

REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

COUNCILLOR PHIL RILEY

Date: 28.7.22

Events round-up

National Festival of Making

We were delighted to welcome The National Festival of Making back to the borough on the weekend of June 11th and 12th for its fourth edition. Significant numbers of people came from far and wide into Blackburn town centre to enjoy this unique free family festival.

It was the first time we were able to hold the event since 2019 - after previous editions were postponed due to the pandemic. It was wonderful to see both our residents – and visitors - come together to celebrate creativity, take advantage of the warm weather and enjoy a well-deserved day out, while proudly celebrating our borough's making heritage.

We have had amazing feedback from both local and national partners on the commitment, passion and energy of everyone involved and on the cooperation and partnership working demonstrated all weekend. I was told – and it was clear – that the sense of pride in Blackburn's making heritage and future potential could be felt in everything and it genuinely feels like a place where magic is happening.

We certainly are a progressive borough with exciting plans to continue the economic progress that has been made in recent years and the National Festival of Making really exemplifies that.

Blackburn Pride

I want to continue to tap into, and build on, everything that makes the borough a great and unique place to live and work and Blackburn's first ever official Pride event on Saturday (June 18th) certainly was a great way to do that.

Around 1,200 people came together to parade through the town in a sea of colours before continuing festivities in front of the town hall. The event was a true celebration of the diversity of our borough, and it was fantastic to see so many people of ages and backgrounds coming together.

Around 2,000 visitors were in the town centre during the course of the whole day, which was a fantastic turnout.

Following on from the event, Blackburn with Darwen residents were invited to join the Blackburn Pride team to take part in filming for a nationwide Pride celebration, which aired on Channel 4 at the start of July.

Well done to the Blackburn Pride Committee for all their hard work to make this first event and wider activity such a success – I know they have plans to build on this and come back next year with a bigger event.

All of these fantastic events show that Blackburn doesn't need to be named a city to act like one and, alongside everything exciting happening in Darwen, it's clear we are a community that knows how to mix and engage.

Platinum Jubilee

The range of activities that went on during the long weekend of celebrations to mark Her Majesty the Queen's Platinum Jubilee in June were also a perfect way to showcase that.

Residents came together with friends, family and neighbours to arrange a 'Big Jubilee Lunch' and street parties.

Blackburn and Darwen town centres were both dressed for the occasion with bunting and new Jubilee-themed planting displays. A 'Last Night of the Proms' celebration and Darwen Live also took place – which itself saw thousands of fans turn out to welcome back the first summer Darwen Live event in three years.

We also supported Darwen Scouts to arrange a lighting of a beacon at Darwen's Jubilee Tower. Thousands turned out to see the landmark lit red, white and blue to mark the Queen's 70-year reign.

Another exciting outcome of the Jubilee celebrations – that also links back to our borough's making heritage - has seen renowned artist, Jamie Holman, creating a stunning multisoundscape tapestry.

Titled 'The Lancashire Tapestry', the artwork is 18 metres long x 1.6 metres and to accompany it, Jamie has recorded 70 people from Lancashire all of whom are aged 70 and have been alive as long as the Queen has been on the throne.

The piece is available for public viewing at Blackburn Cathedral until January 2023. It will then will be shown at other venues nationally and internationally.

Hundreds of people visited during the weekend of the Festival of Making and since and I encourage everyone to go and see this truly impressive creation.

Commonwealth Games Baton Relay

We were also delighted for our residents to be a small part of history when the Queen's Baton Relay visited the borough on Saturday, July 16, on its way to the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games.

We worked hard to make the very most of the opportunity, welcoming the baton to the steps of the town hall in Blackburn, Ewood Park and Darwen where a celebration was underway with live music and sporting activities.

Business Growth

Blackburn and Darwen are both towns with growing energy and spirit and I am keen to grasp new opportunities to improve the prospects of our residents and communities. It is clear business confidence in the borough is strong and we are forging a shared plan for growth - confidence that is now translating into levels of economic investment and growth that out-performs many regional and national benchmarks.

Recent examples have been seen in the owners of Shh! Bar signing up to move into 35 Northgate, which is part of the Townscape Heritage Project in the Blakey Moor area of Blackburn.

The Bar will move to the 19th Century building later in the year, once its £350,000 transformation is complete. When combined with the wider regeneration of Blakey Moor Terrace, a new cinema,

resurgent King George's Hall, and major investment in the College's Victoria Building, we are clearly well on the way to creating a new cultural offer of scale and quality.

We also have the £250m masterplan for the former Thwaites site and surrounding area too – the biggest town centre growth plan in the whole region.

This development is central to our wider Blackburn Growth Axis proposition that will place the Borough at the heart of a new economic framework with the potential to support 100,000 jobs in the area over the coming years, while, for example, leveraging opportunities generated by the new National Cyber Force HQ at Samlesbury Enterprise Zone.

We are currently preparing two Levelling Up submissions to Government. One will support our town centre masterplan – with phase one focused on establishing a new Business Innovation District with a £60M development. Our second submission is looking to secure Government funding to deliver a £30M package of new transport infrastructure improvements at J5 of the M65, integrated with new walking and cycling routes to support of growth opportunities in south Blackburn.

We are submitting in early August to Government the final business cases in support of the Darwen Town Deal Investment Plan, with nearly £13m of match-funding support secured from the Council, which will unlock around £100m in new private and public investment in Darwen.

A signal of our intent is the new investment at Junction 4 Skatepark, made possible by early Town Deal and Council funding, and demonstrates the scale of our ambition for Darwen. The Skatepark is now becoming a national destination for elite athletes, including Olympic medallists, while continuing to serve the young people of the Borough area with its new world-class facilities.

We will also be submitting our Shared Prosperity Investment Plan to Government in early August. The Council has worked with key partners to develop a high impact £6M investment plan with a total value of nearly £20m with a focus on new sector, employment and skills projects.

I will provide further updates in the coming months on our strategic growth plans and priorities, and hopefully good news regarding Government support to help us secure over £200m in new public and private investment.

Honours

Congratulations to everyone with links to Blackburn with Darwen named in the Queen's birthday honours list for 2022.

Cllr Zamir Khan received an MBE for his services to Blackburn Muslim Burial Society and to the wider community, particularly during the Covid pandemic.

Cllr Khan has served as a local councillor for almost 20 years and has dedicated his life to helping others. He is someone who regularly goes the extra mile and his award is very well deserved.

I was also delighted to see friends and colleagues from a range of sectors including business, NHS, charity, police, fire and rescue and education honoured.

Our borough is a hotbed for talented, dedicated people and it's great for some of them to be recognised in this way.

Cost of Living

National circumstances are of course going to present us with more challenges – with the cost of living crisis especially at the forefront of everyone’s minds.

Energy bills, fuel and people’s weekly food bills are all continuing to go up, with further rises expected as we go into Autumn but we obviously don’t want people to struggle.

There is a wide range of local and national help and areas of support available in the borough, delivered by us and our partners in the charity and voluntary sector, around money and debt, homes and housing, fuel costs, food, gambling and work and employment and our financial resilience campaign has been running since February providing vital signposting for residents. We are working closer than ever with our partners to make sure our hardest to reach residents get the help and support they need.

The Household Support Scheme for families and children and other vulnerable adults - who may or may not meet the threshold for benefits but may be affected by the cost of living crisis – is continuing for people to get support with utility bills, food and other essentials that they may be struggling with.

The scheme, from the Council and partners, was due to run until the end of September but has now been extended beyond that, meaning we will be able to offer more help as we move into the winter with further expected price rises.

There is also our Help Hub, started in March 2020 with our partners in urgent response to the first pandemic lockdown, which is still online and can still help with food banks, credit unions, and lots more.

We will continue to work hard through this to support our vulnerable residents while keeping the borough on its upward trajectory. As a responsible employer, we are also looking at what help we can give to our staff to support them at this time.

Refugee Support

Blackburn with Darwen has a proud history of helping those less fortunate and settling refugees in desperate situations from around the world. We have always played our part and will continue to do so to the best of our ability.

We remain shocked and horrified by the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by Russia and of the devastating events that have happened in Afghanistan - and stand in absolute solidarity with Ukrainians and Afghans across Blackburn with Darwen and the UK.

To date our borough has welcomed 30 arrivals from Ukraine with more on the way. As a council we’ve provided wrap around support for every one of them to include those kind enough to open up their homes, making sure they settle into the borough and have access to all available services.

Blackburn with Darwen has received 15 people through the Afghan resettlement scheme to date, with three more families due to move in to their own home in the borough over the next month. Wrap around support is provided through Calico who are working closely with the Council.

Donations can still be made towards the internationally recognised British Red Cross appeal with donation points available across communities.

Devolution

We are continuing to work with other Lancashire councils to unlock funding, flexibilities and powers from Government as part of a devolution deal. I will work with the Lancashire leaders that are committed to developing a shared ambition and long-term plan to secure a better deal with Government.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Our Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) programme is currently being reviewed and refreshed in conjunction with the Organisational Development strategy. It is a timely review as we continue to move towards business as usual and support our staff, communities and businesses to recover from Covid-19. The review will be a wide-reaching exercise and we will be working closely with staff and partners over the coming months.