

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL – COUNCILLOR BLACKBURN

Financial Management

The latest financial performance report for 2014/ 15 were reported to the Executive on 15 December 2014. As at month 7, in-year pressures in Children's Services, Adult Services, Parking Services and Community and Environmental Services have been mitigated in part by the performance of Treasury Management, Area Forum and Ward Budgets. The Council's forecast working balances are now at a forecast year-end level of £4.6m. Services are working to recover their deficits whilst at the same time financial planning for the 2015/ 2016 financial year.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer presented his Autumn Statement to the House of Commons on 3 December 2014. Key announcements relevant to local government are summarised below:

Public Sector Expenditure is set to fall at the same rate as between 2010/ 2011 and 2014/ 2015 until 2018. It is then forecast to increase by inflation in 2018/ 2019 and 2019/ 2020.

The Government estimates that public sector pay restraint in this Parliament is expected to save £12bn by 2014/ 2015. It also expects that the continuation of this policy will lead to commensurate savings by 2017/ 2018.

From April 2016, the Government will increase childcare support within Universal Credit from 70% to 85% of eligible costs for all families.

Travel expenses paid to councillors are to become exempt from income tax and employee NICs from April 2015 (on Approved Mileage Allowance Payment rates).

Business Rates

The Government will undertake a review of the future structure of business rates. This will report by Budget 2016. It will also publish its interim findings on the review of business rates administration by December 2015. The review is intended to be revenue neutral and "consistent with the Government's financing of local authorities".

The current doubling of Small Business Rates Relief will continue in 2015/ 2016. It is expected that this measure should be revenue neutral for local authorities based on the Autumn Statement 2014 Arrangements. The Department for Communities and Local Government currently refunds local authorities for the lower business rates collected (due to the 100% relief instead of 50%) through Section 31 grant payments.

The 2.0% cap on the increase to the Business Rates Multiplier in 2014/ 2015 will also be applied in 2015/ 2016. Based on the September RPI figure (the indicator used to determine the increase to the multiplier in the following year), the increase to the multiplier should have been 2.3%. It is expected that this measure should again be revenue neutral for local authorities based on the current arrangements. It is not necessary to refund local authorities beyond 2015/ 2016, as the Revenue Support Grant paid will be adjusted accordingly from 2016/ 2017 onwards.

The Chancellor also announced that the current £1,000 business rates discount to retailers (announced in Autumn Statement 2013) will continue in 2015/ 2016, but will increase to £1,500.

Legal Services

The service has been drafting and advising in connection with a wide variety of contracts, including Yeadon Way refurbishment, variation to the joint working agreement with Lancashire County Council regarding waste disposal and funding for an apprenticeship scheme. It has assisted with the evaluation processes for the appointment of a project manager and architect for the Blackpool Museum project. Four 'Right to Buy' sales have been completed since October 2014. A Hybrid Agreement is being negotiated for section 278/ 38 Agreements for the Royal Mail delivery office development at Hawking Place, Faraday Way, which would allow and enable road improvements necessitated by the development.

Rigby Road/ Tyldesley Road Compulsory Purchase Order was made and submitted, attracting three objections. One has been withdrawn and an inquiry took place on 13 January 2015 to hear the two outstanding objections with a decision expected in late spring/ early summer. The Queens Park Compulsory Purchase Order attracted one objection. Discussions are taking place in this regard and if the objection is withdrawn, an inquiry will not be required. If the objection is withdrawn, a decision should be made around the same time as the Rigby Road decision.

The service has also been advising and preparing documentation in connection with the new processes introduced by the Anti-social Behaviour Crime and Policing Act 2014, such as public spaces protection orders (previously alley gating orders under the Highways Act 1980) and community protection notices. The service has recently secured conviction, successfully resisted a judicial review application and obtained a Proceeds of Crime payment arising from a prosecution for breach of a planning enforcement notice.

Democratic Governance

A joint working group has been set up with key members from the Standards Committees of both Blackpool Council and Fylde Borough Council (with whom we have reciprocal arrangements) along with the independent persons, who supports the standards framework. The working group will be reviewing the Code of Conduct that was first agreed by Council in 2012 and the arrangements for dealing with complaints and will report back to the Standards Committee and Council in due course.

Revenues, Benefits, Invoices and Payments

Council Tax collection at the end of November was 71.5%, which is 0.4% less than the same period last year. The Business Rates collection figure at the end of November was 69.9%, which is 2.9% (or £1.5m) less than the same period in the previous financial year. This is the first year that businesses have had the right to pay over 12 monthly instalments rather than 10 and so a direct comparison with the previous year is not possible.

Resources are still being concentrated on processing the new Housing Benefit claims and changes of circumstances that are outstanding. As a result, the service is not yet in a position to review the partial closure of the Benefits telephone line.

Online service usage is still being promoted and figures for the number of new Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support claims completed online is steadily increasing. It is anticipated that paper application forms will be withdrawn by the end of March 2015, subject to an Equality Analysis. This change will be co-ordinated with the introduction of an automated download of the form into the core processing system.

Universal Credit went live at the Blackpool Job Centres on 8 December 2014 for single claimants and couples. Training has now been completed for all staff and Blackpool is also taking part in a pilot scheme, which will involve verifying Housing costs on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. Other services the Council will deliver include Personal Budgeting Support and supporting customers to claim Universal Credit.

All of the Council's merchant accounts (bank accounts for credit and debit card payments) are now compliant with Payment Card Industry legislation.

The Council's internet payments site moved to a new server in December, which will improve the payment facility for customers as it is compatible with all web browsers.

Blackpool Fylde and Wyre Credit Union

Since the credit union's successful move to its Birley Street branch it has experienced record months in October and November in levels of new accounts, levels of deposits and levels of new lending and is able to offer a smoother, faster service to its members on site.

Risk Services

Work is currently underway to renew the Council's insurance programme for 2015/ 2016. It is not envisaged that any change to the programme will be required, but updated information in relation to the Council's insurable risks is being collated and submitted.

The transfer of benefit fraud investigators to the Department for Work and Pensions is now picking up momentum with a planned implementation day of 1 April 2015. Initial meetings have been held with the Department of Work and Pensions, Human Resources team and also the operational team and work is underway to populate the detailed project plan with timescales and responsibilities. There will be a significant amount of work, which will remain with the local authority and steps are being taken to assess the impact of this and determine how to resource it.

Contracts and Purchasing

Tenders completed and contracts awarded since the last report include:

CONTRACT	PROVIDER
Provision of Banking Services	Barclays (London)
Bedding Plants	Crosby's Nurseries (Cheshire)
Sprinkler Systems, Dry Risers and Gas Suppression Systems Inspection and Maintenance	FVS Limited (Rochdale)
Firefighting systems, inspection and maintenance	Walker Fire (UK) Ltd (Preston)
Provision of Male Condoms and Lubricants	Leeds Trading Company (LTC) Healthcare (Harrogate)
Medical Assessment in Relation to Blue Badge Applications.	Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (Blackpool)
Council Tax Daily Printing (6 month trial)	Document Outsourcing Limited(Warrington)
Parking Bailiffs	Phoenix (Bolton) Equita (Northampton) Rundle (Leicestershire)
Legionella – Provision of periodic servicing and monitoring of hot and cold water services	Waterman Environmental Services (Staffordshire)

Health and Wellbeing Board

The Health and Wellbeing Board met in early December 2014. It received presentations on two recently successfully submitted BIG Lottery bids, Better Start and Headstart. The first, Better Start, was £45 million over ten years to transform services for 0 to 3 year olds, the second, Headstart, is a £500,000 pilot aimed at building the resilience of 10 to 14 year olds to reduce the likelihood of them developing mental health problems in the future.

Better Start is a Partnership lead by the NSPCC with the key partners being the Council, the Police and the NHS. The strategy has four key components, a public health approach - shifting the curve for the whole population, evidence-based interventions - providing more intensive help for those who need it, systems transformation - building shared understanding, shared action, and creating the Blackpool Centre for Early Child Development.

Headstart is a pilot programme lead by the Council aiming to increase resilience amongst 10 to 14 year old young people. The Council had been selected as one of ten areas to develop a range of innovative interventions with the opportunity to submit a further bid for a longer-term project lasting five years.

The Board also received a number of presentations, including one on End of Life Care which detailed the Hospice at Home pilot, a range of multi-professional education and training, Do not attempt cardio- pulmonary resuscitation (DNACPR) forms, the Gold Standard Framework for care homes and Care of the Dying Pathway.

Staff and Public Communications

A new fostering campaign is being rolled out in the New Year, which will involve an improved website and some social media advertising. Dry January will be the focus of the Public Health campaigns this month.

The main topic generating media interest this month has been the proposed budget savings. Work has been undertaken to ensure both the public and staff are aware of the proposals and how they can share their views.

There has been coverage relating to the new sea defences at Anchorholme, changes to crossings in the Talbot Gateway, new funding to help people with mental health problems gain employment, case studies on business start-ups and the Christmas Give a little campaign.

Social media accounts have been used to keep residents updated of gritting activity and the closure of Yeadon Way.

“Customer First”

The Customer First reception point now deals with Customer First and Benefit enquiries. This enables Benefits staff to assist customers with basic benefit queries and where possible to enable customers to self-serve using the computers in the Centre. This has resulted in shorter waiting times as customers only need to see an Advisor where necessary. The corporate channel shift agenda is currently addressing how we can enable customers to self-serve their enquiries where appropriate.

Council Efficiency Programme

The Budget for 2014/ 2015 required total savings to be found of £15.8 million. As at month 7 of the financial year, 69% of this savings target had been delivered. The current full-year forecast predicts that 86% will be achieved by the year-end, taking into account new in-year pressures and savings and work is underway to close this gap further with alternative savings plans.

Human Resources (including Schools)

Investors in People (IIP)

Following the recent Investors in People review Blackpool Council has received silver accreditation of the prestigious Investors in People award and has been found to be “demonstrating a progressive approach to achieving business improvement through people”.

Achieving silver status of the IIP standard is a fantastic endorsement of our continued commitment to supporting and developing our employees, so that they can be the best that they can be. The fact that staff are still engaged, empowered and committed to providing high quality services is a testament to the professionalism and dedication of Council staff. This is of particular importance in these challenging times, when we face significant financial pressures and increasing demand.

The challenge now for the Council is to embrace any identified areas for development and we will work hard to ensure Council-wide consistency in all that we do so that we can achieve our business objectives and provide the best possible service to Blackpool residents.

NJC Pay award

In November agreement was reached between the National Joint Councils for Local Government (NJC) and the Trade Unions on the pay proposal covering the period 1 January 2015 to 31 March 2016.

The agreement covers the terms and conditions of 95% of Blackpool Council employees.

Flu vaccine programme

The Council's annual programme of flu vaccinations for employees is now complete and totals 690 vaccinations this year, which is an increase of over 200 based on last year's figures.

The programme is designed to help keep employees healthy, improve attendance and protect vulnerable service users.

Fairness Commission

The review of the Fairness Commission is now complete, the Steering Group are due to meet early in the New Year to consider the recommendations and implement any appropriate changes. In the meantime, the Fairness Commission continues to deliver a great deal of activity in our communities:

- The Enjoy and Respect Campaign has been delivered again throughout December 2014, delivering key messages to party-goers in the Town Centre at night;
- The Fairtrade activity continues, the working group has now been established and they continue to work with the Public, Private and Voluntary Sector to ensure Fairtrade products are offered as the first choice wherever possible;
- The Loneliness Project on Grange Park continues to gather pace, community members are working closely with members of the Fairness Commission to provide a range of opportunities for people to make new connections within their community, creating friendships and social cohesion which in turn will improve the health and well-being of our citizens and improve their resilience in times of challenge; and
- A Teenagers Summit took place in December 2014, an opportunity for young people to meet with Public Sector Chief Officers, challenging policy and decision making and sharing their views on how they would like things to look in the future. Over 70 young people attended the summit, which followed the Children's Summit earlier in the year where 80 children mainly from our primary schools attended to share their views. These events are very well received and they will continue in 2015.

Community Engagement

The Night Time Economy Working Group has undertaken an extensive community engagement exercise to gather the views of Blackpool and Fylde Coast residents on Blackpool town centre. Two pieces of work have been undertaken, a random sample survey to understand perceptions and satisfaction with the town centre covering over 360 people and an open access public consultation engaging 625 people. This was achieved through a mix of online responses (supported by press releases, social media and the Your Blackpool newspaper) and proactive engagement in town centres, out-of-town locations, libraries and the college. In total, this represents nearly 1,000 people who have been engaged in this conversation.

The analysis and findings will be reported to the Working Group this month and used to shape future action to improve the town centre.

Museum for Blackpool Project

The recruitment for the new in-house project team is now complete. In all, eight new posts have been created. The project director is Belinda Betts, who joins us from Newcastle, Australia. Belinda has experience of managing major capital developments within the museum sector, including a major development at the London Transport Museum. The full team will be in post in Blackpool early in the New Year.

An external project management company to support the project has been appointed. They are the Prince's Regeneration Trust, which is one of The Prince of Wales's charities, which works to deliver regeneration projects for historic buildings and sites. They have considerable experience in managing high-profile heritage regeneration projects of a similar nature to the Museum for Blackpool.

Interviews for the Architect Design Team took place in December 2014 and a preferred company identified. The final stages of the procurement process are in the process of being finalised. There will be an announcement about the successful company in January.

Next steps for the project are procurement of the interpretative design team, which is a very important appointment and the community engagement programme, which is being planned in detail now and will be rolled out in the New Year.