

REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

COUNCILLOR PHIL RILEY

Date: 26.1.23

Christmas 2022

Events

I hope everyone at Council Forum and across the borough had a happy and healthy Christmas and New Year. Our council teams and partners worked hard to put on another fantastic programme of events across the festive period. Crowds well into their thousands gathered in Darwen Market Square for the lights switch-on and Blackburn town centre also came alive with thousands of people filling King William Street.

The 2022 Blackburn Festival of Light annual light parade made its way through the town centre on Saturday, December 17th featuring amazing community-created lanterns, performers, musicians and light art sculptures. This year there was also a light-up shop window trail and light installations around the town centre.

Spend Christmas

We knew this Christmas was going to be tough for some of our residents and businesses with the cost of living crisis nationally so we teamed with partners to launch our new 'Spend Christmas...' campaign.

We worked really hard to pull together a campaign filled with free events and giveaways and to encourage people into our town centres to have fun with their family and friends – spending their time there and doing their Christmas shopping locally. It was also designed to show people just how much Blackburn with Darwen has to offer – including our fantastic selection of high street and independent shops, events and places to eat, drink and visit.

Feedback from the Mall and Blackburn BID has suggested this joined-up partnership approach was effective in driving more people into the town centre and raising the profile of what we have to offer. The response from the public on social media was also excellent and almost 4,000 people entered the competition to win the top prize. What's special about Blackburn with Darwen is the huge sense of community spirit; we all pull together when times are tough to support each other and I'm really pleased to say, as this campaign shows, that spirit is as strong as ever.

BBC

I was also delighted to see Blackburn Cathedral chosen by the BBC to host its Christmas services. The BBC have never done live broadcasts of both Christmas services from the same location before so it was a real coup for the town and the cathedral and something to be proud of. The investment in the Cathedral Quarter has turned the grounds into something spectacular and we were proud to show off this remarkable work with the rest of the country on live television.

Christmas 2022 was also a time to reflect how far we've come since the Covid-concerns of the previous year but it was another year where we've worked incredibly hard to keep delivering services for our residents, protect the most vulnerable and support our communities and businesses. We know the challenges we face but, at the same time, there is a lot to be excited about as we head towards 2023 and we have a real determination to keep moving ahead with our ambitious plans.

Local Government Finance settlement

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities published the latest Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement just before Christmas. More detail can be found in the Executive Member for Finance and Governance's council forum report but the settlement is largely in line with what we were expecting. The figures are for a year with broader policy principles for two years which provides some limited assistance towards planning for the future.

But while we welcome the overall increase, including additional funding for adult social care, the public services that our residents want and need are still struggling with the impact of ten years of government-driven austerity. Demand is massive and growing, costs are rising, inflation is at its highest level for nearly 40 years and these factors result in pressure on all of our council services.

It's important to recognise that the Government is asking Councils to raise Council tax by the full allowed amount as a means to help solve the crisis in adult social care. This assumes an increase of 4.99 per cent. This crisis has been developing for years and needs a national government-led solution but, instead, the government are expecting our residents to pay additional money to prevent this social care crisis from getting worse. Given the other financial demands on our residents in terms of the cost of living crisis, we are considering this new demand in the context of the impact on them as well as the council's financial position. The final decision on council tax rates will be taken by Finance Council on February 27.

Cost of Living

Our campaign to support our residents with the cost of living continues, with signposting to all available help through our dedicated webpages and regular social media updates pointing people to the most appropriate support, both local and national. This has included a specially produced animation explaining the Household Support Scheme, featuring a voiceover from Community Connector Tracy Davies, to make sure as many people as possible are aware of the scheme.

Since the Household Support Scheme re-launched in October, we have been able to give support to more than 500 people and families, and where anyone is not eligible we have been able to signpost towards additional help via our partners in the voluntary, community and faith sector. The eligibility for the scheme has now been expanded so that it is able to help more people, especially those who are in work but may not meet the threshold for benefits, but who are still struggling.

This will continue in this new year and further work continues to be carried out to make people aware of the scheme via our Community Champions and neighbourhood Teams and communications across all our available channels.

This is an incredibly challenging time but we are confident that with the support and help available, we can weather this crisis, while making sure we continue to steer the borough on its upward course.

Business Growth

We know the challenges we face around budgets and the cost of living but, at the same time, there is a lot to be excited about as we head towards 2023 and we have a real determination to keep moving ahead with our ambitious plans for the borough. There is a real buzz around our towns as shown just recently by The Mall having a record day with shoppers nearly returning to pre-covid numbers.

We are pleased that our plans for almost £7m from the Shared Prosperity Fund, which will leverage around £20m of wider investment, have been agreed by Government. The Council is also working really hard with partners on delivering an ambitious £100m Town Deal Investment Plan for Darwen.

Also key to our future plans is our growth strategy and a vital part of that is being able to progress with the two Levelling Up bids we have submitted to Government which are key to driving forward our growth plans. The delay of many months in making any formal announcements is disappointing but we hope to hear more by the end of January.

We've also recently had news of a £2m boost for the boroughs arts, culture and creative industries via Arts Council England announcing the funding allocation for its prestigious National Portfolio Organisations. This has been the culmination of a series of consistent decisions over the past half a decade to fund arts projects and build culture at heart of what we do. Council officers have been key to building that momentum and this Arts Council funding is all part of our reward for that.

There are many more exciting plans for 2023 and beyond linked to our £1bn vision for the future, including our Blackburn Growth Axis framework, which will seek to capitalise on our reputation for enterprise while leveraging the economic benefit of major new developments within and adjacent to the Borough, but all within our functional economic area – which we will update on in due course but my main message is this: our towns are doing well, despite challenging economic conditions, and we are determined to re-establish the borough as one of the most important economic centres in the North West.

Elections

For reasons that are not entirely clear, election changes have been introduced by the Government that mean voters will be asked to provide photographic ID if voting in person at a polling station. These changes will happen for the first time at the local elections in May. We will be providing more information for electors in the coming weeks but would anticipate the majority of people having an acceptable form of ID. It would be a tragedy however if these changes prohibit anyone from exercising their democratic right to vote.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

The Corporate Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Group is now established and has already discussed a number of topics, including the refresh of the Equality Strategy and Equality Objectives, the use of data in making evidence-based policies and the creation of staff networks. The Council is also in the process of updating and refreshing its response to legal duties including the Equality Watch Report and Equality Impact Assessments.

Going forward, there will be a focus on improving the current data on the workforce and using this to inform internal policies and strategies. There will also be a closer connection to the Organisational Development programme to ensure that EDI is fully embedded within the culture of our organisation. There will also be an EDI training for Members on the 2nd & 8th February, from 6-8pm in Meeting Room A. Meeting invitations have been sent out, and could you all please attend one of these.

These activities will enable staff to work better together, create a more inclusive workforce and ensure all aspects of EDI are incorporated into service delivery. They will also allow us to meet our obligations as a local authority under the Equality Act 2010 whilst supporting our priorities under the refreshed Corporate Plan.