

Thursday, 3 October 2024

A more prosperous borough where no one is left behind.

UK disorder

The tail end of the summer saw some troubling scenes up and down the country with the UK experiencing a level of trouble, disorder and chaos we have not seen for a very long time. Whilst we recognise that Blackburn with Darwen was not as significantly impacted by the trouble as other areas, there were residents directly affected by the tragic events in Southport and we experienced various challenges and pressures locally as a result of what was going on, not least due to the incredibly unhelpful social media postings that were used to spread unnecessary fear and concern, particularly among the town's Asian heritage communities. We've been working with our neighbouring authorities and the Local Government Association on the recovery process.

Unlike many places, the people of Blackburn with Darwen were not drawn into engaging in violence and disorder and that highlights the civic pride and togetherness that exists in our borough. Community cohesion and integration is a priority for the Council and has been for a number of years. I believe the level of work we have put in is why we didn't experience the level of disorder seen elsewhere and that is a source of pride that we can all share. I also want to point to the excellent working relationships across Lancashire's local authorities, emergency services and the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector.

We have made direct representations to the Government in the aftermath of the disorder to ask that appropriate resources and funding remains available to support activities around community cohesion, integration, prevent and youth provision and that the close working relationship between central government and Blackburn with Darwen Council is maintained on this issue.

Pension Credit awareness campaign

We know the cost of living crisis is not over and for many living in our borough the autumn and winter will see fuel bills rising with the energy price cap going up. We're keen to support and have launched a new campaign to encourage older people who are eligible to apply for Pension Credit so that they can then claim the Winter Fuel Allowance this year. This campaign, linking in with key partners, will run throughout the Autumn and Winter across all Council channels as well as pop-up information and support sessions and printed materials to reach as many people of pension age as possible. We're also encouraging family and friends to help signpost their loved ones to the right links so they can apply for the benefit.

Strategic growth

We continue to be eager to collaborate closely with the Government to address the challenges we face locally and to seize the opportunities that lie ahead. Following the changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) announced by the Deputy Prime Minister in the summer, which highlighted the importance of council's having robust Local Plans in place, I'm delighted to say we're ahead of the game in this regard having adopted a new Local Plan in January 2024, which identifies sites for new homes and

business developments up to 2037. As a blueprint for the future, the Local Plan aims to deliver the homes, jobs, supporting infrastructure and community facilities to meet the needs of the borough. This is in line with the government's new policy, as is our progress to review and release Green Belt land - for example by creating an opportunity for a new strategic employment site at Junction 5 of the M65.

On Junction 5 of the M65, we've also recently shared plans for £30m investment to help improve transport links and tackle congestion at the key gateway junction into the borough. The 16 months project led by Balfour Beatty is expected to start in 2025 and will see various improvements including the widening of Junction 5 of the M65 as well as improvements to six different active travel routes – making it easier to get around when walking and cycling. Thanks to a great deal of hard work by council officers, £20m of Government funding has been successfully secured for the scheme and the Council is investing a further £10m, including using cash from new developments in the area to deliver the upgrades.

Elsewhere, the first phase of works to renovate Blackburn's King George's Hall have been completed. King George's Hall is the jewel in the crown of Blackburn's cultural quarter and, like many historic buildings, is in desperate need of repairs and upgrades. Retaining the building's character and charm is at the forefront of the renovations. We scheduled phase one of the works during the quieter summer period to minimise disruption to audiences, performers and agents. The venue is now back open for the busy autumn season and into the festive period. Further phases will commence in 2025. The £8m project is funded from a wider £20m pot of Levelling Up Partnership funding we successfully secured under the last government, which is a significant investment to support our town centre growth priorities.

Works on another project funded from this pot are also set to get under way very soon. Over the next 12 months, the £1.5m renovation of iconic Blackburn town centre venue, the Exchange will see access improvements made including a new eight person lift which will connect the lower ground floor with the entrance level, upper ground level and a new mezzanine level. The iconic octagon shaped tower will be repaired, and a stunning new stairway will provide stepped access to the upper floors. Work will take place to raise and replace the unsafe and leaky roof of the 1920s extension behind the main Exchange Hall too – bringing it into use for the first time.

It was also great to see Blackburn BID reporting visitor numbers in the town centre for the second quarter this year were up to 6,730,000. This was 13.1% up on Q2 2023. As a Council, we are very ambitious for the borough and it's quite clear that a growth programme is the way to increase prosperity and to raise living standards for all our residents. We are focussed on ensuring we leave no one behind and are excited to work with all our partners as well as the new Labour government that shares both our growth objectives and our overall objectives for social inclusion.

Devolution

I'm delighted that proposals to create a Combined County Authority for Lancashire have passed a crucial stage after the Government signalled it was happy to proceed with the plan and support the level 2 deal. Myself along with the Leaders of Lancashire County Council and Blackpool Council received word from Local Government and Devolution Minister, Jim McMahon MP that the statutory tests to implement the proposal have been met. The Government now intend to bring the matter before Parliament in the coming weeks. When parliamentary approval is secured, an initial £20m capital funding will be unlocked to support innovation led growth and net zero ambitions across Lancashire, along with further powers and funding for adult education, transport, employment and skills. This is fantastic news for our borough and the whole of Lancashire. In Blackburn with Darwen we have always been

clear that increasing local control over powers and funds currently held in London will help to increase growth and prosperity across the whole county. We look forward to working with county colleagues and the Labour Government to continue to embed the process of devolution.”

Build healthier, happier and safer communities

Death certification review

Last month, the Government confirmed all deaths in any health setting that are not investigated by a coroner will be reviewed by an independent senior doctor, known as a Medical Examiner. This new process is designed to offer greater transparency and support for bereaved families in our communities when they are dealing with the most difficult times. As a local authority we have responsibility for the registration of deaths and are committed to supporting the successful implementation of these changes. We are working closely in partnership with Medical Examiners, healthcare providers and the wider community to ensure this new system is responsive, effective and compassionate.

Community volunteer awards

The finalists in this year's Community Volunteer Awards were revealed in September with more nominations than ever before being received. The Community Volunteer Awards are a real testament to the dedication and tireless work of the people who volunteer day in day out to help make our borough a better place. The nominees this year are once again truly inspiring and every volunteer and community champion deserves the highest recognition and thanks. I look forward to seeing the winners announced in November.

Recycling film

I was delighted to see a film put together by the Council's communications team which featured a local little boy, Rory, aged 4 who, along with other residents, came forward to express thanks to our Council recycling teams. As a thank you for his dedication he received a little surprise from one of our refuse collectors, Paul. I would encourage you to watch it on our YouTube channel. It's a fantastic snapshot of one part of the massive range of work we do as a Council and really highlights the positive impact it has on our residents. Stay tuned to our social media channels for plenty more of these kinds of stories in future.