

20 January 2016

**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**

**2021 Census**

The Office of National Statistics is currently developing the methodology for the 2021 Census, which will be the first to be carried out online. As part of the preparations, they have combined administrative datasets such as GP registers and tax data to see if this could be used to estimate how many people live in Local Authority areas. They have identified Blackpool as one of a handful of places across the UK where their methodology does not give an accurate estimate.

It is important we get accurate information on our population, for both service planning, but also, as our funding is based on how many people live here. As a result, we have invited the Office of National Statistics to Blackpool to discuss their proposed methods and influence their approach, hoping to avoid the risk that they underestimate our population.

**Changes to National Insurance rates due to introduction of flat rate State Pension**

A new single tier, flat rate State Pension is being introduced for people who reach State Pension age on or after 6 April 2016.

The new State Pension will replace the existing basic and additional State Pension. Employees who are members of either the LGPS or TPS are currently 'contracted out' of the additional State Pension and therefore receive a rebate on their National Insurance (NI) contributions.

This means that most employees are currently paying a lower amount of NI contributions. From 6 April 2016, they will no longer receive this NI rebate, which means they will start to pay a higher amount of NI contributions, an increase of 1.40 %. Likewise Employers will also no longer benefit from the contracted out rebate and will also see an increase in NI costs, an increase of 3.40%

**Employee wellbeing**

As budget announcements are made, continuing to try to improve the wellbeing and resilience of our employees is paramount. Supportive measures such as Occupational Health, Employee Assistance Programme and Coping with Pressure Training are all in place. In addition to this,

almost 200 employees attended well-being events during November, participating in activities such as blood pressure checks, BMI checks, massage and benefiting from nutritional, alcohol, smoking and general health awareness.

### **Unpaid Leave**

The staff briefings, which took place across the Council in November, regarding the £20 million savings in 2016/ 2017, highlighted to staff that the proposals assumed that teams would continue to save the equivalent of five days unpaid leave per full time employee. Employees are aware that this is of significant assistance in helping the Council to mitigate the number of job losses as the money saved by employees taking five days unpaid leave is around £1 million and this equates to approximately 30 jobs saved from redundancy per year. Additionally, many staff have come to value the extra unpaid leave over the last few years and some have requested more than five days, which has been allowed where the service is able to accommodate this. The uptake and assistance offered by employees with regard to this scheme is very much appreciated.

### **Financial Monitoring**

The latest financial performance monitoring report for 2015/ 2016 was reported to the Executive on 18 January 2016. As at month 8 in-year pressures prevail in Children's Services, Strategic Leisure Assets and Public Health with estimated working balances forecast to fall by £3,408,000 against the budgeted position over the year. This fall is in the context of working balances at the start of the year of £6,188,000.

The Budget for 2015/ 2016 required total savings to be found of £25.2 million. As at 30 November 2015, 72% of the 2015/ 2016 savings target had already been delivered. The current full-year forecast predicts that 87% will be achieved by the year-end, which takes into account new in-year pressures and savings and work is underway to close this gap further with alternative savings plans.

The full-year effect of the 2015/ 2016 savings in 2016/ 2017 amounts to 85% of the £25.2 million target and reflects the planned replacement of non-recurrent savings such as the £2.5m contribution from earmarked reserves with recurrent savings.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer published the Government's joint Spending Review 2015 and Autumn Statement on 25 November 2015, setting out public expenditure plans for 2016/ 2017 to 2019/ 2020. The Council's Provisional Settlement for 2016/ 2017 was published on 17 December. The specific details and implications of these announcements will be contained within the Council's Revenue Budget 2016/ 2017 report and subsequent refresh of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

### **Benefit Claims, Council Tax and Sundry Debt Collections**

The Council Tax Reduction (CTR) Scheme 2016/ 2017 consultation has now ended, comments and responses have been added to the updated Equality Assessment.

The average days to process new Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction claims and changes in circumstance has improved by six days since the last report and now stands at 25 days for November 2015.

The number of telephone calls received by Customer First reduced slightly to 11,231 during November 2015. This includes repeat calls and 46% of the total number were answered.

In-year council tax collection at the end of November was down by 2.7% when compared to the same point in the previous year (68.8% against 71.5%). Business rates collection was slightly up at 70.1% compared to 69.9% last year.

### **Electoral Services**

The Electoral Register for 2015/ 2016 was published on 1 December 2015 and there was an overall reduction of 2,632 electors, a major factor being the statutory removal of those electors who were unconfirmed after data matching and household canvass follow up. Work is continuing to be undertaken with partnership groups/ charities etc. to raise awareness of the forthcoming Police and Crime Commissioner election and possible referendum and the need to register to vote.

The Electoral Registration Officer is also working closely with colleagues across the Council in ensuring all new electors are registered at first point of contact. The number of postal votes remained static at 26% of the electorate.

### **Strategic Issues**

#### **Discretionary Awards**

The Council recently submitted written evidence in response to the Work and Pensions Select Committee inquiry into the local welfare safety net. The evidence provided comment and information on how Discretionary Housing Payments, Local Council Tax Reduction Schemes and Local Welfare Provision interact at a local level in Blackpool. The submission was published on the Parliament website and subsequently Jill Farrar, as representative of the Benefits Service, was invited to give oral evidence to the Committee. Blackpool's approach in combining the delivery of the Discretionary Awards within a single team was promoted as good practice in evidence given by other witnesses to the Committee.

#### **Counter Terrorism and Security Act.**

As a specified authority, Blackpool Council now has statutory duties under the new Counter Terrorism and Security Act. The expectation is that local authorities must:

- Co-ordinate preventative actions against terrorism using multi-agency groups.
- Assess risk of at risk adults and children being drawn into terrorism using Counter Terrorism Local Profiles.
- Develop an action plan to reduce risk to identified vulnerable groups.

- Identify and train staff to recognise radicalisation and extremism.
- Refer identified vulnerable adults and children where there is an evidence base of risk factors.
- Establish a responsible booking policy for public venues.
- Refrain from working with extremist organisations.

Blackpool Council has a small task and finish group which is coordinating the implementation of the duties, in which Risk Services have a key role. A briefing on the Act was held for all Elected Members on 20 January 2016.

## **Policy Issues**

### **Welfare Reforms**

The Chancellor announced a number of welfare reforms in the Autumn Statement. Although there is little detail on some of the measures yet, the proposed changes are currently being analysed to determine the impact on the residents of Blackpool. A briefing note will be provided to Members once more detail is known and understood.

### **Business Rates Relief scheme**

It has been announced that the full Small Business Rates Relief scheme will continue for another year, this is worth over £6m to 3,169 small local businesses.

### **Risk Issues**

The Risk Services team has recently reviewed the Council's Anti-Money Laundering Policy and Procedure and this will be taken to Audit Committee for consideration and approval in January 2016.

The Risk Services team arranged a training session for a range of Council services on the use of covert surveillance. This provided a lot of useful information, which will inform future policy development in this area.

## **Transforming Services**

### **Customer Services**

The Council has commenced the process of transforming its customer services strategy to ensure that it supports visitors about the standards of service that they can expect from across the Council. It will also ensure that the way that services are delivered fits with the vision, priorities and values of the Council and establish new monitoring systems so that service standards and customer care standards can be reviewed on a regular basis. It will further develop the process of making sure that services are available in the most appropriate format including wherever possible and practical digital.

The strategy once developed will be the subject of consultation and supported by an extensive training and development programme.

### **Financial Management Information System**

The Accountancy team continues to develop its Financial Management Information System and acquired the Collaborative Planning module earlier this year, which besides creating resilience in the Section allows more effective formulation of the Council's budgets than using unwieldy spreadsheets and enables scenario planning and sensitivity analysis to be undertaken in real-time for longer-term financial planning.

### **Working with Partners**

#### **Blackpool Museum**

Following Project Board approval of the RIBA Stage 2 plans, the Museum project team presented the project to the Heritage Lottery Fund on 30 November for a formal development review session. The review meeting was supported by Councillor Campbell, Senior Council staff and Michael Williams from Blackpool Entertainment Company Limited (BECL). It was also an opportunity to brief our new Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) Trustee for the North West Region, Mr Jim Dixon. Written feedback from the HLF will be received in 10 days giving feedback on any areas for concern and development. The Museum project is viewed as a significant game-changing project by both the HLF and Council.

#### **Property Services**

The current joint delivery arrangements for the Property Services function of the Council and Blackpool Teaching Hospitals is progressing well since it was established. The arrangement is providing opportunities for economies of scale and is achieving savings via joint procurement, contract management and shared resources. Both organisations are benefitting from being part of a larger property delivery arrangement with increased resilience.

This is also developing joint asset utilisation and shared occupation of premises to reduce costs and joint rationalisation of the property portfolio to achieve greater savings.