

REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

COUNCILLOR PHIL RILEY

**PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING
CHIEF OFFICER: Chief
Executive
Thursday, 20 July 2023**

A more prosperous borough where no-one is left behind

Business Growth

One of the guiding principles behind our mission to create a more prosperous borough where no-one is left behind is providing the conditions for businesses to thrive. I was therefore delighted to see Blackburn with Darwen recently named the 4th best place in the UK to work for a small or medium sized business in recent a report by Iwoca – one of Europe’s largest small business lenders. It’s great to see business confidence in the borough so strong and economic growth booming.

To that end, I’m also really pleased that our ambitious new Local Plan for 2021-37 has taken another step forward. Following two public hearings in February and March, we’ve now received initial advice from Government inspectors providing support for our overall growth strategy, which includes the strategic employment site off Junction 5 of the M65. This milestone is a testament to the dedication of our hard working Council teams and brings our exciting vision for housing, employment, environmental and infrastructure improvements for the next 15 years in Blackburn with Darwen one step closer. The growth agenda is absolutely critical to our plans for the borough and approval of the Local Plan will be a major step forward.

Elsewhere, I recently had the pleasure to see the positive impact of the Darwen Town Deal when I visited Darwen Cricket Club and saw the impressive £250k transformation of their clubhouse first-hand. This has been a superb effort by all involved – those at the Club, local businesses, volunteers and our own officers who have supported them – this is a facility they can all be really proud of. With Olympic medal winners training at the nearby Junction4 Skatepark too, which will also host British Cycling’s National BMX Championships over the weekend of July 22nd and 23rd, and the raft of other projects underway, or in the pipeline, the Darwen Town Deal is a rolling good news story. It will leverage £100m of new investment over the coming years – more than we’ve ever seen before – and help kick-start the regeneration of the town.

A beacon for all local businesses to aspire to is the thriving textile business, Herbert Parkinson Ltd, which recently celebrated 70 years as part of the John Lewis Partnership. Along with the likes of Perspex and Crown Paints, Herbert Parkinson has put Darwen manufacturing on the map and has been a fantastic success story for the borough. It was great to attend a recent open day event to celebrate the impressive milestone and enjoy a tour of the factory and meet the staff there. The company is always looking to invest in their partners and offer opportunities to local people to carve out successful careers in the textile industry.

Events Round-up

National Festival of Making

We were again incredibly proud to play host to The National Festival of Making, which made its return to the borough for the fifth time on the weekend of Saturday 8th and Sunday 9th

July 2023. Record crowds came from far and wide into Blackburn town centre to enjoy this unique free family festival.

This is one of the main events in our borough's calendar that really shows what a hotbed of creativity Blackburn with Darwen is, celebrating the unique making heritage of our borough with world-class art installations, workshops and performances. Beyond being a great weekend of activities it also helps us to create a distinctive sense of place while boosting the town's tourism profile and supporting local businesses.

We've had good initial 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. This included Darren Henley, Managing Director of Arts Council England Arts Council, who I met with on the Saturday of the festival. The meeting was an opportunity to cement our relationship with his organisation, who we have received generous funding from for our arts, culture and creative industries with four local National Portfolio Organisations from our borough, and to keep planting the seeds on our cultural progression. I explained how we have made a series of consistent decisions over the past half a decade to fund arts projects and build culture at the heart of everything we do and our fruitful relationship with the Arts Council is all part of our reward for 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 second ever official Pride event on Saturday 17th June certainly was a great way to do that. Hundreds of 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.

Well done to the Blackburn Pride Committee for all their hard work to make this latest event such a success. The Council strives to be a welcoming place for all of our residents and staff so let's keep celebrating our diversity in all of its forms.

Darwen Live

The ever popular Darwen Live made its return to the borough in May. Every year we work hard to make it even bigger and better and are proud it's the UK's biggest free music festival. Crowds of thousands enjoyed glorious sunshine at this year's event which showcased the best local and national talent while supporting businesses right across the town.

Devolution

We continue working with Lancashire County Council (LCC) and Blackpool Council - as Lancashire's three upper tier authorities – and with Government on a devolution deal. Following a recent positive meeting with all four parties, we received a formal commitment from the Minister, Dehenna Davison, to draw up a Deal and to establish a Combined County Authority (CCA) for Lancashire. There's still lots to do over the coming months to secure the best deal we can but this is good news that represents positive progress.

Under the CCA, the three authorities would become the constituent (voting) members of the CCA which, in turn, would secure new powers and resources as defined by the national Devolution framework. To this end, we are exploring the nature and extent of Government's Devolution offer for a non-Mayoral CCA and although this initially secures less in the way of new powers and resources, we know the Devolution pathway then evolves over a series of

Deals (and is not just one event). A first Devolution Deal will be a marker of our future intent for the Lancashire area.

As the details crystallise, as a Council we will need to endorse the proposals as will LCC and Blackpool Council. Subject to the approval of the three Councils, it is envisaged an agreed proposal will be submitted to Government working to their timetable of securing the deal by the Autumn with formal CCA arrangements to follow.

Honours

Congratulations to everyone with links to Blackburn with Darwen recognised in King Charles III's Birthday Honours list for 2023. Our former Director of Public Health, Prof Dominic Harrison, received a British Empire Medal for services to vulnerable people in Lancashire. As well as being incredibly knowledgeable and professional, Dom worked hard to build trust with our local communities during the pandemic to ensure they felt supported and listened to throughout such a terrible time. He is very deserving of a national honour. Lisa Anne Crausby, Executive Director of Star Academies in Blackburn, also picked up an OBE for services to education so well done to her too.

MISSION: Being an innovative and forward thinking Council

Communications strategy

The value of communicating our work and progress is something that I personally champion. The Council's approach to strategic communications and how we prioritise activity to support the delivery of the Corporate Plan is outlined in the overarching Communications Strategy 'Promoting and enabling our organisation's vision for the future'. [Read the strategy here.](#)

Corporate peer challenge

We invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to undertake a corporate peer challenge during the week of Tuesday 11th – Friday 14th July, to provide an external perspective on how well the Council is performing and on our future plans. At the heart of the challenge was a series of meetings and focus groups with a range of people from across the Council - elected members, senior officers, managers, supervisors and front line staff - as well as our key partners. Thanks to everyone involved for being open and honest in sharing their experiences. The team presented its initial findings to myself and my deputy leaders and senior officers at the end of their week on site with a final report due to be published in no later than three months' time alongside an action plan. It's important to note this was purely an exercise in self-improvement. It was not a form of inspection, with a detailed service assessment driven by external requirements or reported to Government.

MISSION: Healthier, happier and safer communities

Covid-19 Public Inquiry

The public hearings for the Covid-19 Public Inquiry began in June, and are being streamed on [YouTube](#). An 'Every Story Matters' [campaign has been launched](#) as well to encourage people to share their experiences of the pandemic. Anonymised themed reports will be produced using people's submissions. As a Council we're working with the LGA and other Lancashire authorities on a request for evidence for Module 5 of the Inquiry around the procurement of PPE and other vital equipment during the pandemic. We'll be sharing comprehensive responses and insights and are continuing with preparations for other ongoing and future modules.