

FOODBANKS

The number of people using foodbanks continues to increase.

Since it started in November 2012, Blackburn Foodbank has fed over 9,000 people. Whilst there is a perception among some politicians and media that life is getting better, the reality is many hard working families are struggling to pay their bills and are facing extremely tough times as these statistics show.

Severe budget cuts to local public services with more to come, cuts to benefits hitting the most vulnerable and the cost of living crisis mean continuing hardship for many people.

It's an outrage that foodbanks are needed in 21st Century Britain but it is a godsend that these organisations are here considering the number of people using them. I want to once again thank the hard working volunteers of our local foodbanks who continue to do all they can to help those in need.

I am very clear that the Council is doing all it can to promote jobs and prosperity in this borough and we have a good record of bringing investment in. But the programme of austerity continues to make life difficult for people here and similar areas in the North.

100 VOICES

I was very pleased that several residents accepted an invitation to talk about their issues at the 100 Voices forum.

The event at King George's Hall was an opportunity for people to give their views or voice their concerns on topics which matter to them, their families and their communities. The audience was made up of residents from different walks of life and a number of issues and topics were discussed.

Facilities for young people, how the Council is getting investment in the borough and the good work residents are doing under the Your Call banner were among the topics discussed. Community togetherness, grit bins, children's play areas and transport were also brought up in the open meeting where nothing was out of bounds and the agenda was set by residents.

I chaired and my fellow councillors, Councillor Damian Talbot, Executive Member for Leisure, Culture and Young People, and Councillor Mohammed Khan, Executive Member for Health and Adult Social Care, also attended.

I'm eager to get to the heart of issues in Blackburn with Darwen which is what this session did. We went there with a blank piece of paper – no hidden agenda. The audience decided what we discussed.

I am pleased to report to Members that it was a good meeting. The audience challenged us on issues but I also challenged them back. I said to them the only way we can improve the borough is by working together.

This is the very essence of our Your Call campaign – if you take the initiative, we will work with you. If people come forward to raise issues of concern we will do our best to address them.

GOOD NEIGHBOURS AWARDS

The date for nominations for the Blackburn with Darwen's Good Neighbours Awards has just passed and I am pleased to say we have had a good response. I look forward to looking through the nominations we have received. Some of their stories are truly heart-warming and make me proud to belong to such a place as Blackburn with Darwen.

The awards were run in partnership with the Lancashire Telegraph and I want to thank our sponsors: Blackburn Rovers, Capita, the Mall and Blackburn with Darwen Clinical Commissioning Group. The chief executive, a representative from the LT and I will be judging the entries soon and the winners will be announced shortly.

The important thing about these awards is that they recognise people who give their time to the community and expect nothing in return. They are the people who keep the community together and make Blackburn with Darwen a better place to live.

FIRST WORLD WAR COMMEMORATIONS

Plans to mark the centenary of the First World War in the borough are progressing.

A number of projects have already started including a move by two local gentlemen to build a larger monument in Corporation Park which lists the names of more than 3,000 men and women who fell in the Great War. This will be added on to the existing remembrance garden and memorial which currently lists only the conflicts in which people from the borough have died.

We are also receiving three paving stones to honour soldiers who received the Victoria Cross for valour in battle in World War One. I will keep fellow Members up to date as these projects progress.

I am very keen on community groups putting on commemoration events. This is why I set up a small grants pot for Your Call groups to apply to. The Council will also offer other support to groups.

A hundred years on, everyone in the borough still has a connection to it either through their own family history or the heritage of Blackburn with Darwen communities. The anniversary allows us to come together to remember the lives of those who lived, fought and died. I feel it is very important that the borough marks this anniversary.

JOBCENTRE PLUS FUNDING

One of our top priorities is getting people into work. As such, the Council has submitted a bid to Jobcentre Plus who have agreed to fund a temporary post for a year to help residents complete and submit job winning applications. This intensive support will help them to present themselves more effectively and improve their chances of getting work.

HIVE

The Hive business leaders' network membership currently stands at 179. Recent joiners are ACME – air conditioning and refrigeration specialists based on the Whitebirk Industrial Estate – and Pro Print Solutions – a leading photocopier supplier operating out of Barnfield House on Accrington Road.

Under the Open for Business initiative, a 'Doing Business in Blackburn' event was held on the March 6 at the Cathedral to highlight the opportunities, passion and pride in local businesses, and what it takes to be a successful business in the borough. The Chief Executive and I sat on a panel session and spoke about our commitment to support our business community.

A new Creative Hive network was launched on the same day. As a spin-off from the wider Hive business network, Creative Hive will support the development of the creative industries in Blackburn with Darwen and see partnerships form across all sectors, not just in the creative industries.

An LSP 'Plan for Prosperity' session was held at Blackburn Youth Zone on the March 17. The event focused on how the borough can generate growth and then use that growth to improve the employment prospects for local people, and improve the borough's image for investors, employers and house builders.

At the event, a video showing what the Council is doing to support businesses was shown. It was filmed and produced by talented Council apprentices and went down very well with the audience.

On the April 10, the NW office for UKTI (trade and investment) held a regional event in Blackburn as part of Export Week. Supported by Hive, the event offered local businesses an opportunity to learn more about winning business in Southern Asia, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. It was hosted by Graham and Brown, a leading exporter in the borough.

LANCASHIRE LEP AND THE STRATEGIC ECONOMIC PLAN

The Lancashire LEP has submitted its Strategic Economic Plan to the Government. The plan sets out Lancashire's growth ambitions for the next ten years and will be the key driver for the LEPs Growth Deal with Government.

Growth Deals will bring £2bn devolved funding to LEPs to deliver economic, transport and housing priorities in local areas and over the next few months there will be a period of negotiation between the LEP and Government Departments. It's crucial that we use this opportunity to hold the Government to account on their growth policies and their public commitment to close the North/South divide.

The Government set up LEPs to provide leadership in sub-regions and be the catalyst for job creation and economic growth and if we are to succeed in supporting our businesses to grow and avoid further job losses it's important that we attract a high allocation. This is not new funding but a redistribution of existing Government department budgets. Over half of the Growth Deal funding will be transport investment which is critical to unlocking many of the employment sites in Pennine Lancashire, particularly along the M65 corridor.