



<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>LEADER</b>
<b>TO:</b>	<b>POLICY COUNCIL</b>
<b>DATE:</b>	<b>5th DECEMBER 2024</b>

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## **NATIONAL POLICY REFLECTIONS, DELIVERING THE CORPORATE PLAN AND ACHIEVING BOROUGH WIDE OUTCOMES**

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### **1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

Policy Council is a key meeting which sets the overall policy direction of the Council each year. This report asks members to note progress and key achievements on the Council's Corporate Plan (2023-2027) and to re-affirm the core missions within it. It identifies some of the key national and local policy drivers impacting on the Council and how those missions within the Corporate Plan are contributing to delivering the government's priorities - inviting members to debate the Council's position on these issues. It also updates on work to widen out the outcomes in the Corporate Plan to incorporate partnership activity and articulates how the Council is working to ensure there is no one left behind in Blackburn with Darwen. Finally, it provides an update on performance against the Corporate Plan's core missions over the last six months.

### **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **That Policy Council:**

- Note the report
- Agree to re-affirm the core missions in the Council's Corporate Plan (2023-2027) and note how those missions are aligned to government priorities
- Agree to progress plans to widen out the outcomes in the Corporate Plan to incorporate partnership activity and ensure there is no one left behind in Blackburn with Darwen
- Note the provisional date of 2 April 2025 for next Partnership Conference and themes highlighted in this report for discussion there
- Agree to the commissioning of a new residents' survey within the next 12 months
- Note the performance of the Council April 2024 to September 2024

### 3. CORPORATE PLAN MISSIONS

At Policy Council in 2022, members agreed to adopt a new corporate plan for 2023 to 2027. The Plan outlined four core missions and two supporting missions. The four core missions are:

- A more prosperous Borough where no-one is left behind
- Every child and young person to have the opportunity to fulfil their potential
- Deliver our Climate Emergency Action Plan
- Build healthier, happier, and safer communities

The two supporting missions are:

- Being an innovative and forward-thinking Council
- Tackle the budget challenge

The Council continues to deliver against these missions, which are here reaffirmed, with the continued aim to positively impact the outcomes within the Corporate Plan. The current outcomes in the Corporate Plan are:

- Fewer people in deprivation
- Increased life expectancy at birth
- The borough closer to being carbon neutral
- More children school ready
- Higher educational attainment
- Better outcomes for care experienced children
- Improvements on all our residents' survey results
- More people who need help or support continuing to live in their own homes

Whilst the Corporate Plan is a Council document, delivery of its outcomes will require a partnership approach. The Council works across a range of significant partnerships to achieve this and during the year has developed and / or updated a number of key strategic documents. These strategies align to the delivery of the Corporate Plan missions and outcomes.

As the Corporate Plan further shapes the direction of travel, work has focussed onto the core missions. A key theme of the Partnership Conference earlier this year was to work closely with local partners to embed the mission; *A more prosperous Borough where no-one is left behind*. A range of activities continue to support those residents who are often the most vulnerable and find themselves with social mobility challenges:

#### **Support to Pension Credit uptake**

The Council recently launched a new Pension Credit campaign for older people to sign up so they can still claim the Winter Fuel allowance. The authority wrote to affected residents directly to let them know they were eligible. It has also been working with Age UK Blackburn with Darwen on the campaign, who are holding support sessions to help people fill in their applications.

## **Digital Inclusion**

A long-term piece of work aimed at helping people without digital devices, internet connections or digital skills to get online has been launched in Blackburn with Darwen. The Council and its partners are taking forward a range of key actions to support those residents who are digitally excluded. Activity is being 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 Council and its partners are also continuing to work collaboratively to ensure there is suitable digital inclusion support for everyone who lives, works, studies, or does business in Blackburn with Darwen, as well as developing opportunities for volunteers to support digital inclusion across the borough.

## **Skills & Cyber Campus**

Plans have been announced for a Skills and Cyber Campus of regional significance in Blackburn. Part of Blackburn with Darwen Council's £250m Blackburn Town Centre Masterplan, £20m of national funding towards the scheme has also been re-confirmed by the new government. Phase one of the project, which will be centred on the Blackburn Market site on Brown Street, will comprise a new contemporary building with landscaping and public space. The Council is in advanced discussions with UCLAN to finalise its accommodation needs. The development will help transform that whole area of the town. The campus is further set to play a key role in the Council's plans for addressing skills gaps for future employment opportunities.

## **Care Leavers**

At its Full Council meeting at the end of July, Members approved the decision to consider care experience as a new protected characteristic, to promote better outcomes for children and young people who are in care or have been in care previously. Care Leavers often face disadvantages, discrimination and stigmatisation, including in areas such as education, employment, mental health, homelessness and criminal justice. This move means that, as a Council, all future policy and decision making must be made with care experienced young people in mind. The Council is hopeful that this will help to remove some of the barriers they can often face.

## **King William Street High Street Accelerator**

Blackburn is one of 10 towns selected as a High Street Accelerator pilot, receiving £237,000 from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to test ideas to revitalise the high street and £500,000 for environmental improvements. Live music events, a regular street market and enhanced festive programme are now helping to build footfall. The new "Discover Blackburn" website, supported by a marketing campaign, is promoting the town's offer. A sustainable planting scheme is being designed that will see more trees and improved pavement café areas, as well as new safety measures and better traffic management. Planting, lighting and play will help create an outdoor destination on King William Street.

## **Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care System**

A community offer in the Ash Grove area within the Darwen East Ward has been established. This has included volunteer development and training, crisis management and confidence building. The Ash Grove Community group has been

supported to participate in a range of initiatives they would normally not attend such as cycling in Witton Park, resistance band training, input into the Healthy Weight Network and as volunteers for adult reading.

The group also brought together a number of asylum seekers and refugees from both The Asylum and Refugee Community (ARC) and DARE (Darwen Asylum and Refugee Enterprise) to work out together each week in a CrossFit environment, building connections, improving language skills, improving mental health and community integration.

### **3.1 DELIVER OUR CLIMATE EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN UPATE**

Climate change is one of the biggest threats facing humanity. It is a matter of grave concern that needs addressing urgently. Blackburn with Darwen Council has declared a climate emergency and set a goal for a carbon neutral borough. Means of working towards this goal are set out in the Council's annual Climate Emergency Action Plan. Whilst the primary driver is cutting emissions of greenhouse gases, local climate action can also deliver economic and social benefits, such as new green jobs, better air quality for residents and improved green spaces.

At the Council's Partnership Conference in 2023 stakeholders expressed an interest in coming together to share knowledge and, where mutually beneficial, working collaboratively on climate action. The Blackburn with Darwen Climate Community, with membership drawn from the public, private and third sectors was established in February 2024. Business is well represented with members from utility companies, large energy consumers and low carbon technology companies. Support to businesses to manage their carbon emissions, and therefore costs, is available from the Council via a low carbon programme delivered by the Chamber and AMRC.

## 4. NATIONAL REFLECTION AND LOCAL IMPACT

Note: further updates to the policies outlined in sections 4.1 and 4.2 are being published by the government on an ongoing basis

### 4.1 COUNCIL ALIGNMENT TO GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

Work is ongoing to ensure the current missions within the Corporate Plan are directly contributing to delivering the Labour Government's priorities. This work is outlined in the table below:

COUNCIL ALIGNMENT TO GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES			
Government Policy	Corporate Plan Mission	What we've delivered	What's planned
4.1.1 - English Devolution Bill and White Paper	<p>A more prosperous borough where no-one is left behind</p> <p>Every child and young person to have opportunities to fulfil their potential</p> <p>Being an innovative and forward-thinking Council</p>	On 19 September 2024, it was announced that a Level 2 devolution deal was agreed by the government, Lancashire County Council (LCC), Blackpool Council and BwDBC.	<p>The devolution deal will see the creation of a new Combined County Authority, which will have oversight of the new money and powers being transferred from central government.</p> <p>Collaborative work will be undertaken with LCC and Blackpool Council to prepare and implement the necessary actions associated with becoming a devolved power.</p>
4.1.2 - Updates to the National Policy Planning Framework (NPPF) and restoring mandatory housing targets	<p>A more prosperous Borough where no-one is left behind</p> <p>Build happier, healthier and safer communities.</p>	BwDBC is committed to developing employment and housing growth within the Borough. The new Local Plan was adopted on 25 January 2024, and is based upon an ambitious economic growth scenario, which falls in line with the objectives of the proposed new NPPF. Delivery of new homes and employment floorspace to date (for 2023/24 and 2024/25) is in line with development trajectories set out in the new Local Plan.	The Council will monitor annually its overall housing and employment completions, and report progress through its Authority Monitoring Reports (AMRs). The housing requirement is to deliver at least 447 dwellings, and employment requirement for around 12,400sqm of new floorspace, per annum.

**COUNCIL ALIGNMENT TO GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES**

Government Policy	Corporate Plan Mission	What we've delivered	What's planned
			<p>Page 37 of the <u>Local Plan 2021 to 2037</u> details BwDBC's commitment to building affordable housing, which is a priority for the government. This includes a commitment that for developments of 10 or more dwellings, 20% of homes delivered will be expected to be affordable units.</p> <p>The Council will continue to promote planning and development within Blackburn with Darwen, to promote the Local Plan growth agenda and wider government ambitions.</p>
<p>4.1.3 - Race Equality Bill</p>	<p>A more prosperous borough where no-one is left behind</p> <p>Build happier, healthier and safer communities</p> <p>Every child and young person to have opportunities to fulfil their potential</p>	<p>BwDBC is undertaking activities to ensure the general and specific duties of the Equality Act 2010 and Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) are adhered to.</p> <p>Information on how the Council has due regard to eliminating unlawful discrimination, advancing equality of opportunity and fostering good relations.</p> <p>Working with communities and partners annually published Equality Watch Report and Service User Data Report.</p>	<p>BwDBC will be implementing recommendations from the ongoing Equal Pay project.</p> <p>The Council is making necessary preparations to ensure any information required under the Race Equality Bill is published appropriately.</p>
<p>4.1.4 - Tobacco and Vapes Bill</p>	<p>Build happier, healthier and safer communities.</p> <p>Every child and young person to have opportunities to fulfil their potential</p>	<p>The Council's Public Health Team, as part of the Tobacco Free Lancashire and South Cumbria Strategy 2023- 2028, are launching new initiatives to work towards preventing young people from starting to smoke or vape.</p>	<p>BwDBC will continue to complete the activities set out in the Tobacco Free Lancashire and South Cumbria Strategy 2023-28 and in September 2024, there was a smokefree places conference and an action plan is</p>

**COUNCIL ALIGNMENT TO GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES**

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		<p>The first of these is the new Community Stop Smoking Service which started on October 1, 2024. This will target all smokers; however, the main activity is based around education initiatives, primarily targeting young people via digital communications and in-person approaches, working with young people's groups around the borough.</p>	<p>ongoing, working with partners on wider communication and interventions. This includes work associated with the Tobacco and Vapes Bill. The key outcome locally includes the reshaping of the BwD smoke free alliance partnership working with our new providers for the Community Stop Smoking Service and the current pharmacy offer.</p>
<p>4.1.5 - Changes to food waste regulations</p>	<p>Deliver our Climate Emergency Action Plan</p> <p>Build happier, healthier and safer community</p>	<p>BwDBC has begun preparations in order to ensure that the Council commences weekly food waste collections by June 2026.</p> <p>The Council has received £1,157,421 in capital funding to obtain food waste collection vehicles, kitchen caddies, bins and large communal containers for blocks of flats.</p>	<p>In preparation for the June 2026 deadline, a procurement exercise will be undertaken for the necessary items to support the implementation of weekly food waste collections. This will be funded by capital funding from the government, and should that funding not be sufficient, the Council will utilise its capital funding stream for any difference.</p> <p>A communications campaign will be undertaken to inform residents of the requirement to separately collect food waste from households on a weekly basis.</p> <p>Additional staff will to be recruited to operate and supervise the service.</p>
<p>4.1.6 - Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill (Martyn's Law)</p>	<p>Build happier, healthier and safer communities.</p>	<p>The bill had its second reading in parliament on 14 October and has now been passed to committee stage. The current bill differs from the</p>	<p>A working group is in the process of being set up to consider the impact of the bill on BwDBC premises and to look at action required.</p>

**COUNCIL ALIGNMENT TO GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES**

Government Policy	Corporate Plan Mission	What we've delivered	What's planned
		<p>original draft bill introduced by the previous government, a summary of which is below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The threshold for a standard duty premises has increased from 100 to 200. This is now defined by reference to the number of people it might be reasonable to expect to attend, rather than potential capacity</li> <li>• Responsible persons are only expected to take measures that are 'reasonably practicable'</li> <li>• There is no longer an expectation that venues undertake standardised training</li> <li>• The Security Industry Authority is established as the regulator.</li> <li>• Education settings and places of worship are classified as standard duty premises regardless of capacity</li> </ul> <p>Proactive work has been taken by Council employees to prepare for the implementation of the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill. This includes a review of the Council's events policy and wider preparatory discussions with departments impacted.</p>	<p>The Event Safety Advisory Group (ESAG) application form will be updated to request event organisers to conduct counter terrorism risk assessments within their event management plans.</p>
<p>4.1.7 - Extension to the Household Support Fund</p>	<p>Build happier, healthier and safer communities.</p>	<p>BwDBC has continued to work with a range of partners to ensure residents can access the Household Support Fund alongside other wraparound support.</p>	<p>The Household Support Fund has been extended by six months until March 2025.</p> <p>BwDBC will continue to receive applications and will work with partners to ensure that appropriate</p>



**COUNCIL ALIGNMENT TO GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES**

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		<p>The scheme has provided successful applicants with practical help and advice, as well as support with (not exclusively):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gas and electricity costs</li> <li>- Water costs</li> <li>- White goods and children's beds</li> <li>- Boiler inspections/repairs</li> <li>- Affordable food options</li> <li>- Essentials for under 5s</li> <li>- Debt</li> <li>- Subsidised school meals</li> </ul> <p>For examples of households who BwDBC have supported, please see the following website:</p> <p><a href="#"><u>Household Support Fund   Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council</u></a></p>	<p>support and/or guidance is given to eligible residents.</p> <p>In addition, BwDBC will also continue to identify areas of support proactively and through targeted support.</p> <p>A key area to note for this period will be the use of the grant to support with winter fuel payments where needed.</p>
<p>4.1.8 - Skills England Bill</p>	<p>A more prosperous borough where no one is left behind</p> <p>Build happier, healthier and safer communities</p> <p>Every child and young person to have opportunities to fulfil their potential</p>	<p>BwDBC is committed to driving economic growth, supported by a robust skills system that empowers all individuals. By unlocking the potential of our workforce, we aim to create more opportunities and ensure that every person, young and adult, can acquire the skills necessary to thrive.</p> <p>Along with other local authority colleagues, the Council's Adult Learning and Employment Support service continues to work with a range of education and employability providers under the umbrella of the BwD Employment, Skills and Support Hub.</p>	<p>A new Employer Forum has recently been launched by the BwD Employment, Skills and Support Hub which will complement the Skills England Bill by:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Understanding employer needs</li> <li>2. Strengthening qualification offers</li> <li>3. Supporting schools' education systems by developing parents' skills</li> <li>4. Providing high quality careers advice and guidance for all ages</li> </ol>

**COUNCIL ALIGNMENT TO GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES**

Government Policy	Corporate Plan Mission	What we've delivered	What's planned
		<p>The Employment, Skills and Support Hub comprises of members of an existing Employability Network within the borough which includes a range of education and training organisations working with different target groups of potential employees.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Employer engagement</li> <li>6. Supporting employer investment in skills</li> <li>7. Ongoing collaborative engagement between partners and employers</li> <li>8. Providing a central point of contact for employment, education and support needs</li> </ol> <p>Employers will be supported to remove barriers to recruitment, including skills and knowledge gaps and an identified lack of individuals with 'work ready skills'.</p>

## 4.2 OTHER KEY LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

### 4.2.1 Great British Energy Bill

A new state-owned energy investment and generation company, GB Energy, will be created by the Great British Energy Bill.

### 4.2.2 The Renters Rights Bill

A Renters' Rights Bill, will ban so-called no-fault evictions and extend a series of building safety rules for social tenants, known as Awaab's Law, to private renters.

### 4.2.3 The Passenger Railways Services Bill

A Passenger Railway Services Bill will allow the government to renationalise nearly all passenger rail services, when existing contracts expire.

This is about transferring passenger rail service operations into public ownership, but it is not proposed to be a Local Transport Authority responsibility. The government is proposing that this will ultimately be under Great British Rail, which will be subject to further legislation in due course. As the LTA, we will continue to engage through relevant regional/sub-regional rail partnerships on rail ambitions and improvements.

### 4.2.4 Children's Wellbeing Bill

The new Children's Wellbeing Bill aims to raise educational standards while promoting the overall wellbeing of children. At both the school and community levels, the bill seeks to keep children safe, happy, and connected within their local communities. It also includes initiatives such as the introduction of free breakfast clubs to ensure every child is well-prepared for the school day, and measures to limit the use of branded items in school uniforms and PE kits, reducing financial pressure on families.

At both local council and national levels, the Children's Wellbeing Bill aims to enhance the consistency and safety of educational systems by introducing key reforms. These include the creation and maintenance of 'Children Not in School' registers, providing support for home-educating parents, and ensuring thorough investigations into serious teacher misconduct. The Bill also emphasises stronger cooperation between schools and local authorities on admissions; mandates that all schools teach the national curriculum; requires new teachers to attain or work towards 'Qualified Teacher Status' and brings multi-academy trusts under the inspection framework.

The Government has also announced major reforms to overhaul the children's social care system, which will feed into the new Children's Wellbeing Bill. Four key principles have been set out:

- **Wherever possible children should remain with their families and be safely prevented from entering care in the first place.** This will focus on working with the whole family, supported by multi-agency teams, to offer a clear plan and support to prevent escalating needs. Learning will be drawn from: youth justice teams, SureStart, Supporting Families, Families First for Children

- **Support children to live with kinship or foster carers rather than residential care** via the use of family-based decision making, rolling out kinship reforms and recruiting more foster carers
- **Fix the broken care market** via a range of measures to improve competition, regulation and commissioning, as well as shining a light on the levels of profit being made
- **A focus on key enablers** including better data and information sharing, spreading evidence-based programmes and the workforce

#### **4.2.5 National Wealth Fund Bill**

A National Wealth Fund Bill will set up a new fund to invest £7.3bn over five years in infrastructure and green industry.

#### **4.2.6 Better Buses Bill**

The Better Buses Bill is about putting the control over bus services back in the hands of local leaders. The bill hasn't yet come forward, but a statutory instrument has already been laid before Parliament extending the powers for bus franchising away from just Mayoral authorities. The Lancashire CCA will be the new LTA once it is formed, therefore this will be an option to discuss as the CCA. The conversation about bus franchising should be an integral part of considering the ambitions for the new Local Transport Plan (LTP4) for the county, based on the timescales LTP4 is likely to cover. Preparation of this is underway now with Members and stakeholders, with public consultation planned in 2025.

#### **4.2.7 High Speed Rail Bill**

A High-Speed Rail Bill, previously tabled to build the now-scrapped Northern leg of the HS2 rail link, will bring in powers to build new rail infrastructure in Northern England.

#### **4.2.8 Mental Health Bill**

The Mental Health Bill aims to “modernise the Mental Health Act 1983”. The bill advances the majority of the recommendations for reform made in December 2018, following the independent review of the act led by Professor Sir Simon Wessley.

Following the review of the legislation in 2018, the previous government had published a draft Mental Health Bill, which had undergone pre-legislative scrutiny. The current government introduced the mental health bill in parliament 6 November 2024 and entered its second reading in the House of Lords on 25 November 2024.

The Mental Health Bill will modernise the Mental Health Act, giving patients a greater say in their care, along with bolstered support from family and friends as part of treatment to ensure that their interests are protected and that their voice is heard throughout the treatment process.

#### **4.2.9 Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill**

The Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill was announced in the King's Speech on 17 July 2024. The focus of the bill is to strengthen borders and reform the asylum system.

The background to this Bill is around the small boat crossings, the scrapping of the Rwanda scheme and the asylum backlog.

The three main aspects of this bill are the:

- Border Security Command - giving the new Border Security Command and wider law enforcement the tools and powers they need to crack down on criminal gangs.
- Deterrents and penalties - providing a strong deterrent and penalty for criminals involved in organised immigration crime.
- Reforming the asylum system - making it more efficient and effective to ensure the rules are properly enforced by ending hotel use through clearing the asylum backlog, ensuring fast-track returns for individuals coming from safe countries and ending the failed and incredibly costly Migration and Economic Development Partnership to redirect money into the Border Security Command.

Whilst Blackburn with Darwen itself has no asylum hotels, the impact of the planned closures to these hotels elsewhere may lead to an increased need for dispersed accommodation within our Borough. This however is not an issue specific to just Blackburn with Darwen but one impacting many towns and cities across the North West, and nationally, placing strains on places like Blackburn with Darwen who have a tradition of welcoming people and communities to the Borough.

#### **4.2.10 Employment Rights Bill**

The Employment Rights Bill 2024 is looking at the regulations around zero-hours contracts. Blackburn with Darwen Council does not offer zero-hours contracts. As part of the bill, there will be a requirement for employers to offer guaranteed hours contracts after a "reference period", with the reference period yet to be confirmed. There will also be further clarification regarding flexible working requests from day one of employment.

#### **4.2.11 Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023**

This came into effect 26 October 2024 and amends the Equality Act 2010 to place a proactive duty on all employers to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace. The new duty is anticipatory as it requires employers to anticipate how their staff may be sexually harassed and to keep the position under ongoing review. The new duty is preventative, so that if sexual harassment has taken place, action should be taken to stop it happening again. The new duty allows employment tribunals to uplift sexual harassment compensation by up to 25% in cases where the employer is found to have breached the new duty to prevent sexual harassment.

BwDBC has produced a guidance document on Sexual Harassment in the Workplace. The unions have agreed this document through consultation, and it will be going live imminently.

### **4.3 DEVOLUTION/LANCASHIRE COMBINED COUNTY AUTHORITY**

Ahead of the Labour Party Conference in September, the government announced it had signed off on the devolution deal for Lancashire and the creation of a Combined County Authority for the administrative area covered by the three upper tier councils, Blackburn with Darwen Council, Blackpool Council and Lancashire County Council.

The Lancashire CCA aims to help address years of historically low investment in the area and provide a platform for accelerated growth. It will provide a single body for the whole of Lancashire to champion its interests, deliver on local priorities and provide greater local accountability and decision-making powers.

In partnership with business and public service providers, including district councils, the new CCA will give Blackburn with Darwen and the rest of Lancashire a stronger voice on the regional and national stage, ensuring greater benefit from funding and other opportunities.

Progress towards establishing the CCA has now unlocked an initial £20m capital funding contribution from Government to support the delivery of early innovation priorities, including £6m of new investment for Blackburn's Tech Innovation Quarter. Once established, the CCA will drive forward a new Growth Plan, along with further powers and funding for adult education, skills and transport.

Blackburn with Darwen Council will continue to work with its local partners and the government to continue to embed the process of devolution.

The process to lay the Statutory Instrument, required to give legal force to the CCA, started in November, with the CCA expected to be established in early 2025.

A new framework for English devolution will be laid out by government in the English Devolution Bill and White Paper, which is expected imminently.

### **4.4 AUTUMN BUDGET**

The Autumn Budget sets out the government's tax and spending plans for the year ahead. This year's statement was delivered on 30 October 2024. A multi-year spending review is also underway and will conclude in Spring 2025.

Building on the public spending audit 2024/25, conducted by the government following its election in July 2024, the Autumn Budget 2024 seeks to put the public finances on a sustainable footing by strengthening the fiscal framework and taking difficult decisions on tax, welfare and spending. Governing spending will increase by c£70bn over the next five years funded in almost equal measure by tax rises and an increase in borrowing.

Specifically, the budget provides growth in day-to-day departmental spending at an average of 2%pa in real terms up to 2029/30 to support public services. Capital investment of over £100bn over the next five years, including transport, housing and research and development will, with a greater focus on value for money and delivery, help unlock longer-term growth.

For local government, which is essential to the running of the country, and which delivers a wide range of vital services, core spending power will increase by 3.2% in real terms with £1.3bn of new grant funding including at least £600m of new grant funding for social care. What this means for Blackburn with Darwen Council will not be known until the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement (LGFS) is announced w/c 16 December.

Other notable announcements in the Autumn Budget 2024 that are relevant to the Council include:

- Funding the cost to the Council of the additional employers' National Insurance contributions.
- Funding of up to £1.1bn for local authorities through the implementation of extended producer responsibility for packaging scheme (with funding allocations to local authorities due to be announced and guaranteed for 2025/26).
- Investment in children's services to put them on a sustainable trajectory with a £1bn uplift for special educational needs and alternative provision.
- £900m to extend the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to fund local growth schemes for one more year in advance of wider funding reforms.
- £640m more funding for bus service improvements plans.
- Additional 'pothole' funding of £500m.
- An additional £233m of additional funding in 2025/26 to prevent homelessness.

The Budget also included various Business Rates policy measures. Multipliers for 2025/26 were set; retail, hospitality and leisure (RHL) relief of 40% for eligible businesses was confirmed and changes for 2026/27 were also announced, including lower tax rates for RHL properties below RV500K funded by higher tax rates for properties above RV500K.

The government has also confirmed that the Council's Levelling Up fund projects will continue to be funded as will the Long-Term Plan for Darwen, though this programme will be refocused with new guidance expected on the way forward.

Returning to the LGFS, the government is committed to a comprehensive set of reforms to the local government finance systems including much needed fair funding reforms including the approach within the LGFS so that funding distributions reflect an up-to-date assessment of needs and local revenues. This is expected to be a long-term programme of recovery and reform which will start with a deprivation-based approach in 2025/26 with additional funding targeted to the places that need it most. Broader redistribution of funding will be through a multi-year settlement from 2026/27.

## **4.5 REGULATORY LANDSCAPE**

### **4.5.1 Productivity Plans**

As part of the previous government's Public Sector Productivity drive, Councils were asked to publish productivity plans measuring performance metrics, financial savings, service quality, stakeholder feedback, and long-term impacts. The aim was to maintain service quality while reducing wasteful spending and incorporating regular feedback

from stakeholders. Local Authorities were encouraged to focus on transforming service delivery, leveraging technology and data, reducing wasteful spending, and identifying barriers to progress.

The government recently shared an update on productivity plans, highlighting a shift from the previous Conservative government's focus on equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) spending. The Government emphasised practical solutions and efficiency improvements, acknowledging the innovative advancements in technology, staff engagement, and cross-sector collaboration in the submitted plans. They also stressed the importance of multi-year financial settlements and simplified funding streams to address financial challenges. The government committed to working collaboratively with councils and other partners to improve efficiency and resource utilisation.

Additionally, they shared that they are planning to host roundtables to discuss lessons from the plans and overcome barriers. Importantly, the government decided not to request further information on EDI spending, trusting councils to manage these aspects independently.

#### **4.5.2 Office for Value for Money**

The Office for Value for Money (OVfM) is a newly established entity within the UK government, created as part of an initiative to enhance oversight and efficiency in public spending. Its primary responsibilities are to ensure that value for money is central to government spending decisions and to recommend reforms that support the government's financial goals. This includes working closely with HM Treasury and other departments to guide spending reviews and to assess the effectiveness of public expenditure.

The OVfM operates as a time-limited, multidisciplinary team, focusing on targeted interventions to improve the financial accountability of various departments. The aim is to create lasting improvements in how public spending is managed, minimizing the risk of inefficiency. It is directly accountable to senior Treasury officials, including the Chancellor.

This initiative is part of broader reforms aimed at strengthening the planning and review process for public spending, ensuring that resources are used effectively to support the government's strategic objectives.

#### **4.5.3 Update on Oflog**

The government has provided an update on the Office for Local Government (Oflog), emphasising a review of its long-term role and short-term remit. This review aims to enhance the understanding and support of local government performance through authoritative and accessible data. The government plans to continue updating and adding new metrics to the Local Authority Data Explorer, focusing on areas most relevant to their missions. Additionally, they are committed to improving the Data Explorer to better explain data limitations and ensure responsible use by third parties. This update reflects a shift towards a more data-driven and supportive approach to local government performance.



#### 4.5.4 Statutory Inspections

The Care Quality Commission (CQC) are continuing apace with their inspections of local authority adult social care services. Over 60 local authorities across the country and seven across the north-west had received their notification, before Blackburn with Darwen Council received notification on 11 November.

These assessments focus on the effectiveness of how the Council is delivering on its duties under the Care Act.

They will evaluate:

- What is working well
- What needs further development
- How we measure our performance
- What our improvement plans are

To gain a full overview, CQC's focus will be on a framework that consists of four themes and nine quality statements.

The first phase of the assessment was to complete a self-assessment which needed to be submitted to CQC by 29 November. This required evidence to be provided around 41 information returns, which provide evidence of how the local authority is meeting its statutory obligations. Once submitted, the next phase is for CQC to seek any clarifications around the information before arranging an on-site assessment visit. CQC will provide up to six weeks' notice of their intention to visit and this could be any time up to a maximum of six months from the point of the self-assessment submission. As such, the Council can expect the visit between December 2024 and May 2025.

Ahead of receiving its CQC notification, the Council utilised the time to ensure preparations were made for the inspection. Council teams forged ahead with evidence collation to meet the requirements of the notification, utilising sector support from the Local Government Association to aid preparations.

As part of the preparations, the Council commissioned a peer review of the Adult Social Care Service which took place on week commencing 22 October 2024. Eight assessors from organisations across the country spent time reviewing evidence submitted in line with the CQC information return (including our self-assessment) and from speaking with people across social care and its partners.

The peer review identified much good practice and a dedicated and committed workforce. It also identified areas in which the Directorate could improve including for example in the areas of:

- Reconfiguring the service "front door" to make it easier to navigate and to include a multi-disciplinary response.
- Enhanced use of strength-based approaches to be demonstrated in all practice.
- Continuing to build on rehabilitative approaches.
- Review of arrangements for hospital discharge process.

In addition, the service has strengthened its governance arrangements and developed an improvement board led by an independent chair with extensive experience in the sector. This is further shining a light on areas where the service performs and to assist in continuous improvement.

The Council's Children's Services was subject to an Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) in April 2024, which was a focused visit on arrangements for care leavers aged 18 to 25.

Ofsted Inspectors praised effective improvements to the quality of support for young people leaving care in the borough following the inspection:

*"Since the last inspection, when the overall effectiveness of the service was judged to be requires improvement to be good, there has been effective and focused action by senior leaders, elected members, and partners to improve services for care leavers. Leaders have invested appropriately in the care leavers' service to improve the care leaver offer and to ensure sufficient capacity in the workforce. Systems and processes have been established to enable leaders to fully understand the experiences of young people leaving care and to be clear about the quality of practice undertaken. External scrutiny, challenge and meaningful consultation with care leavers have been actively sought and responded to effectively by senior leaders. As a result, leaders know themselves well, including their strengths and areas for development, and care leavers are well supported to achieve their best outcomes."* **Quote taken from letter dated 24 May 2024 to Blackburn with Darwen Council's Strategic Director Children and Education (DCS) from His Majesty's Inspector, Rebecca Dubbins<sup>1</sup>**

Preparations are currently underway for inspections that are due around ILACS - Overall Effectiveness and SEND Local Area.

In addition to external scrutiny, the Council continues to seek assurance with the support of the Local Government Association (LGA); quarterly self-evaluation and an established improvement plan which is reported to an internal governance board. The Children's Services Improvement Board continues to meet regularly and an independent chair from the LGA supports and challenges the board. There is a focus on priority areas of practice, impact, and the inspection framework, with the support and challenge from wider corporate directors including Finance and Human Resources. In the latter months of 2024, an LGA Peer Review focusing on Children in our Care (CIOC) and Fostering Service has been undertaken to further improve our services.

#### **4.5.5 Changes to Ofsted**

The new changes to Ofsted in England and Wales, effective from September 2024, include the removal of single-word overall judgements for Section 5 graded school inspections. Inspectors will instead provide separate judgements in the 5 key areas including: Early Years, Quality of Education, Behaviour and Attitudes, Personal Development, and Leadership and Management. Inspections will now be announced on Mondays, with inspections taking place on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Additionally, there is a greater emphasis on individualised progress for SEN pupils, increased focus

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<sup>1</sup> (<https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50248040>)

on SEN attendance and safeguarding, and a shift towards using exclusion as a last resort. The changes also include the introduction of mental health training for inspectors and the establishment of a Friday 'Ofsted Academy' for training and development. These updates aim to improve the inspection process and reduce anxiety for those being inspected.

#### **4.5.6 Best Value**

Best Value in local authorities relates to a statutory obligation on the Council to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Local Government Act 1999). This obligation is currently underpinned by statutory guidance, which also sets out the seven Best Value themes of continuous improvement, leadership, governance, culture, use of resources, service delivery and partnerships & community engagement.

The current Best Value Framework was updated by government prior to the recent General Election. This was in the light of a growing number of councils (not including Blackburn with Darwen) experiencing acute financial difficulties and seeking exceptional financial support, as a last resort, from the government.

A key element of the Best Value Framework is that it sets out the characteristics of a well-functioning local authority. Equally, the Framework describes indicators of potential failure where assurance activity may not be effective, and which will lead to a failure to deliver Best Value.

It is unclear at this stage whether the current government will retain the existing Best Value Framework or whether it will develop its own set of standards that define what a well-functioning local authority should look like.

#### **4.5.7 Improvement and Assurance Framework (Local Government Association)**

Whilst the Best Value Framework outlined above provides the statutory basis for improvement, ultimately, councils are responsible for their own performance and improvement for the benefit of local residents to whom they are accountable. There is also an obligation on councils, as a sector, to have a collective responsibility for improvement. The Local Government Association's (LGA) Improvement and Assurance Framework (IAF) has been developed to provide councils with a framework to deliver such a sector-led approach to improvement.

The IAF builds on the requirements of the Best Value Framework and is part of a continuum of improvement which includes Corporate Peer Challenge, the Best Value Framework, the work of Oflog (and likely, OVfM) and statutory interventions.

The components of the IAF include actions that contribute to assurance by local authorities (by officers, Members and other bodies) and Local Authorities' public accountability (the council holding itself to account and others holding the council to account).

Full details of the IAF can be found here:

<https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/improvement-and-assurance-framework-local-government>

#### **4.5.8 External Audit**

The Council's new External Auditors are Forvis Mazars. The role of the External Auditors, as set out in legislation (and governed by organisations such as the National Audit Office), is broadly two-fold. Firstly, to provide an opinion on the Council's Annual Statement of Accounts and secondly, to assess the Council's arrangements for securing value for money. This is a broad assessment covering matters such as financial sustainability, governance and arrangements to improve economy, efficiency and effectiveness of Council services.

As a result of a backlog of audit work nationally, which has led to delays with the publication of Statement of Account by the majority of councils in England, including Blackburn with Darwen, the government has put in place legislation that sets out clear deadlines for councils to publish audited Statement of Accounts.

For Blackburn with Darwen, the latest set of published audited Statement of Accounts is for 2022/23 (for year ending 31st March 2023) (as approved by the Audit and Governance Committee on 26th November 2024). The deadline for publishing the audited Statement of Accounts 2023/24 (for the year ending 31st March 2024) is 28th February 2025.

Forvis Mazars are currently in the process of reviewing the Council's arrangements for securing value for money as they applied in 2023/24. The outcome of this review will be the subject of a report to the Audit and Governance Committee in due course.

#### **4.6 NHS/ICB LONG TERM PLAN**

The Health and Care Act 2022 introduced changes to the NHS health and care commissioning landscape, including the formal creation of Integrated Care Systems across the country. They are made up of two parts – an Integrated Care Board (ICB) which is an NHS organisation with responsibility for allocating the NHS budget and commissioning services for the population, taking over the functions previously held by Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and an Integrated Care Partnership (ICP) which is a statutory joint committee of the ICB and local authorities in the area.

Within the Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care System, it has been agreed that there will be four "places", where commitment has been made to grow and support thriving Place Based Partnerships, aligned to Upper Tier Local Authority boundaries - Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool, South Cumbria and Lancashire.

The Council has supported the development of a Place Based Partnership (PBP) for Blackburn with Darwen aligning its People Directors and Executive Membership for Adults and Children's Services, Housing & Public Health to work closely with the Director of Health and Care Integration to drive collaboration forward. Since inception in April 2023, the PBP has delivered a number of health and care integration programmes:

## **Neighbourhoods**

The Local Government Association (LGA) undertook detailed engagement to support the refresh of ambitions for integrated neighbourhood working and revitalise delivery arrangements. A Neighbourhood Evolution Plan was co-produced which is currently being driven forward to improve integration of health and care services within neighbourhoods.

## **Intermediate Care at Albion Mill**

System partners across health and social care have worked together to develop an optimal test of change model for intermediate care. The 35 bedded facility has been opened in a two phased approach, with the first 13 beds being operational from 1 July 2024. The new model will ensure effective step up and step down for patient recovery and preventing unnecessary hospital stays.

## **Developing an Enablement model of care**

System partners are working together to develop an Enablement model of care. This model will heavily support urgent and emergency care recovery and transformation by refocussing on providing rapid response services to people living at home. The service will ultimately increase the number of people we keep at home and maintain their independence.

## **Population health & health inequalities**

The establishment of a Population Health programme focussed on reducing health inequalities in residents who experience above average numbers of hospital attendances and admissions, across 11 priority wards. Commissioned priority insight work through Healthwatch which has driven change in the neighbourhood model of care and supported a greater understanding of population need and behaviour.

## **Community services transaction**

Successful transfer of two key services, Blackburn with Darwen and East Lancashire Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) from East Lancashire Hospitals Trust (ELHT) to Lancashire and South Cumbria Foundation Trust (LSCFT) and Blackburn with Darwen adult community services from LSCFT to ELHT. The transfer will improve patient outcomes and experiences by reducing fragmentation and creating a more resilient service offer and overall will improve quality, safety and clinical outcomes through a reduction in unwarranted variation in provision.

## **End of Life moving to Outstanding**

Healthwatch BwD were commissioned to undertake resident insight work over the summer of 2023. This work has enabled us to understand residents' views and experiences of end-of-life care. Work is underway to implement the recommendations set out in the review.

## **Evolving joint commissioning**

There is an established Joint Commissioning and Recommendations Group, which provides commissioning oversight of the Better Care Fund and plays a role in the strategic development, reporting and assurance of other joint commissioning opportunities across all ages.

On 12 September 2024, Lord Darzi published his independent review of the NHS, which revealed the scale of challenge facing the NHS including rising pressures in demand, that ill-health is being diagnosed too late and that not enough is being done to prevent it in the first place. It is too hard for people to get an appointment, hospitals are overcrowded, NHS workers are overstretched, and costs are escalating.

The report made a number of recommendations for the government to focus the 10-year NHS plan on, including more focus on community-based care by simplifying and innovating care at a neighbourhood level, moving from analogue to digital, driving productivity in hospitals and supporting more people off long waiting lists to get them back into work.

On 21 October 2024 the Government launched a national conversation with the public and staff: 'Change NHS: help build a health service fit for the future' to further inform the 10-year plan which is expected to be published in Spring 2025. Blackburn with Darwen's current model of integrated neighbourhood care, which involves GPs, district nurses, social work teams, social prescribers and wellbeing services, plus our prevention, social prescribing and enablement model developments will be well placed to respond to the future direction of travel.

#### **4.7 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 not seen for a very long time. Whilst 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. Various challenges and pressures were created locally, not least due to the incredibly unhelpful social media postings that were used to spread unnecessary fear and concern, particularly among the borough's Asian heritage communities. In the aftermath, the Council worked with 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 the borough. Local leaders actively urged residents to stay away from potentially violent protests. Close working relationship with police to support their readiness and visible presence helped to deter potential rioters. Our on-going efforts to build a stronger community may have contributed to a more resilient and united response to potential unrest. However, tensions in the community do still exist and to recognise that we do have challenges is important as it acknowledges our awareness of issues. The challenges of segregation require deeper conversations to facilitate a shared knowledgeable position of the current state and what can be done to alleviate the divide. At the same time, we recognise intra-community tensions as a contributing factor to segregation.

Cohesion and integration is a priority for the Council and has been for a number of years. Blackburn with Darwen was one of five national Integration Areas invited by Government to work closely on innovative plans to address social integration. The resulting social integration programme, Our Community Our Future, saw the authority working together with partners and the community to strengthen relationships between

people from different backgrounds. This is an example of where central govt funding can make a difference however without a core medium to long term strategy, the benefits are time limited.

The Council made direct representations to the government in the aftermath of the disorder to ask that appropriate resources and funding remains available to support activities surrounding 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.

It is also important to highlight the excellent working relationships across BwD and Lancashire's local authorities, emergency services and the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. There is now some work going on to explore how to bring together the knowledge and skills that exist across these partners on a regular basis for the purpose of supporting and strengthening our communities.

## **5. SOCIAL VALUE**

The Council remains committed to the Social Value Policy agreed in 2022 whereby a commitment was made to ensure that every contract (over a de minimis level of £25k) contributes some form of social value to the borough. The Council has developed a number of objectives to provide clarity on the asks of contractors and how they can deliver on these commitments, these are:

- to address climate change
- to contribute to a social value fund and
- to provide employment and skills for members of the borough

The Council is currently exploring how it can maximise the social value of contracts, commissions and supply chains; and how to gain maximum benefit for the borough and its communities. It is also working to ensure that the pledges put forward by partners at the Partnership Conference 2024 are aligned to the outcomes of the Social Value Policy.

Further to this, a Task and Finish Group is working to embed the Social Value Policy across the organisation. Looking to 2025 it will explore options to grow social value contributions with partners in both the public and private sector, maximise opportunities to pool activities and encourage more volunteering and philanthropy.

## **6. PARTNERSHIP CONFERENCE**

The Council's Partnership Conference is now established as a key event in the municipal year. The first two Partnership Conferences, since 2018, were held in March 2023 and March 2024 and were well attended with positive feedback from partners. The conferences have been developed as one of the main vehicles for the Council to engage and agree new strategic directions and actions with its key partners, within the framework established by the Council's Corporate Plan.

The next Partnership Conference is tentatively scheduled to take place on Wednesday, 2 April 2025 at Ewood Park. Initial scoping has resulted in an outline focus, with themes including:

- Social Value Charter
- Agreement of Borough-wide outcomes
- Corporate / Place narrative / Residents' Survey 2025
- Key business updates: Lancashire Business Board/Hive/Cyber work

The above themes would allow the Council to continue to take partners on our journey towards accomplishing the mission to ensure there is *No-one Left Behind* in Blackburn with Darwen.

The 2025 Conference is a timely opportunity to formalise long-term plans around the purpose of the Conference, what can realistically be delivered as a partnership and the outcomes that are being aimed for.

## **7. MANAGING OUR PERFORMANCE**

### **7.1 Performance**

In addition to the updates provided earlier in this report, a performance framework is in place to help the Council measure performance against the Council Missions. The Council updated its suite of corporate Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) following the introduction of the Corporate Plan in April 2023. 40 metrics were agreed at Executive Board in 2023. The corporate KPIs were revised for the year 2024-25 to ensure that our KPIs remain relevant. These indicators summarise performance across the Council's services. They are supported by a larger number of operational metrics which departments manage and report on via their internal governance arrangements.

The suite of KPIs for 2024/25 include previous KPIs as well as new KPIs. New KPIs for 2024/25 include:

- Increase the number of community cleanups taking place
- Increase the number of attendances at the 3 Council owned leisure centres, Blackburn, Darwen & Witton Park
- Number of young people using Council Leisure and Cultural Services (this KPI is currently included as two separate KPIs (26a and 26b in Appendix 1)
- Increase the number of children walking to school (initially based on 10 schools within the borough)
- Number of trees planted
- Percentage of Freedom of Information Requests responded to within timescale

To help assess progress against targets, RAG ratings have been defined as follows:

Red = Performance is not currently on target. High risk that year-end target will not be achieved.

Amber = Performance is not currently at expected levels. Confidence that the target will be achieved by year-end.

Green = Performance is on or above target.

No rating = Target cannot be assessed this quarter (i.e. annual measure or awaiting publication of data.)



No rating = Information measure targets not applicable (i.e. volume or demand measures where 'good' is neither high or low.)

Each department is required to provide a rating for their performance measures based on data collated over the relevant period. Appendix 1 to this report provides an overview of the Council's performance as of 30th September 2024. The Exception Report in Appendix 2 includes one KPI which has been rated as Red.

An overview of the information relating to the 39 KPIs for the first half-year of 2024/25 (April 2024 to September 2024, as included in appendix 1 is as follows:

- 1 measure was rated "Red" where performance is not currently on target and there is a high risk that the year-end target will not be achieved (2.6%)
- 7 were rated "Amber" where performance is not currently at expected levels, but there is confidence that the target will be achieved by year-end (17.9%)
- 28 were rated "Green" where performance is on or above target (71.8%)
- 1 measure was categorised as "Information measure targets not applicable" (2.6%)
- 2 could not be assessed this quarter as data were not available (5.1%)

Policy Council is asked to note the overall performance against the delivery of the Council's Missions, as illustrated in Appendix 1 and to note the remedial action to improve delivery against one KPI as outlined in Appendix 2.

## **7.2 Annual Delivery Plan**

To further strengthen performance management & assurance the Council has introduced an Annual Delivery Plan for 2024-25. This plan brings together in-year activity from the Corporate Plan, alongside other priority projects being delivered. The plan provides a consolidated set of priority activities for the organisation in a single place. The aim for the plan was to have to defined priorities for each portfolio, to produce items to be considered for inclusion in scrutiny workplans and to enable a consistent mechanism for departments to report back on, twice a year via internal governance arrangements. The new Delivery Plan also includes an updated suite of Performance Indicators for the year 2024-25.

## **7.3 Residents' survey**

In order to fulfil the Council's commitment to continuous improvement, it is essential to understand the views of the borough's residents. It is important for the Council to know what communities think of the way things are being run, the value for money being received and whether they feel well informed. This information is vital for improving services and directing resources at issues that matter most.

In the next 12 months the Council will be commissioning a residents' survey. The most recent residents' survey was conducted in 2022 and informed the current Corporate Plan 2023-2027, which was agreed by Policy Council in December 2022. The Corporate Plan set out a range of missions for the Council to work towards, however, policy and funding changes must be adapted to remain effective. With a new Labour government now in power, now is the time to review the current position.

## **8. POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Policy will be developed to address the various changes in legalisation.

## **9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. However, the Corporate Plan provides the necessary framework and context upon which the council can direct its decision-making and significantly contributes to robust corporate governance arrangements.

## **10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no additional legal requirements arising from the report.

## **11. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

There are no additional resource requirements arising from the report.

## **12. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

An equality impact assessment is not required for this report.

## **13. CONSULTATIONS**

In preparing its budget for the financial year from April 2025 to March 2026, the Council is currently undertaking a budget consultation, which launched on 1 November and will run to 13 December. As part of the consultation, the Council is canvassing residents' views on what its priorities should be as it continues to deliver the core missions in its corporate plan; to get their feedback on some specific spending proposals as well as seeking to understand what they view the borough's biggest strengths and challenges to be and how the cost of living is currently affecting them.

No further engagement is required for this report, but individual departments engage on priorities with service users, stakeholders and partners on a regular basis.