

## **REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR NEIGHBOURHOODS HOUSING & CUSTOMER SERVICES**

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**PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING  
DIRECTOR:  
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**Community Learning Trust (CLT) Pilot** - The Department of Innovation and Skills (BIS) have been visiting us to observe our work as a community learning provider, spending time meeting staff, partners and learners. They have been impressed with everyone they met, particularly enthused to meet with volunteers undertaking Your Call activities, including meeting the Friends of Blackburn Old Cemetery.

**Community Resilience - Flood Action Group** - there are now three flood action groups based in Lower Darwen and Darwen, supported by a task group including the Neighbourhood Manager, Groundwork and the Borough's climate change officer. This task group was successful in getting a small grant from the Department of the Environment, Fisheries and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to help the flood action groups with their plans, including artificial sandbags, and equipment to protect against flooding. The 3 groups are working together to share information and held a workshop on the 18 March 2013. In addition to the small grant funding (£10,000), it has just been confirmed that the task group has also been successful in obtaining a much larger DEFRA grant for £276,000 to support flood action across the Borough. Planning and consultation will now commence in terms of how this larger fund will be spent.

**Your Call "Winter Squads" Winter Squad** - There are now 50 active groups across the Borough, with over 150 volunteers. The council delivered more than 60 tonnes of grit to groups, as well as "high viz" vests, ice cleats for shoes, shovels, buckets and gloves. We also delivered over 200 emergency winter packs for vulnerable people, and 200 information packs on related services such as the care network and the handy man service.

**ADVICE SERVICES** The co-location within the Library of the Council's own team, Citizens Advice Bureau and Age UK has now been agreed. The transferring of services to the library will take place throughout April with all organisations occupying by May. Further communications will be issued over the next few weeks regarding the exact dates of the moves and the branding and advertising of the service.

**SOCIAL FUND** The policies and procedures concerning the localised Social Fund schemes have been completed and agreed by Executive Board. The Emergency Support Scheme (the replacement of Crisis Loans) will deliver

basic emergency assistance, i.e. food and the reconnection of heating and lighting through partnership with a number of Voluntary Sector organisations.

**CUSTOMER SERVICES** The One Stop Shop and Contact Centre have seen large increases in customers requesting help and advice. The increase is being driven by the welfare changes, namely, the Council Tax Support Scheme and the under occupation of social housing (bedroom tax). Further increases in customer contact are expected following the start of the Social fund on 3 April.

### **Housing Needs & Homelessness**

Mortgage repossessions and evictions from private and social tenancies continue to be a concern. During the previous 12 months we have assisted 60 households with mortgage difficulties, 92 households with rent arrears and 146 households given notice to leave a private rented tenancy.

Homelessness prevention - during the previous 12 months 490 households have been prevented from becoming homeless. In total for this period we had 1401 households contact the service for assistance with housing difficulties, an increase of 21% compared to 2011/2012.

The prevention fund that we received from the Government has in the previous 12 months prevented 81 households from becoming homeless of which 13 were owner occupiers, 29 were private tenants and the remaining 39 were social tenants.

The rent deposit bond scheme is extremely popular and since April 2012 it has assisted 60 households into private rented accommodation. We have had 16 claims on bonds due to the tenant owing rent arrears or because of damage that they have caused in the property.

We continue to experience an increasing demand for our services resulting from the current financial climate and the introduction of Welfare Reforms. We have increased our portfolio of temporary accommodation and this has been consistently full over the last six months due to the increase in demand for homelessness assistance.

### **Local Community Care Grants**

As part of the Welfare Reform programme by Government the Social Fund administered by DWP is changing and from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 the Community Care Grant scheme will be administered by BwD. This scheme will sit within the Housing Needs Team.

**Griffin Area Regeneration** We have purchased 153 properties from the 165 properties identified for clearance. Negotiations are ongoing with owners to purchase these properties once residents have been re-housed. 111 properties have been demolished in the regeneration area.

### **Empty Properties**

**HCA First Round** – To date around 125 owners have registered their interest in the scheme. The Together Housing Group (TVH) have carried out initial surveys on 39 properties, 16 of these have now progressed to a second survey. 1 property has been purchased, 5 have received offers and 9 properties have been identified for the leasing scheme, negotiations are still underway with the others.

Letters are being sent to the owners of an additional 50 properties that have recently reached the 2 years empty stage and now qualify for the scheme.

**Cluster Bid** – Capita have now completed valuations on the 14 properties on Queen St in Darwen that belong to the council. Negotiations are ongoing with TVH to agree sale prices for these properties in line with the Council's land disposal policy. The properties will be sold to TVH to refurbish and bring back into occupation.

### **Empty properties CPO'd by the Council**

A sale has been agreed for 363 Audley Range, Blackburn for £50,000 and contracts have now been exchanged. The buyer has been granted a licence to renovate the property to the required standard and final completion will take place once the property has been successfully renovated. The buyer intends to owner/occupies the property, once completed.

A sale has also been agreed for 85 New Park Street, Blackburn and legal formalities are under way. The procedure will be as for 363 Audley Range Blackburn. 11 Hollin Bridge Street Blackburn, which was marketed at the same time as the 2 previous properties, has received very little interest and none of the potential purchasers would intend to owner/occupy the property but would be offering it for private rent.

We are now looking at offering 3 further properties for sale that are owned by the Council through TV Shaw. These properties are 109 Infirmary Street Blackburn, which was acquired by CPO and 102 Stansfeld Street and 76 Hancock Street which were bought by agreement.

### **Shorey Bank – Older Persons Housing**

The Tender exercise to develop a new older person's housing scheme at Darwen is progressing well. Received bids are being evaluated and the scheme proposals were presented to officers on the 25<sup>th</sup> March. A report with recommendations seeking approval to appoint the 'preferred bidder' is being progressed.

### **Orchard Grove**

Phase 2 of the development completed early January 2013 and resulted in 43 brand new properties being made available on the Orchard Grove development. There are currently 21 properties occupied on phase 1, 25 plots on phase 2 reserved or sold and a further 3 properties on phase 3 reserved off plan. The scheme is progressing well and is due to complete in spring 2014.

**North Road**

Remediation works continue on site and due to on-going service diversions it is anticipated the development will commence in June 2013. The scheme will offer two and three bedroom homes for affordable rent and shared ownership through Great Places Housing Group.

**Consumer Advice Service Closure**

The Citizens Advice Consumer Service, a national call centre and first point of contact for all consumer matters, was able to refer consumers to the Consumer Advice Team where a consumer had followed initial advice but had been unable to resolve matters. From 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 will no longer accept referrals for civil matters. Information regarding criminal matters will continue to be referred as normal, and the Public Protection Service will continue to handle investigations into trading standards offences.

The Public Protection Service will maintain its online resource of self-help civil advice leaflets, and will continue to monitor all civil complaints made to the Citizens Advice Consumer Service from Blackburn with Darwen. Consumers contacting the Public Protection Service for civil advice will be signposted to alternative sources of information and advice, such as the CAB, Care Network, and the Council's own Home Maintenance Advice Service.