

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

The Corporate area covers my portfolio and those of:

- Councillor Ivan Taylor (Cabinet Member for Projects and Partnerships)

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

At the end of July Council Tax in-year collection performance was 34.2%, an increase of 0.4% compared to the previous year, and this equates to £203,000 based upon the Council Tax Net Requirement excluding Police and Fire. Business Rate collection was 33.2%, a reduction of 0.6% compared with the previous year. This equates to £152,000 for the Blackpool element. Recovery action through the Magistrates Court is taking place against defaulting individuals and businesses.

The most significant impact on collection is locality, where transience and ability to pay create additional challenges for collection in Blackpool. The impact of locality in this regard can be clearly shown as Blackpool and Fylde operate a shared service for collection of Council Tax and Business Rates; indeed Fylde district, with the exact same staffing, systems and processes, consistently have higher collection levels than Blackpool. At year-end, in-year collection for Fylde was over 6% higher for Council Tax and over 3% higher for Business Rates when compared with Blackpool. The impact of locality therefore, and the specific challenges facing our population in comparison to our neighbours, should not be underestimated.

At the end of July, sundry debt collection was 76.2%, which was 10.7% lower than the previous year when it was 86.9%. This indicator can fluctuate significantly from month to month if large invoices are raised within the month. This was the case in July when an additional £3m became due from three large organisations, two of which were paid in early August. The notional amount uncollected at the end of July compared to last year is £2.3m.

The average number of days to process Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Scheme new claims and changes in circumstances for April was 22 days.

The call answer rate for Customer First was 45% for July, a 12% improvement compared to the same period last year.

Strategic Issues

Financial Monitoring

Financial performance monitoring in the early part of 2017/ 2018 highlighted financial pressures emerging in Children's Services, Strategic Leisure Assets, Parking Services, Treasury Management/ Business Loans Fund and Places with estimated working balances forecast to fall by £3,475,000 against the budgeted position over the year. This fall is in the context of unaudited working balances at the start of the year of £6,166,000, an erosion of 56%. However, in the context of £34.0m of Earmarked Revenue Reserves and with nine 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 three financial performance report for 2017/ 2018 was reported to the Executive on 11 September. The Budget for 2017/ 2018 required total savings to be found of £18.7million. As at 30 June 2017 (month 3) 22% of the 2017/ 2018 savings target had already been delivered and the full-year effect of the 2017/ 2018 savings in 2018/ 2019 amounts to 63% of the £18.7 million target.

Blackpool Airport Enterprise Zone

Blackpool Airport Enterprise Zone, one of the largest in the UK, was established in 2016 and over its 25-year life span is poised to transform the Blackpool and the Fylde Coast's economic base. Over its lifetime the Enterprise Zone is anticipated to attract over £300 million of private investment, and lead to the creation and safeguarding of 3,000 jobs supported by new infrastructure. This 141 hectare site has already experienced positive growth since its launch a year ago, with over 39 companies and 580 (circa 180 brand new) jobs locating since April 2016. This early growth includes the newly constructed Lancashire Energy HQ, which will be formally opened on the 6 October 2017. Since the establishment of the Enterprise Zone three new commercial developments, two conversions of existing buildings and a new food store have commenced or completed construction, supporting new employment and generating additional business rates income which is to be retained to support the cost of future enabling infrastructure provision for the site.

A team led by international consultants Mott McDonald are currently undertaking a comprehensive masterplan for the Enterprise Zone and are due to complete this work by October 2017. A large stakeholder and marketing perceptions consultation was held on the 5th September in partnership with Marketing Lancashire to give business and other key parties the opportunity to help shape the final detail of the plan. The masterplan will be presented for formal approval in October 2017.

Work is also progressing on the formal Enterprise Zone Implementation Plan, required by the Department for Communities and Local Government toward the end of the year. The masterplan is key to this. The Implementation Plan will include a site marketing strategy and provide primary marketing collateral for Marketing Lancashire in progressing International marketing of Lancashire's four Enterprise Zones.

The four Lancashire Enterprise Zones, at Warton, Salmesbury, Hillhouse and Blackpool Airport, will be launched for international marketing under the LAMEC (Lancashire Advanced Manufacturing and Energy Cluster) brand at MiPiM UK, which takes place at Olympia in London on the 18/ 19 October 2017. This early marketing activity will include the provision of new high quality interactive web sites for each individual Enterprise Zone. Blackpool and Fylde Councils will be assisting Marketing Lancashire in the promotion of Lancashire's Enterprise Zones at MiPiM UK.

Northern Powerhouse Ministerial Visit and the Future of Joint Working in Lancashire

On the morning of 15 August, I was delighted to host a visit by the Northern Powerhouse Minister, Jake Berry MP. During the first half of the morning, the Minister and I discussed options for future joint working in Lancashire and a small number of senior colleagues from the Local Enterprise Partnership and neighbouring Local Authorities joined us. It was a very positive discussion. The Minister acknowledged that Lancashire had shown appropriate ambition and willing in forming a shadow Combined Authority in the summer of 2016, but concurred that current Government policy regarding the future of devolution since the EU referendum remained unclear. However, the Minister urged partners in Lancashire to commit to the continuation of proposals to enhance joint working. Combined Authority working was now pulling in additional resource and powers into Manchester and Liverpool and Lancashire is in danger of slipping even further behind. We identified a number of options in discussion with the Minister and I shall be taking these for further detailed discussion with Lancashire Leaders at the next meeting of the shadow Combined Authority on the 19 September. The Minister agreed that I would write to him after this meeting in order to confirm intentions, so that he may then progress things within Government as appropriate.

Later in the morning I accompanied the Minister on a tour of the Winter Gardens, specifically to outline and showcase our plans for a new conference centre offer, with construction about to commence. The Minister showed great interest in the scheme and fully endorsed the development as a significant improvement to Blackpool's existing visitor and business tourism offer in various media interviews afterwards. The Minister also volunteered to assist Blackpool in recapturing appropriate conference trade, an offer I enthusiastically accepted.