

REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

COUNCILLOR PHIL RILEY

Date: 6.10.22

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

I begin on a sombre note regarding the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. It has been a particularly poignant few weeks for us all after the news of her death with the sadness shared across the borough and nation as a whole. The Queen was a guiding light and source of inspiration over her reign of 70 years and this has been a hugely important moment in the history of our country. After the announcement, Blackburn with Darwen came together to pay tribute, as well engage in events to mark the accession of the new monarch, King Charles III.

Our Council staff worked closely with many local partners including the Local Resilience Forums (LRF), Lancashire Constabulary, the Lord Lieutenant's office and Blackburn Cathedral to follow appropriate guidance, carry out civic arrangements and events, including floral tribute and flag protocols.

We suspended non-urgent council communications and social media messages, with website changes and new commemorative content for our digital screens until after the funeral to ensure we gave out relevant and respectful information. A letter of condolence was sent to the palace on behalf of the borough and books of condolence were also opened in our town halls for those wishing to pay personal tributes or leave memories. With the Queen's funeral declared a bank holiday there were some changes to services but the core work of the Council continued and essential services remained in operation.

I want to place on record my thanks to everyone for their efforts, I am proud of how the Council, partners and community have come together on our collective response. I hope the tributes brought comfort to those who were feeling the loss.

The new monarch, His Majesty King Charles III was officially proclaimed King during the meeting of the Accession Council on Saturday, September 10th and we held two Local Proclamations on Sunday, September 11th in Blackburn and in Darwen. We will be making plans to engage in local plans and activities leading up to his coronation.

Cost of Living

As I have outlined in more detail later on in this report, our borough is on the up. Our reputation is that of a growing place – the increasing energy and spirit across our towns is evident. But at the same time, our country is facing a massive cost of living crisis and we are heading into a very challenging period locally. The next few months and beyond are going to be very tough, particularly for the most vulnerable members of society.

Our priority is supporting our residents and we continue to work with Voluntary Community and Faith Sector organisations on opportunities for action and continue to help facilitate the wide range of local and national help and areas of support available in the borough, around money and debt, homes and housing, fuel costs, food, gambling and work and employment to mitigate against the impacts of the crisis.

The Household Support Scheme, which has been further extended by the Government to run past September through until March 2023, is available for anyone eligible to apply for support with fuel costs, boiler servicing and repairs, food and other essentials to keep warm and fed. The Council and partners have worked quickly and closely to channel this funding to people who are eligible.

Blackburn with Darwen's Health and Wellbeing Board held a special meeting recently bringing together partners and voluntary organisations to look at what more can be done. A cross-Lancashire local authority working group has also been set up looking at what joint work can be done across the area.

We will continue to do all we can locally but the scale of this issue cannot be underestimated. As a Council we are digesting the details of the Government's recent announcements on financial support and its mini-budget but we know a significant intervention is needed at national level for all communities as well as businesses for whom huge energy price rises and a cut in discretionary spending could be disastrous, especially those in hospitality and leisure services.

What is clear to me though – and what the last few years of the pandemic have illustrated – is the huge amount of positive and caring people we have in Blackburn with Darwen. We will be challenged to show that 'covid spirit' again as a result of the cost of living crisis and I know we will all rise to the challenge.

We will continue to work hard through this to support our vulnerable residents while keeping the borough on its upward trajectory.

Events round-up

Darwen Tower completion

We are continuing to tap into, and build on, everything that makes the borough a great and unique place to be and a recent example of that has come with the news the £300,000 restoration of Darwen Tower is now fully completed. Inside, the painstaking work to restore the Grade-II listed building includes improvements to the internal structure, staircase and the iconic dome at the top. The restoration works have been funded by Darwen Town Deal, Darwen Rotary and Blackburn with Darwen Council and have been undertaken by specialist contractors UK Restoration Services in close consultation with Heritage England. Once the Darwen Town Deal is given the go ahead by the government, £3m could be invested to improve and create new links and pathways from the town centre, up and across the moors, including to the Tower over the next four years.

Britain in Bloom nomination

I am delighted that Blackburn has been announced as a finalist in the national 'Britain in Bloom' award. RHS Judges were welcomed to a sun-soaked Blackburn in August by the Council's gardening team and partners including The BID, The Mall and the Cathedral. They were given a grand tour of Blackburn's blossoming displays alongside environmental improvements and community projects. During their visit the judges recognised the immense efforts being made here – with praise given to gardeners, town centre and partners. The town centre was put forward after it scooped top Gold Awards for the fifth year in a row at regional finals. It is an amazing achievement for our borough and especially immense given Blackburn town centre is one of only two places in the whole of northern England nominated in its category: "Business Improvement Districts, Town Centres and City Centres" alongside much bigger places like London and Cornwall. This shows 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 with a growing reputation.

Covid Memorial Benches project

Following a public consultation earlier this year, we're progressing plans for permanent memorials to the Covid pandemic across Blackburn with Darwen. Our Environment team is working with Darwen-based social enterprise, Nimtech, which is part of Crown Paints and provides employment opportunities for long term unemployed people in our local community. Nimtech are producing 17 benches made from recycled materials, one to be positioned in each ward in the borough, on Council-owned land. We're also drawing on existing relationships with the National Festival of Making team and linking to their 'Of Earth & Sky' poetry project. This invited residents to pen poetry about their thoughts and feelings during the pandemic, and short excerpts from 17 different poems will be inscribed onto the benches. This fits well with what residents said about our proposals for a permanent pandemic memorial: they wanted to see something functional positioned outdoors and within a modest budget. A launch event for the benches project is being planned for this autumn, with a focus on the benefits of the outdoors and connections with others to mental wellbeing and as a means to tackle loneliness.

People's Jury on climate change

Blackburn with Darwen Council declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 and set a goal of being carbon neutral by 2030. Despite the challenging set of circumstances facing our borough due to the cost of living crisis, this is still a crucial issue and one we're prioritising. To aid with that, a new People's Jury on the Climate Change Crisis is set to be held in the borough. More than 6,000 randomly-selected households across the borough have received letters inviting them to register to be part of the jury. It's being hosted by the Council and jury members will be asked to answer a question on what needs to be done in homes, business and the local area to help tackle the climate change crisis. The Jury will work over eight weeks to develop recommendations which will help shape future actions right across the borough. We certainly are a progressive place and our firm commitment to tackling the climate crisis and this project really exemplifies that.

Business Growth

Despite the ongoing impacts of the cost of living crisis and serious upcoming budget challenges meaning more difficult decisions will have to be made, we have a real determination to keep moving ahead with our ambitious plans for the borough. We have a lot to look forward to.

Recent footfall figures have shown an impressive upswing in visitor numbers to Blackburn town centre this year. At the time of reporting at the end of August, the total number of people making trips into central Blackburn stood at 1,510,179 for the year to date, which was 53.4% up on 2021's figures. Even with the ongoing effects of covid impacting figures for 2021 this is still an impressive achievement. This is especially so when compared against stats for the north and Yorkshire over the same period where only a 43.8% increase was noted. The total number of visitors to Blackburn in the month commencing 4 July 2022 was 189,585 alone – a testament to the fantastic programme of summer activities that were put together by the Council and its valued partners. It's clear there's a level of resilience in Blackburn that's not apparent in many other places.

Business confidence is strong and latest year-on-year growth figures have shown the borough outperforming regional and national comparator areas. We're truly making good on our pledge to grasp any and all opportunities to improve the prospects of our residents and communities.

A recent example has of that been seen in the opening of the first eatery as part of the £3.8m transformation of Blakey Moor. Sofra Turkish Cuisine promises to offer authentic and genuine Turkish dishes with four experienced chefs leading the culinary team. The owners have invested more than £350,000 in transforming the former Jubilee pub into an impressive, modern restaurant with a Turkish design influence. They're now looking to attract diners from across the North West with their quality offer with a view to expand across the region with more eateries.

Inevitably, not all new hospitality venues will be successful and the recent problems at East Z East, Blackburn are disappointing. The Growth team are now concentrating on finding a new tenant for this venue and we've already had some interest from a potential new entrant into town.

With more new openings planned soon though, Blackburn with Darwen is shaping up to have one of the best dining offers anywhere in the North West outside of the big cities.

The Mall is now under new and local ownership. Greater local control and investor commitment will generate a new impetus, and enable the Mall to secure new retailers and leisure uses. In the coming months, we can look forward to more positive announcements.

As part of its recent mini-budget, I noted the Government's intention to establish new Local Investment Zones in England, it says to drive growth, unlock new housing and remove planning regulations. We are seeking more clarity as to why Blackburn with Darwen was missed from the initial list of upper tier authorities the Government identified. At this stage we suspect this to be an administrative error and, to this end, we are working with both our local MPs to establish the Government's process and criteria.

Our strategic growth plans and priorities are shaping up well though. We successfully submitted our recent bids for over £200m in new public and private investment, as outlined in my last Council Forum report. This includes the two Levelling Up submissions, our final business cases in support of the Darwen Town Deal Investment Plan as well as our Shared Prosperity Investment Plan. In light of the Government's announcements regarding Local Investment Zones, I hope this new initiative is not at the expense of progressing our current major investment proposals which are awaiting a decision from Government.

I will provide further updates in the coming months on our strategic growth plans and priorities.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

The Council will be taking part in the East Lancashire Hospitals Trust Festival of Inclusion in September. The Director of Public Health, Abdul Razaq, will be a keynote speaker at one of the online events and some staff will also be attending some of the online sessions and workshops. This demonstrates the continued partnership working that is taking place around Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) across the public sector and namely with our NHS colleagues. We are looking at our Council EDI work programme and reviewing our priorities to create a unified vision and shared understanding of EDI across the council, and to set up our efforts for success. We are also in the process of arranging EDI training for members and I encourage all colleagues to attend.