

REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

COUNCILLOR MOHAMMED KHAN

Date: 7th October 2021

Covid-19

The Government published its Covid-19 Autumn and Winter plan on 14th September. Regulation has mostly been replaced with advice and guidance that needs to be communicated to our residents. I know Council staff are working on our own local plans and further details will be provided in future updates.

It is important to remember that Covid-19 is still with us. The winter months will bring many challenges; there is the possibility of a new variant and flu and other respiratory viruses will also be circulating. Vaccination, testing, tracing and isolating will be the focus of our defence against Covid-19 to support the NHS and social care settings by minimising infection in our communities.

Government has also outlined contingency measures to be introduced if needed, including further mandatory vaccinations, face coverings and working from home. It is important that our community is prepared so that they are able to respond quickly to any further measures.

Universal Credit

The universal credit uplift of £20 was due to officially end on October 6. I wrote to Government detailing the impact of the ending of the uplift in our borough and received a reply stating there were no plans to continue it.

In Blackburn with Darwen, we have nearly 20,000 people in receipt of universal credit, many of them working. Recently, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published a report which showed 413 parliamentary constituencies across Great Britain will see over a third of working age families with children hit by the planned £1,040-a-year cut.

Covid has been extremely difficult for everyone and Blackburn with Darwen has been hit particularly hard because of our social and structural inequalities – health inequalities, deprivation and poor housing. Now is not the time to increase the difficulties on struggling families in our borough as we recover from the pandemic. Ending the uplift also sucks money out of the local economy which will hamper our recovery from the pandemic.

We expect the full impact of the universal credit cut on our borough to become apparent in the next couple of months with a likely big impact on third sector organisations such as our local food banks.

Our Community, Our Future social integration programme

It's been a busy summer for the social integration team as more projects have got up and running. Around £68,500 has been awarded to 22 local projects through the Our Community, Our Future small scale grants programme. From projects involving arts, music and sport, to those focused on health and wellbeing, green spaces and the environment– there are activities for people of all ages to get involved in.

Community projects such as these can have a powerful impact on breaking down barriers between people who perhaps wouldn't normally mix.

At the last board meeting, we heard this first-hand – Saleha who had taken part in Lancashire Wildlife Trust's Outside Side By Side programme spoke about how the project has helped her

grow in confidence and learn new skills, while meeting new people and forging friendships through shared interests. Saleha also spoke about her involvement in our Community Ambassadors programme, along with Chloe who credits taking part with helping her get a job with Blackburn Rovers Community Trust, working in an equalities and integration role that she'd always dreamed of.

It really was uplifting to hear the impact of our projects on these women's lives, and I also felt incredibly proud that our social integration programme is delivering such positive outcomes across our communities.

Many Youth Ambassadors groups have been running over the summer, through partners including Blackburn Youth Zone, Youth Action, Blackburn Rovers and One Voice. One Voice collaborated with Blackburn's McNally Music Tuition on a project that formed a new band – BANNED Cohesion – made up of One Voice members and McNally students. Through a shared love of music and performance, new friendships have formed – and the young people's families were brought together to watch the band's first live performance earlier this month.

Blackburn College continues to deliver our Workforce Integration Ambassadors, and has recruited 14 local employers onto the current programme, with recruitment ongoing.

Our ESOL Hub team have spent the summer recruiting new learners onto English classes delivered through the Learning English Together partnership of ESOL providers. Through the Learning English Together website, we've received over 70 new registrations in the last few months. These learners have been signposted onto the best ESOL courses for them, as well as local volunteering and social mixing opportunities.

Together an Active Future (TaAF) - Sport England update

Covid has had a huge negative impact on health locally and this is especially true for our older residents. To support recovery and reverse the physical deconditioning experienced by this vulnerable group, Age UK are adapting their ways of working to offer one-to-one support to help people to begin to move again after spending over a year at home doing very little. This volunteer led approach will be evaluated and could be expanded to support others to develop new activity habits.

Sport England are excited about the progress already achieved by Pennine's leisure providers connecting with GPs and primary care to increase access and support into existing physical activities. A new Programme Manager will be key to driving and developing this shared way of working across the six leisure providers, strengthening links to social prescribing, neighbourhood accelerator, VCFS sector and wider partners. Increasing physical activity remains an important way to improve health and wellbeing and I'm pleased that Sport England are working closely with us.

Health and Wellbeing Board

On September 2nd, the Health and Wellbeing Board held its latest meeting with attendees gathering together in person. The agenda included an Age Well annual update & Living Longer Better strategy, a presentation on the Start Well Highlight Report as well as updates on the Walking and Cycling Plan, the Better Care Fund and Covid Situational Awareness.

World Suicide Prevention Day

On September 10th Council leaders, community, voluntary and faith partners and members of the public gathered in both Blackburn and Darwen town centres for vigils to raise awareness of suicide prevention and the support available. I gave a welcome address in Blackburn and

powerful and thought provoking speeches and perspectives were also delivered by the Mayor and Deputy Mayor, our Elected Member Mental Health Champion, members of the interfaith forum, hospital chaplaincy and brave residents sharing their heart breaking insights and impact of being bereaved by suicide. A poem was also read out that was written by young people wellbeing champions.

This year's theme was to 'walk a mile in someone else's shoes' led by the Men In Sheds volunteers who carried a candle and banner from Blackburn to Darwen. In addition, one mile routes around each town centre were marked with messages of hope from people with lived experience of suicide. People were invited to walk round to help raise awareness, combat stigma and encourage those who need it to ask for help from the support services and an army of suicide first aiders available in the borough.

1V and Community Volunteers Awards

The 1V Awards have taken place in Blackburn since 2013 and are a prominent part of the One Voice Annual Dinner. Run by One Voice Blackburn charity the 1V Awards are a celebration of community and volunteer contributions in Blackburn with Darwen.

This year, on Saturday 9th October in King George's Hall, awards will be handed out to deserving winners for – the 1V Woman of the Year, 1V Man of the Year, 1V Group of the Year and the Aya Hachem Young Person of the Year. Our own Director of Public Health, Dominic Harrison will be presented with the John Roberts Outstanding Achievement Award and I will be presenting a special Leader's Award on the night.

The finalists have been announced for this year's Community Volunteer Awards taking place on November 3rd.

There were a record-breaking number of nominations this year, with an astonishing 415 people and organisations nominated. This is a real testament to the dedication and tireless work of the volunteers and helpers across the borough. This is especially true over the last year and a half, when we have been battling the pandemic and the huge changes that have taken place in people's lives.

Our borough will always rise to the challenge when it comes to helping out and doing our bit in difficult times, and the response of local residents, charities and community groups to the Covid-19 pandemic has been remarkable and is truly inspiring. It was extremely difficult to narrow down these incredible nominations. Every volunteer and community champion deserves recognition and thanks for their work, and we should be really proud that we have so many people in Blackburn with Darwen who work hard every day to make it a better place.

It will be a great honour to meet all the finalists at the awards in November. Every single one is deserving of an award and our borough is a better place thanks to all of them.

Islamophobia Awareness Month

Islamophobia Awareness Month takes place in November. We plan to mark the month to raise awareness of the threat of Islamophobia as well providing information on the positive contribution of British Muslims to the United Kingdom

As members will be aware, we adopted the All Party Parliamentary Group definition of Islamophobia and as a Council we are committed to tackling hate crime and challenging hate of any and all forms wherever we can.

Communications and Media

Covid-19 remains an important part of our communication activity, including working closely with the NHS around vaccines, supporting the work of the Council's engagement team and a focus on 'back to school' information to ensure parents/guardians are aware of the current guidance around testing and self-isolation.

Other priorities and projects include supporting the Council's environmental campaign, social integration programme (Our Community, Our Future), staff wellbeing, cultural events, public health, and cycling and walking initiatives.

Looking ahead we have the unveiling of the Barbara Castle Statue this Saturday, October 9th and a wide programme of cultural events during Autumn including the British Textile Biennial and the 100th anniversary of King George's Hall.

Police Crime Commissioner review part two consultation

The Government has been reviewing the office of Police Crime Commissioner (PCC) over the last year. The review has been carried in two parts with the findings of the first stage announced in March 2021.

As a principal authority, we have been asked for our views as part of the second part which looks at giving PCCs greater powers of competence – whether to increase the role's powers to a wider functional power of competence enjoyed by fire and rescue authorities or a general power of competence, similar to councils.

The consultation finishes on 27 October 2021.

As an authority we will continue to support and work closely with the office of PCC to tackle crime and improve community safety in our borough, and through our representation on the Police and Crime Panel we will continue to challenge and scrutinise the PCC publicly at meetings of the Panel.

MJ Award

The Council's Senior Leadership Team were 'Highly Commended' at the recent MJ Local Government Achievement Awards 2021. Coming runners up in the Senior Leadership Team category is testament to the hard work and dedication of the whole workforce and evidence of the success of the 'One Council, One Team' approach taken by the Senior Leadership Team. Congratulations to all.