

**Blackpool Council
Report from
Director of Public Health
to
Executive
on
15 December 2016**

Budget and Medium Term Financial Sustainability Strategy Engagement exercise – autumn 2016

1. Introduction

This report summarises and presents the findings of a series of community engagement meetings and focus groups that were held during Sept / Oct 2016 in order to share the Council's overall financial position and seek a consultative dialogue with key community, equality, voluntary and Faith sector representatives over the way forward in the years ahead.

In all, 9 separate events have been held, involving an aggregate of 73 people (the age range was from aged 13 years old to early 80's the gender balance was slightly more females than males approximately 55% to 45%) representing a minimum of 14 hours contact/engaged dialogue ; the time spent with groups on average was 1 hour 45 minutes .

The selection sought to reach out to those who may be 'hard to reach' or underrepresented in surveys or consultation as well as those who represent many of the core groups and organisations across organised civil society in Blackpool. Further details of this are appended to this report

2. Methodology and approach

An approach was developed aiming to encourage an informed, open but focused quality discussion over highly complex issues relating to Local Government finance and the pressures facing the Council's Budget over the next three years. The process sought to use creative participatory engagement methods (these were based on Ballin 2011/ Local Government Assoc Listening to Communities /Ofsted 'listening to young people) and develop a facilitated dialogue to ensure the groups stayed on task but also were allowed to pursue 'themes' and ideas; the initial objectives were

- To enable a 'space' where 3rd Sector Organisations can feel comfortable to talk and discuss their views and suggest potential initiatives and options for appraisal or 'solutions'.
- Capture their thoughts on the priorities for them on the budget priority areas.
- Allow the opportunity to make suggestions on how to make reductions or increase income or develop collective responses to the issues facing the communities of Blackpool.

The information on the budget came from the Mid Term Financial Sustainability Strategy and the leaflet that accompanies the Council Tax letter and then interactive elements were used in all groups

from young people to senior residents forums, these helped initiate the debate, however the key was a 'space' to talk, listen and debate in an informed manner with a solution based focus where ever possible.

The 'feedback' at the end of each session was positive to the approach with community members/groups finding it to be well facilitated, though provoking, informative (to a degree), interactive and a dialogue where they could see the challenges and complexities facing the Council.

However all groups would have liked to understand more of how the Council works, it's budget and where it spent and a more in depth process, in essence a participatory budget consultation or workshop/s.

3. Key issues highlighted

Through the 'dialogue sessions' a pattern emerged of key areas of debate; these could be categorised as Budget, Economy and Community. There was clear overlap and inter connectivity between these themes of Tourism and Community but for this report have been separated.

The overall message/s from these sessions can be summarised in a variety of themes:

- a. **General understanding of the Council** – captured within the dialogue was a feeling that the Council was *"doing the best job it can in difficult circumstances"* and that *"we understand that these are tough times"*, as well as a genuine surprise at the level of reductions in core funding since 2011, many residents felt that this was a cause for concern and worry. All groups were worried about how their communities would be affected in the times of change, given the impact to some of the services they have used – Adult Social Care, services/ places to go for young people, Mental Health Services, Substance Misuse and 'Community Hubs'/Centres.
- b. **"Things can be done differently"** - there was an incredible sense of Community Groups/residents groups wanting to be involved in being part of the discussion and answer to how Blackpool moves forward to address the complex needs of its residents balanced with an economy based on primarily Tourism. There was a strongly feeling that;
"WE – the Community, residents, Council, NHS, Police and community organisations need to work together to look at different approaches. No one organisation owns Blackpool nor can 'fix it' without working together and seeking different approaches."
- c. **Partnerships/Opportunities** – an emphasis was placed on collaborative working to reduce costs, share resources and improve outcomes. Many of the groups debated what services the Council delivered now in comparison to the past, the Council Core function and what could other partners develop, support and initiate. Given the depth of cuts/reductions in Budget the groups wanted to look at partnerships to deliver services differently or look at how others with the Council could redefine the 'delivery'/services landscape. There was discussion of the 'history' and previous relations with the Council but a strong acknowledgement that was 'history' and the *'we' need to move forward together.* However, there was a view from several groups that the Council did not trust the community sector and needed to improve two way communications.

- d. **Communication** - a strong theme focusing on how the Council communicates with its residents informs them and engages in the most appropriate ways. There is a clear issue of digital illiteracy within the communities in Blackpool, with some of the groups wanting everything on social media whilst others wanted paper copies. *Your Blackpool* was praised as a way of reaching out and informing however many groups felt that the Council needed to communicate in plain straightforward English and make more use of Social Media.

There is a desire for Community Groups/Residents to have a more active role in shaping Blackpool's future and to receive more information around budgets, services and the challenges ahead that could help with this process. It was felt that the Council should be listening as well as talking.

- e. **Image of Blackpool** - this was raised in all the 'dialogues' as it was felt the image of Blackpool was still 'poor'/'bad' and based on hen and stags. For many residents it remains a tourist town with a 'front of house' and a 'Back of house' with a continued perception that less was spent at the back of house/community. The challenge they felt was to continue to challenge the 'image' as a party town or one that was the most deprived local Authority in England – this fact was seen to be one that caused the most concern for residents. Constantly the image of Central Drive and parts of Blackpool were discussed and how the impact of unkempt or dilapidated houses, hotels and vacant shops could be improved.

- f. **Celebration of Blackpool** – many of the groups commented there was lots to celebrate about Blackpool, its residents and people and this is not collected into “*so many good news stories, little things and big things that need to be celebrated to show what the real Blackpool is and where it is going*” – “*it (Blackpool) has so much going for it, challenges yes look at the glass half full, we are not all drug addicts, drinkers, jobs and layabouts but tell people about its good side*”.

- g. **Economy** – this was discussed at all sessions and in-depth.

i. **The Challenge of tourism** - all the groups discussed the tension between residents and tourism and the challenge of the Council to balance the demands of a vibrant economy and the needs of the community.

ii. **Employment** – was a major issue for young people and older residents. It was felt that there was not enough good quality, long term job opportunities in Blackpool. Young people felt there was not “*reason or opportunities to stay*” and would seek work in Manchester rather than Blackpool. Those who would like stay wanted more security than tourist based work. For other residents it was about addressing the issue of the cyclical nature of the seasonal job market that on ending would mean they would need to seek other employment or then fall into a gap to try to claim benefit but may lead to problems (debt or arrears being the most frequent). This group wanted to see more employers who had year round industries/employment opportunities (such as warehouse work/semi skilled work) to give some job security and stability. Men over 50 felt that there was little or no job opportunities for them in the labour market.

iii. **Developing the Economy to attract** – more families, overnight stays and move the resort from “*cheap booze and lapdancing clubs*”. The plans for a

new conference centre were seen as positive but understanding that it needs to attract a different clientele to Manchester and Liverpool. Much discussion was held on utilising the vacant shops to encourage business/create creative centres based on low cost rents.

- iv. Understanding that residents are also business owners** - this was a theme that many in two groups felt the Council overlooked in its priorities, it was not a case of either or but was something that may not be fully understood fully by the Council.

- h. Community-** there were constant debates and dialogues on this issue and much more than this report can contain, the salient points were;
 - i. Housing** - this was a constant theme particularly the issue of irresponsible landlords was raised in a number of groups, especially those who live outside of the town and buy property here because it is cheap. Selective licensing and Transience team were highlighted as good practice but residents felt this needed to be expanded and developed.
 - ii. Safety/ASB** there is a perception that anti social behaviour is a big issue for the town and is linked into irresponsible landlords who do not take action when their tenants are making unreasonable noise, flytipping etc. Young People felt incredibly unsafe in Blackpool especially young women. People did not feel safe in poorly lit areas of the town. Addressing the perception was felt to be the key goal and linked to celebrating Blackpool, acknowledging success in addressing the challenges.
 - iii. More Spaces to meet as collectives/groups** Residents felt that budget cuts had led to a reduction in Community Centres or spaces where they could meet in local areas at low cost that small residents group could afford . They wanted somewhere to go for support and help and where they could 'get together and organise things' for their community.
 - iv. Services and "why cannot services talk to each other"**- many commented on the need for services such as Mental Health/Social Care/3rd Sector to work more harmoniously and provide a more 'together plan' with a shared outcomes and collaborative approach. This theme was repeated in terms of large funding coming into the Blackpool area but being seen as parachuted in rather than collaborative or complementary.
 - v. Capacity building of residents and Community,** a theme of how residents could do more and apply for funding and look for support for across sectors. There was at times felt to be a disconnect from small community groups and the wider larger 3rd Sector Organisations.

Conclusion

The 'dialogues' have provided more in depth discussions and a desire to 'engage' with Council on its priorities, unlike the Council Couch the 'dialogues' allowed a rapport to be developed, a debate and moved the focus from the Couch being as a way to complain about the Council to understanding the complexities that the Council faces.

It is evident that there is a desire to continue with the 'dialogues' and the groups felt an onus was on the Council to develop this, to enhance co-delivery, co-production and look at a 'collective' response to the demands and needs of Blackpool. All acknowledged that a shared history of issues needs to be learnt from and moved beyond, a revised dialogue and development of shared understanding and trust. A shared mutuality in Blackpool was a common theme as was the move from the Council being expected to deliver everything to a potential cusp of residents and community groups/3rd Sector/Social Enterprise to be seen to leading on elements and working to access opportunities the Council could not or was unable to.

Partnership working between the Council and Third Sector can and needed to be enhanced and improved in order to realise the ambitions for a sustainable and resilience community for Blackpool. In the past, relationships were impeded by a disconnect, due to very different cultures and a perceived lack of openness and communication.

More collaborative working needed to be built both within the highly diverse groups that make up the Third sector and between the sector and the Council / other agencies.

Recommendations

1. To encourage the nurturing of genuine dialogue and trust it is vitally important for the Council to feedback on each of the specific proposals, within a reasonable timeframe. It is therefore suggested that this report is shared with relevant Cabinet Members, before recommended responses are taken back to the Council Executive, and then communicated to these groups in the New Year, once the Budget has been approved.

2. To consider the developing this exercise into a more permanent cycle of strategic engagement with the sector, through piloting a thematic approach to meetings covering the following type of themes:

Arts and culture

Sports/ Leisure

Environment

Health and care

Social enterprise (covered by exciting Social Enterprise network)

Youth

Older people (covered by the Blackpool Gold group)

Faith (covered by the existing Faith Forum, and Blackpool Food Partnership)

Equalities (covered by the exciting groups – including Disability Partnership, Equality Forum, Race Equality Network, LGBT Partnership)

Appendix A – Feedback from the Community Groups and Sessions

Group	Issues	Key Message
LGBT Forum	<p>Safety in Blackpool- too much drug dealing/ASB and limited response from the Police however others felt a good response from Police and Asb team – keep logging calls.</p> <p>Housing a major issue- poor landlords and tenants, selective licensing and Transience team some good outcomes but still long way to go.</p> <p>Communications with the Council, cannot contact via phone and easier to walk down and talk to someone.</p> <p>Council talks down to residents, big brother/parent aspect, Council Officers can be rude and dismissive, the Council not a partner in Blackpool, politics over residents.</p> <p>Need More Community listening sessions – Listening Cafes more informal and laid back – Council needs to reconnect.</p> <p>Communication mediums poor and ineffective especially social media, plain straight forward language not Council Speak or complicated words, Your Blackpool praised- acceptance that different generations need different communications processes. Explain why the Council does things. Young People are missing out on services especially since cutbacks.</p> <p>Services – Mental Health services poor and hard to access, services not working together, mismatch between Vol Sector and Council, lots of gaps and wasted money.</p> <p>Vol Sector and residents – not enough support to the Vol Sector or residents to do the things the Council cannot. What can we do together this key and the future is how we best provide for our communities</p>	<p>Why does the Council not insist on a minimum standard of accommodation before paying benefits/</p> <p>Residents are also Business people but that is not seen by the Council.</p> <p>Access to Services is poor, we need more services joined up, working together and demonstrating equal and positive treatment.</p> <p><i><u>“WE – the Community, residents, Council, NHS, Police and community organisations need to work together to look at different approaches. No one organisation owns Blackpool nor can ‘fix it’ without working together and seeking different approaches.</u></i></p>
U R Potential Young People	<p>Something to do for young people- service that support young people are limited – especially in services that offer a ‘voluntary relationship’ or one with a trusted adult to talk with and engage with, more than a number be like Big Hero 6 Beta Max, listen, empathise, support. More things to do or places to go that are cheap, able to hang out, wider offer to young people.</p> <p>Blackpool unsafe – do not like going into town as unsafe, no difference in gender all unsafe, leads to poor image of the town, dirty, run down all drunks and louts. Tourist town all money spent on tourists not residents.</p>	<p>Listen to young people, do not assume what we need, listen and talk to us. No really listen.</p> <p>Make Blackpool safe for everyone who lives here.</p>

	<p>Employment – more security in employment, better wages for young people, more proper jobs offering security. More apprenticeships, more opportunities to have a business.</p> <p>Looking to leave asap go to Manchester or Liverpool – school does not support aspirations - poor schools.</p> <p>Services - mental health services could be better, what do you do after accessing services where do you go next , Social Services need to be better, jump to assumptions, did not listen to me.</p> <p>Poverty – affects everyone, health, well-being, living, and opportunities – cannot always afford transport to get around – cannot afford rent and then debt issues.</p>	
Faith Forum	<p>Poverty – concerns over debt. Residents without jobs feel worthless.</p> <p>Mental Health- services are no longer being provided, voluntary groups are taking over where there is a gap</p> <p>Disconnect - there is a disconnect between the decision makers and the people '<i>Public need to know the true facts to make an informed decision</i>'. Power should be devolved to the residents.</p> <p>Partnership Working - Food Partnership is a good example of the Council and community / faith groups working together. The management is supported by the Council. Churches can provide volunteers and buildings but the Council should own the management of these resources.</p>	Faith communities and Council to work together to protect and serve the poor, powerless and vulnerable.
Disability Partnership	<p>Image - Blackpool is better than people give it credit for, should promote the good.</p> <p>Services – People '<i>need to be strong minded to find activities</i>'. There should be better co-ordination of activities for socialisation. People with mental health issues maybe too vulnerable to find them.</p> <p>Voluntary Sector - more could be done to use the voluntary sector, co-ordination, mapping, capacity building. The Council could work with organisations to make the most of the volunteers we have.</p>	We would like to see the Council commit to working with us to build an inclusive and accessible town for all.
Equalities Forum	<p>Social Isolation – no sense of community. More projects like the seed bombing in Bloomfield would increase pride in area.</p> <p>Housing - Rogue landlords from out of town, don't care about the state of the properties</p> <p>Enforcement - enforcing the minor issues, asb etc, would have a huge impact in poor areas. Shops should have to sort themselves out.</p>	Improve the standards for all in the town, landlords, business and residents.
Blackpool	Tourism – Blackpool is good for families but can be	Community Groups want to do

Gold Action Group	<p>expensive. Small B&Bs should be subject to the same checks as the private landlords to raise standards across the board. Business rates and car parks are expensive which leads to shops closing down.</p> <p>Housing – Too many landlords are from out of town. People should respect our town.</p> <p>Communities – <i>‘People want places where people can get together and organise things’</i>. The Council is <i>‘frightened to use your community’</i>.</p> <p>Communication – People from the Council come and talk to the group but they don’t get feedback.</p>	more but need the Council to respond to them.
St Peters Drop In	<p>Employment – There are no big employers in the town that offer year round jobs such as warehouses and distribution centres. If you are over 50yrs then finding a job is impossible. People have multiple jobs as it is expensive to live and travel around in Blackpool. There is a lack of skills in Blackpool to attract big business.</p> <p>Community - Due to cut backs there are very few community centres where people can get together and support each other.</p> <p>Tourism – A lot of money is spent on the front but the side streets are dirty and in poor condition, with asb and bad landlords.</p>	<i>‘People who live here see the real Blackpool’</i>
Third Sector – Economy Group	<p>Council – the Council’s processes are slow and bureaucratic and there is an unwillingness to pilot ideas and learn from them. The Council could work with social enterprises and the VCFs to look at how it could deliver it services different. But looking for best value might mean losing some control. <i>‘Got to do it together’</i>.</p> <p>VCFs - the VCFs brings in millions for the town through benefit maximisation and debt work. There should be some acknowledgment of this.</p> <p>Employment - There should be a focus on all year round, well paid employment.</p>	The interface between the Council and the social enterprise / VCFs isn’t very strong. The message from the top level of the Council should be <i>‘Together Stronger’</i>
Third Sector – Community Resilience	<p>Investment – feels like all the money goes to the front but the streets behind tell a different story, 3 things are needed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adequate resource - Clear ideas / vision - Skilled people <p>Third Sector – lots of hidden gems in the third sector that are not known. The Council should enter into a dialogue about service deliver and engage with these groups to see if either they could deliver it, or could work in partnership with the Council, or are the Council duplicating work already going on.</p>	Please engage with us now in the fullest sense, don’t wait. How can <i>‘we’</i> work together in the future.

	<p>Commissioning has made the sector more competitive but 12 month contracts mean it is difficult from organisations to retain and motivate staff.</p> <p>Communication – Celebrate the good stuff, including in the local press</p>	
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