

REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

COUNCILLOR PHIL RILEY

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

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A more prosperous borough where no-one is left behind.

Strategic 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.

That's why we're delighted to start off 2024 with the news that Government inspectors have approved our Blackburn with Darwen Local Plan 2021-2037. We're therefore bringing it to this Council Forum with a recommendation it is formally adopted, following which it will then guide future planning decisions. In development since 2018, the plan provides a 'blueprint for the future' – identifying sites for new homes and business developments up to 2037. Residents were invited to have their say throughout the process.

And I was delighted to see one such new homes scheme come to reality just before Christmas, when I cut the ribbon on more than 60 new and affordable homes at the £9.6million Heathfields development in Darwen. The Great Places homes, a mix of shared ownership and affordable rented properties, form part of a much larger, new neighbourhood off Ellison Fold Way which, once completed, will house a total of 353 new homes. I visited some of the new properties and it was really touching to meet some of the local people whose lives have been transformed by moving into quality new affordable homes. It really brought home how transformative improving the quality of housing in our borough is; I truly believe it to be one of the very best ways to help improve the health and wellbeing of our residents and better their life chances. It reconfirmed our desire to continue to take every opportunity to work with developers to keep improving our housing stock.

Elsewhere, major Darwen employer, Brookhouse Aerospace, is set to expand into a brand-new HQ being developed at the 41,650sq ft Balle Mill site in Darwen, brought forward with support from the £100m Darwen Town Deal to help cement the businesses' long-term growth plans. The new investment will help retain 100 jobs in the town and will pave the way for more than 60 new roles over the next five years. We're also busy working through the new guidance from Government for up to £20m of support for Darwen announced through its Long-Term Plans for Towns scheme. We want to ensure we can secure as much as possible and put it to the very best use – just like we've successfully done with the Darwen Town Deal. Detailed plans will need to be submitted by August to secure the funding with it expected to be available to spend from 2025.

As we move into 2024, we're also hoping to reveal some exciting plans soon around our status as a Government Levelling Up Partner – which has unlocked £20m of new funding. Our proposals are with the Government with a view to securing formal agreement and, if successful, will further support our Blackburn town centre cultural investment programme, as well as providing further improvements to the physical and social environment and supporting entrepreneurship and growing the economy.

This is all alongside the major schemes we're already delivering on around the Blackburn Town Centre Masterplan, the Cultural Quarter, Darwen Town Deal and the Youth Investment Fund investments plus wider inward investment work.

Place promotion

As Leader of Blackburn with Darwen Council, I am a proud ambassador for our borough – a job made easy given we have so much to celebrate. Let's continue to talk up our place, we really have a lot to shout about. On that note, December 1st saw the finest craft beers finally 'on tap' in Blackburn's new £50m Cultural Quarter. The award-winning Blackedge Brewery opened the doors of the new Ribblesdale Tap at number 35 Northgate. The striking 19th Century building Opposite King George's Hall, was formerly the Ribblesdale Hotel, Gladstone's and Baroque. We worked really hard to find the right tenant for this iconic building - which underwent an impressive £350,000 transformation as part of the Blakey Moor Townscape Heritage Project with the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Blackedge Brewery feels like a really good fit and we're so happy the doors are now open. I hope as many people as possible support this quality establishment.

I mentioned in my last report that our Making Rooms in Blackburn town centre had received the brilliant news that it had won a bid to host a European Creative Hubs Network workshop. That event took place at the start December with 15 hub leaders from Milan to Stockholm, Barcelona and across Europe and the UK coming to Blackburn for four days to learn and share various making technologies, makerspace models and to hear from our creative economy partners. It was brilliant to be able to give a warm Blackburn with Darwen welcome to all of our European and UK friends in attendance. We feel incredibly lucky and proud to have The Making Rooms in Blackburn and this event – as well as the recent visit from Government's Levelling Up Minister, Jacob Young, was a perfect showcase for it.

Devolution

Before Christmas, the Government announced that it was willing to enter into a historic devolution deal putting greater power into the hands of local communities in Lancashire. The move follows extensive negotiations between Government and the three upper tier local authorities of Blackburn with Darwen Council, Lancashire County Council and Blackpool Council, who agreed to cooperate on the creation of a new devolution deal that would cover the Lancashire area by establishing a Combined County Authority (CCA).

The proposals were given unanimous approval by the three constituent councils in November after which we moved into an eight-week period of public consultation which closes tomorrow, January 26th. The consultation has given residents, businesses and anyone else in the region a chance to feedback on a number of important areas included in the proposals, including improving public transport, boosting economic prosperity, and improving employment and skills. Gathering people's views and ideas has been important to make sure the deal meets the aspirations and priorities of people locally and across the county. At the time of writing this report, 1,089 people had responded. Each area has also hosted public information sessions for people to drop-in and receive information and engage directly with officials, with two drop-in sessions taking in Blackburn and Darwen during January which were well attended.

Overall, we have made a big step here to accessing more funding and creating opportunities that will directly benefit people in Blackburn, Darwen and more widely across Lancashire and is something that can lead to real improvements over time. I will keep you updated on developments as they happen, and a new website has been launched at lancashiredevolution.co.uk where you can find out more about the deal and what it means.