping at The Mall.

In Darwen, the Totally Local Christmas festivities also include, Ghost Murder Mystery Tour in partnership with a local restaurant and children's street entertainment on Saturdays throughout December.

COMPREHENSIVE SPENDING REVIEW

Officers are digesting the announcements made on 20th October about the level of cuts they think the whole public sector and in particular to the Regeneration Portfolio.