

REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

COUNCILLOR PHIL RILEY

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

Thursday, 14 March 2024

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

Strategic growth

At the start of March we were delighted to announce that our bid for £20m of new Levelling Up Partnership funding has been agreed by Government. The announcement comes after months of hard work between Council and Government officials. Together, a strong investment package to support town centre growth priorities has been developed. At the heart of the bid is an impressive £8m to renovate the ever-popular King George's Hall - the jewel in the crown of our new £50m Cultural Quarter. There'll also be new investment for the likes of Tony's Ballroom, Imperial Mill and the Exchange. Our planning committee recently granted permission for the £9m refurbishment of the Grade II listed Exchange building. It is a key part of our cultural offer and plan to grow our local economy. To see it being brought back into use more permanently as a hub for the whole community and a cultural events space is a real boost to our growth plans. Creating new jobs and supporting businesses is high on the agenda of the Levelling Up Partnership too, with money secured for Blackburn College to deliver new cyber and digital skills opportunities, a pioneering AMRC development in Darwen, and a cash injection to support the re-purposing of local business support networks.

We have a proud and proven track record of delivering here in Blackburn with Darwen and the amount of funding we are securing is testament to that. The Government has real confidence in us as a Council and in our ability to make sure every single penny counts. They know we'll spend the money wisely and on projects that will make a real difference, projects that are important to our residents and to our businesses.

In a busy period we've also been able to say hello to the fast-growing Indian restaurant chain Akbar's, which opened in our Cultural Quarter in Blackburn in early March. Akbar's already has successful Indian cuisine restaurants in major cities, including Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham and has now taken its place in the former Blakey's Bar at the side of King George's Hall. I wish them all the best for the new venture.

I was delighted to see an item brought to February's Executive Board outlining the appointment of a masterplanner to bring forward plans for a new strategic housing site expected to deliver around 1,500 high quality homes in the north-east of Blackburn. The site has been allocated in the new Local Plan (2021-2037). One of the most transformative things we can do for our residents' quality of life is to keep improving the quality of our housing stock. The link between good quality housing and improved health and wellbeing is proven and I am keen to stress we are fully focussed on working with developers to keep growing our borough in this way. We also received the great news that our partners at Barnfield Construction have completed work at Millbank Business Park. All units have been let or sold at the site between Greenbank Terrace and Milking Lane in Lower Darwen, just off M65 junction 4.

In October, the Prime Minister included Blackburn with Darwen Council on a list of local authorities offered funding for 55 towns across the country via its Long-Term Plans for Towns scheme. Darwen was included on this list and we are keen to ensure we can secure

as much of this further £20m funding as possible and put it to the very best use for the town – just like we’ve successfully done with the Darwen Town Deal. A business case for that is set to be submitted this summer.

Place promotion

The Shuttle extra magazine, now in its fifth year, is being delivered across the borough during March. It retains its heavy focus on place promotion following positive feedback from residents and businesses. The magazine celebrates the very best of Blackburn with Darwen and encourages community pride through telling the stories of inspirational people from our two towns. It also features information on how to access Council services and information, updates on major projects, initiatives and investment across our borough, plus important Council budget information. The 2023 edition inspired an impressive collection of works by artist Alexandra Gallagher, celebrating key landmarks across Blackburn with Darwen. Given the interest in the works, and to link with the publication of the new magazine, prints of the limited-edition artwork are on sale to mark the 150th anniversary of Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery.

I was delighted to attend the 1V Awards Dinner at King George’s Hall in February. This annual event, supported by Blackburn with Darwen Council, celebrates the achievements of individuals and groups in the borough who are an inspiration to those around them. This year’s group of finalists was one of the strongest yet and it was inspiring to see all the ways local people are serving their communities while celebrating the positive impact One Voice Blackburn has made on people’s lives. Congratulations to all the winners. I was especially delighted to award the One Voice Leader’s Award to Debra Cartlidge, Chief Executive of the Deaf Village, a community for the deaf and hard of hearing set against a stunning woodland backdrop just off Preston Old Road, near Pleasington. It provides a shared learning environment in which deaf people can thrive; learning life skills and growing their independence. Debra’s own story of growing up with a hearing problem and then turning it into such a huge positive for others is very inspiring. Debra is a very worthy winner of this award and I congratulate her on her success.

Being an innovative and forward-thinking Council

I was pleased to lead our latest Partnership conference event, which took place at Ewood Park last week. The event was an opportunity to reflect on progress since our last conference in March 2023 and brought together over 100 partners from a range of different sectors across Blackburn with Darwen. The conference aimed to determine how we ensure ‘no-one is left behind’ in Blackburn with Darwen and joined the dots together on the ways the we are looking to achieve that by touching on current major agendas including devolution, the linkages between good health and wellbeing and the economy and cyber. Updates were provided from keynote speakers from the wider public sector and beyond with breakout sessions around growth, skills, employment, cyber education and Health and care. The conference also provided an opportunity for general networking.

On Tuesday, March 26th we welcome back a team of officer and political peers from the Local Government Association (LGA) for the day to conduct a progress review following the Corporate Peer Challenge we undertook in July 2023. The progress review is an important part of the Corporate Peer Challenge process. It is an opportunity for us to update the peers on progress around the action plan we developed in response to their recommendations. A series of meetings and focus groups with a range of people from across the Council - elected members, senior officers, managers, supervisors and staff will again take place to provide a rounded picture. I’m sure everyone will make the peers very welcome.