

**LEADER OF THE COUNCIL –‘CORPORATE’ PORTFOLIO AREA**  
**COUNCILLOR SIMON BLACKBURN**

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The full details of the portfolio areas can be found on the Council’s website at  
<https://www.blackpool.gov.uk/Your-Council/Your-councillors/Executive-members.aspx>

**Corporate Issues**

**Benefit Claims, Council Tax, Business Rates and Sundry Debt Collections**

The average number of days to process new Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Scheme claims and changes in circumstances remains static at 20 days whilst work is ongoing to clear older items of changes in circumstance work.

The call answer rate for Customer First for September was 45%, a slight improvement on the same time last year.

At the end of quarter two, Council tax in-year collection performance was 52.4%, a reduction of 0.7% compared to the previous year, this equates to £338,000 based upon the Council Tax Net Requirement excluding Police and Fire. Business Rate collection was 51.63%, a reduction of 0.48% compared to a like for like comparison with the previous year. This equates to £128,000 for the Blackpool element. Recovery activity, including court action when necessary, is well underway in respect of outstanding current year debts.

Sundry debt collection was 88.00%, which was significantly higher than the previous year when it was 70.64%.

**Lancashire Combined Authority and Devolution**

A total of 14 of the 15 Local Authorities in Lancashire came together as the shadow Lancashire Combined Authority (LCA) in July 2016, electing me as Chairman. I am delighted that in recent meetings we have agreed which Leader will act as the lead member for the many different strands of work we now need to progress. The shadow LCA has now met three times, making solid progress in a number of areas only made possible by coming together in this way. For example, Lancashire, via the Combined Authority, has now secured access to the Government’s One Public Estate programme, following successive failures to get on the programme by a number of individual Lancashire local authorities over the last two years. We have secured an initial £260,000 of government support for 2016/ 2017 to begin to orchestrate a Lancashire One Public Estate programme. More funding will follow in 2017/ 2018. Partners have just submitted a list of projects to government for funding next year, including several in Blackpool. It is very encouraging that Government’s One Public Estate team has recently made it clear that

they wish to work with us and the Ministry of Justice, on the relocation of the courts away from the Central Station site as part of enabling its redevelopment.

Partners remain hopeful that an Order can be presented to Parliament that will enable the Lancashire Combined Authority to come into formal legal existence in the spring of next year. I am now working very closely with key partners such as Edwin Booth, Chairman of the Lancashire Enterprise Partnership, on preparations for early discussions with Ministers on both the formal creation of the Lancashire Combined Authority and the onset of devolution negotiations. In this respect, a single political voice trusted to speak for Lancashire, alongside the LEP, is already paying obvious dividends in gaining traction within Government.

### **Corporate Delivery Unit (CDU)**

The CDU is now operational and the first board meetings were held in October. These initial meetings have been used to set the priorities for the team and work is underway in key areas to improve the visibility of service performance and support effective decision-making. Stocktake reports are being compiled for the next meetings, with the team working alongside services to facilitate information gathering, access to research and evidence and designing or refining performance management systems.

### **Human Resources**

#### Leadership Charter

Human Resources has been working with the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) to develop a Leadership Charter, which has now been through consultation with Council Managers and has been refined through valuable feedback. When completed, the next step will be to develop a leadership development programme, which complements the charter and supports the organization to grow and develop valued leaders.

#### Apprenticeship Levy

A project group has been set up to understand the draft funding rules for levy-paying employers participating in the new Apprenticeship programme from 1 May 2017.

### **Strategic Issues**

#### **Financial Monitoring**

Financial performance monitoring in the early part of 2016/ 2017 highlighted financial pressures emerging in Children's Services, Strategic Leisure Assets, Concessionary Fares and Property Rationalisation with estimated working balances forecast to fall by £2,880,000 against the budgeted position over the year to a level of £2,756,000.

In the context of £35.0m of Earmarked Revenue Reserves and with seven months of the financial year remaining, there should still be sufficient time to redress the position and revised service and financial plans are underway to do so.

The latest month five financial performance report for 2016/ 2017 was reported to the Executive on 7 November.

The Budget for 2016/ 2017 required total savings to be found of £25.1 million. As at 31 August 2016 (month five) 81% of the 2016/ 2017 savings target had already been delivered and the full-year effect of the 2016/ 2017 savings in 2017/ 2018 amounts to 91% of the £25.1 million target.

Following significant feedback, the Government has announced its decision to defer the introduction of Local Housing Allowance rates for Supported Accommodation until 2019/ 2020 when it expects a new funding model to be introduced. As further details are announced, the Benefits Service will work with other services and providers to understand the implications of any changes.

## **Policy Issues**

### **Benefits**

The lowered Benefit Cap took effect in Blackpool from 7 November 2016 for existing cases and 5 December for new ones. The new maximum amount of benefit allowable is:

- couples or lone parents of working age will no longer be entitled to receive more than £384.62 per week (previously £500)
- single adults of working age with no children will no longer be entitled to receive more than £257.69 per week (previously £350).

Whilst exact numbers are not yet known it is estimated that around 300-400 households in Blackpool will be affected. The Department for Work and Pensions wrote to potentially affected claimants in September to inform them that they may be subject to the lowered cap.

The Benefits Service will be working with affected customers to identify whether a Discretionary Housing Payment would be appropriate.

## **Transforming Services**

### Channel Shift

An on-line form is now available on the Council website to allow customers to report problems with roads and pavements.

## **Working with Partners**

### Blackpool Museum

The Gateway meeting with the Heritage Lottery Fund referred to in my last report was postponed and will now take place in January.