

COUNCIL FORUM

Thursday, 25 July 2024

PRESENT –*The Mayor Councillor Taylor (Chair), Councillors Casey, Connor, Floyd, Gunn, Hardman, Khan Z, Khonat, Mahmood, Marrow, Smith D, Smith J, Brookfield, Hussain M, Hussain S, McGurk, Rigby, Riley, Shorrocks, Sidat, Slater Jacq, Slater Jo, Slater Ju, Slater N, Talbot, Desai M, Fielding, Humphrys, Patel Alt, Russell, Ali, Imtiaz, McCaughran, Raja, Whittingham, Khan S, Gibson, Shaw, Patel S, Kapadia, Hussain, Khan, Johnson, Masters, Patel and Whalley.*

RESOLUTIONS

12 Prayers by Mayor's Chaplain followed by Welcome and Apologies

Following the reading of the notice convening the meeting by the Chief Executive, there then followed Prayers by the Mayor's Chaplain. Apologies were received from Councillors Mahmood T, Akhtar, Jackson, Fazal and Ahmed.

At this point of the Meeting a Minute's Silence was observed in memory of Council Officer Chris Bradley, who had recently passed away.

13 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED - The Minutes of the Annual Council Meeting held on 16th May 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

14 Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were submitted.

15 Mayoral Communications

The Mayor updated Council Forum on recent events and activities he had attended including Civic Sunday, D-Day and Armed Forces Week events, Blackburn with Darwen Pride, work with charities including Maggie's Stillborn Legacy and the Royal Lancashire Show.

The Mayor also noted that this was the last Council Forum meeting that Council Officer Phil Llewellyn would attend and passed on thanks to Phil for his support to Members over the last 24 years.

16 Council Forum

The Chief Executive announced that one question had been received under Procedure Rule 10 as follows:

Question to the Council Leader from Saima Afzal, member of the public

Standards in Public Life

I am here today, as I believe everyone in this chamber should continuously explore how can standards in public life be improved.

The recent local and general elections have unearthed a serious of concerns for me, not least the unseemly behaviour of several elected Councillors, and locally known 'political activists'. (So, not random unknown persons on social media); persons well known locally; many of whom have displayed or engaged with unacceptable behaviours which I can only categorise as political hooliganism. I have observed these behaviours both during the local and general election campaigns and outside of the polling stations. Therefore, the local 53% low turnout does not, sadly, shock me in any way.

In addition, the overwhelmingly heavy presence of patriarchal power and secondary permeation of this power via for example, charities, businesses, and sadly, even places of worship, has left me feeling as I have travelled back in time at least 3 decades or so. It seems as if politics is for the connected only and the rest of us are mere spectators; no or limited funds, connections seem to equate to no or limited opportunity, therefore in my mind we appear to have a political structure that polarises and segregates us all, and instead of progressing has regressed.

Yet, political activists are claiming their respective campaigning was 'inclusive'.

I do hope, that in due course the council leader and trusted officials will help me question the issues I raise in more detail as a layperson. I do not need to enter into the current toxic, male-dominated domain of politics to be heard, and therefore I am happy to use non-power positions, to question and challenge, But, for now a few words of advice that persons can take or leave; representation and inclusivity cannot be achieved alone by, for example, presenting persons of different skin shades and tone in social media sound bites, memes and imagery.

I can only describe this type of 'social-media spin' as superficial, and the public are not blind to this, I would go further, and describe some of the editing and clipping and 'abuse' of social media, power privilege and connections as akin to gaslighting; and subsequently putting me and many like me completely 'off' politics.

I have observed, locally, during the 2024 local and general elections a catalogue of behaviours that I would describe as, coercive, insidious and divisive tactics, all of which, in my view undermine the legitimacy of the UK political processes. For example, memes, oratory and videos, discouraging votes for non-Muslims and 'outsiders', the use of language that can be described as xenophobic, language which is 'othering', dehumanising, and for example, categorising any person who votes for the Labour or the Conservative party as a 'sinner'.

The implications of calling someone a 'sinner' is significant for believers and followers of Islam, and should not be underestimated. The psychological impact and behavioural impact of such language, especially when coming

from those deemed as 'men of faith' cannot be overlooked; the word 'sinner' is not just a word, it is a 'loaded' phrase denoting sanctions, severe reprisals and punishment from no other than the 'almighty'.

As such I am not surprised by the low turnouts not just in Blackburn but across the UK. For me, the low turnouts are indicative of a whole range of factors, including lack of trust, apathy, voter disillusionment, and fear of being categorised as a 'sinner'. As someone who works in the safeguarding and policing arena, such behaviours in a domestic or community-based abuse setting would collectively be classified as a form of coercion, control, suppression (external factors) and oppression (Internal factors). Is it only me who observes that the tactics used collectively amount to voter suppression and oppression?!

So, given just this brief overview of behaviours I have observed first-hand, I am pleased to say at least enhanced vetting is being proposed for all elected members; something I desperately would have like to introduce in my role as Chairwoman of Audit and Standards, during my brief 3-year stint as a Councillor, 2018-2021.

However, I am under no illusions that vetting alone is not the panacea or will by default of introduction embed trust back into politics, remove the apathy, mistrust and dare I say fear that some of us experience.

Therefore, I would like to ask a critical question about assurances that I believe are required right now. I feel strongly that we must not wait or waste any time in weeding out those that have no place in this chamber. To be blunt; anyone with criminal convictions has no place in this chamber. If they are spent, then declare them and let the public know what they are voting for or have voted for. If the laws don't allow for this then let's collectively call for reforms, that can enable and improve standards in public life.

The role of Councillor is a very powerful one; one which opens a range of doors, including into people's homes, therefore my own view being only the highest set of standards should be expected and proactively demonstrated in the public sphere.

- *Can the Council Leader describe what checks and balances are in place to prevent those that are guilty of criminal offences from entering onto the council as elected members or in any other associated capacity?*

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Phil Riley, responded to the question and comments made, noting the national situation, with people being attacked via social media, which would put people off from standing for public office, and which didn't reflect well on the democratic process. The Leader stated that he felt that a lot of members of the public would be surprised that all Councillors did not undertake DBS checks currently and referred to the report on the agenda which recommended enhanced DBS checks for all Members.

In response to a supplementary question relating to appropriate measures and accountability, the Leader referred to the processes in place for the Labour Party and the Conservative Party to check

potential candidates and suggested that Saima Afzal contact the Leader of the 4BwD Group for assurance on their processes.

17 Motions

No Motions had been submitted under Procedure Rule 12.

18 Implementation of DBS Enhanced Checks for Elected Members

A report was submitted which informed Council Forum of the proposed recommendation in response to the Independent Review of the Disclosure and Barring Scheme initiated by the government in February 2022 recommending all Unitary and Upper Tier local authorities to undertake DBS checks on all elected members who were being considered for appointment to any committee involved in decisions on the provision of children's services or services for vulnerable adults.

As part the ongoing commitment to safeguarding and transparency within our local governance, the Council was recommended to introduce enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks for all Elected Members. This new measure would bolster public trust and ensure that those in positions of authority were held to the highest standards of integrity and accountability.

Elected Members must complete the initial DBS checks within three months of the application being created by HR colleagues.

Given the recommendations in the Minister's letter it was suggested to implement DBS checks for all Elected Members with a view to prioritise:

- The Executive Board Members.
- The Executive and Assistant Executive Members for Adult Social Care & Health.
- The Executive and Assistant Executive Members Children's Young People & Education.
- The members of the Children & Young People and the Health & Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committees
- Those Elected Members who hold responsibility for being a member of a Schools Governing Body.

Given that Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council Elected Members were elected for a 4-year term by thirds (at each election a third of the council is elected), it is proposed that following the initial process of DBS checking all elected members, this process be again implemented once the new councillor was elected, or the existing councillor was re-elected, following the election for that councillor's seat. Following that, Enhanced DBS checks would then become aligned with the election of a new councillor, or the re-election of an existing councillor, every 4 years.

RESOLVED –

That Council Forum:

- 2.1 Note the contents of this report.
- 2.2 Agree the implementation of undertaking Enhanced DBS checks

- for all elected members.
- 2.3 Subject to 2.2 above, as the Council is minded to implement Enhanced DBS checks for all Elected Members, agree that the Code of Conduct for Elected Members is updated accordingly.
 - 2.4 Agree to lobby the Government to make Enhanced DBS Checks for all Elected Members a legislative requirement.

19 Making Care Experience a Locally Protected Characteristic

A report was submitted, recommending to Council Forum that care experience be adopted as a locally protected characteristic. If approved, it would be added to the definitions already outlined in the Equality Act and the three local characteristics currently in place. These were carers, vulnerable communities and deprived communities.

Members were advised that on 11th July 2024, the Executive Board voted to recommend to Council Forum on 25th July 2024 that care experience be adopted as a locally protected characteristic.

Care Leavers often faced disadvantages, discrimination and stigmatisation, including in areas such as education, employment, mental health, homelessness and criminal justice. Due to these disadvantages, in May 2022, an Independent Review of Children's Social Care recommended that the 'Government should make care experience a protected characteristic'.

By approving the above recommendations, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council would be acknowledging the unique challenges of those who have left care. In addition, this would provide a platform to call upon others, as well as supporting its core missions as set out in the Corporate Plan 2023-27.

RESOLVED –

That Council Forum:

- a) Note the contents of this report and the Executive Board Decision on 11th July 2024 titled '[Making Care Experience a Locally Protected Characteristic](#)'.
- b) Approve the adoption of care experience as a locally protected characteristic.

20 Corporate Plan Performance Update Year End 2023-24

Council Forum was provided with an update regarding the progress against the Council Missions documented within the Corporate Plan 2023-2027 and to provide assurance that appropriate actions were being taken to address key areas of concern.

Appendix 1 of the report provided an overview of the Council's performance as of 31st March 2024. Each portfolio had been asked to provide a Red, Amber, or Green rating for their performance measure. The Exception Reports in Appendix 2 included performance measures which had been

rated Red, meaning that they were below target, performing poorly or a cause for concern. The Exception Reports outlined the reason for performance and what had or was being done to address these issues.

Of the 40 Key Performance Indicators at year end (1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024):

- 10.0% were rated “Red” where performance is, or likely to be off track (4 indicators)
- 25.0% were rated “Amber” where delivery is on track and currently being managed (10 indicators)
- 60.0% were rated “Green” or on track and performing well (24 indicators)
- 5.0% did not have a RAG rating (2 indicators)

RESOLVED - That Council Forum:

- a) Note the overall performance against the delivery of the Council’s Corporate Plan Missions, as illustrated in Appendix 1.
- b) Note the steps to be taken to improve delivery against the Corporate Missions, as outlined in the Exception Reports in Appendix 2.

21 Corporate Peer Challenge Review

Members received an update on the final stage of the Council’s Corporate Peer Challenge following a progress review by the LGA; together with the progress report and the Council’s response to it.

Blackburn with Darwen Council invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to undertake a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) during the week of Tuesday 11th – Friday 14th July 2023, to provide an external perspective on the performance of the Council and its capacity to deliver on the new corporate plan and priorities.

Following on from the publication of the LGA’s final report on the Corporate Peer Challenge and the publication of the Council’s action plan at Council Forum on 5th October 2023, which detailed the steps being taken to respond to the 11 recommendations in the LGA report, an official progress review took place on 26th March 2024. The full progress review report was attached as an appendix to the report.

In the short position statement and RAG rated Action Plan (Red, Amber, Green) that the Council shared with the LGA ahead of the progress review, details were provided to highlight how progress was being against each recommendation. Peers recommended the Council should continue with its current approach to the implementation, monitoring and reporting on, the delivery of our Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan.

RESOLVED -

That Council Forum:

- Acknowledges the progress report.
- Agrees the Council's response to it.
- Formally thanks the Corporate Peer Challenge team.

22 Constitutional Update

Members received a report on the updated Council Constitution.

Periodically, the Council needed to undertake a review of its Constitution. The report submitted presented the outcome of the most recent review reflecting, amongst other matters, changes to Executive Portfolios, Management responsibilities and various changes to procedural rules.

An opportunity had also been taken to make minor administrative changes to job titles, names of legislation etc where it was considered necessary to do so. Such changes occurred from time to time so Council Forum was asked to delegate authority to the Deputy Director, Legal and Governance (as the Council's Monitoring Officer) to make any such changes.

RESOLVED –

That Council Forum:-

- a) approve the updated Constitution provided at **Appendix B**;
- b) give delegated authority to the Deputy Director, Legal and Governance to make minor administrative changes to the Constitution as appropriate.

23 Updates from Other Committees

Council Forum received an update on the progress of the Policy and Corporate Resources, Health and Social Care, Children and Young People and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committees, all of whom had held their first meetings and chosen work programme topics for 2024/25.

RESOLVED –

That the report be noted.

24 Reports of the Executive Members with Portfolios

25 Leader

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

26 Adult Social Care & Health

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

27 Children, Young People & Education

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

28 Digital & Customer Services

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

29 Environment & Communities

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

30 Finance & Governance

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

31 Growth & Development

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

32 Housing & Public Health

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

33 Questions from Members

No Questions from members had been received under Procedure Rule 11.

Signed at a meeting of the Council Forum
on Thursday, 3 October 2024
(being the ensuing meeting of the Council Forum) by

MAYOR