

## REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

COUNCILLOR MOHAMMED KHAN

Date: 25<sup>th</sup> March 2021

People: A good quality of life for all of our residents

### **Health and Wellbeing**

On 10<sup>th</sup> March, the Health and Wellbeing Board held its fourth meeting since the introduction of restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The agenda included a range of non COVID-19 specific items including, Better Care Fund, Disabled Facilities Grant, Lancashire Child Death Overview Panel Annual Report and a comprehensive update from Healthwatch BwD.

On 11<sup>th</sup> March, exactly one year on from the World Health Organisation declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic, a joint meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Board, Health Protection Board and Local Outbreak Engagement Board was convened to reflect on the last year and discuss the action needed to improve the health of our populations over the coming year. A summary of the health, social, economic and other impacts of COVID-19 was considered, including key recommendations for consideration by all partners.

Both meetings were conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams and enabled supportive and constructive dialogue with all partners.

### **Health and Care Integration**

The integrated health, care and community workforce continues to work hard to ensure residents are supported as best as possible during these challenging times. The weekly integrated neighbourhood teams, which include representation from District Nursing, Adult Social Care and Voluntary, Community, Faith Sector organisations, have developed highly effective ways of working online to jointly plan and co-ordinate much needed support and services for vulnerable residents.

The Social Prescribing Alliance which meets on a monthly basis has a steady growing membership. Over 14 community based organisations join forces on a regular basis to improve the physical and mental well-being of local people by offering a range of non-medical interventions. The frontline workforce are greatly benefitting from the opportunity to develop awareness of local provision, share good practice with each other and access high quality training opportunities. Recently, recruitment of five additional Social Prescribing Link Workers has taken place. They look forward to joining the Alliance and developing key relationships with Primary Care colleagues.

Over the next few weeks Social Prescribing Link Workers along with staff from Lancashire & South Cumbria Foundation Trust and Age UK BwD, are making welfare calls to local people who have been discharged from hospital following a covid-19 positive diagnosis. Due to the excellent partnerships that exist in BwD it is envisaged that the calls will help identify any unmet social, health and wellbeing needs and ensure local people are supported to navigate the services available to support greater health and wellbeing.

Since the last report, an innovative project has commenced within a small number of Care Homes to help local elderly residents access and participate in a range of new, highly engaging wellbeing activities using virtual reality and live distance learning. Through a partnership consisting of Primary Care, Care Network and the Council's Adult Learning Team a small grant from the Active Lancashire Tackling Inequalities Fund has been secured. The funding has been used to purchase virtual reality kits and IT equipment with a view to reduce loneliness and social isolation in Care Homes during the pandemic. It is hoped that further funding can be secured to expand the project in other Care Homes across BwD and Pennine Lancashire.

Place: Community pride in a vibrant place to live and visit

### **Our Community, Our Future social integration programme**

Recommissioning work has begun for three successful Our Community, Our Future projects: Youth Ambassadors, Community Ambassadors and Workforce Integration Ambassadors. Plans are in place for these three important projects to start from April, in line with the government's road map. Commissioned partners – the Strategic Youth

Alliance, Spring North and Blackburn College – are building contingency into their plans to allow sessions to go ahead online if small face-to-face groups cannot meet.

The social integration team will launch another wave of Our Community, Our Future grants in mid-April. Grants of between £2,000 and £5,000 will be available to local groups and organisations who have ideas for projects that have integration at their heart and collaborative bids from two or more groups are encouraged. The Learning English Together programme of ESOL classes and social mixing activities will end on 31 March. Partners have adapted well to delivering sessions online. Particular successes include Arts2Heal's sessions delivered over Zoom bringing together women who would not normally mix, and song, craft and storytelling sessions run by Home Start Blackburn & Darwen for parents with pre-school children. Learners are growing in confidence as they practise their English in these sessions. Over the next six months, the Learning English Together website will be developed to introduce a learner resources section and add more content.

The team is also exploring an ESOL Buddy scheme of conversation classes, and a higher level learning programme for learners who had professional roles in their home countries, to help them get jobs that use their skills.

### **Community Volunteer Awards 2021**

I am very pleased to let you know that the Community Volunteer Awards is returning this year after an enforced pause due to the pandemic. It will make its return on Wednesday, November 3<sup>rd</sup> at King George's Hall.

This is a really important event that celebrates and highlights our dedicated and selfless volunteers. There are so many people in this borough who go above and beyond and this last year has shown us that community and helping each other is more important than ever.

I fully expect to see countless examples of volunteering and helping out from so many of the residents of Blackburn with Darwen. I hope everyone will help to nominate the people who have made a real difference this year, whether it is through helping their neighbours in so many ways, cleaning up their community, or just reaching out to be a friendly ear to someone in need.

### Council: Delivered by a strong and resilient Council

#### **Census 2021**

With Census day on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2021, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) have been sending out invites for residents to take part and from the 22<sup>nd</sup> March ONS fieldwork staff will be out and about in the borough helping residents with enquiries and following up no response.

Whilst there is a requirement for us all to complete the census by law, our borough had a good response to the last census in 2011. The information available from the Census continues to be a hugely important to us it remains the only place we can get range of ward and borough level statistics, and is more important than ever as we develop our services and our recovery from covid-19.

#### **Budget 2021**

The Chancellor announced the Budget 2021 on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2021 and I was disappointed and underwhelmed to hear no reference to adult social care, public health or local government. We have proven in the past 12 months that we can deliver services quickly, efficiently and in response to local needs. For the Chancellor to not recognise this was disheartening. Council budgets continue to be impacted and as a borough we have been delivering services in a period of austerity for a decade now. I believe it is unfair to force councils to raise council tax to pay for social care when it is well known and well documented with research that a long-term sustainable solution is desperately needed.

Following the Budget 2021, the National Audit Office has published a worrying report about the state of finances in local government. 25 councils are on the brink of financial ruin and many have already asked the government for support. We are not one of them as we have been managing our budget well for the past ten years despite austerity measures - indeed we set a balanced budget for 2021/22 at our Finance Council meeting at the beginning of this

month. But the government needs to recognise that this cannot be a permanent state of affairs. They need to recognise the value of local government and invest accordingly in the sector.

### **Elections 2021**

The local elections which were postponed in 2020 due to the pandemic will be going ahead in May this year. The elections this year are for Blackburn with Darwen Council, Darwen Town Council, Police and Crime Commissioner for Lancashire and Parish Council elections. Whilst many people will have been vaccinated by this date and we will have extra safety measures in place, many people may still want to vote by post. As this is proving popular, please do not delay in registering at <https://www.blackburn.gov.uk/elections-and-voting> if you wish to use this option. Otherwise you can vote in person on the day or ask someone you trust, to vote on your behalf with a proxy vote.

The elections will be an opportunity to send a message to government about significant failures around spending and transparency that have occurred during the past 12 months. The failure of the national Test and Trace system despite a budget of £37billion over two years is a reflection of how budgets are not being managed properly at a national level. Despite our own local budget struggles we have managed to deliver a successful local Test and Trace system along with many other local councils. At a time when the public sector and VCFS is in dire need of funding, we have proved time and time again how we can deliver successful local programmes based on local need. Alongside this, the lack of transparency around COVID-19 contracts including those awarded for PPE, has been ruled as unlawful by the High Court because they were not published within the 30 day deadline. Public trust in institutions is of immense importance during these difficult times and unlawful activity of this kind risks undermining the good work we are doing locally.

### **COVID-19**

It has been over 12 months now since a global pandemic was declared by the World Health Organisation and in that time we have seen our lives change dramatically. But now with a vaccination programme in place we can start to look forward to doing the things we love again. A report on how we have responded to the pandemic is elsewhere on this agenda, but I want to use this opportunity to say a huge, heartfelt thank you to every volunteer, resident, business and staff member from across the public, private and VCFS sector who helped make our response possible. From the first stages of the BwD Help Hub scheme to volunteers at the county's first large scale vaccination centre at the Cathedral, they have shown immense care and courage in making sure that BwD responds to the pandemic to its full potential. I am proud to be Leader of a borough whose response has been so well supported.