

REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR DIGITAL AND CUSTOMER SERVICES

COUNCILLOR MAHFOOZ HUSSAIN

PORTFOLIO CO-ORDINATING
CHIEF OFFICERS: Director CE
Thursday, 3 October 2024

Being a forward thinking and innovative Council

Health and Safety

There were 139 Council accidents, incidents and near misses reported in Q1 of 2024/25. Nine near misses were included in the overall headline figure.

No reports were made to the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) under Reporting of Injuries, Disease and Dangerous Occurrence Regulation (RIDDOR) during Q1.

69 incidents were reported from schools in the same period.

A summary of recent and planned activity:

- Programme of Council Audits continues, and targeted support provided where necessary
- Building Safety Task and Finish group are supporting a wider review of the safety of Council and School buildings.
- Health Surveillance is an ongoing programme
- Violence & Aggression (V&A) Focus Group to continue on a quarterly basis
- Closer working established with the Community Safety Team to ensure appropriate follow-up on V&A incidents.
- 50+ schools have repurchased Health and Safety Service Level Agreements with the Council, plus quotes requested for 3 new schools.

Civil Contingencies

Following the tragic stabbing of three young girls in Southport on July 29, 2024, the Council has been involved in operation Eskin, a co-ordinated multi-agency response in Lancashire to manage the subsequent unrest.

On August 3, a police-led multi-agency briefing was held, and the Blackburn with Darwen Emergency Control Centre (ECC) was established. A large policing operation was in place across the county, which included significant resources across the Borough. Despite fears, no right-wing protests occurred, but a peaceful anti-racism march took place.

The Civil Contingencies Service and the activation of the ECC played a crucial role in coordinating the response and providing support to local staff and communities. The efforts involved significant time and resources, highlighting the challenges of managing misinformation and ensuring community safety.

ICT and Cyber Security

The Project Portfolio for the IT and Digital Transformation Team continues to be delivered effectively. The removal of legacy technologies from the estate is continuing with significant number of servers and network switches upgraded during the last year.

Approval has been given to begin work on an extensive project to improve Management Information capability and the deployment of enhanced digital public services during

2025. This will be achieved through Council buildings in Blackburn and in Darwen using growth funding (ring fenced to the town) through a new network and digital inclusion project.

Our enhanced cyber security approach continues to be developed and improved. New technologies and people have been acquired to help protect our data and services in an increasingly hostile digital environment.

Digital Inclusion

A long-term piece of partnership work aimed at helping people in Blackburn with Darwen without digital devices, internet connections or digital skills to get online has been launched in the last few months. The Council and its partners are taking forward a range of key actions with activity aimed at enabling people who don't currently operate online – or have limited access – to get on the internet, access usable digital devices and build their skills and confidence to access information and digital services.

The first phase of this work has seen a new leaflet – Digital Support For All – produced and shared with local stakeholders and partners who support residents with lower levels of digital skills as well as council members. The leaflet signposts people to the local organisations and support services that can help them. The roll-out of this has been a success with key accomplishments so far including the team at Blackburn Deaf Village distributing the digital inclusion information and producing their own BSL version of the leaflet to share with clients as well as Together Housing giving leaflets to neighbourhood outreach officers for onward sharing. The Council's Executive Board also has approved a strategy to donate old Council laptops for reuse in the local community. We are working with The Making Rooms to support the redistribution.

The launch of the leaflet is one part of a wider digital inclusion action plan, which is currently being worked up and includes ambitious plans over the next 12 months to provide practical and meaningful changes to help our residents. This includes the reinvigoration of the Digital Inclusion Network, which is a board of key partners and stakeholders from public, private and VCFS sectors all working together to ensure there is suitable digital inclusion support for everyone who lives, works, studies, or does business in our borough.

Information Governance (inc GDPR)

There have been 19 new information assurance incidents within Q1 2024-25. All incidents are monitored as part of the breach reporting process. None have been of a significant enough nature to warrant referral to the ICO.

We have achieved the minimum requirement for compliance (90%) with the FOIA in Q1 2024-25 320 FOI requests were received in Q1. 347 FOI requests were due for disclosure during this period. 94.52% were responded to on time.

We have achieved the minimum requirement for compliance with EIR (90%) in Q1 2024-25. 526 EIR requests for information were received in Q1 2024-25 by the Support Services Team in Growth and Planning for matters relating to environmental information (CON 29 type request). 547 EIR requests were due for disclosure during this period. 97.99% were responded to on time.

We have achieved the minimum requirement for compliance with GDPR/DPA2018 subject access requests (90%) in Q1 2024-25. 146 SARs were received in Q1 2024-25, with 119 due for disclosure during this period.

A total of 64 schools have bought into the SLA for the 2024/25 financial year generating a total revenue of £55,094.

RIPA

There have been no applications for authorisation for undertaking covert surveillance or to use a covert human intelligence source for a number of years nor have there been any such activities outside the RIPA legislation that merited the use of the NON-RIPA application process since 2019.

On 3rd November 2022 there was an inspection of the Council's RIPA processes with an inspector appointed by the IPCO. After the inspection the IPCO recommended some minor amendments to the Council's procedure and guidance. The Council's RIPA Co-ordinator has worked through the amendments and adopted them. Training has been made available for officers concerned.

On 26 March 2024 the IPCO issued its Annual Report for the year 2022. The Report stated that 100 Councils were inspected using telephone or video conferencing. Of the 100, nine Councils, including Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, were commended for their good practice.

School admission appeals

During the Main Intake period (May – August) for the academic year of 2024/2025, the team have administered 197 appeals for high schools and primary schools within the Borough. A breakdown of the results of these appeals are set out below:

- Unsuccessful – 142
- Successful – 20
- Withdrawn – 35

The In-Year admissions are due to start from September and there are currently 57 appeals scheduled to be heard throughout September.

The last academic year 2023/2024 the team administered 487 admission appeals which is a significant increase compared to the last academic year of 375 appeals. The increase in appeals is due to a number of factors, including new housing developments in Blackburn with Darwen, families moving into the Borough from other parts of the UK and International New Arrivals.

The School Appeals team arranges admission appeal hearings for 7 high schools and 55 primary schools.