

REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

COUNCILLOR PHIL RILEY

**PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING
CHIEF OFFICER: Chief
Executive**

Thursday, 5 October 2023

A more prosperous borough where no-one is left behind

Cost of Living

As I have outlined in previous reports, we are an ambitious borough with ambitious plans for growth. We are determined to continue on an upward course but at the same time we understand the challenges we face. Financial circumstances remain very difficult, not just for the Council but for many of our residents and, realistically, that isn't going to change any time soon. Difficult decisions are inevitable and we aren't going to be able to do everything we'd like to do so we all need to prioritise and work as efficiently as possible to achieve as much as we can. Our priority is supporting our residents - particularly the most vulnerable - and we continue to do so in ways including the Household Support Fund, which has now been operational for two years and can help with many issues from food, heating and repairs to replacement white goods and much more. Information on all of the support available can be found on the Council's website under the dedicated cost of living section.

Business Growth

We know the challenges we face around budgets and the cost of living and our vision is always driven by wanting to do better for our residents – creating a more prosperous borough where no-one is left behind. Central to that core mission is building a stronger local economy with opportunities for people to get on in life and live the best lives they can. It was therefore pleasing that Executive Board signed off our 23/24 Growth Programme for Blackburn with Darwen in August. This document sets out planned development projects and initiatives that will be implemented over the short, medium and longer term. It builds on what we're trying to do by supporting the creation of jobs, housing and the delivery of much needed new infrastructure.

We've also just concluded the final round of public consultation on our Local Plan. In development since 2018, the plan provides a 'blueprint for the future' – identifying sites for new homes and business developments up to 2037. It was recently reviewed by Government inspectors who confirmed their support of our vision for growth. Residents have been invited to have their say throughout the process and this final period of public consultation was part of the final steps ahead of adopting the plan from early next year.

During September we were also able to share new images of how Blackburn's St John's church could be transformed into an impressive new Innovation Hub. The artist impressions are part of a new planning application for the Grade II listed building, which was extensively damaged by a devastating fire in 2019, and sets out detailed plans to develop it into a high quality, sustainable work space – providing offices, meeting rooms and more as part of a new Tech Innovation Quarter. The new facility will be spread over four floors – with a proposed new roof space – and is part of the Council's ambitious £250m Blackburn Town Centre Masterplan, including a new Business Innovation District.

As a Council, we're working hard to strengthen the future of both of our towns. As part of the Council's Barnfield Blackburn Ltd joint venture with the Barnfield Group, a new planning

application has also been submitted for a site at Chapels in Darwen. With support from the £100m Darwen Town Deal, which our Council officers are driving forward, this site could be developed to house a new manufacturing and research centre with neighbouring smaller industrial units. Impressively, initial discussions with Sheffield University's Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre to be the anchor tenant there are well advanced – with the proposed centre earmarked to house its first-of-its-kind Additive Manufacturing Accelerator, if the plans are approved. We know that schemes like this are important in creating new skilled jobs in our borough and also in developing what is known as a sector cluster – attracting similar businesses to be located here. Darwen has a long and impressive industrial heritage – being a world-leader in some fields – and this is a fantastic new opportunity as we look to develop a strong future for the town.

Perspex International Ltd, a major employer in the town, is also developing plans to expand its neighbouring Chapels site with its own proposed new £30m national manufacturing centre, again, with support from the Town Deal. A planning application is expected to be submitted later in the year. Schemes like these unlock new possibilities for Darwen – creating new jobs and supporting existing businesses to grow.

Events Round-up

British Textile Biennial

After the success of The National Festival of Making, which brought record crowds from far and wide into Blackburn town centre in July, I'm delighted the borough is once again playing host to the British Textile Biennial. This year's event started on 29 September and will run through to 29 October. Venues and spaces in Blackburn are hosting new artist commissions, exhibitions and performances all presented against the backdrop of the impressive infrastructure of the cotton industry across Pennine Lancashire. The British Textile Biennial was one of the borough's National Portfolio Organisations to take a share of £2m funding from Arts Council England. Having high-quality cultural activity and spotlighting our boroughs creative talent is an essential ingredient for success in our towns, and it has been proven time and time again that arts activities have the power to reignite town centres and bring communities together.

Making Rooms

Our Making Rooms in Blackburn town centre continues to go from strength-to-strength. The community facility for use by artists, inventors, students and children is often a hive of activity where art meets technology. The makerspace received brilliant news recently that it has won a bid to host a European Creative Hubs Network workshop, where 15 hub leaders from across Europe and the UK will come to Blackburn for four days to learn and share various making technologies, makerspace models and to hear from our creative economy partners. European Creative Hubs Network members have been voting on a date for the event, with it looking like going ahead in November. Congratulations to the Making Rooms team and I look forward to giving a warm welcome to all of our European and UK friends in attendance.

Devolution

We continue to move forward with drawing up a landmark devolution deal for Lancashire, working collaboratively with our Upper Tier Authority colleagues at Lancashire County Council (LCC) and Blackpool Council to progress our joint negotiations with government officials. We're currently pulling together a bid; looking at what the deal might look like and how an injection of new money and powers from central government to a newly created

Combined County Authority (CCA) will allow us to tackle key local priorities such as better housing and public transport, boost economic prosperity and improve employment and skills. As well as bringing in greater investment, a deal means that more decisions about key issues affecting our communities would be taken here in Lancashire rather than at Westminster. Our discussions will continue into the autumn and all three authorities will need to ratify the proposals before submitting them to Government.

Deliver our climate emergency action plan

Rail ticket office closures

The public consultation on proposals to shut train ticket offices across England closed on 1 September. Blackburn with Darwen Council has joined residents, elected representatives from across the political spectrum, transport bodies, charities, unions and passenger groups in urging the proposals be reconsidered. We wrote to both the Secretary of State and our local MPs to outline our concerns. The provision of ticket offices is vital in ensuring that those not in a position to purchase tickets online or via machines are able to do so. This includes some of the most vulnerable members of society, including the elderly, disabled and those with learning difficulties.

Encouraging and increasing the use of rail travel is also a vital part of our efforts to tackle the climate emergency and it is inevitable that many passengers will stop using trains if they are not able to continue booking tickets at ticket offices. Let's hope the more than 680,000 people who responded to the public consultation are heard, sanity prevails and the proposals are reconsidered.

Every child and young person to have the opportunities to fulfil their potential

Youth Investment Fund

In August came the news that facilities for young people across Blackburn with Darwen are set to be transformed with £8m of new funding. The money has been successfully secured through the Government's Youth Investment Fund (YIF) and translates to a £3.3 million investment to double the size of the Darwen Youth Centre, £1 million to transform Audley and Queen's Park Children's Centre into a seven days-a-week youth hub, and £800,000 to revamp the Shadsworth Hub into a new youth centre. £2.9 million was also secured to provide Blackburn Youth Zone with a new skills and education campus of national significance and we were delighted to get a glimpse into the future of this exciting project at an event at the end of September. More detail was given on the transformative project which will transform the striking Fusebox building, linked to Blackburn Youth Zone in Jubilee Street, into a state-of-the-art training academy, Maker Zone, Sector-based Youth Club, and open events space for showcasing young talents.

The Youth Investment Fund success is a brilliant outcome for our borough's youngsters and will go a long way to supporting our core mission to ensure every child and young person has the opportunities to fulfil their potential. Of course it comes on the back of an incredible amount of hard work by the Council and our partners. That kind of collaborative partnership working is in our DNA as a Council and something we were recognised for in our recent corporate peer challenge.