

# Public Document Pack

## Council Forum

Thursday, 5th October, 2023

6.00 pm

Council Chamber, Blackburn Town Hall

[Link to Webcast](#)

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### AGENDA

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5. Council Forum  
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Date Published: Wednesday, 27 September 2023  
Denise Park, Chief Executive

## **COUNCIL FORUM** **Thursday 20th July 2023**

**PRESENT** – *The Mayor Councillor Parwaiz Akhtar, Ali, Baldwin, Brookfield, Casey, Connor, Desai M, Desai S, Fazal, Fielding, Floyd, Gee, Gibson, Harling, Hardman, Humphrys, Hussain I, Hussain M, Hussain S, Irfan, Jackson, Khan S, Khan Z, Khonat, Liddle, Mahmood, Marrow, McCaughran, McGurk, Patel Ab, Patel Alt, Patel S, Raja, Rigby, Riley, Russell, Shaw, Shorrock, Sidat, Slater Jacq, Slater Jo, Slater Ju, Slater N, Smith D, Smith J, Talbot, Taylor, and Whittingham.*

### **RESOLUTIONS**

#### **13 Welcome and Apologies**

The Chief Executive read out the notice convening the meeting.

There then followed Prayers by the Mayor's Chaplain.

Apologies were received from Councillors Akhtar H, Imtiaz and Gunn.

#### **14 Minutes Of The Previous Meeting**

**RESOLVED** – That the Minutes of the Annual Council Meeting held on 18th May 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

#### **15 Declarations of Interest**

No Declarations of Interest were received.

#### **16 Mayoral Communications**

The Mayor reported on events he had attended since the last meeting, including the Darwen Brass Band competition, Armed Forces Day Events, the Installation of the Bishop of Blackburn, NHS 75, and a retirement service for Lord Shuttleworth, Lord Lieutenant of Lancashire.

#### **17 Council Forum**

The Chief Executive reported that two questions had been received under Procedure Rule 12 as follows:

1. Victoria Alletson

*What does the Council deem as an overdevelopment of Blackburn with Darwen in light that the Borough has met government targets and will the proposed new homes be built directly up to existing homes or is there to be a consideration to give a sense of space and openness to both the new and existing homes? Following on, will a safety and impact report be written for the proposed Bank Hey Development to outline the road requirements to meet the need of the planned development and when and how will those findings be shared. Also, what is the proposal for the construction traffic access to service the proposed planned development of Bank Hey? Is it this Council's intention to take it past the primary school and onto the existing residential estates?*

2. Laura Hindle

*The Oakdale and Fernhurst area already floods down from the fields of the proposed Bank Hey development. What is the Council's plan to manage this for the present and future residents as this is has been sent to the Council and the water authorities and to date nothing has been addressed, has a recent survey taken place for the A666 and what is the capacity expected that it can manage to enable flow at present and in the future?*

*Can the Council explain their plan which shows there will be enough school places for the additional children that new development will bring into this area? Due to the green agenda, what is the energy efficiency plan for new homes in Blackburn with Darwen and what is the policy for working times on construction sites across the Borough and who enforces this?*

The Executive Member for Growth & Development gave a detailed response to both questions. In terms of the first question, Cllr Mahmood advised of the importance of addressing infrastructure requirements, gave details of housing targets and requirements, with the emerging up to date Local Plan containing local evidence of housing needs. A transport assessment was being assessed, and should the development proceed, construction traffic would be established in the most appropriate location to minimise disruption. Cllr Mahmood also highlighted design principles relating to open spaces and the protection of amenity for existing residents.

In response to a supplementary question from Victoria Alletson on affordable housing and homes for the elderly and people with mobility issues, Councillor Mahmood advised that 25% of housing development over the last six years had been affordable housing, and all were adaptable for disability needs etc.

In response to the question from Laura Hindle, Cllr Mahmood gave details of the Flood Risk Assessment and drainage proposals, and information relating to the additional school places, and the developer would be required to contribute a significant commuted sum towards the provision of additional primary school places in West Blackburn, and additional secondary school places were needed, which the Council was addressing with local schools. Cllr Mahmood gave details of energy efficiency and also working times that would be controlled by planning conditions and enforced by Planning Enforcement Officers.

In response to a supplementary question from Laura Hindle, which highlighted concerns about traffic jams, particularly relating to emergency vehicle access, risks to children from emissions, concerns relating to teacher shortages and flooding caused by new developments, Councillor Mahmood explained that a detailed traffic assessment would be part of the planning application, and he encouraged Laura to share her experiences and objections as part of this process. Councillor Mahmood advised that emissions levels were monitored and were reducing, and in terms of school places, developers would be required to contribute Section 106 monies to build new schools or extend existing schools.

## 18 **Motions**

The Chief Executive announced that one Notice of Motion had been submitted under Procedure Rule 10 as follows:

*A key priority of Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council is in tackling digital exclusion and social isolation. This Council therefore notes with dismay, the recent announcement of proposals for hundreds of train station ticket offices to close. These include nearby stations such as Preston (a main-line station with over 4 million passenger movements in 2021-22), Accrington and Burnley – all of which will be used by Blackburn with Darwen residents.*

*Not only do our railways provide a vital service in ensuring that our residents and communities stay connected, but they also form a key element of the climate change strategy.*

*Government's role should therefore be to encourage rail use and this announcement contradicts statements in support of increasing rail travel.*

*The provision of ticket offices is vital in ensuring that those not in a position to purchase tickets online or via machines – a fifth of all passengers, most certainly to include some of the most vulnerable members of society, including the elderly and those with learning difficulties – are able to do so and it is inevitable that many passengers will stop using trains if they are not*

*able to continue booking tickets at ticket offices. This will be yet another lifeline cut off for potentially millions of individuals around the country.*

*This Council therefore condemns the recent announcement of ticket office closures and requests that our Chief Executive and Leader raise these concerns with the Secretary of State for transport and our local Members of Parliament.*

*Moved by Cllr Damian Talbot*

*Seconded by Cllr Brian Taylor*

Following discussion, Council Forum moved to the vote.

**RESOLVED** – That the Motion be carried.

## **19 Proposed Introduction of Article 4 Direction**

Members received a report updating Council Forum with the results of the consultation on the proposed Article 4 Direction, undertaken in August/September 2022.

Approval was sought to confirm the Article 4 Direction which would remove the permitted development rights for the change of use from Use Class C3 (dwelling-houses) to Use Class C4 (Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO)) in all urban areas of the Borough, as illustrated on the plans accompanying the Direction.

Members were advised that subject to Council Forum approval to confirm the Article 4 Direction, the Direction would then become effective on 9 August 2023. The existing Article 4 Direction (2013) would be cancelled on the date that the new Direction took legal effect.

**RESOLVED –**

That Council Forum:

Approve the confirmation of a Direction under Article 4 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (GPDO) 2015 (as amended), having had a 12-month lead-in period, to remove the permitted development right granted by Schedule 2 Part 3 Class L(b) of that Order, which allows a change of use from a dwelling-house (C3) to a HMO with between 3 and 6 occupants (C4) and which will apply to all urban areas of the Borough as shown on the accompanying plan.

**20 Audit & Governance Committee Annual Report and Minutes of Meetings 2022/23**

Council Forum received the Annual Report from the Audit & Governance Committee, along with the minutes of the meetings held in 2022/23.

**RESOLVED –**

That the Audit & Governance Committee Annual Report be endorsed and the Minutes of Meetings 2022/23 be noted.

**21 Governance Update**

A report was submitted which requested that Council approve the updated Council Constitution, to include the amendments outlined in the report.

Council was also asked to approve the appointment of the statutory Section 151 Chief Finance Officer and note the other senior management changes recommended by the Chief Officer Employment Committee.

The report outlined the changes to the Constitution, and changes relating to Chief Officers. The Chief Officer Employment Committee (COEC) had met to consider changes to the Council's chief officer senior management posts. Following the former Strategic Director, Resources leaving the Council in early January 2023, the role has been disestablished with the responsibilities allocated to other Chief Officer posts.

The revised Strategic Director, Finance & Resources role incorporated the former Director of Finance role, including the statutory section 151 Chief Finance Officer function, and had now been allocated the statutory Senior Information Risk Officer (SIRO) function. The Chief Officer Employment Committee met on 14 June 2023 and recommended the appointment of Dean Langton to the Strategic Director, Finance & Resources role and therefore the statutory s151 chief finance officer role for the Council.

The COEC agreed that responsibility for IT and Digital Transformation functions were added to the Assistant Director role in the Chief Executive's Department, along with the statutory scrutiny officer function and that the post is re-designated Director, Chief Executive's Department.

The COEC also approved the establishment of a new post in the Adults & Health Directorate of Assistant Director - Commissioning & Support Services with responsibility for commissioning across 'People' services, including Adult social care, Children's services and Public Health.

The COEC agreed that, to provide capacity and support to the Chief Executive and the Leadership, one of the Strategic Directors would also carry additional responsibilities to act as Deputy Chief Executive, this was confirmed as Martin Kelly, Strategic Director of Growth & Development.

## **RESOLVED –**

That Council:

- 2.1 Approve the updated Council Constitution as contained in the **Appendix**.
- 2.2 Note that a pdf version of the updated constitution will be published on the Council website.
- 2.3 Agree the recommendations of the Chief Officer Employment Committee as outlined in this report and:
  - (i) approve the appointment of Dean Langton as the Strategic Director, Finance & Resources and the statutory Section 151 Chief Finance Officer
  - (ii) note the other changes to Chief Officer roles and the senior management structure for the Council.

## **Updates from Other Committees**

22

Council Forum received an update from the Chairs of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees on the progress of their work.

## **RESOLVED –**

1. That the updates from the Overview and Scrutiny Committees be noted.

## **23 Reports of the Executive Members with portfolios**

The Leader and Executive Members presented their reports, providing updates as appropriate.



**RESOLVED** - That the reports of the Leader and Executive Members be noted.

**24 Questions from Members**

No questions from Members had been received under Procedure Rule 11.

*At the close of the meeting, the Mayor asked Members to note that his Mayor's Ball would be held on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2024 at King George's Hall and asked that they try to attend.*

*Councillor Phil Riley thanked the Mayor for his Chairing of the Meeting.*

Signed at a meeting of the Council Forum

On 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023

(being the ensuing meeting of the Council) by

MAYOR

## DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN ITEMS ON THIS AGENDA

**Members attending a Council, Committee, Board or other meeting with a personal interest in a matter on the Agenda must disclose the existence and nature of the interest and, if it is a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest or an Other Interest under paragraph 16.1 of the Code of Conduct, should leave the meeting during discussion and voting on the item.**

**Members declaring an interest(s) should complete this form and hand it to the Democratic Services Officer at the commencement of the meeting and declare such an interest at the appropriate point on the agenda.**

MEETING:                      **COUNCIL FORUM**

DATE:                              **5<sup>TH</sup> October 2023**

AGENDA ITEM NO.:

DESCRIPTION (BRIEF):

NATURE OF INTEREST:

DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY/OTHER (delete as appropriate)

SIGNED :

PRINT NAME:

(Paragraphs 8 to 17 of the Code of Conduct for Members of the Council refer)



<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>LEADER</b>
<b>TO:</b>	<b>COUNCIL FORUM</b>
<b>DATE:</b>	<b>5 OCTOBER 2023</b>

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## **CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE**

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### **1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

To update members on the outcome of the recent Corporate Peer Challenge and to agree the Council's response and action plan in response to the recommendations

### **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

**That Council Forum:**

- Note the LGA's final Corporate Peer Challenge report
- Agree the Council's response and action plan
- Note the timetable for the progress review

### **3. BACKGROUND**

Blackburn with Darwen Council invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to undertake a corporate peer challenge (CPC) during the week of Tuesday 11th – Friday 14th July 2023, to provide an external perspective on the performance of the Council and its capacity to deliver on the new corporate plan and priorities. During the peer review a series of meetings and focus groups took place with a range of people from across the organisation which included elected members, senior officers, managers, supervisors, front line staff and with key partners.

As with all corporate peer challenges, this was an exercise in self-improvement, and to gain an external perspective on performance and areas for further development. It was not a form of inspection that delivers a scored or detailed service assessment, it was also not driven by external requirements or reported to Government. It is recommended best practice that Councils undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge every five years with the previous one in Blackburn with Darwen being in 2018.

The LGA has adopted five high-level themes which provide the framework for the CPC.

They are:

1. **Local priorities and outcomes:** Are the Council's priorities clear and informed

by the local context? Is the Council delivering effectively on its priorities and achieving improved outcomes for all its communities?

2. **Organisational and place leadership:** Does the Council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture:** Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of respect, challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management:** Does the Council have a clear understanding of its current financial position? Does the Council have a strategy and a clear plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement:** Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the Council have the capacity to improve?

The Council is required to publish the full report alongside a response and action plan.

### **3. KEY THEMES, RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS**

Members of the peer review team were very impressed with both the organisation and support they received through their four day stay in the borough.

The report highlights the Council as having:

- Strong, visible and well respected political and managerial leadership with senior leaders having a clear understanding of Blackburn with Darwen as a place, its opportunities and challenges.
- High levels of ambition and determination to think big and unlock the borough's potential including a £1billion vision for the future for investment and commitment to growing the cultural offer with a well-crafted Corporate Plan with missions for both the council and wider borough
- An impressive track record of managing significant challenges including the ongoing reductions in spending power since 2010 with robust financial monitoring arrangements in place.
- Many examples of projects which are testing new ways of working and which have been recognised on a national scale with an impressive entrepreneurial spirit in the borough
- Clear commitments to tackling inequalities and strengthening equality, diversity and inclusion across the council and borough
- A working culture that is very supportive with opportunities for staff to participate in learning and development

The final report makes 11 recommendations. We have responded to each recommendation in the action plan.

Following publication of the final report and action plan, a progress review with the LGA peer team has to take place no later than May 2024. The progress review report will be expected to be published by July 2024.

#### **4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Any policy implications are outlined in our response and in the action plan.

#### **5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

#### **6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

#### **7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

Any resource implications of the corporate peer challenge will be managed within existing budgets.

#### **8. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

The pre-equality impact assessment has been undertaken and is not required.

#### **9. CONSULTATIONS**

N/A

#### **Chief Officer**

Contact Officer: Corinne McMillan, Director, Chief Executive's Department

Date: 05/10/23

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council

11 – 14 July 2023

Feedback report





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## 1. Executive summary

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council (BwD) is an ambitious council with strong and well respected political and managerial leadership. The peer team were impressed with the clear sense of pride and ambition for the borough demonstrated by all those who spoke with them. This was articulated by one partner as *“there is a unique passion in Blackburn with Darwen and you see that passion for the borough in the council”*.

The borough of Blackburn with Darwen is made up of diverse and multi-cultural communities (as outlined in 4.1). The area was significantly impacted by Covid and also experienced tighter national and local restrictions for longer periods compared to most other areas. The borough’s Public Health Annual Report (2022) shows how COVID-19 impacted on some of these communities harder than others including older people and black and ethnic minority communities. Both councillors and officers are understandably proud of the council’s leadership during this unprecedented time and their role supporting local communities and businesses.

Post pandemic peers were pleased to see how the council are using the new Corporate Plan (2023-2027) as an opportunity to re-set a clear strategic vision for both the council and the borough. The new Corporate Plan, agreed in December 2022, sets out a vision for *“every single resident, no matter who they are, to have a good quality of life”*. The peer team were impressed with the extensive consultation undertaken to inform the new Corporate Plan including a conference involving 130 partners and a resident survey involving up to 2,000 people. A set of new organisational values, to underpin the Corporate Plan, have been co-designed with staff through an employee voice champions group. The peer team heard from staff how these new values are beginning to shape organisational culture and how leaders are committed to continuing the work to embed these values across all services.

The council is in the process of finalising a new performance management framework aligned to the new Corporate Plan. This will include a revised number of key performance indicators and a commitment to report performance on a quarterly basis. The council’s most recent publicly available performance report (at the time of the peer challenge) was published in December 2022. This relates to delivery of the previous Corporate Plan (2019 – 2023). It will be important for the council to ensure



the new performance framework, aligned to the new Corporate Plan, is finalised so that it is able to report, demonstrate and track achievement of priorities against the new Corporate Plan, its vision and missions.

There are also opportunities to better prioritise, rationalise and align the wide range of strategies and plans currently in place or in development in support of the council's core missions. The peer team would encourage the council to undertake a prioritisation exercise which will also support the 'grow or stop' elements of the council's Finance Strategy (outlined in section 4.4 below).

The peer team were struck by the level of ambition and determination to think big and unlock the borough's potential. Creating 'a more prosperous borough where no-one is left behind' is a key priority in the Corporate Plan. A proposed £1bn vision for the future is underpinned by the new Local Plan (2021-2037) which is in the final stages of development. The aim is to help unlock new economic activity and guide investment and development in the borough. The peer team were impressed with the council's commitment to growing the cultural offer in the borough in support of this vision. The council, working with partners, has been successful in attracting considerable external funding including two levelling up fund bids totalling £40m and the Darwen Town Deal totalling £25m.

As investment schemes are bought forward, it will be important to ensure they are underpinned by robust business cases including option appraisals, detailed financial modelling, risk analysis and legal implications for each scheme. This will help the council to constructively challenge and scrutinise each proposal, ensuring they are deliverable and sustainable. It will also be important for the council to continually demonstrate how physical regeneration schemes are aligned to improving outcomes for residents and there are opportunities for the council to strengthen its narrative for residents in this regard.

The council has an impressive track record of managing significant challenges including the ongoing reductions in spending power since 2010, the turbulence caused by COVID-19 and the impact of the recent economic challenges. Financial challenges are set to continue with a forecast funding gap for the period to 2026/2027 of £18.6m in addition to agreed savings totalling £3.716m to balance the budget for this year (2023/2024).

Demand for adult and children's social care remains an on-going pressure. The children's services Ofsted judgement changed from 'good' to 'requires improvement' (RI) in February 2022 and an improvement plan is in place and is being delivered through an improvement board with an independent chair. A Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) published in July 2023 shows positive progress is being made with more work still to do. Similar to many other councils, pressures also remain in adult social care including increased demand for extra care and domiciliary care, increasing complexity and costs of care packages and the on-going impact of cost-of-living crisis on communities.

In this context, it will be important for the council to maintain focus on delivery of the required savings. The council will need to ensure the right balance in terms of ensuring continued progress in relation to the borough's ambitious growth plans and the need to meet the ongoing pressures within both children's and adults social care. In the context of increased socio-economic challenges associated with rising prices and interest rates, it will also be important for the council not to be over reliant on economic growth to help bridge the budget gap.

Similar to other councils, budget reductions implemented over the past ten years have led to a re-shaped work force and significant reduction in overall staff numbers impacting all parts of the council. As the council has sought to prioritise front line services, this has impacted on capacity in some back office enabling and support services such as Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Human Resources, policy, research, performance, finance, legal and democratic services (outlined in more detail in section 4.5 of this report).

The council, as demonstrated in their position statement, is aware of the capacity challenges it faces. The council is already in the process of reviewing/testing its operating model to ensure it is working effectively and efficiently in support of the council's agreed missions. It will be important to ensure this work includes a specific focus on the capacity of core services. There is also an opportunity, as this work develops, to engage staff and councillors to build a greater understanding of the future operating model, its underlying principles and to set out the steps and resources to get there.

Peers were impressed with many examples of transformation and innovation

highlighted throughout this report. But in the conversations that the peer team had with a range of staff and councillors, there was a mixed understanding on what future transformation means for them and the council. There are opportunities to build greater clarity for staff and councillors on the future vision for transformation and how this will lead to measurable improvements in efficiency, effectiveness and resident satisfaction.

During their time on site, the peer team were presented with examples of strong corporate governance and a commitment to ongoing review and improvement. There are robust financial planning and monitoring arrangements in place and these have improved since the council's Corporate Peer Challenge in 2018. The Audit and Governance Committee is working hard to ensure the council's framework of governance, risk management and control is in place. Building on this, the peer team believe there is an opportunity to develop the Corporate Risk Register shared with the Audit and Governance Committee into a more comprehensive document which captures risks, impact, likelihood, mitigation actions and timeline for actions.

Further improvement could be made if the role and profile of overview and scrutiny were enhanced. This should include work with both councillors and officers across the organisation to help build a better understanding of the role and function of overview and scrutiny, its purpose and effectiveness. Ensuring that there is effective officer support will be key to this.

Peers were pleased to see how the council has established a forum which brings statutory governance officers together on a monthly basis. These include the Chief Executive, Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer (MO). There are opportunities to further enhance the golden triangle of good governance by reviewing opportunities to involve the Chief Legal Officer (MO) in other decision-making forums/governance meetings. This will ensure that they have the opportunity to shape discussions, alongside the Section 151 Officer, ensuring appropriate oversight is included at all levels of decision making.

The peer team also identified a number of quick wins in relation to enhancing core governance practices. These quick wins include ensuring consistency in how minutes are published on the democratic services website. They also include reviewing the approach to how officer decisions are published so that they are more easily

accessible to external stakeholders.

## 2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

### 2.1 Financial Management

Maintain focus on the delivery of the required savings and ensure council wide understanding and ownership of the on-going financial challenges and associated savings requirements. Develop clear, realistic delivery plans for 2024/2025 and future years savings with regular monitoring reports focussing on the delivery of those savings to both the leadership team and Executive Board.

### 2.2 Prioritisation

A wide range of strategies plans and frameworks have been developed and are in place or planned. The peer team were impressed with the ambitions of the council. Similar to many other councils, the capacity of the council is constrained with the on-going financial challenges faced and the capacity of 'back office' functions. The council should undertake a rationalisation and prioritisation exercise to help bring focus, where possible, and to consolidate into a fewer number of these whilst ensuring they are aligned to the new Corporate Plan, resources and capacity to deliver. This prioritisation exercise will also support the 'grow or stop' elements of the council's Finance Strategy.

### 2.3 Performance Management

It is recognised the council is in the process of revising and finalising a suite of key performance measures aligned to the Corporate Plan (2023 -2027). The council should finalise this work at pace to enable it to report quarterly on progress and achievements against the new Corporate Plan to staff, residents, partners and stakeholders.

### 2.4 Growth

The council has exciting and ambitious growth plans aimed at creating a more

prosperous borough. As schemes are brought forward, they should be underpinned by robust business cases including options appraisals, detailed financial modelling, risk analysis and legal implications.

## **2.5 Inclusive Growth**

The council should continue to challenge itself to ensure regeneration schemes are not viewed only as physical regeneration but are aligned to people, improved outcomes for residents and the boroughs wider priorities including health, housing, skills, climate change and business growth. The council should strengthen its narrative for residents in this regard.

## **2.6 Social Care (children and adults)**

Similar to other councils, rising demand in both children's and adult social care social care presents a key challenge. The council needs to maintain focus on these core services and the ongoing improvements in children's social care following the Ofsted 'requires improvement' judgement in 2022.

## **2.7 Corporate Capacity**

Ensure the work already underway to review and test the council's existing operating model includes a specific focus on the capacity of core services. This will support the council in ensuring its ambitions and priorities are aligned with available people and resources. It will also be important, as this work develops, to engage wider staff and councillors and to set out the steps and resources to get there.

## **2.8 Transformation**

Build greater clarity for staff and councillors on the vision for transformation and how this will lead to measurable improvements in efficiency, effectiveness and resident satisfaction.

## **2.9 Overview and Scrutiny**

Engage councillors and officers in work to enhance and embed a culture of effective overview and scrutiny across the council. Consideration should also be given to the officer resource required to support effective overview and scrutiny at the council.

## **2.10 Governance**

Building on the Statutory Governance Officers Group, review opportunities to further enhance the golden triangle of good governance by ensuring the council's Chief Legal Officer (monitoring officer), chief executive (head of paid service) and Section 151 officer are involved in all relevant senior decision-making forums.

## **2.11 Core Governance Practices**

Increase the visibility of core governance practices. This includes ensuring greater consistency in the way minutes are published on the democratic services webpages and in the publication of officer decisions are published. It also includes opportunities to develop the Corporate Risk Register shared with the Audit and Governance Committee into a more comprehensive document which captures risks, impact, likelihood, mitigation actions and timeline for actions.

# **3. Summary of the peer challenge approach**

## **3.1 The peer team**

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Alison Greenhill, Chief Operating Officer, Leicester City Council
- Councillor David Baines, Leader of St Helens Borough Council
- Councillor Rob Waltham MBE, Leader of North Lincolnshire Council
- Adam Richens, Director of Finance, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council
- Asif Ibrahim, Director of Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer), City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council
- Cindy Lowthian, LGA Peer Challenge Manager

## **3.2 Scope and focus**

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

In relation to theme 5 (capacity for improvement) the council asked the peer team to share particular reflections on how you can ensure that the corporate core of key services e.g., ICT, digital, HR, performance, policy, procurement, business planning and democratic services etc, remain resilient and are directed effectively in support of corporate priorities, particularly in the context of budgetary savings over a number of years.

### **3.3 The peer challenge process**

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent four days onsite at Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, during which they:



- Gathered information and views from more than 45 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 100 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1 Local priorities and outcomes

The council has a history of embracing external peer challenge to support ongoing improvement and shared learning. This is the council's third Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) with the last one taking place in 2018. Over the past three years the council have also had themed peer challenges covering Early Years, Communications, Children's Services (remote peer support) and 'Leaving Care'.

Since the CPC in 2018, it is clear the council has made progress in a number of areas and has much to be proud about, even with the disruption to business-as-usual arising from the pandemic in 2020 and the move to RI in children's services in February 2022.

During our time on site, the peer team saw many examples of projects which are testing new ways of working and which have been recognised on a national scale. These include (but are not limited to) participation in the national Supported Housing Improvement Programme to improve conditions in supported housing, the Homeless Pods Project to support rough sleepers in the borough, the development of digital communications during the pandemic which won a 'gold' award at the national Public Sector Transformation Awards, participation in the national Social Integration Pilot and work through a People's Jury to tackle Climate Change.

A strong pride, commitment and ambition for both the council and place was displayed by staff, councillors and partners who met with the peer team. We saw a



genuine ambition to deliver the vision for “*every single resident, no matter who they are, to have a good quality of life*”.

BwD is a diverse and multi-cultural borough. The council's position statement shows how 36 per cent of residents identified their ethnic group within the Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh category, up from 28.1% in 2011. The 0-19 younger population is the fifth highest in England and the 65 plus population grew by 18% between 2011 and 202. As outlined above, COVID-19 impacted on some of these communities harder than others including older people and black and ethnic minority communities and the borough experienced tighter national and local restrictions for longer periods compared to most other areas. The council's leadership and response, working alongside partners, during such challenging times, is understandably a great source of pride for councillors, officers and partners.

Post pandemic, the peer team were pleased to see how the council is using the new Corporate Plan (2023-2027) as an opportunity to re-set the vision for both the council and the borough to ensure “*every single resident, no matter who they are, to have a good quality of life*”. The peer team found the Corporate Plan to be well crafted and designed, identifying a clear strategic vision and associated missions which provide a strong blueprint for where the council is going.

The peer team were impressed with the extensive consultation undertaken to inform the new Corporate Plan including a cross-sector partnership conference involving 130 partners, a resident survey involving nearly 2000 people and engagement with staff and members. A set of new organisational values, to underpin the Corporate Plan, have been co-designed with staff through an employee voice champions group. The peer team heard from staff, members and partners how “*we are on a journey*” (referencing ways of working to support implementation of the corporate plan). We also heard from staff how the new organisational values are beginning to shape a more engaging and open organisational culture. This work should continue to ensure the new values are fully embedded across all service areas.

Through the development of a revised business planning and performance management framework, the peer team saw evidence of how the council is seeking to ensure that there is a strong golden thread to link strategies and operations with the Corporate Plan and its key missions. There are a wide range of strategies, plans

and frameworks in place, under development or planned. The council's position statement refers to over 15 plans which cover key areas such as skills, housing, cultural investment and equality and diversity. In addition to these there are also strategic plans in place which cover a range of corporate core services such as finance, digital, climate, data and procurement.

Similar to other councils, the capacity of the council is constrained with the on-going financial challenges faced and the capacity of 'back office' functions. There are opportunities to undertake a rationalisation and prioritisation exercise to help bring focus, where possible, and to consolidate into a fewer number of these plans and strategies whilst ensuring they are aligned to the new Corporate Plan, resources and capacity to deliver. This prioritisation exercise will also support the 'grow or stop' elements of the council's Finance Strategy.

BwD council is clearly committed to tackling inequalities and strengthening equality, diversity and inclusion across the council and borough. This includes work through the borough's Corporate Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Group and through the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy. The council has published equality objectives covering workforce, decision making, training, culture, educational attainment and work with the voluntary, community and faith sector. The council is a level two Disability Employer. Peers were also pleased to see how the council records, analyses and publishes data in relation to the make-up of both its workforce and service users.

The latest 'Equality Watch' (2022/2023) provides analysis on the make-up of the workforce. There is recognition of the need to undertake further work to ensure the make-up of the workforce is, as far as possible, more reflective of the borough as a whole including ethnic minorities who are currently under-represented. The data also implies a need to better understand progression routes into higher graded roles where the ethnic minority workforce is under-represented. Staff feedback embraced the relaunched work in this area and want to use the development of the new Equality and Diversity Action Plan – to be published this year – as an opportunity to focus on this work and ensure real visible change.

## **Performance Management**

Section one of this report shows how the council is in the process of finalising a new

performance management framework aligned to the Corporate Plan agreed in December 2022. It will be important to prioritise this work to enable the council to report publicly on progress and achievements against the new Corporate Plan (2023 – 2027) vision and missions.

The peer team considered Blackburn with Darwen's latest [LG Inform Headline Report](#) which outlines key performance data and how this compares to the council's Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) nearest neighbours. It shows how the council's performance is stronger in a range of key areas including average 8 attainment score (21/22)<sup>i</sup>, time taken to process housing benefit claims and change events (Q3, 22/23) and the processing of planning applications for both minor and major applications (Q2, 22/23). The council's position statement also shows how the council is in the top 19% of all councils for the time taken to determine major planning applications and the top 12% for non-major developments.

The council performs below the average of CIPFA nearest neighbours in relation to the percentage of household waste sent for recycling (2021/2022). This is reflected within the council's Corporate Plan with a commitment to increase recycling rates from 30 per cent to 65 per cent by 2030.

One clear priority for the council, reflected in the Corporate Plan, is the improvement of children's services following the Ofsted 'requires improvement' judgement in February 2022. The council has responded through the development of an improvement action plan to address the key concerns which were around multi-agency strategy discussions, data and assurance and services and support for care leavers up to the age of 24. Implementation of the action plan is overseen by an independently chaired Improvement Board. As outlined in section 4.4 of this report, the council is also making additional investment in the service to support improvement.

A joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) of the multi-agency response to identification of initial need and risk was undertaken by Ofsted in May 2023. It is positive how this report highlights how recent changes in the senior leadership team have been a catalyst for improvements. The report highlights both the areas of strength and progress and a number of areas that still need to improve. The council will need to maintain a one council commitment to on-going improvement in children's social

care. It will also be important for the council to ensure the right balance in terms of ensuring continued progress in relation to the borough's ambitious growth plans and the need to meet the ongoing pressures within social care.

Both LG Inform data and the council's position statement highlight the borough's impressive entrepreneurial culture. Business registration rates per 10,000 are the second highest of CIPFA nearest neighbours and start up rates are higher than Lancashire as a whole, alongside the proportion of higher turnover businesses just above the Lancashire average. Blackburn with Darwen is listed in 4<sup>th</sup> place out of 25 Town and Cities for Small to Medium sized Enterprise jobs and the council's position statement shows how this is seen as evidence of the Borough's strong recovery from the pandemic.

There are economic challenges and inequalities facing the borough and the peer team found the council has a strong commitment to address these. These include some skills gaps with levels at working age below the national average. The council are currently developing a new Skills Plan to help address these gaps. The borough also has high levels of economic inactivity, particularly amongst women and ethnic minority populations, with a notably high proportion of people economically inactive due to looking after their family or home. It is positive that the council is working with partners to commission research to better understand this.

The borough also has some significant health inequalities which are captured within the borough's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. This includes life expectancy which is below the national average. Peers were pleased to see how there is a commitment to tackle these health inequalities through the Corporate Plan which has 'Building healthier, happier and safer communities' as a clear mission for the council.

In relation to Adult Social Care, LG Inform data shows staff turnover (all sectors, all services) is higher than the CIPFA average. Peers can see how the council is proactively seeking to address these challenges (and workforce challenges in other areas such as children's social care) through the new workforce strategy (2023-2026). Despite these workforce challenges, the council is still around the average of CIPFA nearest neighbours in relation to the overall satisfaction of people who use services with care and support (2021/2022).

## 4.2 Organisational and place leadership

Blackburn with Darwen Council demonstrates strong, visible and well respected political and managerial leadership. The peer team found that senior leaders have a clear understanding of Blackburn with Darwen as a place, its opportunities and challenges. The Corporate Plan outlines a clear vision and associated missions for both the council and wider borough.

Over the past year, there have been changes to the senior leadership team including new strategic directors for Children/Education (DCS), Adults and Health (DASS) and a new Director of Public Health. A new post of Director of Health and Care Integration, a joint appointment between the council and Integrated Care Board, was appointed in summer 2022. The Strategic Director of Finance and Resources (s151) post, vacant during the peer challenge, has been subsequently filled through the return of the previous postholder. This strengthened leadership stability is important as the council looks to reset itself to deliver the vision and missions within the Corporate Plan.

Over the past two years, investment has been made in the development of both the political and managerial leadership through a focus on member development opportunities and the introduction of a 360-degree leadership tool for senior officers. Now that key senior officer positions on the leadership team are filled, the peer team recommends that the Corporate Leadership Team look to set aside time, alongside the political leadership, for some facilitated 'top team' development sessions. These sessions would help to further strengthen ways of working together in support of the corporate plan.

As outlined in section one, the council has developed a proposed £1bn vision for the future underpinned by the new Local Plan (2021-2037) that is in the final stages of development. This outlines six priority areas including the Blackburn Growth Axis which will build on key regional growth corridors and opportunities arising from the relocation of the National Cyber Force Headquarters in a neighbouring borough. A £250m masterplan for Blackburn town centre sits at the heart of the Growth Axis. It is positive and exciting that the council has been successful in bids for external funding to support the borough's growth ambitions including the Darwen Town Deal, £20m Levelling Up Funding for improvements to Junction 5 of the M65 and a second £20m Levelling Up Funding to help bring forward plans for a £60m skills and education

campus as part of the Town Centre Master Plan. The peer team visited some of these developments and saw first-hand how these are already transforming the borough.

As investment schemes are brought forward, it is important that they are underpinned by robust business cases including option appraisals, detailed financial modelling, risk analysis and legal implications for every scheme. This will help the council to continue to constructively challenge and scrutinise each proposal, ensuring they are deliverable and sustainable. The peer team, whilst impressed with the regeneration ambitions could not easily identify the risks to the council in delivery of the schemes.

The council should also continually challenge itself to ensure that regeneration schemes are not viewed solely as 'physical regeneration' but are aligned to delivering the council's vision for every single resident to have a good quality of life. This includes the creation (and monitoring) of social value through procurement. It also includes being clear on how outputs of the Levelling Up bids (as an example) are resulting in the creation of new jobs (not only job re-location). The council is encouraged to strengthen its narrative for residents in this regard.

Meeting future housing need through the provision of quality and affordable housing is key to this. Over the past four years, the borough has seen delivery of c1,500 new homes and half of these are high quality detached properties<sup>ii</sup>. Peers heard how the borough is now one of the places in the North-West that consistently outperforms in relation to national housing delivery targets<sup>iii</sup>. The council is also working through two Joint Venture Development Companies - Barnfield Blackburn Ltd and Maple Grove Blackburn Ltd - to help create residential developments, jobs and employment space.

But housing challenges remain associated with the borough's high-density older housing which can be less energy efficient and more difficult and expensive to heat. Discussions with partners also gave the sense that there are opportunities to ensure social housing issues are reflected more prominently in the council's priorities. There were some perceptions that housing growth, whilst extremely positive for the borough and welcomed, was mainly in the higher end sector. The Peer team accept this is undoubtedly more complex in a council which has undertaken a stock transfer. However, the proposed development of a new Housing Strategy presents an opportunity to strengthen links with social housing providers to help address the



social and affordable housing needs for the borough.

The peer team met with a range of statutory, voluntary and private sector partners and heard how the council is seen as outward looking with ambitious plans to improve the prosperity of the borough. Partners reflected that council is seen “as a *force for good*”, that “*we value the council*” and that the council has a “*long history of partnership working*”.

Peers heard how the council is working, alongside Blackpool Council and Lancashire County Council, with a view to securing government commitment for a devolution deal. The council is clear that any devolution deal secured must result in positive outcomes for the communities of Blackburn with Darwen.

Blackburn with Darwen forms part of the Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care System (ICS) where partners come together to plan for and deliver joined up health and care services. It is positive that the council is represented on the different levels of governance for the ICS. Peers were told that the council is seen as a ‘*trusted and valued partner*’ and one of the ‘*easiest partners to work with*’.

Peers heard how the Integrated Care Board has recently agreed to delegate some future NHS services to Blackburn’s ICS place-based partnership in support of greater integration and this has been welcomed by the council’s leadership. It is positive that there was recognition, from both the officer and managerial leadership, that there is still much work to do to achieve this integration including providing clarity in terms of what this means in terms of practice for staff, developing culture and ways of working,

The borough’s strong voluntary, community and faith sectors are a key asset to the borough and the council works closely with them through commissioning, provision of financial support and a range of volunteering initiatives. Peers were impressed with the number of groups and volunteers in the borough. An annual celebratory event is held to show thanks to these volunteers. It will be important for the council to continue to show recognition and value for the work they do across all communities in the borough.

The peer team were also impressed with the council’s commitment to growing the cultural offer in the borough. This includes the Festival of Making which combines art, manufacturing, making and communities to celebrate the unique making heritage of

the borough whilst attracting tourism and supporting local businesses. This year's event had attracted thousands of people into the borough.

The council, working with partners, has also successfully attracted external funding including £2m Arts Council funding (2023 – 2026) in support of key cultural organisations and projects. This is in addition to £1m awarded in December 2021. The peer team visited a number of cultural, leisure and heritage projects and heard more about how the council is seen as a valued partner and one who is committed to growing the cultural offer in the borough. The peer team would encourage the council to continue to develop this approach and share their learning regionally and nationally.

The council declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 and has identified delivery of the Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP) as a key mission. The peer team were impressed with the work undertaken through a People's Jury to inform the plan. A report shared with the council's Executive Board in June 2023 outlines progress made in the implementation of the CEAP including energy efficiency measures, tree planting, procuring of electric vehicles and staff training. The council recognises that there is more work still to do and it will be important to ensure that delivery of the action plan is owned by officers, councillors and partners and continues to be informed by residents and businesses.

#### **4.3 Governance and culture**

There are constructive and mature relationships between members and officers and a clear passion and sense of ambition for the place. Staff described the senior officer leadership as approachable and accessible, and the peer team heard how there is a healthy environment of mutual support and challenge amongst the senior leadership team.

Over the past eighteen months there has been a clear focus on staff engagement. This includes work through the employee voice champions group, bi-annual staff pulse surveys, annual staff awards, chief executive vlog, storytelling to highlight values and behaviours, staff intranet, departmental briefings, 'thank you Thursdays' and an annual leadership conference. The peer team were invited to observe a 'Team Talk live' on-line meeting with the chief executive and directors and learned how these sessions cover a range of themes and topics.



Staff told the peer team that they feel empowered and that the working culture is “*very supportive*” and that Blackburn with Darwen “*is a brilliant place to work*”. As outlined in section 4.1 the council’s new Workforce Strategy, including new organisational values which have been co-designed with staff, are beginning to shape an engaging and empowering organisational culture. The relationship between the council and trade unions was also described as positive by both the council and union representatives.

The council operates through a leader and executive model of governance and the leader of the opposition sits on the Executive Board. The peer team were also impressed that the Borough’s youth MP and two Deputy youth MPs attend each meeting of the Executive Board to provide an update on their key issues.

In July 2022 the council took a positive step by reviewing the overview and scrutiny committee (O&SC) arrangements in view of the significant changes happening in health and social care and the enhanced focus on children’s services improvement. The People O&SC was replaced with two new O&SCs for Health and Social Care and Children, Young People and Education. The council has a further two committees for Place and Policy and Corporate Resources. Three of the committees are chaired by the majority group and one committee is chaired by an opposition member.

The council now needs to undertake further work to enhance and embed a culture of effective overview and scrutiny across the council. Whilst the chairs of each committee are clearly dedicated, knowledgeable and committed, there is an opportunity to work with members and officers across the council to build a better understanding of the role and function of overview and scrutiny, its purpose and effectiveness. This should include work with opposition members to address some feedback, picked up by the peer team, that it can sometimes be difficult to influence agendas and the future work programmes for some committees.

Consideration should also be given to the officer resource required to support effective overview and scrutiny at the council. The current officer resource is limited to one dedicated Democratic and Scrutiny lead. More recently, a named volunteer (head of service) has been allocated to offer independent support to each scrutiny chair. The peer team accept that it is too early to assess the impact this is having, but

question whether the ask is too great of these officers in terms of their capacity to ensure consistent, robust, high-quality support to the committees including dedicated support for scrutiny reviews.

The council is already working with the LGA to support the children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee in strengthening good and effective scrutiny of children's services. There are opportunities to build on this by sourcing further support from the LGA or Centre for Governance and Scrutiny for instance, for all of the council's overview and scrutiny committees.

During their time on site, the peer team were presented with examples of strong corporate governance and a commitment to ongoing review and improvement. The peer team observed a meeting of the Audit and Governance Committee which is working hard to ensure the council's framework of governance, risk management and control is in place. The peer team accept that they observed only one meeting of the committee, but based upon this, there may be opportunities for the committee members to self-reflect on their level of pro-active engagement during meetings to help ensure they continue to have a constructive and inquiring approach when items are presented. As outlined above, there is also an opportunity to develop the Corporate Risk Register shared with the Audit and Governance Committee into a more comprehensive document which captures risks, impact, likelihood, mitigation actions and timeline for actions.

There are five scheduled senior officer meetings whose membership reflects the purpose of each meeting. The peer team would encourage the Chief Executive Strategy Team to keep these meetings under review to ensure they remain effective. Peers were pleased to see that one of these meetings includes a forum which brings statutory governance officers together on a monthly basis. These include the Chief Executive, Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer (MO). There are opportunities to further enhance the golden triangle of good governance by reviewing the involvement of the Chief Legal Officer (MO) in other decision-making forums/governance meetings. This will ensure that they have the opportunity to shape discussions at evolution phases alongside the Section 151 Officer, rather than being consulted at a more advanced stage.

The council should also consider increasing the visibility of some core governance

practices in line with the approach of most other councils. This includes ensuring consistency, across all committees, in the way agendas and minutes are displayed on the council's democratic services pages. There are also opportunities to review the way in which officer decisions are published on the website to ensure they are easy to find (the peer team struggled to find them).

#### **4.4 Financial planning and management**

The council has an impressive track record of managing significant challenges including the ongoing reductions in spending power since 2010, the turbulence caused by COVID-19 and the impact of the recent economic challenges.

The peer team found that the council has robust financial monitoring arrangements in place. These arrangements have improved since the last Corporate Peer Challenge in 2018. Reports now include the overall budget position alongside the tracking of budget savings and the council has a clear Financial Strategy in support of the Corporate Plan (as outlined below). Financial monitoring also includes a formal mid-year review of the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) following a recommendation made by the external auditor in their draft conclusion on financial stability for the 2020/2021 audit.

The council has finalised closure of accounts for 2022/2023 and is now undertaking work to produce the annual statement of accounts and finalise sign off of the accounts for 2020/21 and 2021/2022 by the external auditor. The latest external auditor's findings are for the year ending March 2021 which were reported to the Audit and Governance Committee in July 2023. Their Value for Money conclusion shows no significant weaknesses identified.

For 2023/2024, the council has set a general fund budget of c£171m and a capital programme of c£111m through to 2026. The council has no commercial investments outside of the borough and borrowing and government grants make up most of the capital programme. Peers were pleased to see how the budget for 2023/2024 is aligned to the new Corporate Plan and its core missions.

The updated MTFP (2024/27) outlines the financial challenges facing the council. It shows the forecast funding gap for the period up to 2026/27 is estimated at £18.6m. This is in addition to agreed savings totalling £3.716m for 2023/2024. The forecast

has been updated for pay and award, contract price increases and revised forecast of council tax increases. Budget papers show how the council remains heavily dependent on Government funding (both from the core settlement and discretionary grants) to both provide services and to invest in economic growth and regeneration. The papers outline challenges associated with raising income locally including a low tax base.

Peers were pleased to see how, in response to a recommendation from the Corporate Peer Challenge in 2018, the council have developed a financial strategy. This clearly sets the longer-term context and financial challenges facing the council alongside the current MTFP. It is based around the four themes of Growing (opportunities to raise income using mechanisms in place to increase taxable capacity), Charging (raising income through fees and charges), Saving (doing things differently and more efficiently through transformation) and Stopping (stopping spending on lower or non-priority areas).

Peers learned how the council have developed a strategic approach in support of savings for 2023/2024 and 2024/2025. This strategic approach is focussed on a number of workstreams covering organisational structure, use of assets, future delivery models, procurement, back-office efficiencies and income generation. It is positive that the council has started work to develop the council's budget for 2024/2025 based on these strategic work streams with targets set for each of these. The council now needs to develop clear and realistic delivery plans at pace to achieve these targets and future years savings.

It will also be important to ensure whole council wide understanding and ownership of the on-going financial challenges, transformation programme and associated savings requirements and continued strong monitoring and oversight to ensure delivery. The council should also consider opportunities to enhance public consultation and engagement on the budget to build understanding on the challenges ahead.

Over several years the council has used reserves to make up for year-end overspends, other than in 2020/2021 mainly because of the way in which they had to treat COVID-19 expenditure. In 2023/2024 the council has allocated £2.688m from the 'budget support reserve' in support of a balanced budget. Looking ahead, the MTFP assumes that the council will use c£1m of reserves to support the budget in

2024/25, reducing to £500k in 2025/26. Again, this is being taken from the Budget Support Reserve which will be exhausted by March 2026.

The council is showing higher risk in relation to the sustainability of reserves. The outturn report for 2022/2023 shows unallocated reserves fell from £7.718m in December 2022 to £6.941m in March 2023. Earmarked reserves in March 2023 are £55.469 million compared to £56.420 million in March 2022. It will be important to keep these under review especially as the council moves into the delivery stage of its growth projects.

The borough's trajectory of housing growth is good, with an increase in the council's taxbase for 2023/2024. The 'growth' strand of the council's financial strategy is mainly dependent on the council's regeneration activity. Given the current economic challenges associated with rising interest rates, rising price inflation and impact of the cost of living on communities, it is important that the council does not over rely on economic growth to help bridge the budget gap.

As outlined earlier in this report and similar to other councils, rising demand in both adult social care and children's social care presents a key challenge. The financial position of the Children's, Young People and Education Service has continued to see significant deterioration during 2022/2023 with an overspend of £2.968m. This is further to an additional £2.8m investment in the service as part of the agreed budget for the year. Budget papers show how the greatest demand pressure relates to the commissioned placements budget. Additional pressures were also seen against the Special Educational Needs Transport, Adoption and Fostering budgets. The budget for 2023/2024 includes additional investment of £3.5m to address these issues.

Pressures also remain in adult social care. Although the portfolio showed an underspend of c£2m in 2022/2023, this was primarily the result of maximising the use of additional discharge funding and other associated budget adjustments. The pressures for 2023/2024 include winter pressures, increased demand for Extra Care and Domiciliary Care, increasing complexity and costs of care packages and the impact of cost-of-living crisis on communities.

The peer team considered LG Inform data which compares the council to its CIPFA nearest neighbours across a range of financial metrics. The council's core spending power (per dwelling) is showing higher than the average, with social care spend as a

percentage of overall core spending being around the average of other councils. Debt servicing as a percentage of core spending power is higher than the average (this is the latest published data which relates to 2021/2022). As the council looks to make savings and improve outcomes for local communities, it will be important to continue to benchmark itself against others to support learning from across the sector.

#### 4.5 Capacity for improvement

The peer team heard how there are opportunities for staff to participate in learning and development to help build the required skills and capacity within the workforce. This is reflected within the new Workforce Strategy. Achievements over the past two years include the roll out of ILM programmes, strength-based leadership programmes, introduction of 360-degree feedback, development of a new leadership hub and annual leadership conference. The strategy outlines the commitment to ensure annual appraisals and structured one to one meetings which are aligned to agreed missions within the Corporate Plan.

Similar to many other councils, budget reductions implemented over the past ten years have led to a re-shaped work force and significant reduction in overall staff numbers impacting all parts of the council. The council's Equality Watch reports show there are around 770 fewer posts than was the case in 2010.

As the council has sought to prioritise front line services, this has impacted on some back office enabling and support services such as ICT, HR, policy, research, performance, finance, legal and democratic services. Staff told the peer team *"we're a small unitary, capacity is a challenge"*, and *"we don't have people to do everything they want us to do"*.

Examples shared with the peer team include HR and Finance where some tasks are being undertaken which would normally fall within the remit of service managers (not the back office). The increased focus on children's services improvement (post Ofsted) is also impacting on the ability of enabling services to respond to other priorities. The peer team heard of some challenges within ICT relating to historic under-investment within some core areas but were given reassurances that this is

now being addressed. The ongoing capability, capacity and security of its ICT Infrastructure is key given the increasing focus on digital working practices.

The council is aware of its capacity challenges, which is why they asked the peer team to provide additional focus in this area. Work is already underway to review and test the council's existing operating model to ensure it is working effectively and efficiently in support of the agreed corporate missions. Peers were told that a set of design principles is being developed to underpin the future model and any changes agreed. There are opportunities to ensure this work includes a specific focus on the capacity of core services. This will support the council in ensuring its ambitions and priorities are aligned with available people and resources. It will also be important, as this work develops, to engage wider staff and councillors to set out the steps and resources to get there.

The council should also continue to explore the benefits of bringing together and aligning corporate core services as far as possible. Some of this work has already happened including a new centralised data and insights team which was established in 2020 which is continuing to expand and merge with other data and performance roles.

Peers understand that the council's transformation programme is aligned to the delivery of the Digital Strategy and its parallel aims of becoming 'digital first', 'enabling transformation for staff', ensuring the council is 'data driven' and facilitating 'secure and resilient technology'. As outlined above, a series of workstreams (to support delivery of savings) have also been agreed covering organisational structure, use of assets, future delivery models, procurement, back-office efficiencies and income generation.

Peers were impressed with the many examples of transformation and innovation already taking place across the council. Examples shared with the peer team include the Foster Care Transformation project and the digitalisation of services such as the taxi licencing function. Other examples include the running of community assets such as libraries and a leisure centre by communities.

In conversations the peer team had with a range of stakeholders, there was a mixed understanding of the council's future vision for transformation and a sense that the transformation work undertaken to date has been more reactive (as opposed to



proactive) with a focus on achieving savings.

The council has recognised this, and peers heard how a governance board is being established to develop and oversee the future programme. As outlined in the Corporate Peer Challenge undertaken in 2018, it is important for the council to be clear, to both members and officers, on the council's vision for transformation and how this will lead to measurable improvements in efficiency, effectiveness and resident satisfaction.

## 5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

The LGA then ask you to publish the CPC report within three months of the CPC, alongside an Action Plan. The LGA will also publish this on their website.

The LGA will work with you to schedule a Progress Review – this is an opportunity for your senior leadership to update peers on progress against the action plan and identify any areas where you require further support. The LGA ask that this takes place not later than ten months of the CPC.

In the meantime, Claire Hogan, Principal Adviser for the North West, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Claire is available to discuss any further support the council requires. Claire's email address is [Claire.Hogan@local.gov.uk](mailto:Claire.Hogan@local.gov.uk)

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<sup>i</sup>Attainment 8 measures pupils' attainment across eight qualifications.

<sup>ii</sup> council Position Statement

<sup>iii</sup> council Position Statement



## BwD LGA Corporate Peer Challenge 2023 - Action Plan

Recommendation	Response - what we plan to do	Lead Officer(s)
<b>Recommendation 1 - Financial management</b>		
<p>Maintain focus on the delivery of the required savings and ensure council wide understanding and ownership of the on-going financial challenges and associated savings requirements.</p> <p>Develop clear, realistic delivery plans for 2024/2025 and future year's savings with regular monitoring reports focussing on the delivery of those savings to both the leadership team and Executive Board.</p>	<p>The Council has a clear Financial Strategy and Medium-Term Financial Plan, (MTFP) 2023/24 to 2025/26, which we will continue to implement alongside the BwD Capital Strategy 2023/24 to 2025/26.</p> <p>Further work is required to develop detailed proposals and related delivery plans so that the Council can set a balanced budget for 2024/25 and over the medium term, including reviewing and updating the MTFP. The work to do this will start during Autumn 2023 and, when it is considered necessary to do so, proposals will be brought forward for consideration by the Executive Board, Council and with public consultation as appropriate.</p>	<p>Dean Langton Strategic Director, Finance and Resources</p>
<b>Recommendation 2 – Prioritisation</b>		
<p>A wide range of strategies plans and frameworks have been developed and are in place or planned. The peer team were impressed with the ambitions of the council. Similar to many other councils, the capacity of the council is constrained with the on-going financial challenges faced and the capacity of 'back office' functions.</p> <p>The council should undertake a rationalisation and prioritisation exercise to help bring focus, where possible, and to consolidate into a fewer number of these whilst ensuring they are aligned to the new Corporate Plan, resources and capacity to deliver. This prioritisation exercise will also support the 'grow or stop' elements of the council's Finance Strategy.</p>	<p>We will complete the current policy and strategy mapping and review exercise and report on the findings and next steps to ensure that the policies and strategies of the Council are up to date, relevant and aligned to the Corporate Plan and compliant with any statutory or regulatory requirements.</p> <p>We will progress a review of corporate 'back office' functions across the Council aligned to our future operating model and financial strategy.</p>	<p>Corinne McMillan Director, Chief Executive's Department</p>

### Recommendation 3 – Performance Management

It is recognised the council is in the process of revising and finalising a suite of key performance measures aligned to the Corporate Plan (2023 -2027). The council should finalise this work at pace to enable it to report quarterly on progress and achievements against the new Corporate Plan to staff, residents, partners and stakeholders.

We are implementing our revised suite of Corporate Key Performance Indicators which support the Corporate Plan and have undertaken a soft-launch of collecting data for Quarter 1, with formal reporting continuing from Quarter 2 onwards to Executive Board and Policy Council.

Corinne McMillan  
Director Chief Executive's

We will continue to publish updates of Corporate Key Performance Indicators alongside an Annual Report to highlight progress against the deliverables in the Corporate Plan.

### Recommendation 4 – Growth

The council has exciting and ambitious growth plans aimed at creating a more prosperous borough. As schemes are brought forward, they should be underpinned by robust business cases including options appraisals, detailed financial modelling, risk analysis and legal implications.

The Council undertakes extensive business case development for all major growth opportunities and will continue to ensure:

- All Growth initiatives are subject to robust business case development and approval processes, consistent with national guidance.
- Council funded and co-funded projects are subject to approval/considerations of viability/risk.
- All Growth initiatives are subject to transparent internal and external governance processes, including appropriate Executive Board decision approvals and capital programme management and reporting measures – in line with the Council's Financial Strategy.
- Evidence of regular reporting/monitoring by Government Departments

Martin Kelly  
Strategic Director Growth and Development, Deputy Chief Executive

### Recommendation 5 - Inclusive Growth

The council should continue to challenge itself to ensure regeneration schemes are not viewed only as physical regeneration but are aligned to people, improved outcomes for residents and the boroughs wider priorities including health, housing, skills, climate change and business growth. The council should strengthen its narrative for residents in this regard.

The Council is building on local growth plans to lift BwD's economic performance - which is now matching/out-performing key regional and national benchmarks.

Undeterred by major reductions in government investment, availability of council core-funding and challenging macro-economic conditions, we will continue to focus on the following to enable businesses and residents to prosper and improve their quality of life:

Martin Kelly  
Strategic Director Growth and Development, Deputy Chief Executive

- Rates of increase in GVA
- Health
- Employment
- Skills
- Climate change
- Business growth
- Physical change and place-making – via new housing developments and major growth initiatives

We will ensure our narrative for residents, partners, businesses and other stakeholders highlights the implementation of our Corporate Plan, which sets out our ambitions for BwD and articulates how growth and wider Council priorities combine, linking with our partners and community to ensure “no one is left behind.” This is our local reference to our ‘inclusive growth’ ambitions.

We are updating and aligning plans, including the Skills Plan for BwD to re-focus on cross-sector partnership priorities for the borough.

We are undertaking extensive research to better understand key issues impacting residents and to help re-focus measures of local/national partners to address the scale of economic inactivity, and the needs of key target groups.

We will utilise our Levelling Up Partnership opportunity to realign national “economic inactivity” policy and measures to help ensure they effectively address local needs to reduce inequity, make better use of public funding and deliver better economic outcomes.

**Recommendation 6 - Social Care (children and adults)**

Similar to other councils, rising demand in both children’s and adult social care social care presents a key challenge. The council needs to maintain focus on these core services and the ongoing improvements in children’s social care following the Ofsted ‘requires improvement’ judgement in 2022.

Work is already underway to tackle challenges relating to the continuing rising demand for both children’s and adult social care. This will include:

- Completing and implementing the next steps following a review of Safeguarding Adults and Safeguarding Children Boards to develop and reinstate BwD arrangements
- Implementing changes to the staffing structure following a review of Adults Safeguarding Practice in the context of CQC Inspection
- Developing Provider Services Improvement Plans

Joanne Siddle  
Strategic Director, Children & Education

Mark Warren  
Strategic Director, Adults and Health

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing Strategic Commissioning Plans</li> <li>• Complying with increasing and evolving statutory returns, including new performance reporting requirements</li> <li>• Working on Place-based Integration and workforce transformation with health colleagues</li> <li>• Continuation of a dedicated resource from the Service Design Team in both Adults and Children’s areas working with the operational departments and with the users to co-design services and processes</li> <li>• Maintaining sharing of data with corporate and political leadership – providing a better narrative of the demand for Children’s and Adult Social Care.</li> </ul>	
<b>Recommendation 7 - Corporate Capacity</b>		
<p><b>7.</b> Ensure the work already underway to review and test the council’s existing operating model includes a specific focus on the capacity of core services. This will support the council in ensuring its ambitions and priorities are aligned with available people and resources. It will also be important, as this work develops, to engage wider staff and councillors and to set out the steps and resources to get there.</p>	<p>We will complete the work on redesigning, implementing and embedding our operating model in line with the ongoing development of our digital and transformation programmes, aligning with the Medium Term Financial Strategy.</p> <p>As referenced in recommendation 2, we will progress a review of corporate ‘back office’ functions across the Council aligned to the future operating model and financial strategy, engaging staff and elected members to ensure our corporate services can effectively support our operational services and corporate priorities.</p>	<p>Corinne McMillan Director, Chief Executive’s Department</p>
<p><b>7.1</b> Build greater clarity for staff and councillors on the vision for transformation and how this will lead to measurable improvements in efficiency, effectiveness and resident satisfaction.</p>	<p>We will continue our work to further develop a range of service performance and financial metrics which will track progress over time and be valuable in our decision-making and used as evidence of achievements.</p> <p>We will further develop our governance around growing demand for our corporate services and develop a 3–5-year strategy for Transformation which sets our vision and performance measures. This strategy will be co-produced with elected members, staff and residents and will link in with our developing financial strategy and align to plans related to Digital service models, Communications and engagement, Organisational</p>	<p>Corinne McMillan Director, Chief Executive’s Department</p>

	Development, Digital Inclusion and will also reference our Customer Standards and Front Door model for service users.	
<b>7.2</b> Engage councillors and officers in work to enhance and embed a culture of effective overview and scrutiny across the council. Consideration should also be given to the officer resource required to support effective overview and scrutiny at the council.	<p>A revision of scrutiny support has taken place this year and a senior officer supports each committee. This pilot will be reviewed regularly with recommendations for further development of the scrutiny support function. Each overview and scrutiny committee has agreed areas for focus and a work plan is in place for each of them for 23/24.</p> <p>The Council will continue to enhance and embed the culture of effective scrutiny with appropriate support.</p> <p>This will include creating a Corporate Parenting Panel, the launch of a new induction programme and improving the wider training and support plan for chairs and all members of the Overview &amp; Scrutiny Committees.</p>	<p>Dean Langton Strategic Director, Finance and Resources</p> <p>Corinne McMillan Director, Chief Executive's Department</p> <p>Asad Laher Deputy Director, Legal &amp; Governance (Monitoring Officer)</p>
<b>7.3</b> Building on the Statutory Governance Officers Group, review opportunities to further enhance the golden triangle of good governance by ensuring the council's Chief Legal Officer (monitoring officer), chief executive (head of paid service) and Section 151 officer are involved in all relevant senior decision-making forums.	<p>The Statutory Governance Officers Group established by the Chief Executive will look to ensure continuous improvement in promoting good governance and decision making across the Council through reviews of key processes and compliance, including ensuring there is appropriate information, training and development for Council officers and members.</p> <p>We will also continue to review and ensure that statutory governance officers and other relevant officers are sighted on and involved in key decision making processes and groups.</p>	<p>Denise Park, Chief Executive (Head of Paid Service)</p> <p>Dean Langton Strategic Director, Finance and Resources (s151)</p> <p>Asad Laher Deputy Director, Legal &amp; Governance (Monitoring Officer)</p>
<b>7.4</b> Increase the visibility of core governance practices. This includes ensuring greater consistency in the way minutes are published on the democratic services webpages and in the publication of officer decisions are published. It also includes opportunities to develop the Corporate Risk Register shared with the Audit and Governance Committee into a more comprehensive document which captures risks, impact, likelihood, mitigation actions and timeline for actions.	<p>We will review the website layout to ensure visibility and access to the Council's Forward Plan, meeting papers, decisions and minutes liaising with Modern.Gov and the Web Team as appropriate.</p> <p>We will also review how we utilise the Modern.Gov system to its full potential to unlock additional functionality and transparency for stakeholders, meeting organisers, committee members and residents.</p> <p>We will continue with current robust core governance practices, including regular reviews and updates of detailed Corporate Risk Register entries, including the details</p>	<p>Dean Langton Strategic Director, Finance and Resources</p> <p>Asad Laher Deputy Director, Legal &amp; Governance (Monitoring Officer)</p>

	noted at our (officer) Corporate Leadership Team meetings, and we will also share the full Corporate Risk Register supporting information with the Audit & Governance Committee as part of its regular briefing sessions on the Corporate Risk Register.	
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**REPORT OF:** CHIEF EXECUTIVE  
**TO:** COUNCIL FORUM  
**ON:** 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023

## COUNCIL APPOINTMENTS 2023/24 - Update

### 1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To provide an update on the composition and the political balance of the Council, note the change to appointments to committees and approve the Vice-Chair of the Planning & Highways Committee for the remainder of Council year 2023/24.

### 2. BACKGROUND

Further to approval of the Council Appointments at the Annual Council meeting on 18 May 2023, Councillor Hussain Akhtar has resigned from the Council's Labour Group and now serves as an Independent member.

The current political composition of the Council is as follows:

Labour	38 seats
Conservative	12 seats
Independent	1 seat
<b>Total</b>	<b>51 Seats</b>

The Local Government and Housing Act 1989 ("the Act") imposes a duty on the Council to allocate seats on committees to political groups in accordance with the size of each group as a whole, unless alternative arrangements are notified to all Members and agreed without any councillor voting against them. The Council is required to observe the following principles as far as it is reasonably practicable:

- (a) that not all seats on the body are allocated to the same group;
- (b) that the majority of seats on the body are allocated to a particular political group if the number of persons belonging to that group is a majority of the authority's membership;
- (c) subject to paragraphs (a) and (b) above, that the number of seats on the ordinary committees of a relevant authority which are allocated to each political group bears the same proportion to the total of all the seats on the ordinary committees of that authority as is borne by the number of Members of that group to the membership of the authority; and
- (d) subject to paragraphs (a) to (c) above, that the number of seats on the body which are allocated to each political group

bears the same proportion to the number of all the seats on that body as is borne by the number of Members of that group to the membership of the authority.

In light of the change to the political composition, the proportionality and allocation of seats on council committees to political groups has been reviewed and detailed below:

**Summary of seats – July 2023**

<b>GROUP</b>	<b>SEATS on the Council</b>	<b>Seat percentage entitlement based on 50 Councillors</b>	<b>Seats on Committees based on 81 seats in total</b>	<b>Rounded to</b>
<b>Labour</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>76.0%</b>	<b>61.56</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Conservative</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>24.0%</b>	<b>19.44</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>TOTAL for Proportionality</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>81</b>	
<b>Independent</b>	<b>1</b>			
<b>TOTAL SEATS</b>	<b>51</b>			<b>81</b>

As an independent member cannot constitute a political group there is no requirement to consider them when calculating proportionality based on Council’s political composition, and allocate seats to them.

With reference to the above calculations, the allocation of seats to the Labour and Conservative political groups remain unchanged. The Labour Group Leader has therefore nominated the following to the two seats on committees previously held by Councillor Akhtar:

- Councillor Suleman Khonat: Planning & Highways Committee
- Councillor Salma Patel: Children & Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

As Councillor Akhtar was also the vice-chair of Planning & Highways Committee, the Council will need to approve a new appointment for this position, for the remainder of Council year 2023/24.

**3 RECOMMENDATIONS**

That Council:

- 1) notes the current political composition and political balance on the Council, as referred to in this report;
- 2) notes the new appointments to the Planning & Highways Committee and the Children’s & Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee; and



- 3) approves the appointment of Councillor Sabahat Imtiaz as vice-chair of Planning & Highways Committee for the remainder of Council year 2023/24.

**Denise Park  
Chief Executive  
26<sup>th</sup> September 2023**

Background Papers: The Local Government and Housing Act 1989, Local Government (Committees and Political Groups) Regulations 1990, Council Constitution (all published)

Contact Officers: Asad Laher, Deputy Director - Legal & Governance

## **Council Forum, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023**

### **Progress of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees**

#### **Purpose of the Report**

To update the Council Forum on the progress of the Policy and Corporate Resources, Health and Social Care, Children and Young People and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

#### **Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

At the meeting on 7<sup>th</sup> August, the meeting was dedicated to scrutiny of the Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB).

Members received a presentation from Kevin Lavery, Chief Executive for NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria about the expectations for the ICB, and Claire Richardson, Director of Health and Social Care Integration (Blackburn with Darwen) at NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB on Developing Health and Care integration in Blackburn with Darwen in a place based partnership. Mark Warren, Strategic Director, Adults & Health, also reported on the Adults and Health Service Plan for 2023/24.

The Committee highlighted the need for better use of Darwen Health Centre, to alleviate pressures at Royal Blackburn Hospital A&E and other hospitals, feedback from residents who had to accept hospital appointments outside the Borough, and the difficulty of getting to their appointments due to financial constraints and distance. It was noted that each hospital in Lancashire had their own specialist consultants and areas and therefore it would still be necessary to travel further for appointments in some cases.

Members also discussed COVID boosters/vaccinations, and where residents did not meet the criteria they would be encouraged to have the Flu vaccine.

Outside of the main Committee, the Task and Finish Group looking at Care Homes has started its work and will report back to the Committee in February 2024, with the next Committee meeting in October focussing on how prepared the Council is for the CQC Self Assessment.

#### **Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

At the meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2023, the Committee received an update from the Youth MP and Youth Forum on their recent events and activities, as well as information relating to the role of Young Inspectors, how inspections were carried out, and how certification was awarded, and what happened following an inspection.

The Committee also discussed next steps following the recent LGA Training '6 steps to Effective Scrutiny of Children's Services'. All of the advice and recommendations were noted and those who attended asked for feedback. Discussions were taking place about implementing as much as possible whilst recognising many are dependent on extra capacity. Reducing duplication was being considered as part of

agenda setting process. There would be more focus on data and analysis – with a dashboard at every meeting with relevant KPIs. A glossary of terms specific to Blackburn with Darwen Children’s Services was to be developed. Members, Officers and partners were investigating the proposal to merge the Corporate Parenting Special Advisory Group (Members) and the Corporate Parenting Executive Board (Officers and partners) to form a Corporate Parenting Panel. A workshop was planned for mid-Sept to explore this further, once structures and membership were in place the LGA could be invited to deliver training.

The Children’s Services sector led improvement partners (SLIP) approach would also be explored to identify other local authorities that may be able to support the council on its improvement journey.

As requested at the previous meeting, the Committee also received a report and information on the Wellbeing Champions project, commissioned by the Public Health Team.

Finally, the Committee received detailed presentations and information relating to Corporate Parenting, which outlined the role of the Council and Councillors as Corporate Parents, working together with key partner agencies such as Health, Police and Education, and examples given of how Corporate Parents could contribute and shape the lives of children. The presentation highlighted the role of the Virtual School, and detailed Corporate Parenting performance data. Foster Carer Recruitment continued to remain a priority for the Council, which remained a challenge, as it continued to be nationally. Challenges, as well as the shortage of foster carers, included shortage of suitable local accommodation for children seeking asylum, and imminent regulation by Ofsted of post 16 provision. Members discussed the key points arising and it was felt that generally there was a better understanding of the role of Corporate Parents, but more work was still required with Members.

The next Committee meeting in November will focus on the Local Safeguarding Assurance Partnership, and receive an update on the last 5 months since the update at the June meeting.

### **Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

The Committee received a report and presentation on Waste, Litter and Dog Fouling Enforcement at its meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> August 2024, and debated the key issues arising. Following discussions the following actions were agreed:

- Tony Watson to circulate details to Members of litter and dog fouling hotspots.
- Phil Llewellyn to circulate the Whatsapp contact information for reporting littering and dog fouling offences to Members.
- Consideration to be given to reviewing the current FPN charges with a view to increasing the fees to reflect national charges. This to be considered alongside the likelihood of cases backing up in the courts and potentially lower collection rates.

- The littering and dog fouling contract to be reviewed on its renewal date and consideration be given to strengthening the role of the dog enforcement officer in particular.

At the next meeting in November, the Committee will focus on Highways Infrastructure, with particular emphasis on the condition of the roads themselves, including information on pot-holes and issues with traffic lights.

### **Policy and Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

As agreed at the last meeting, the main agenda item at the meeting held on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2023 was Sickness Absence, and Members received a presentation that detailed staff absence data from April 2018 to March 2023.

Following the presentation, Members asked a number of questions and made statements on the topic and also received information and questions from the Joint Unions.

The Committee resolved:

- That Officers be requested to provide information on the breakdown of absence data between Clerical and Manual Staff, and of Long Term Absences (over 20 days or more) over the last two years, and provide answers to the questions presented by the Unions;
- The Committee recommend that consideration be given to increasing the hours of the Part-time in-house Occupational Health Advisor, and also that the arrangements relating to Occupational Health support be reviewed;
- The Committee recommend that more proactive support be given in regard to Mental Health/Neuro-Diversity and the Menopause before people needed to access support such as Mental Health First Aiders; and
- The Committee recommend that consideration be given to re-introducing dedicated HR support to project manage sickness absence.

At the next meeting in January, the Committee will receive an update on Finance and discuss budgets, emerging pressures, and income collection issues.

**Councillor Tony Humphrys**, Chair of the Policy and Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

**Councillor Jacqueline Slater**, Chair of the Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

**Councillor Sylvia Liddle**, Chair of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

**Councillor Suleman Khonat**, Chair of the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

## REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

COUNCILLOR PHIL RILEY

PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING  
CHIEF OFFICER: Chief  
Executive

Thursday, 5 October 2023

### A more prosperous borough where no-one is left behind

#### Cost of Living

As I have outlined in previous reports, we are an ambitious borough with ambitious plans for growth. We are determined to continue on an upward course but at the same time we understand the challenges we face. Financial circumstances remain very difficult, not just for the Council but for many of our residents and, realistically, that isn't going to change any time soon. Difficult decisions are inevitable and we aren't going to be able to do everything we'd like to do so we all need to prioritise and work as efficiently as possible to achieve as much as we can. Our priority is supporting our residents - particularly the most vulnerable - and we continue to do so in ways including the Household Support Fund, which has now been operational for two years and can help with many issues from food, heating and repairs to replacement white goods and much more. Information on all of the support available can be found on the Council's website under the dedicated cost of living section.

#### Business Growth

We know the challenges we face around budgets and the cost of living and our vision is always driven by wanting to do better for our residents – creating a more prosperous borough where no-one is left behind. Central to that core mission is building a stronger local economy with opportunities for people to get on in life and live the best lives they can. It was therefore pleasing that Executive Board signed off our 23/24 Growth Programme for Blackburn with Darwen in August. This document sets out planned development projects and initiatives that will be implemented over the short, medium and longer term. It builds on what we're trying to do by supporting the creation of jobs, housing and the delivery of much needed new infrastructure.

We've also just concluded the final round of public consultation on our Local Plan. In development since 2018, the plan provides a 'blueprint for the future' – identifying sites for new homes and business developments up to 2037. It was recently reviewed by Government inspectors who confirmed their support of our vision for growth. Residents have been invited to have their say throughout the process and this final period of public consultation was part of the final steps ahead of adopting the plan from early next year.

During September we were also able to share new images of how Blackburn's St John's church could be transformed into an impressive new Innovation Hub. The artist impressions are part of a new planning application for the Grade II listed building, which was extensively damaged by a devastating fire in 2019, and sets out detailed plans to develop it into a high quality, sustainable work space – providing offices, meeting rooms and more as part of a new Tech Innovation Quarter. The new facility will be spread over four floors – with a proposed new roof space – and is part of the Council's ambitious £250m Blackburn Town Centre Masterplan, including a new Business Innovation District.

As a Council, we're working hard to strengthen the future of both of our towns. As part of the Council's Barnfield Blackburn Ltd joint venture with the Barnfield Group, a new planning

application has also been submitted for a site at Chapels in Darwen. With support from the £100m Darwen Town Deal, which our Council officers are driving forward, this site could be developed to house a new manufacturing and research centre with neighbouring smaller industrial units. Impressively, initial discussions with Sheffield University's Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre to be the anchor tenant there are well advanced – with the proposed centre earmarked to house its first-of-its-kind Additive Manufacturing Accelerator, if the plans are approved. We know that schemes like this are important in creating new skilled jobs in our borough and also in developing what is known as a sector cluster – attracting similar businesses to be located here. Darwen has a long and impressive industrial heritage – being a world-leader in some fields – and this is a fantastic new opportunity as we look to develop a strong future for the town.

Perspex International Ltd, a major employer in the town, is also developing plans to expand its neighbouring Chapels site with its own proposed new £30m national manufacturing centre, again, with support from the Town Deal. A planning application is expected to be submitted later in the year. Schemes like these unlock new possibilities for Darwen – creating new jobs and supporting existing businesses to grow.

## **Events Round-up**

### *British Textile Biennial*

After the success of The National Festival of Making, which brought record crowds from far and wide into Blackburn town centre in July, I'm delighted the borough is once again playing host to the British Textile Biennial. This year's event started on 29 September and will run through to 29 October. Venues and spaces in Blackburn are hosting new artist commissions, exhibitions and performances all presented against the backdrop of the impressive infrastructure of the cotton industry across Pennine Lancashire. The British Textile Biennial was one of the borough's National Portfolio Organisations to take a share of £2m funding from Arts Council England. Having high-quality cultural activity and spotlighting our boroughs creative talent is an essential ingredient for success in our towns, and it has been proven time and time again that arts activities have the power to reignite town centres and bring communities together.

### *Making Rooms*

Our Making Rooms in Blackburn town centre continues to go from strength-to-strength. The community facility for use by artists, inventors, students and children is often a hive of activity where art meets technology. The makerspace received brilliant news recently that it has won a bid to host a European Creative Hubs Network workshop, where 15 hub leaders from across Europe and the UK will come to Blackburn for four days to learn and share various making technologies, makerspace models and to hear from our creative economy partners. European Creative Hubs Network members have been voting on a date for the event, with it looking like going ahead in November. Congratulations to the Making Rooms team and I look forward to giving a warm welcome to all of our European and UK friends in attendance.

## **Devolution**

We continue to move forward with drawing up a landmark devolution deal for Lancashire, working collaboratively with our Upper Tier Authority colleagues at Lancashire County Council (LCC) and Blackpool Council to progress our joint negotiations with government officials. We're currently pulling together a bid; looking at what the deal might look like and how an injection of new money and powers from central government to a newly created

Combined County Authority (CCA) will allow us to tackle key local priorities such as better housing and public transport, boost economic prosperity and improve employment and skills. As well as bringing in greater investment, a deal means that more decisions about key issues affecting our communities would be taken here in Lancashire rather than at Westminster. Our discussions will continue into the autumn and all three authorities will need to ratify the proposals before submitting them to Government.

## **Deliver our climate emergency action plan**

### **Rail ticket office closures**

The public consultation on proposals to shut train ticket offices across England closed on 1 September. Blackburn with Darwen Council has joined residents, elected representatives from across the political spectrum, transport bodies, charities, unions and passenger groups in urging the proposals be reconsidered. We wrote to both the Secretary of State and our local MPs to outline our concerns. The provision of ticket offices is vital in ensuring that those not in a position to purchase tickets online or via machines are able to do so. This includes some of the most vulnerable members of society, including the elderly, disabled and those with learning difficulties.

Encouraging and increasing the use of rail travel is also a vital part of our efforts to tackle the climate emergency and it is inevitable that many passengers will stop using trains if they are not able to continue booking tickets at ticket offices. Let's hope the more than 680,000 people who responded to the public consultation are heard, sanity prevails and the proposals are reconsidered.

## **Every child and young person to have the opportunities to fulfil their potential**

### **Youth Investment Fund**

In August came the news that facilities for young people across Blackburn with Darwen are set to be transformed with £8m of new funding. The money has been successfully secured through the Government's Youth Investment Fund (YIF) and translates to a £3.3 million investment to double the size of the Darwen Youth Centre, £1 million to transform Audley and Queen's Park Children's Centre into a seven days-a-week youth hub, and £800,000 to revamp the Shadsworth Hub into a new youth centre. £2.9 million was also secured to provide Blackburn Youth Zone with a new skills and education campus of national significance and we were delighted to get a glimpse into the future of this exciting project at an event at the end of September. More detail was given on the transformative project which will transform the striking Fusebox building, linked to Blackburn Youth Zone in Jubilee Street, into a state-of-the-art training academy, Maker Zone, Sector-based Youth Club, and open events space for showcasing young talents.

The Youth Investment Fund success is a brilliant outcome for our borough's youngsters and will go a long way to supporting our core mission to ensure every child and young person has the opportunities to fulfil their potential. Of course it comes on the back of an incredible amount of hard work by the Council and our partners. That kind of collaborative partnership working is in our DNA as a Council and something we were recognised for in our recent corporate peer challenge.

## REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR ADULTS SOCIAL CARE & HEALTH

**COUNCILLOR**

**PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING  
CHIEF OFFICERS: Strategic Director  
of Adults and Health  
Thursday, 5 October 2023**

### **Build happier, healthier and safer communities**

#### **Adult Learning and Multiply**

As the end of the academic year for 2022-23 approaches, Adult Learning has supported over 2600 adult learners in the borough to build the skills and knowledge for career development and progression. Examples include aspects such as ICT and employability skills, courses aimed at improving health and wellbeing, gaining skills to support their children or to develop English language skills to participate more fully in daily life in their communities. The service has continued to grow its accredited offer and delivered longer, more substantial programmes that resulted in an increase in the Adult Education Budget (AEB) income received from £164,985 in 2021-22 to £220,100 in 2022-23 (33% increase in funding).

The service is also accountable for the coordination and delivery of the borough-wide multiply initiative, a government funded initiative to help people improve their numeracy skills. The service has been working with a range of local partners to provide free courses and workshops to help adults build confidence and skills in using numeracy and Maths in their daily lives. In the first year of the collaborative programme of partners working with the council engaged 804 learners to attend short courses with 61 progressing to achieving a numeracy accreditation. From April 2023 to present date, the programme remains on course to achieve all targets with 364 enrolments of which 87 are working towards a qualification.

#### **Commissioning**

Work to further develop our strategic commissioning plans is well underway with initial priorities and programmes of work being undertaken for carers services, ageing well and specialist services. Initial work is focused on Council commissions and is being aligned with the delivery of the council's corporate priorities and strategic intentions and the department's business plan objectives. The interdependencies with health commissioned services is recognised and our plans will be extended to become integrated Health and Social care commissioning plans as the ICB develops. A significant part of this work will enable the council to commission services which deliver on the right outcomes for our population whilst being value for money and delivering efficiencies. Plans are being progressed to fundamentally review a number of commissions for Extra Care Housing schemes, Mental Health and Learning disability schemes.

Provider forums are scheduled through the year with the next forums taking place in September and October. These particular forums will support the beginning of our engagement with the care market to agree provider fee uplifts for 2024/2025. The Government have recently announced additional Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund: Workforce for 2023/24 and 2024/25. This additional grant must be allocated in full to adult social care and is intended to provide funds to meet pressures and make improvements in adult social care capacity and services, namely:



- increase fee rates paid to adult social care providers, particularly as we continue to prepare for the implementation of charging reform
- increase adult social care workforce capacity and retention
- reduce adult social care waiting times

The Council's additional allocation of £1.1m must be spent in these areas and the local authority is required to demonstrate improvements via reported metrics and returns.

Preparations for winter pressures are also underway. Planning is in progress across our Health and social care systems including the utilisation of discharge funds allocated to the council and ICB via the Better Care Fund.

## **Integrated Care**

To support the continued integration of social, health and community care across the East, North and Darwen Primary Care Neighbourhoods, members of the integrated neighbourhood workforce development group have worked collaboratively to develop, deliver and evaluate a new half day integrated care induction for the BwD neighbourhood workforce. Sessions have started to be delivered and so far, 35 integrated neighbourhood staff members have completed the induction and offered feedback.

Attendees on the day included Adult Social Care staff, Mental Health practitioners, Red Rose Recovery Navigators, Social Prescribing Link workers, NHS Community Physical Health Clinicians, NHS Associate Psychological Practitioners, Age UK BwD officers, Spark Recovery Collaborative Practitioners, Early Help Children's Service Team Managers.

The key themes for the content have included:

- A sense of place, what makes BwD special and unique?
- Creating and cultivating a one team approach for the benefit of local people
- How we engage and know the communities we serve
- Ways to foster integrated leadership principles
- Promote coaching principles for inspiration and healthy mind-set shifts
- An overview about our shared health, care, community & wellbeing commitment
- Key approaches that helps build trusted relationships

Plans are now underway to roll out the induction throughout the year.

## **Adult Social Care**

The Principal Social Worker Annual report 22/23 has been finalised which highlights the development and training activity that has been undertaken within the social work teams during 22/23. We successfully supported our apprentices, students, newly qualified and qualified social workers within teams to achieve qualification whilst simultaneously retaining and supporting students into their first professional role within social work.

Social workers from within the department have engaged with the National Institute for Health and Care research (NIHCR) Practitioner Research Project in collaboration with the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN). The social workers presented projects on 'Alcoholism and Mental Capacity' and 'Learning Disability and Digital Usage'. The 6 month project, with facilitation from UCLAN, had an emphasis on improving practice within the department.

Lyn Romeo, Chief Social Worker visited Blackburn with Darwen at the start of August, to meet with the Social Care Teams. Lyn commented on the positivity of the staff group and the evident passion for supporting local residents. The Chief Social Worker for Adults works alongside the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, forming the Government's Office of the Chief Social Worker. Lyn met with various teams across Adult Social Care whereby our transformation, coproduction and assurance activity was shared. The day ended with a presentation from Lyn considering workforce wellbeing and resilience and improvement and innovation.

## REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION

COUNCILLOR JULIE GUNN

PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING  
CHIEF OFFICERS: Strategic Director  
of Children & Education (DCS)  
Thursday, 5 October 2023

### Every child and young person to have opportunities to fulfil their potential

#### Help and Protection

#### CADS, Duty and Assessment and Safeguarding and Support

We are continuing to focus on recruitment to Social Work posts to achieve a skilled and stable workforce and reduce our reliance on agency staff. At this time across CADS (Child Advice and Duty Service), Duty and Assessment and Safeguarding and Support we have 13 agency social workers, (4 of whom are covering maternity leave). Our agency rate has reduced from 30% to 12% over the last 10 months, in comparison to other Local Authorities in the region who consistently have agency rates of 30% up to 50% of their workforce.

Following a successful JTAI (Joint Targeted Area Inspection) the service has developed and implemented key actions to address the recommendations received. Inspectors were very positive about our committed and hardworking workforce. As the inspection was a review of partnerships response to identification of initial need and risk, the department is working closely with relevant partners and external agencies to continue to improve outcomes for children.

We have recently had an external review of practice for children who are subject to Child in Need plans, the review team were impressed by our Social Workers who had told them that they were happy working for Blackburn with Darwen and feel supported by their managers.

#### SEEDS

Our HAF summer activity program once again proved to be a roaring success. It provided our young people with some fantastic opportunities that they would not normally have access to. We supported 18 young people to attend The Anderton Centre where they were able to participate in a range of adventurous activities. The program consisted of both land based and water based activities. Whilst some of these activities really pushed some of our young people out of their comfort zone, they adapted brilliantly and embraced every opportunity they were given.

The Seeds supported 24 families with weekly food boxes for the 4 week period which was greatly appreciated. The HAF was a resounding success thoroughly enjoyed by everyone that attended. We have received positive feedback directly from young people about their experiences.

#### Corporate Parenting and Permanence

#### Children with Disabilities

Our Disability Links Family Fun Day took place on the 6<sup>th</sup> August 2023, this was a fantastic event with over 200 people attending during the day. It was great to see our families coming together; children went out of their comfort zone in climbing the tower, encountering animals and being around lots of people. The feedback from our children and families was great to hear which was overwhelmingly positive.

#### AppleTrees Short Breaks

It has been a very busy summer holiday period at Appletrees, with staff proving extremely enthusiastic about supporting young people with outside activities so they enjoy new experiences. Every young person has been on an outing, this has included trips to Hothersall

Lodge where they experienced caving, rock climbing, zip-wiring and canoeing. Other trips have included Blackpool Zoo, Chester Zoo, Eureka, Sea Life centres and many trips to beaches and parks.

All our families have had at least one additional overnight stay to support them through the holidays and the service has continue to be flexible in our approach adjusting arrival/pick-up times for young people to support families working hours.

Within this period there has also been another excellent, Regulation 44 report which has spotlighted the activities over the summer.

### **Fostering**

Our Recruitment activity continues to pick up pace, with two current initial enquiries taking place and three initial visits being completed. We have now approved seven households this year and are in the process of undertaking four new assessments that will hopefully progress to approval so we can place more of our children and young people in house. The assessments will be presented to panel through September, October and November. We have a KPI of approving 12 households for 2023 – 2024 and we are already hitting our target for the first half of the year.

We will always need foster carers on an ongoing basis due to foster carers retiring, but also accepting that children and young people who can't seek permanency within their own family, a kinship carer or adoption, will have a care plan of long term care with their foster carers. This then does not leave vacancies for any more children or young people to be placed with them.

As schools are going back and universities are taking a new influx, so the team will be looking at reminding those with "an empty nest", to consider fostering. There are new bus stop adverts going out embedding the new QR code. To add to this, the new Ice Hockey season is due to start at Blackburn Hawks and our recruitment and marketing lead has been working behind the scenes to have a new ticket option in place. Once this has been confirmed, we can share this with our foster carers so they can go to the home games for free as a family. It's a wonderful family event and they are child and family centred. GO HAWKS!!

### **DFG/OT Service**

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, we brought the Occupational Health for social care and schools and the Disability Facilities Grant (DFG) Team in-house. The team will be embedded into the Children with a Disability Team which will provide a unique multi-disciplinary team of Social Workers, Child Support Officers, Occupational Therapists, a Therapy Assistant and a DFG Coordinator in collaboration with the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Teams. The team is in the early stages of development, working closely with our Digital Team to ensure seamless referral options and case management systems.

### **Leaving Care**

The final new staff are due to join the team in the next two weeks bringing additional capacity into the team. Care experienced young people are meeting at Limes this month to create a video on what permanence means to them. A further update will be provided in the next council forum report.

The Service Lead recently contacted a number of young people to seek their views on the service, their understanding of the entitlement and their relationship with their PA, feedback received was really positive, see a couple of quotes below:

*The service is "good", Julie is like an Aunty, I adore Julie we have a really good relationship. I love Julie (PA).*

*I know she is there for me no matter what, we have had a relationship for 4/5 years. She comes to see me we, message each other there is nothing else that I need.*

## **Young People Services (YPS)**

### **Youth Investment Fund:**

As you will likely have seen we are now able to publicly celebrate successfully bidding for new youth infrastructure funding across the borough. The Local authority has secured £4.583m for council assets and over £8 million in new Youth Infrastructure across the borough alongside partners. The £4.583 council funding will support development of Darwen Youth Centre (£3.343m) and Audley & QP Centre (£1.038m).

In addition BYZ have secured significant funds to redevelop the Fusebox into an employability and wellbeing hub. Newground Together have also been successful and will develop a brand new Youth Hub in the heart of Shadsworth community.

The YIF boards have been established and Young People will be consulted again in the coming weeks on design/colour scheme ideas – which follows on from pre-application consultancy that has driven the overall design plan.

### **HAF**

YPS has just completed its summer HAF programmes that offers food and activities to the TYS (Targeted Youth Support) and SEND cohorts. Highlights have included trips to Blackpool Pleasure Beach, Blackpool Zoo, Cinema, Bowling, Trips to the seaside, Blackburn Rovers matches and ground tours, and nature reserves plus a whole range of outdoor activities including water sports, mountain biking, climbing and archery.

YPs have also delivered a number of residential experiences too including Waterpark on Coniston for CIOC (Children in our Care) and SEND C&YP. Over 150 vulnerable individual children & YP have benefitted from the YPS offer with over 500 total attendances.

### **Youth Justice Service (YJS)**

The YJS Turnaround Programme, designed to intervene early and prevent children and young people from becoming involved with the justice system, has established a partnership with the Young BwD Foundation to support delivery using key community organisations. This seeks to engage young people with one or more of the various services that come under the foundation's umbrella, with a view to increasing the support network available to children within their local communities and to build sustainable engagement for them beyond the ending of their YJS involvement.

In collaboration with the Police and Community Safety, the YJS has developed and launched the Youth Referral Panel, a forum for children under the age of 18 to be referred into when they have come to the attention of the Police for repeated incidents of anti-social behaviour. The panel provides a collective oversight on the needs of the child and refer on for specialist support and intervention. It is hoped that the aforementioned Turnaround Programme will be a valuable referral source for many of these children.

## **Education**

### **Educational Outcomes – Key Stage 2**

The DFE released individual Year 6 pupil level data to schools in July 2023 as well as national headline statistics for attainment of Year 6 pupils who took Key Stage 2 SATS assessments in summer 2023.

Caution is advised when considering any data for the academic year 2022/2023 as these pupils experienced considerable disruption to their learning during the pandemic, particularly at the end of Year 3 and in Year 4. Performance Measures Data will not be available to Local Authorities until schools have completed their data checking exercise in early September. When this data is released it is expected to be presented in a broadly similar way as pre-pandemic, for example, with comparison tables for schools, local authorities and multi-academy trusts.

Nationally, overall children's attainment in individual subjects increased in maths, writing and science compared to 2022. Attainment remained the same in Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling and fell in reading.

- In **reading**, 73% of pupils met the expected standard, down from 75% in 2022.
- In **maths**, 73% of pupils met the expected standard, up from 71% in 2022.
- In **writing**, 71% of pupils met the expected standard, up from 69% in 2022.
- In **grammar, punctuation and spelling**, 72% of pupils met the expected standard, unchanged from 2022.
- In **science**, 80% of pupils met the expected standard, up from 79% in 2022.
- **Attainment** in all of reading, writing and maths (combined) remained the same as in 2022.

### **Educational Outcomes – Key Stage 4**

Grades for GCSEs this year were much closer to 2019 levels with attainment slightly above 2019 levels.

- 22.7% of GCSEs were graded 9-7, compared to 21.9% in 2019
- 70.5% were graded 9-4, compared to 69.9% in 2019.

Grades were higher during the pandemic, as in both 2020 and 2021 all public exams were cancelled and grades were awarded using different systems, known as Centre Assessment Grades (CAGs) and Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs). CAGs and TAGs grades were higher, on average, than those awarded in more typical years. Last year, to avoid a sudden sharp fall in grades, they were adjusted to a level between their peak in 2021 and the level in 2019, the year before the pandemic affected exams. In 2022 Blackburn with Darwen GCSE performance in English and Maths was stronger than in other subjects and early predictions suggest that this has continued. Regional and school level data is not expected to be published until the end of this year.

### **Ofsted Inspections**

Routine inspections of schools are normally carried out by Ofsted as follows:

- A school judged outstanding or good will usually be inspected within the 4 academic years following its last inspection.
- A school judged requires improvement or inadequate will usually be inspected within two and a half years.

However, this hasn't been the case for schools over the last couple of years due to;

- A pause in inspections during the pandemic
- The government lifting the inspection exemption for outstanding schools; adding an additional 3,000 schools to the schedule, many of which had not been inspected for a decade or more
- The government requiring every school to be inspected at least once before August 2025

As a direct result, last academic year 2022-2023, Blackburn with Darwen had 19 of the 55 primary schools inspected by Ofsted under the Education Inspection Framework (EIF) and 6 high schools. Currently, 90% of our primary and secondary schools are judged either good or better with 15% judged as outstanding.

## REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR DIGITAL AND CUSTOMER SERVICES

COUNCILLOR MAHFOOZ HUSSAIN

PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING  
CHIEF OFFICERS: Director CE  
Thursday, 5 October 2023

### Being a forward thinking and innovative Council

#### Civil Contingencies Service (CCS)

A total of 186 incidents were reported in Q1 2023/2024, 48 of them being information received and 138 being warnings. There were a total of 5 Strategic Officer and 13 Duty Officer Activations. Some of the emergencies responded to included flooding, fires, water supply issues and concerns around anti-social behaviour.

A summary of recent and planned activity:

#### Emergency Planning / Preparedness

- The 24/25 Corporate Exercise is being prepared and will focus on emergency preparedness and response.
- Training will be prepared and delivered to Strategic Officers in the autumn, and this will complement the formal Multi- Agency Gold Incident Command training due to take place in October.
- A review of emergency plans has begun, with initial focus on the Council's Local Emergency Response Plan.
- In addition, following the publication of the Government's National Risk Registers, the Council's local Community Risk Register will be reviewed and updated in line with the national and LRF documents.
- The service has also been supporting the LRF with several plan reviews, including Human Aspects, Pipeline, LERP, Mass Fatalities and Excess Deaths, alongside several Risk Workshops.
- In conjunction with health colleagues, we will be looking at winter preparedness.
- Updated information on emergency preparedness has been shared with all elected members for awareness and cascade.

#### Business Continuity / Business Continuity Promotion

Following the audit of Business Continuity Plans (BCP), all plan owners have been given actions to ensure their plans are updated appropriately and the corporate BCP is now being reviewed. In addition to this, we have worked with colleagues in IT to identify critical systems in the event of a network outage.

#### Community Resilience / Volunteers

A volunteer networking event took place on 13<sup>th</sup> September, to ensure continued engagement and to provide important updates to our community volunteers. Going forward, an Internal Emergency Response Group training schedule will be rolled out. The team are also working on Resilient Telecommunication hubs alongside colleagues from the Local Resilience Forum.

## **Health and Safety (H&S)**

There were 165 Council accidents, incidents and near misses reported in Q1 of 2023/24, broadly similar to the previous quarter. Approximately 50% of incident reports come from Environment and Operations, where many of our frontline higher risk services are. 116 incidents were reported from schools in the same period.

Reports made to the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) under Reporting of Injuries, Disease and Dangerous Occurrence Regulation (RIDDOR) included:

- 2 Council reports in Q1
- 1 School report in Q1

Near miss incident reports rose slightly to 24 in Q1 with the majority from Environment and Leisure teams.

A summary of recent and planned activity:

- Direct support to Leisure Services is continuing with full H&S audits undertaken and in-person training delivered to managers. The number of incidents reported have increased and accident investigations have improved in quality and outcomes.
- Direct support to services at Davyfield Road Depot is continuing.
- Annual H&S Corporate Compliance checks have now been received from many areas and data is being reviewed.
- The Building Safety Task & Finish Group was set up following a number of recent reported incidents at council buildings.

The Violence & Aggression Focus Group is continuing with various progress made to date.

### *Schools*

Summer Term visits were undertaken, focusing on DSE and H&S clinics as well as some training delivery. The autumn term visit will address Asbestos Management in schools – in line with focus from the Health & Safety Executive (HSE)

## **Digital Services and Transformation**

The team continues to support Children's Services with the Fostering Transformation project. Our User Researcher has built strong relations with our Foster Carers who are at the heart of our designs for the future of the service. Foster Carers can now register an interest and apply online and the statutory checks process has been digitalised. Foster Carers are working with the team to design online forms.

The Family Hubs programme is under way, with 48 recommendations being worked through which will improve existing buildings and the processes being undertaken, using new and existing technology.

The new Public Protection system replacement is due to launch in September.

## **Website and Intranet**

The website content team are working on content for the Family Hubs microsite. This is an exciting development and will become the model for future microsites. We are reviewing the content for Taxi Licensing after feedback was gathered by the User



Research team from taxi drivers and we will continue to liaise with them and ensure that they are able to apply for services easily online.

We are nearing the launch of a new intranet site for staff. The final design is being approved and we are working with the Communications team to ensure we have the correct technology to distribute the weekly newsletter to staff effectively.

### **Information and Communications Technology**

The IT Team has made planned progress in key areas. These include:

1. The installation of Rubrik, a new Backup and Recovery system, which will become functional in September 2023.
2. The creation of tender for the new Unified Communications Environment, which will be published during September. This will allow for full deployment in 2024.
3. A large programme of security penetration testing, which will assist in our continued securing of the technical environment.
4. The continued upgrade of the Council hardware and software environments, Children and Adult's social care systems and the move forward to the latest Microsoft environments.
5. Planning to tender for new laptop devices to replace those which are no longer supported.

This progress has been supported by closer working with the Transformation Team, which has led to more effective deliveries. Furthermore, the team is finding success in acquiring new local talent as we develop a more robust IT team for the future.

Going forward, the new core network will be implemented and enabled during Quarter 3. Deployment of further upgrades will take place in 2024.

### **Data Strategy and Business Intelligence**

Our new suite of Corporate Key Performance Indicators have now been approved and are being monitored.

We are working closely with Children's and Adults Services to continue to build new reports to track performance across those departments. These reports enable departmental management teams quicker access to key data items, which are used to manage operational services and also to report to government departments and inspectorates.

### **Information Governance and Data Protection**

There have been 14 new information assurance incidents within Q1 2023-24. All incidents are monitored as part of the breach reporting process. None have been of a significant enough nature to warrant referral to the ICO.

292 FOI requests were due for disclosure during Q1 2023-24. 95.21% were responded to on time. As such, we are complying with the FOIA during this period.

In Q1 2023-2024, 391 EIR requests were due to disclosure, with 98.21% responded to on time. Therefore, we are complying with EIR during this period.

128 GDPR/DPA2018 subject access requests were due for disclosure in Q1 2023-24. There was a compliance rate of 90.63%, meaning that we are complying with GDPR/DPA2018 during this period.

Following recent cyber-attacks across the country, we continue to ensure that all staff and Elected Members have completed their annual Information Governance and DOJO Cyber Security training. We have also implemented the Data Protection Officer's recommendation that staff are made aware of the training's importance in ensuring the security of the Council's network.

A total of 62 schools have bought into the SLA for the 2023/24 financial year, generating a total revenue of £53,286.

### **RIPA (Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act)**

There have been no applications for authorisation for undertaking covert surveillance or to use a covert human intelligence source for a number of years nor have there been any such activities outside the RIPA legislation that merited the use of the NON-RIPA application process. Much of the Council's enforcement processes are done openly. This does not exempt the Council from having to have processes in place and the Council is subject to scrutiny by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office (IPCO) so training is ongoing and RIPA Officer's Group meetings are being held quarterly.

In November 2022, there was an inspection of the Council's RIPA processes by an inspector appointed by the IPCO. The IPCO recommended minor amendments to the Council's procedure and guidance, mainly around the secure storage and use of documentation including RIPA authorisations and strengthening of the processes for the lawful access to publicly available social media information. The Council's RIPA Co-ordinator has submitted a report to Executive Board to this effect. Training in relation to Internet and Social Media investigations was provided in August 2023. A web-based training course is currently being developed by HR and the RIPA Co-ordinator.

### **Customer Services**

It has been another busy quarter in Customer Services, with over 30,000 calls, 4,600 emails and nearly 7,000 chat exchanges with residents. Chat messaging is proving a popular way for residents to contact us, with growing numbers choosing to use this method as it becomes more prevalent with other suppliers such as travel firms and utility companies. We also processed over 900 blue badge applications, with 94% of applicants 'self-served' via our website.

As residents choose to use digital and phone methods, we have seen demand decrease in our reception centres. This quarter we have seen the taxi licensing application process being made available online. This has been well received and used by taxi drivers, who now no longer need to produce evidence in the town hall.

### **Complaints/Feedback**

During July 2023 and August 2023 the Complaints team has dealt with: 112 MP Enquires, 182 Informal Complaints, 10 'Stage 1' complaints and 5 Ombudsman Enquires. The team also received 72 compliments during the same period, the majority relating to Adults services (53).

There has been a 10% decrease in informal complaints compared to July/August 2022, and a slight increase in the number of 'Stage 1' complaints.

The number of MP enquiries received has increased (total 112) compared to the same months last year (69 s received for July - August 2022). These mainly related to Environment & Operations.

Overall, the team has worked well in resolving most complaints at the informal stage and without having the need to invoke the formal complaints process (hence only 10 from the 182 informal complaints). Also, the team worked well in 'gate keeping' to resolve those complaints that did require dealing with under 'Stage 1', without the need for any complaints to be investigated under 'Stage 2' of the complaints process.

During the year 2022/23, 28 complaints relating to Council services were referred to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO), of which only 3 were upheld (Adults Social Services - 2 and Children's Social Services - 1).

### **School admission appeals**

During the period 1<sup>st</sup> July to 31<sup>st</sup> August, the team have successfully administered 75 admission appeals. A breakdown of the results of these appeals are set out below:

Unsuccessful - 54

Successful - 7

Withdrawn - 12

The school appeals team is still seeing a significant increase in appeals, and are currently working on over 60 appeals (September 2023).

During this academic year (2023-24) the team has so far (inc. September) administered 310 school admission appeals, which is a significant increase compared to the academic years 2022-23 (375), 2021-22 (345), 2020-21 (239) and 2019-20 (242). The increase in the appeals is due to a number of factors, including new housing developments in BwD, families moving into the Borough from other parts of the UK and also International New Arrivals.

### **Registrars**

It has been a busy period for the service, particularly August, which saw a 14% increase in the number of deaths registered, 16% increase in the number of marriages and 25% increase in the number of couples giving their intention to marry compared with July 2023. Appointment waiting times and levels of customer satisfaction across all statutory services remain excellent at 100%. The demand for marriages looks set to continue going into the autumn.

Testing is currently underway for the new online appointment booking. Initially, this will enable customers to book birth registration appointments online, and if this is successful, online death registration appointment bookings will be introduced.

## REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT & OPERATIONS

**COUNCILLOR JIM SMITH**

**PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING  
CHIEF OFFICER: Strategic Director of  
Environment & Operations  
Thursday, 5 October 2023**

### **Build happier, healthier and safer communities**

#### **Waste and Recycling**

##### **Waste Compositional Analysis**

The Council's Environment team are undertaking a waste analysis this autumn, to identify the composition of the waste and recycling collected from residents of the borough. The composition of household waste and recycling is forever changing as the economy, our personal behaviours, consumption and recycling habits shift over time.

The information on what is in our waste and recycling bins helps us to drive improvements in reducing general waste and food waste which affect climate change, address contamination problems and it also helps demonstrate what items in what quantities are in our recycling bins. This information enables us to achieve the best value for money when tendering waste and recycling contracts.

As a Council we now undertake these analyses every 2 years, with the last analysis showing that over 40% of the weight of the contents in burgundy bins was food waste with over half of the food waste still edible, in date, or not even used. In the past two years, we have included messages in our calendar packs and leaflets regarding food waste, its impact and the benefits to residents from reducing food waste. On average, families are throwing away £700 a year of food waste that could still be used or needn't have been bought. As an aside, we are awaiting information from Government on how the introduction of mandatory food waste collections across England will be operated and funded.

##### **Waste Enforcement**

The Envirocrime team are continuing to investigate and progress enforcement cases for prosecution. However, a continuing delay via the courts in cases being heard, due to a backlog in the judicial system, is limiting our ability to reflect publicly on the good work of the team, as we cannot promote our cases until they have been through the courts. The matter has been raised with DEFRA, seeking their support to liaise with the Ministry of Justice to consider ways to tackle the increasing backlog of cases.

##### **Parks Levelling Up Fund**

The Council received £85,000 to be spent at Roe Lee Park, to improve facilities. A number of initiatives have been progressed with the funding and working with the Friends of Roe Lee Park. Diseased Ash trees have been removed and replaced with mature trees. A new community orchard has also been established at the park, the first of its kind within Council parklands, whereby the Friends Group manage the orchard for the local community. The multi-use games areas have been renovated to enhance the play options available, with basketball, netball and hockey as well as football now being available to be played. New CCTV equipment has been provided to help deter and catch those who commit anti-social behaviour. The pond has been desilted, with leftover materials redeployed as a compost within the park. Last but by no means least,

five new pieces of outdoor gym equipment, part of an active trail throughout the park, have also been installed, which includes disability accessible equipment, which ensures as many members of the community as possible can enjoy the facilities.

## **Public Protection and Environmental Health**

### **Air Quality Monitoring**

DEFRA working in partnership with the Council, has installed a new real-time air quality monitor in the Borough. The equipment, which is located at Audley Lane in Blackburn, will monitor smaller particulate matter (known as PM<sup>2.5</sup>) in the atmosphere for the Automated Urban and Rural Network, which is paid for and run by the Government. PM<sup>2.5</sup> pollution typically comes from transport (diesel vehicle emissions, brake dust, tyre particles) as well as other sources. This will add to our current real time monitor which measures NO<sub>2</sub> emissions coming from petrol vehicles.

Both the real-time monitors measure background levels of pollution. When combined with the data provided by the 48 static NO<sub>x</sub> tubes placed at hotspots around the Borough and maintained by PP&EH. The data will allow us to model air quality even more accurately that we do now. We are required to submit an annual Air Quality Status Report to DEFRA every year; over the last few years our reports have been well received by DEFRA, and this additional data will only improve the standard of these reports. We have also been asked to maintain the equipment under an SLA, so we are actually being paid (a small amount) for having this additional useful resource in the Borough.

### **Parking Services and Police Joint Operations**

There have been two joint parking operations with the Police in relation to evening enforcement of illegal parking (6.00pm – 9.00pm), these took place on the 26<sup>th</sup> July 23 and 2<sup>nd</sup> August 23. These operations were deemed by us and the Police as a success, the results are below:

- 26<sup>th</sup> July 23 – 2 CEOs and 2 Police officers went out on patrol and issued 25 Penalty Charge Notices.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> August 23 – 4 CEOs and 2 Police Officers went out on patrol and issued 45 Penalty Charge Notices.

We are working with the Police to programme more of these joint operations to take place on a regular basis.

### **Blakewater Car Park**

Construction commenced on the 27<sup>th</sup> July for the new car park on the old Blakewater Lodge site just off Swallow Drive, the car park will provide 54 parking spaces plus 5 Disabled Bays. The new car park will provide additional parking for the surrounding area and will help reduce the number of vehicles which are parked on the roads and residential areas in the vicinity of the car park. It is anticipated that the car park will open for use by the general public before the end of September 2023.

## REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE

**COUNCILLOR VICKY MCGURK**

**PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING  
CHIEF OFFICERS: Head of Finance  
Thursday, 5 October 2023**

### **Tackling the budget challenge**

#### **Business Rates**

The Business Rates Team have undertaken a major piece of work to rate and bill an additional 1,200 business-rate properties in the Borough. This large number of new accounts is due to a significant number of storage units now being separately rated for Business Rates. Despite this significant change, the key indicators within the Business Rate service are still extremely good at this mid-point in the financial year.

#### **Council Tax**

The collection rate for 2023/24 continues to improve compared to the previous financial year. At present, the collection rate is 0.28% higher than the 2022/23 figure, which is a positive sign for the final outturn figure.

#### **Benefits**

The Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has commenced discussions regarding the new Supported Housing Regulatory Bill that received Royal Assent in June. As part of the Supported Housing Improvement Programme (SHIP), the Council is well placed to influence the new monitoring processes that will be required of Local Authorities and the standards expected of providers.

A number of Council departments will be considering the impact of the new Regulatory Bill over the coming months. Further details on how this affects providers and vulnerable residents will be circulated in future updates.

In July, the Department of Work and Pensions informed the Council that all recipients of Tax Credits and Child Tax Credits in the Borough will be asked to apply for Universal Credit. Claimants will be randomly chosen from postcodes and issued with letters asking them to claim Universal Credit. Failure to claim within a period of 3 months will result in Tax Credits / Child Tax Credits being ended.

In addition, we have also been informed that the majority of all other legacy benefit claimants (Housing Benefits, Income Support, Job Seekers Allowance and Employment Support Allowance) will also be asked to claim Universal Credit during 2024/25.

#### **Financial Services**

The team are working with our external auditors, Grant Thornton, to finalise remaining queries on the 2021/22 Statement of Accounts prior to final sign off. Work will then commence on the 2022/23 Statement, after which Grant Thornton will be handing over to Mazars, who will become our auditors for 2023/24 onwards.

Budget monitoring continues to take place across all of the Council budgets. Quarter 1 monitoring was presented to Executive Board in September and the team are currently working on the Quarter 2 report, which will be taken to November's Board meeting. The finance team are also working with budget holders to try to identify savings to offset pressures reported in Quarter 1 monitoring.

The budget setting timetable for 2023/24 is now being drafted and the detail will be circulated shortly to Directors and their managers outlining the action and timescales that need to take place between now and sign off of a balanced budget at Finance Council on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2024.

### **Audit & Assurance**

The Audit & Assurance team have continued with the delivery of the 2023/24 Annual Audit Plan approved by the Audit & Governance Committee in March. A Progress Report was presented to the Committee meeting on 19<sup>th</sup> September for consideration. This provided members with details of the outcomes of the internal audit reviews completed to the end of August and a commentary on the counter fraud work undertaken in the period since the last report. It included the results so far of reviewing the findings from the latest National Fraud Initiative, which is administered by the Cabinet Office.

The Committee also received a Risk Management Report setting out the risk management activity undertaken in the period, along with a summary of the strategic risks as at the end of August.

The Committee's Independent Member Appointments Panel reported on the outcome of the process to appoint a co-opted independent member to one of the two independent member vacancies on the Committee. The Panel's recommendation to appoint of Jennifer Eastham, Vice Principal Finance & Corporate Services of Blackburn College, as a co-opted non-voting Independent Member to sit on the Audit & Governance Committee for a period of 2 years, was approved.

### **Corporate Procurement and Contracts**

The Procurement team have been working on a range of tender activity including for Traffic Management, Highways Structures Inspections, Waste Composition Analysis and Property Valuations.

The Procurement team have also received the latest Local Government Procurement Index published by Tussell. Local Spend improved from 47% up to 51% by their methodology and we moved from being ranked 100<sup>th</sup> to 83<sup>rd</sup> council. Our SME Spend % remained stable but our ranking moved from 86<sup>th</sup> up to 51<sup>st</sup>. Overall, the Council was ranked in the high performing quartile of local authorities.

### **HR Services**

As of September 2023, there has been very little change to the negotiations around the 2023-2024 pay award. The Unions met on the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2023 to consider their position as the employers' side confirmed that the offer for this year would not be increased. However, as the GMB were still carrying out their ballots for potential industrial action, the Unions advised that they would be reconvening after this had taken place. The current offer under consideration is £1,925 or 3.88% for those above SCP 43 on the salary scale.

Teachers Pay Award: The Government has accepted the School Teachers' Review Body's recommendation of a 6.5% pay increase for school teachers and leaders. A higher uplift of up to 7.1% will be applied to M1 pay points. The process is currently in progress going through parliament and it is expected to be applied in the November 2023 salary payments (back dated to September 2023).

## **Organisational and Workforce Development**

The Council's second annual staff awards took place on the 29<sup>th</sup> September. This year, there were 341 nominations from across the whole organisation, covering 11 categories, including 5 individual awards and 6 team awards.

We continue to invest in leadership and management development and are developing an internal programme to support coaching in the workplace, as well as supporting some of our staff get certified in coaching through formal training.

We continue to support our annual apprentice programme, with a further 27 who started on 1st September 2023. We have developed a robust support programme to ensure all of our apprentices successfully complete their programme and are starting early discussions to ensure they are able to secure a permanent position by the end of their apprenticeship.

## **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion**

The Corporate EDI Group continues to meet on a bi-monthly basis, facilitating discussion and delivering actions around key EDI activities for the organisation and residents. Following the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge, there will be a review of the relevant recommendations in due course, and this will feed into the Equality Strategy and Action Plan which is scheduled to launch at the end of the year. We are currently in the final stages of launching the Staff Inclusion Networks, which will coincide with the annual Staff Briefings in October.

## **Legal & Governance Services**

The Adults Social Care and Education legal team are dealing with an increasing number of contentious Court of Protection applications (to resolve disputes about residence, care arrangements and deprivation of liberty), alongside a high volume of non-contentious court applications (to authorise deprivation of liberty in community settings and to authorise the Council to manage finances for individuals that lack capacity to do so themselves) - with new referrals in June (24) and July (10). Generally, the team is dealing with an overall increase in contentious court work (75% increase since June 2022 and 110% increase since July 2022), and an ongoing increase in referrals for challenges to deprivation of liberty in care home settings (6 new matters in June; 1 in July).

In addition, the team deals with a high volume of new and existing non-court related work, including safeguarding and funding disputes. The team is also dealing with an increase in Education work, including work relating to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Tribunal. The team also continue to provide advice to schools.

The Legal Property team also supported the Growth team in completing the transaction to purchase Imperial Mill, which included investigation of the title to the site and undertaking due diligence checks and searches. However, even more effort was necessary to the grant of lease of one of the floors of the Mill to enable the previous owner to remain in occupation as our tenant, helping ensure its continued business operation.

## **Governance Team**

The Governance team continues to work on the annual canvass process. This includes organising canvassers to visit properties, processing completed canvass forms, online notifications, and responding to general queries. The team will very soon be arranging for forms to be delivered to approximately 51,550 properties, for householders to check



the information held and notify the Elections team of any changes. All forms and notifications received must be processed in readiness for publication of the new electoral register on 1 December 2023.

In addition, the team is assisting with the preparations for the polling districts/polling place/polling station review, which will commence on 2 October 2023. Furthermore, the team has started planning for 'Tranche 2' of the Election Act 2022 changes, which includes online absent vote applications (OAVA), postal and proxy voting requirements (PPVR), overseas electors (OE) and European Union citizens voting and candidacy rights (EUVCr).

## REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

COUNCILLOR QUESIR MAHMOOD

PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING

STRATEGIC DIRECTOR: MARTIN KELLY

DATE: 5<sup>th</sup> October 2023

### ALL PRIORITIES:

#### **New Local Plan to 2037**

Our ambitious new Local Plan for the Borough (2021-2037) continues its progress through its Examination in Public (EiP). The Planning Inspectorate has appointed two Inspectors to conduct the EiP, which began in August 2022 and is now entering its final stages. Following the Public Hearings in February – March 2023, and a post-hearings Inspectors' letter received in June, the Council has now commenced a 6-week public consultation on the 'Main Modifications' that the Planning Inspectors believe are necessary to make the Plan 'sound'. Comments are invited until the 2<sup>nd</sup> October, and details are available on the Council's webpage [Local Plan 2021 to 2037: Draft Main Modifications Consultation | Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council](#).

All comments that are received during the consultation period will be forwarded directly to the Inspectors', who will consider them and whether any further modifications are justified to the Plan. A formal Inspectors' report will be provided in due course which will set out all the Main Modifications required to be made, in order for the Council to adopt the new Local Plan. This remains on track to be brought before Council Forum in early 2024.

### **PLACE, PRIORITY 4: CONNECTED COMMUNITIES**

#### **Levelling Up Fund 2 – Blackburn Growth Axis Transport Package (South East)**

In January 2023 the Council secured £20m from the Government's Levelling Up Fund (LUF 2) to help bring forward improvements to Junction 5 of the M65, and to deliver a comprehensive, high-quality walking and cycling network in SE Blackburn. The funding supports the Council's Growth Axis ambitions and will deliver two key projects required to support our ambitions for SE Blackburn. Together these significant transport interventions (totalling £30.8m) will help tackle congestion, address safety concerns and promote active travel between key origins and destinations (including links to Blackburn town centre). This investment will support the Council's Local Plan, help drive prosperity across the Borough and wider East Lancashire, and reduce emissions and improve the health and wellbeing of residents in the area.

The active travel network across SE Blackburn consists of six priority routes that were identified with the aim to improve conditions for walking, wheeling and cycling. WSP, independent consultants, were commissioned to undertake a feasibility study on all six of these routes. This study has been completed with various options identified for each route. Options are now being considered within the funding available. Active Travel England are supporting the review process and once affordable feasibility designs are available these will be shared with stakeholders. It is anticipated that this will be towards the end of October/November.

#### **Highway Maintenance Programme 2023/24**

The Council's road surfacing programme is underway. The sites listed below are completed:

- Billinge End Road, Blackburn;
- Broadhead Road, West Pennine;
- Cemetery Road, Darwen;
- Downham Street, Blackburn;
- Greens Arms Road, West Pennine; and
- Haslingden Road, Blackburn.

Resurfacing at the following sites started in late September:

- A666 (Cochran Street) Darwen;
- Audley Range, Blackburn;
- Harrison Street, Blackburn;
- Preston Old Road, Blackburn.

Two sites were identified for retexturing to improve their skid resistance performance and are close to completion. These sites are:

- Lower Eccleshill Road Roundabout, Lower Darwen; and
- Stopes Brow; Lower Darwen.

### **Blakewater Lodge Car Park**

All work has been completed, and final site measures are being undertaken. Arrangements are being finalised regarding the opening of the Car Park.

### **Cultural Services**

**Library Summer Activities:** Record numbers of children have been flocking to Blackburn with Darwen libraries to sign up for this year's Summer Reading Challenge, a national initiative which encourages children to keep up with their reading across the 6 week break. In Blackburn Library alone, more than 300 children enrolled on the scheme in the first week of the school holidays – the first time this has ever happened. The children's holiday activity programme has also been well attended so far, with a great variety of activities and events on offer, including Crazy Colin's Library Magic Show and Zoolab animal handling sessions, as well as building tennis rackets, catapults and much more from cardboard and craft materials; there were even indoor Sports Days at Blackburn Library and Darwen Library. Adults weren't forgotten, with two performances of Invisible Ink – a new play about letter writing and lost friendships written and performed by Guy Hargreaves of Beggars Belief Collective, based locally in Darwen.

**Heritage Open Days:** Both Darwen and Blackburn Libraries held exhibitions during September. At Blackburn Central Library the entrance showcased a treasure trove of ad hoc advertisements, posters, flyers, handbills, railway timetables, hymn sheets, poems, political cartoons and squibs, theatre and sporting notices, a rich and fascinating social history collection. Whilst at Darwen Library an exhibition of photographs, news cuttings and memorabilia entitled Discover 'owd' Darwen was drawn from Darwen Library's local history collection.

**Venues:** Over the summer our Venues linked with CBeeBies to offer shows at both KGH & DLT. KGH hosted a hugely prestigious, and sold out, CBeebies Prom to the Classic programme; Ocean Adventure event featuring the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra and was only 1 of 7 CBeeBies proms in 2023. DLT hosted two days of CBeebies' show Sarah & Duck which sold over 300 tickets and was very popular. For

details of what's coming up over the next few months, including this year's pantomime Aladdin visit [www.bwdvenues.com](http://www.bwdvenues.com)

**Casual Recruitment:** To support the busy autumn programme Venues held a casual recruitment fair in early September for roles such as bar staff, technical assistants, and box office staff. It was a really successful event attracting a lot of interest. Nearly 300 people attended on the day and over 60 casuals were recruited during the event.

**Heritage and Arts: Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery:** Over the summer the Museum had a major programme of activities with workshops, crafts and handling sessions which were run by young volunteers. The artist-led sessions including Tote bag printing, clay modelling and tile decorating have been successful with 900 participants making and taking part. The Museum is undergoing roof works and surrounded by scaffolding with only the ground floor open, however, this has not deterred visitors with an increase of over one third in relation to previous years.

**British Textile Biennial:** Throughout October, across Pennine Lancashire there are artists, activities and talks across the area. Blackburn town centre is the main hub of activity with exhibitions across several venues including Blackburn Museum, Tony's Ballroom, Prism Gallery and the Cathedral. There are many drop in workshops including the Spinning and Weaving school at Blackburn Market. For times and more details [Programme Archive - British Textile Biennial](#)

## **PLACE, PRIORITY 5: SAFE & CLEAN ENVIRONMENT**

### **Climate Emergency Action Plan**

The Executive Board approved an updated Climate Emergency Action Plan in June. Decarbonisation of heat supply to buildings and facilitating the shift to electric vehicles are key priorities for 2023/24. Heat networks are being explored as a solution to the former and a grant application to the Heat Networks Delivery Unit for assistance with feasibility studies is in preparation. Potential locations for electric vehicle (EV) charge points to serve areas with no off-street parking are being assessed and a survey of residents' attitudes to EVs has been launched. 11 new Council EVs will replace old diesel fleet vehicles in October. Work continues with the People's Jury to implement their recommendations and sustain engagement with local people on climate priorities.

## **PLACE, PRIORITY 6: STRONG, GROWING ECONOMY TO ENABLE SOCIAL MOBILITY**

### **Employment Developments**

The Council's key employment sites are making good progress with more details to be provided in the next update report.

A planning application has also been submitted for a new manufacturing research centre at Chapels. This is a site that has been brought forward with support from the £100m Darwen Town Deal. Barnfield Blackburn Ltd – a joint venture between the Barnfield Group and Blackburn with Darwen Council – has submitted the proposals for the two hectare site. And, initial discussions are well advanced with Sheffield University's AMRC, as anchor tenant – housing its first-of-its-kind Additive Manufacturing Accelerator. Perspective Personal Ltd, a major employer in the town, is also developing plans to expand its neighbouring Chapels site with a proposed new

£30m national manufacturing centre there – again, with support from the Town Deal. That planning application is expected to be submitted later in the year.

## **Housing Developments**

Further to the Council's agreed Growth Programme, the following major housing projects involving Council land are continuing to progress:

- Haslingden Road Housing Site - Keepmoat Homes are developing 300 new homes, including 160 family homes for sale and up to 50 keyworker affordable homes in the first phase. A revised planning application is likely to be determined at Planning & Highways Committee in October.
- Whalley Old Road Housing Site - Vistry Partnerships have completed the purchase of the site to deliver 165 high quality family homes. Blackburn will be the first site to offer Bovis Homes in Lancashire.
- Holden Fold Housing Site - Vistry Partnerships will build around 477 new homes, including 170 affordable homes for rent and home ownership. Vistry plan to deliver their Bovis and Linden Homes brands. A planning application has been submitted and will be determined at Planning & Highways Committee in late 2023.

Despite challenging economic and market conditions, progress continues to be made by other developments on Council land:

- Countryside Homes and Together Housing are making good progress at their development of 390 new homes of mixed tenure on two sites on Fishmoor Drive and one site on Roman Road, which will see new affordable homes for rent come on stream later this year.
- McDermott Homes at Ellison Fold Way, Darwen, will deliver around 340 new family dwellings, including 70 affordable homes plus funding towards more school places, roads and improvements to Blacksnape Play Area.
- McDermott Homes have almost completed a successful build programme at Lomond Gardens, Blackburn.
- Elan Homes, Milking Lane, Lower Darwen – which the Council owns as part of the Barnfield Blackburn Ltd Joint Venture – have started works on site to build 76 new family homes.

## **Empty Homes**

Empty homes in the Borough continue to be tackled by the team, because they can have negative environmental impacts on neighbourhoods in addition to being a much-needed housing resource. At neighbourhood level, empty properties attract fly tipping, crime, arson and nuisance. It's therefore a priority to tackle these problems through enforcement as part of the wider effort to improve neighbourhoods and prevent blight.

Activity in Quarter 1 of 2023/24 resulted in 214 empty homes being brought back into use, 191 of which were classified as empty and unfurnished for over 6 months. The properties were brought back into occupation following intensive negotiations between the team and the owners, exceeding the quarterly target of 200 homes.

## **PLACE, PRIORITY 7: SUPPORTING OUR TOWN CENTRES AND BUSINESSES**

### **Townscape Heritage Project - Blakey Moor/Northgate/Lord Street West**

Works continue to progress well at Blakey Moor Terrace. Internal scaffolding to the original part of the building is being removed and mezzanine floor created. This will be followed by the reinstatement of the shopfronts. The steelwork frame for the new extension has been erected and floors will be installed next. As part of our heritage skills training programme, six Level 2 bricklayers and one joiner from Blackburn College will be gaining onsite work experience in September and October.

Local artist, Alexandra Gallagher, was commissioned to create some new imagery to help promote the building and wider cultural offer. This has now been used to animate the hoardings around the site. This is to be further complemented with lamp post banners that will form part of a creative heritage trail delivered in partnership with Blackburn BID.

We are also working closely with our partners at Blackburn College on the multi-million pound restoration works of the iconic Victoria Building. The flagship project is one of the largest schemes of its kind in the UK, transforming the historic building into a modern hub of learning, skills and community activity – complete with a top floor art space. Once finished, it will become a central feature of Blackburn's Cultural Quarter. Ahead of a new road closure being implemented in August to allow for the works to be carried out safely, detailed stakeholder engagement was undertaken with all surrounding businesses. New hoarding designs are also being developed for this three-year project – again using the striking Alexandra Gallagher artwork – to promote the scheme and affected businesses in the Cultural Quarter.

The refurbishment of 50 Northgate is complete and now occupied by 'Dark Secrets Hair'. The new 'Topsy' micro bar has also opened at 48 Northgate. 29 Northgate will host a pop-up exhibition through October as part of the British Textile Biennial 2023.

### **Morrisons Relocation**

Maple Grove Blackburn (Joint Venture Partnership between the Council and Maple Grove) has agreed heads of terms with Morrisons for purchase of the former Thwaites brewery site for the construction of a new store. The contract is being prepared and design progressed, with a planning application expected imminently.

### **St John's Refurbishment Project**

A full design team including OMI Architects were appointed in 2022 to prepare a design for the refurbishment of the former St John's Church. Proposals include an ambitious refurbishment and extension to the Grade II listed building, to provide an innovation hub with a range of flexible work spaces. The planning application was submitted in September, and subject to receiving consent, works are anticipated to start on site in the summer of 2024.

## REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH, PREVENTION & WELLBEING

**COUNCILLOR DAMIAN TALBOT**

**PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING  
CHIEF OFFICERS: Director of Public  
Health  
Thursday, 5 October 2023**

### **Build happier, healthier and safer communities**

#### **Public Health**

##### **Breastfeeding celebration event**

A breastfeeding celebration event took place on a Saturday in Witton Park on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2023. Despite the wind and rain on the day, around 200 people attended and took part in the activities, which included circus skills with the Re:refresh clowns, pedalling a smoothie bike, seed planting with Lancashire Wildlife Trust, storytime, rhyme and puppets with the Library, face painting, crafts and a beautiful feeding tent.

Stallholders shared public health messages around breastfeeding, safer sleep, stopping smoking, food and nutrition, as well as giving information regarding the 0-19 Service, Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND), Fostering, Homestart, Sling Library, Humraaz, University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) School of Midwifery and the Children's Centres. The event was supported with volunteers from Red Rose Recovery and the Bureau of the Arts. Families gave positive feedback regarding the range of activities available and appreciated the fact that they could access support from infant feeding specialists on the day.

There are plans to grow the annual celebration event but also ensure that breastfeeding awareness stalls are present at a range of community events. The intention is to increase visibility and recognisability of the 'Believing in Breastfeeding BwD' branding and use every opportunity to reiterate the messaging. The breastfeeding initiation rates for new mums in Blackburn with Darwen is over 80%.

##### **Age Well Mental Health campaign**

A new Public Health Campaign was launched in July 2023 and runs throughout 2023/24. Bespoke to Blackburn with Darwen, the Campaign aims to:

- Improve awareness of mental wellbeing amongst older people and professionals who work with this age group;
- Encourage individuals to take steps to improve their own mental wellbeing or that of someone they are worried about;
- Raise awareness of local mental wellbeing projects with older people and professionals so they know about them and how to access them;
- Provide training for professionals in older people's settings on mental wellbeing.

The Campaign is being run in partnership between BwD Age UK and the Public Health Team. For more information and to download the leaflet, see our website: <https://bewellbwd.com/news/ageing-well/>

### **School uniform exchanges**

A series of school uniform pop-up shops were organised by the Child Poverty Strategy Group and were held in Blackburn and Darwen libraries from 22<sup>nd</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> August 2023. They were used by residents to donate and pick up pre-loved school uniform before the start of term. Stock was donated by council staff and residents on the day and from our Family Hubs throughout summer. Both pop-ups were well attended, and positive feedback was given by those who picked up uniforms.

*'It's so expensive to buy branded items with the school badge on so it's great to be able to take this. We usually get the cheap ones from a major supermarket so it's nice that we have an official one now.'*

Branded items such as blazers, PE kits and jumpers were in demand and were the first items to be taken in both shops. Further signposting was also provided to Rummage Rescuers and SAMS who also stock pre-loved uniforms. All uniform that was remaining was sent to the Family Hubs so the community can continue to donate what they can and take what they need. Schools that were requested frequently were noted and follow-up work will be undertaken to encourage them to create their own pop-ups and inform parents of where pre-loved uniform can be found. Learning from these pilot pop-ups will be taken forward to next summer's shop activities.

### **Dental surveys for school children**

The University of Central Lancashire's dental school have been awarded the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) dental epidemiology contract for up to five years. In 2023/24 a full census survey will be undertaken where we hope to check every five year old's teeth. This is an 'opt in' survey and therefore schools have been requested to support in ensuring consent is received from as many parents as possible for their children's teeth to be checked. The data will support us to commission and effectively target oral health interventions within the borough and to evaluate and demonstrate our existing work is making a difference.

### **Neighbourhoods Wellbeing and Prevention**

#### **NHS Enhanced Health Checks**

This is a new development, which is taking a collaborative approach to delivery; with the GP Federation supported by Public Health and Neighbourhood, Wellbeing & Prevention Teams in addition to the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) Sector. Enhanced Health Checks aim to focus on prevention and reducing ill-health from cardiovascular disease (CVD), which still causes 24% of deaths, by taking a holistic view that addresses the social and wider determinants of health. This is achieved by supporting Blackburn with Darwen residents at greater risk of preventable disease, who require additional support into a range of community services that address social, financial and emotional vulnerabilities. An enhanced health check provides additional time with a healthcare professional to discuss the needs of the individual.

The council's Health and Wellbeing Team is taking the lead with GP engagement, training and targeted health check delivery in the community which is strengthening our existing relationships with Primary Care.

The councils Wellbeing Service is the referral pathway for those requiring support following a health check, where there is the expertise for physical activity and health



coaching, however if appropriate, connecting with Social Prescribing and Integrated Neighbourhood Teams ensures holistic and patient centred support.

### **Household Support Fund**

Household Support Fund (HSF) 4 covers April 23 to March 24 and is providing £3.2m of direct financial support available to residents to support with the cost of living crisis. At present the Household Support Fund national funding is only in place until March 2024. The primary route to access this support is through an online application process, administered by Community Connectors within Neighbourhoods, Wellbeing and Prevention who provide a bespoke, strength based and trauma informed service to support residents access the fund – this ‘front door’ is referred to as the Help Hub. .

In 2023/24 the team have processed:

- 1373 applications and responded to over 300 phone calls.
- 96% of households that apply and respond to support receive financial benefit from the scheme covering aspects including food, white goods, children’s beds, gas and electric payments, fuel efficiency, finance, benefit and debt support, employment and well-being.
- 31% of applicants have someone in the household in work (this includes over 90 Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council employees);
- 63% are households with children;
- 42% of households supported report someone in the house with a disability. A supplementary payment to electricity support is now also given to any household that has an electric aid that supports their disability with increased electric usage.

In addition to the application process, the fund has supported schools to extend and fill gaps in the free school meals and holiday activities food provision. Over 7000 extra pupils, from 3000 families have benefited from this support and been provided with a hot meal for free at their school.

