

REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL**COUNCILLOR KATE HOLLERN****PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING CHIEF
OFFICER: GRAHAM BURGESS****DATE: 28 JUNE 2012****PAT ON THE BACK**

The public sector is going through tough times – this council has already faced £33M of cuts and there are more to come from the Government over the next few years. However I am pleased that our dedicated staff have been resilient throughout this period and have continued to deliver excellent services for our residents despite being under unprecedented pressures.

Recognising the commitment of our staff is a key priority for me as Leader. That is why in May, I attended another successful Pat of the Back awards ceremony and had the pleasure of meeting staff of local public sector organisations and volunteers who go the extra mile to help others, give back to the community or deliver an excellent service.

They had all been given a Pat on the Back award for the fantastic work they do day in, day out. The awards recognise people and teams across the public sector who really stand out for their dedication, skill and innovation. It's crucial we continue to recognise the hard work and dedication of our workforce throughout the tough times the public sector is facing.

YOUR CALL CAMPAIGN UPDATE

Response to the Your Call campaign continues to be strong. We have seen 44 community clean-ups and 1365 people have taken part in community activities. This is exceptional and shows our communities are pulling together despite the tough economic climate.

In March, we held a special celebration event to recognise the community groups and volunteers who have taken part in the campaign.

Myself and Councillor Hussain presented certificates to people, who day in and day out, go out and make a difference.

I also announced a small grants fund for groups involved in the campaign to for to put events for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee.

The pot was made up of funds from the Council and other public sector, community and business partners.

Resources are tight at the moment but it was important to reward and recognise those who have taken part in the campaign. It allowed several events to be put on in communities. Hundreds of street parties and community events took place as you could see from travelling across the borough over the Bank Holidays, and from the coverage in

the Lancashire Telegraph and the Shuttle. The Council has enabled these to take place by assisting groups with small grants through the Your Call initiative and also assisting with temporary road closures and street cleansing to allow the events to make the best of spaces in our streets and neighbourhoods and to make sure areas are clean and tidy afterwards.

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

The business buddy initiative is now working well with 25 businesses across the borough and it is planned to have Council Officers adopting over 100 businesses by the end of the year. Key issues raised by businesses include support for expansion plans, car parking and planning, help with training and apprenticeships and networking. Assistance to Industry grant funding continues to be very popular in supporting business growth. Regenerate Pennine Lancashire is the delivery agent and recent grant awards include Great British Envelopes Ltd, creating an additional 10 full time jobs and generating private sector investment totalling £488,151.84. Enquiries are now being pursued for 2012/13, against an increased budget of £300,000. Four schemes have been approved and a further five are progressing, attracting grants totalling £136,000 and generating over 50 new jobs. In addition the Accelerating Business Growth programme is due to launch in the summer with £7.5million government funding to support high growth businesses. On the back of Open for Business the Council is planning to submit a bid under the Enterprising Britain initiative to recognise the Council's work to support business. The LSP Prosperous group is making good progress with its three priorities this year - to promote business, grow the number of apprenticeships and to support local procurement. The Council with the support of the East Lancs Chamber of Commerce is working with business to increase the amount and range of goods and services procured locally by the Council. The Council supported the recent 100 Apprenticeships in 100 Days initiative at Crown Paints with seven apprentices recruited by the Council. Superfast Broadband is still on target to start in the summer. Confirmation is awaited from Government that the project has cleared all state aid hurdles.

WELFARE REFORM

Welfare reform is a major attack upon the living standards of many Blackburn with Darwen residents. Together with cuts to the Council, Police, Health and the voluntary sector, tens of millions will be taken out of the local economy leading to even further job losses in the private sector. We are evaluating the impact of the Government's welfare reform on the Council and citizens of the borough. The Government is announcing major changes to Council Tax benefit which will involve more major cuts in this benefit affecting our residents in the borough, and I am working hard with my Executive Board to fully understand the impact this dramatic Government reform may have on the borough. Already we are aware that the changes to council tax benefit alone will cost the poorest several hundred pounds a year.

Further details of this and other work being done on the Government's welfare reform can be found in report of the Executive Members Resources. The Council working to deal with the impact of the Government's health and education reforms and we are planning early to deal with every eventuality.

PENNINE LANCASHIRE – HOUSING

Pennine Lancashire has recently been awarded £9.4m grant funding following our bid to the HCA's 'Clusters of Empty Homes Fund'. The Blackburn with Darwen element of this bid (£840,000) is for Central Darwen for 30 properties which have been empty for an average of 2 years or more. The funding will allow 14 properties on Queen Street adjacent to the new Orchard Grove development to be remodelled and refurbished to provide high quality energy efficient affordable housing for rent and shared ownership. Further properties have been identified and the Council is negotiating with owners to purchase these properties so that they too can be brought back into use. New Homes Bonus payments can be applied to homes brought back into use as well as council tax income of approximately £120-150,000.

This is in addition to the £4.8m award for Empty Homes announced in March 2012. By running the two programmes concurrently the Council can continue efforts to tackle empty homes. This is significantly less than the investment planned for the area under the previous HMR programme. The area still has major housing challenges to address and this will now have to be looked at longer term.

Specifically for our Borough this means that we have £2.1m allocated from HCA funds and this will allow us to tackle 130 homes over the next 3 years. This comes on the back of £1.8m HMR transitional funding announced last year. In total this gives the Council £3.9m over the next three years, significantly short of the annual projected needs for this Borough under the HMR programme. However to mitigate the serious risks posed by abrupt withdrawal of HMR and leaving an area like Griffin in the lurch, the Council has since 2011/12 used its own Capital of £3.6m to try and finish off the clearance area. Sadly due to further budget challenges it is unlikely that the Council will be able to repeat this.