

BUDGET SAVINGS

Following the Special Council meeting on 6th January the Regeneration Portfolio is required to progress savings proposals of £2.2m for 2011/12 in advance of budget setting at Finance Council on 7th March. Work has progressed in putting staff at risk of redundancy in service areas where funding cuts are anticipated. Staff in Regeneration Strategy, Projects and Programmes, Forward Planning and Transport, Transport Services, Markets Management and Business Support are among those affected and are being supported through this process. Budgets for Public Transport and Highways Maintenance will also be affected. It is anticipated that further savings will be required next year to meet portfolio targets and work is underway to identify options.

TITHEBARN

Following advice from the Council's legal team, in connection with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government's decision to grant planning permission for the Preston Tithebarn Area development proposals against the recommendation of the Planning Inspector, the Council submitted a legal challenge to the decision to the High Court in the week ending 31st December 2010.

It is anticipated that the matter will be listed for hearing in the High Court - Administrative Court later in the Spring of this year and that the hearing will take place in Manchester.

PENNINE REACH SUBMISSION

The Council has now submitted the required Expression of Interest (EOI) form to the Department for Transport for the Pennine Reach project. The EOI confirms that BwDBC and Lancashire County Council wish Pennine Reach to be taken forward for consideration for funding by the DfT in the spending review period. The Council has reiterated the primary objectives of the project which are to make public transport better through faster, more reliable journeys with better information for passengers, in order to combat congestion and ensure sustainable regeneration.

Following a detailed re-appraisal of Pennine Reach, the revised total outturn cost stands at £39.5m (previously £50m)

A summary of changes to the project are described below (in the BwD area) which have helped to reduce costs and make the scheme more competitive:

- Removal of the bus lane in Darwen
- Retention of some smaller elements in the Darwen section, but no bus lane
- Reduce Blackburn bus station costs
- Stopes Brow section removed
- Ticketing and technology reduced scope
- Land purchase requirements reduced
- Risks reduced and inflation allowance increased

The Council will work with the DfT this year to refine the business case, aiming for a final submission to DfT by Autumn 2011.

CHRISTMAS IN THE TOWN CENTRES

Christmas events went well in both Blackburn and Darwen despite the cold weather. The Big Wheel in Blackburn was well received, though income generated and ride numbers were down on last year from £15,000/15,000 rides to £12,000/8,000 rides. This was partly due to bad weather and reduced novelty factor. The wheel did generate significant positive coverage for the town centre in local and regional media including North West Tonight, 23rd December.

Other events in Blackburn included the annual Christmas lantern parade, Cathedral fireworks and Carol Concert on 15th December. This event has grown in popularity over the last few years and now successfully attracts 1000s of visitors and families to the town centre, many of whom enjoyed the late-night shopping after the event.

After successful trading in November, the festive markets continued as planned in December despite considerable problems caused by heavy snow. Marquees could not be safely erected, so traders from the Art and Craft market and Specialist Food Market were combined in one location under smaller gazebos on Town Hall Square and utilised additional space in the LET shop at 65 King William Street. The markets were a popular attraction and the majority of traders did well.

Town Centre footfall was very healthy over the main Christmas period, with December's pedestrian footfall on town centre streets peaking at it's highest for 5 years. The Mall reported footfall to be up on last years figures by 4.9% on week 51 and 3.4% on week 52 (week up to 27th December). The snow did have an impact on footfall, but despite this Blackburn was top performer of the 9 shopping centres operated by The Mall.

Marks and Spencer reported that their Blackburn store was the third best performing branch in the Region in the week before Christmas.

In Darwen town centre, bad weather also disrupted some planned entertainment but this was rescheduled for alternative days. The main event, Darwen's Christmas Market and ice-rink successfully took place on the evenings of 21st-23rd December on Market Square. Footfall was relatively good and traders (particularly food) did well. Local bars which helped organise the event felt it had a positive impact on business.

Darwen's Ghost Walk was extremely popular and the walk leader is now looking into holding the walks on a regular basis as a commercial venture.

HIGHWAYS WINTER MAINTENANCE

The prolonged period of low temperatures with snow and ice this winter has resulted in some disruption to the highways network, however this has been kept to a minimum by a considerable amount of out of hours gritting being undertaken. Prior to the start of the season a secondary salt supplier was identified and an order was placed for 1000 tonnes to be delivered in January 2011. Deliveries from this order have now been received.

Communication about winter maintenance has improved this season by the use of Facebook and e-mail contacts and this has been well received with a good deal of praise notably from Transdev, who have commended the Council's communications strategy. Praise has been received for the gritting service from a number of individuals and organisations.

The freeze/thaw has resulted in significant damage to the highway network. In spite of the pressures on the highway budget we are currently undertaking emergency pothole repairs even though winter is not over. A long term plan is being prepared for more permanent solutions in some areas.

MARKETS

New Market Fit-out – Completion of the fit-out for March 5th has become more complicated since the M&E sub-contractors (Allgroup) went into liquidation. A revised programme won't be determined for a couple of weeks until Capita have been able to produce a report (jointly with the contractor, Browns) which assesses the impact on the programme of revised delivery and installation. On the positive side Browns are now accelerating and considering re-sequencing of the work.

I will review the Council contribution to trader stall fit-out costs when we have further detail of traders specific proposals which, for the non-food stalls, should be received by the January 21st.

Mall completion issues – the reinstatement of Church St and Ainsworth St, are now agreed and the works on Church St have started on site.

Trader support in January and February - I have agreed to offer further rent reductions to traders in Jan and Feb, 75% rent reduction for Jan and 95% reduction for Feb.

Continuity of trade has been guaranteed for traders in the existing markets and contingency arrangements are being considered if occupation is needed beyond March 4th.

BLACKBURN WITH DARWEN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

Following the completion of the Core Strategy which is on the agenda as a separate item, work has started on the preparation of the Site Allocations and Development Management Policies Development Plan Documents, (SA & DM Policies DPD). This is necessary to take forward the Core Strategy and deliver the spatial objectives for economic and housing transformation and facilitate sustainable and high quality development on the ground.

The document needs to be based on sound evidence and follow the same procedures as the Core Strategy including an independent examination. The next nine month will be spent in putting together the evidence base and carrying out consultation with stakeholders and the community. A Consultation Strategy will be prepared setting out how the community and stakeholders will be engaged in the preparation of the document.

The timetable for the preparation of the SA & DM Policies DPD is: -

- Public consultation on draft document: Autumn 2011
- Pre-submission consultation: July 2012
- Submission to the Secretary of State: October 2012
- Examination hearing sessions: February / March 2013
- Receipt of Inspector's report: May 2013
- Adoption: November 2013

The Localism Bill is progressing through Parliament and includes a number of changes to the planning system. Any work undertaken in relation to evidence and preparation of the draft plan will incorporate the implications of the Localism Bill.

CROSS PARTY MEMBER GROUP

At the request of the Council Leader a cross party group has been set up to consider current matters in relation to Planning policy and Development Management and in particular how the Council makes planning decisions so as to ensure consistency.

The group will not have any decision making powers and its role will be to make recommendations to the Executive Member for Regeneration and the Chair of the Planning and Highways Committee. The group will be chaired by the Executive Member for Regeneration and will meet monthly.

The function of the group will include:

- Reviewing the Council's decision making arrangements for planning applications including the Scheme of Delegation
- Reviewing the Member Referral Scheme whereby planning applications can be referred to the Planning and Highways Committee
- Reviewing the Council's performance in relation to planning appeals, including instances where Planning and Highways Committee has overturned an officer recommendation, and ensuring that any lessons are learnt
- Reviewing the arrangements set out in the Council's Constitution for the use of emergency powers in relation to planning
- Maintaining and promoting a programme of member training on planning issues
- Considering the provision of information sessions for members of the public on aspects of development
- Preparing Development Plan Documents as part of the Local Development Framework; or other documents forming part of the Development Plan under any new national planning system
- Identifying and preparing any Neighbourhood Plans that are to be prepared under the Government's localism agenda

The Terms of Reference will be considered and agreed at the Group's inaugural meeting which is likely to be by the end of January 2011.

The Group will have a key input in the development of documents in the Local Development Framework and other planning policy matters. It is envisaged that group will consider and steer the preparation of the Site Allocations and Development Management Policies DPD to ensure an efficient and effective process.

WASTE PROCUREMENT

The Council is progressing with its long term waste processing/treatment solution, to avoid waste going to landfill, due to the future increased costs for landfill. Two potential solutions are being progressed with a view to identifying a preferred bidder and solution for summer this year.