

30 March 2016

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

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 and Sundry Debt Collections

The average days, to process new Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction claims and changes in circumstance, improved by one further day since the last report and now stand at 24 days for January 2016.

The number of telephone calls received by Customer First remained at around 12,500 during January 2016 this includes repeat calls. A total of 45% of all calls were answered.

In-year council tax collection at the end of January was down by 1.5% when compared to the same point in the previous year (85.3% against 86.8%). Business rates collection was up at 85.7% compared to 84.3 last year.

Strategic Issues

Financial Monitoring

The latest financial performance monitoring report for 2015/ 2016 was reported to the Executive on 7 March 2016. As at month 10, in-year pressures prevail in Children’s Services, Strategic Leisure Assets and Public Health with estimated working balances forecast to fall by £2,868,000 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 31 January 2016 (month 10), 72% of the 2015/ 2016 savings target had already been delivered. The current full-year forecast predicts that 89% 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 92% of the £25.2 million target and reflect the planned replacement of non-recurrent savings such as the £2.5m contribution from earmarked reserves with recurrent savings.

On 8 February 2016, the Department for Communities and Local Government announced the Final Settlement of Blackpool Council's 2016/ 2017 Settlement Funding Assessment. There was no change to Blackpool Council's funding allocation of £75.85m in 2016/ 2017, as such the 2016/ 2017 General Fund Estimate of £122,999,000 was recommended to the Executive on 22 February 2016.

The Council's Discretionary Support Team has earned praise from the Parliamentary Work and Pensions Select Committee for its work in developing a local service to support people who are truly in need. Members of Parliament (MP's) on the Committee said the Blackpool team, along with their counterparts in Croydon and Milton Keynes, deserved 'great credit' for their work on initiatives to help residents.

The comments were made as part of an inquiry into the Local Welfare Safety Net, following on from the changes made to the Welfare System in April 2013. The Blackpool Scheme has been acknowledged by the MP's as showing best practice and innovation at local level, addressing vulnerable people's needs in the most cost effective way by providing practical help and person-centered support to prevent further needs arising.

Talbot MSCP

The Basrai World Buffet opened a few days before Christmas 2015 and seems to be trading well. A schedule of the landlord works is being agreed with 'The Gym' and will need to be carried out prior to the site being occupied. Following this, the Gym will commence their fit out works and expect to be open to trade in June 2016.

Speculative Offices, Retail Units and Sale of Assets

A public sector organisation viewed the first floor for the third time on 1 December, they are very interested, but it is dependent on the sale of their existing premises. Two private sector organisations have viewed the first floor in the last few weeks. Both have said that once they have made a decision they would want to move in by the end of June this year.

The Blackpool Entertainment Company has agreed to take unit 2A of No. 1 Bickerstaffe Square to operate as a coffee shop/ café branded, as the Tower Coffee Company selling Coffee Republic. The contractor started work on 22 February.

Talbot Gateway

As part of future phases of this project, the Council has been looking at how the Wilkinson's building fit into the wider development. Options including acquisition, to better facilitate the tramway extension, will be considered by the Council in the coming weeks.

Blackpool Museum

The formal 'gateway' review by Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) of the Museum development highlighted the progress made in developing this ambitious and highly complex project. The HLF commended us on the comprehensive community engagement programme, the quality of the team and the considerable progress made to date. Having acknowledged that the museum

is 'an exciting and innovative concept', they are recommending that we take additional time to develop the national and international significance of the Blackpool story, as well as the funding partnerships needed to deliver it. The team is currently reviewing the timetable, as well as the cost implications and further discussions with HLF and other funders are scheduled in the next few weeks. Recently, officers from every regional team from the Arts Council of England participated in a workshop to develop the Interpretative Brief.

Policy Issues

Welfare Reforms

The Government has announced proposals to cap the amount of rent that Housing Benefit (HB) will cover in social sector accommodation with effect from April 2018. The proposed change will restrict the amount of HB to the relevant Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate, which currently applies to private sector tenants.

It is understood, that the Government's LHA cap will also apply to supported and Sheltered Accommodation. The impact of limiting Housing Benefit payments via an LHA related cap to such vulnerable individuals could be significant for both the claimant and providers. Current Government proposals include making additional funding available to local authorities in the form of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) to enable top ups between the LHA rate and the actual rent and service charge. The Benefits Service is currently gathering information on the impact the proposed changes could have on residents and Social Housing providers.

Employee Engagement

The Group that has been managing the process around the budget cycle met to complete a lessons learned review of the arrangements for this year. The group found that each year the approach to managing the processes continues to become more efficient and so this way of managing arrangements will continue. The review particularly noted the importance of ensuring that engagement, communication and a pro-active approach to supporting employees facing redundancy was an essential part of effectively managing budget processes.

Working with Partners

Revenue and Benefits Service

Fylde Council has recently confirmed that it will be taking the option to extend the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service arrangement to October 2017.

Combined Authority

Work has been continuing on influencing the shape of any Combined Authority with the rest of Lancashire. This has included exploring what 'deal' could be agreed with Government if a Combined Authority were to be agreed. This will be debated elsewhere on the agenda.

Public Services Board

The Public Services Board made up of all the key public sector partners in the town hosted an event for all senior managers in the City Learning Centre. The purpose of the meeting was to establish a shared vision for Blackpool that would resonate with all partners and to begin to explore what that would mean in terms of actions and commitment of participants. The Transformation Network, who facilitated the event, will provide a report, which pulls together the key outcomes from the session and compares the strategies and plans of each of the main public sector bodies to identify synergies and differences.