

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR NEIGHBOURHOODS, HOUSING AND CUSTOMER SERVICES**CLLR JAN-VIRMANI****PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING
DIRECTOR:
SAYYED OSMAN
DATE: 27 JUNE 2013**

Under Age Sales Update - For 2012-13, test purchase sales rates in Blackburn with Darwen for both alcohol and tobacco were below regional averages; 13.5% of test purchases for alcohol resulted in sales (a drop of 4.5% from the previous year's figure) compared with 16% across the region, and 7% of test purchases for tobacco resulted in sales (a drop of 5% from the previous year) compared with 10% across the region.

Troubled Families update - Year One of the programme was completed by the end of March 2013, with 131 families identified and attached. The central Troubled Families Unit (TFU) confirmed Year Two funding, with a target to identify and attach a further 280 families. The procurement process for third sector organisations to provide key workers for the families has been completed with five organisations now in the support framework including Action for Children, East Lancashire Women's Centre, Child Action Northwest, Groundwork Pennine Lancashire and Barnardo's. Eight in-house posts for full time key workers have been established. Following recruitment, six staff have been appointed to these posts, commencing early June, with a further two workers to be recruited in the coming months.

Housing Needs, Temporary Accommodation Pressure - We continue to experience increasing demand for our services resulting from the current financial climate and the introduction of Welfare Reforms. Our portfolio of temporary accommodation has been consistently full over the last three quarters and we have had to resort to using Bed and Breakfast accommodation for two families. The last time we used this type of accommodation for a family was over ten years ago.

Empty properties CPO'd by the Council - Two properties have been agreed for sale with contracts exchanged and license granted to refurbish the properties. A price has been agreed on a third property which is currently with our legal department. We are offering 3 further properties for sale at 109 Infirmary Street Blackburn, 102 Stansfeld Street and 76 Hancock Street. A number of offers to purchase the properties has been received by our agent and we will be evaluating these offers to purchase during the next two weeks.

Shorey Bank - the Council have now engaged in detailed discussions with officers from the Keepmoat consortium to engage in negotiations with view to starting the planning process in June 2013.

Orchard Grove, Darwen - The Orchard Grove scheme is progressing well and is on track to complete in spring 2014. So far 47 properties out of 73 completed properties built in phases 1 and 2 have now been occupied.

Pearl Street and Gretna Road Blackburn- Twin Valley Homes have been granted planning permission in February 2013 to develop 20 new homes. This will provide 14 new 2, 3 and 4 bed affordable homes at Pearl Street (site of the old Brookside Care Home) and six 2 bed bungalows at Gretna Road in the Little Harwood ward. Work started on site in March and the anticipated completion date is January 2014.

Moorgate Mill - A 'sod cutting' ceremony was held on 7 May for the proposed new 'Independent Living' scheme. This scheme will provide housing for People with Physical and Learning Disabilities.

Advice Services - The Citizens Advice Bureau, Age UK and the Council's own team have been successfully relocated into the Library to deliver the new advice service provision. It is anticipated that the service level agreement which will cover welfare, housing and debt advice in the Borough will be finalised in the next few weeks.

Social Fund - The Emergency Support and Local Community Care Grant schemes have been successfully introduced from the beginning of April. The initial customer contact at the One Stop Shops has been much lower than anticipated with the delivery of the scheme via the voluntary organisations working well. A fuller review of the customer contact for localised social fund provision will be completed after the first quarter has elapsed.

One Stop Shop and Contact Centre

The One Stop Shop and Contact Centre have seen a continued increase in customers requesting help and advice during April and May. In the main, the increase continues to be driven by the welfare changes, namely, the introduction of Council Tax Support and under occupation of registered social landlords (bedroom tax).

The Contact Centre has seen a 16% increase in Council Tax and Benefits calls in April 2013 compared with the previous year. In addition to the increased number, the calls are more complex in nature, and accordingly, the average call length has also increased. Overall, this has increased the workload of the team by 30%.

The One Stop Shop has also seen a similar increase in Council Tax and Benefits visitors, however, accurate figures cannot be given due to the failure of the queuing management system. Additional pressures have also arisen by the advent of the localised Social Fund provisions.

As an interim measure, temporary staff are being recruited to support the Customer Service teams. It is hoped that once the customer statistics are known from the first quarter of the year, the Council will have a much better understanding of customer volumes and the staff resources needed to address the enquiries.