

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL – COUNCILLOR SIMON BLACKBURN

Financial Management

The 2014/ 2015 Accounts prepared under the International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) format have been completed. These will now be examined by our external auditor and reported to the Audit Committee on 24 September. The draft Accounts show that the Council's working balances as at 31 March 2015 are slightly above the £6 million target at £6.2 million.

Council Efficiency Programme

The Budget for 2015/ 2016 required total savings to be found of £25.2 million. The first Corporate Budget Savings report for 2015/ 2016 was reported to the Corporate Leadership Team on 26 May. As at 30 April 2015 (month 1), 66% of the 2015/ 2016 savings target had already been delivered and of the remainder a further 20% is expected to be achieved by the year-end.

Revenues, Benefits, Invoices and Payments

The average time to process new benefit claims and changes for April was 36 days. Work continues on processing old items of work. Until this work is completed, processing times are unlikely to improve. Work is progressing to automate the download of claims into the back office processing system.

The Universal Credit housing pilot has been extended until the end of August, but the number of cases transferring from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit remains low.

The council tax year-end collection was 92.4% against the target of 92.5%. It is anticipated that the difficulties in collecting from working age customers who receive council tax reduction will continue. At the end of April, collection showed an improvement at 10.7% compared to the previous year at 9.5%.

Business rate collection at the end of March was 95.09%, which is a small improvement on the previous year, which was 94.89%. At the end of April, there was an improvement at 9.14% compared to 8.21% the previous year.

Transactional Services have been trialling lodge cards in four sections of the Council and with Ralph Livesey, the supplier of fruit and vegetables to the Council. A lodge card is a purchasing card that is held with the supplier allowing the sections to place orders by phone, saving processing time and catalogue management. The supplier is also paid quicker as they receive payment seven days later. This process is now being rolled out to all sections and schools who use Ralph Livesey. We will then be looking to introduce further suppliers from September.

Customer First

Customer First ensured maximum staff resources were available to deal with increased demand due to annual billing and elections.

Customer First is working closely with the Communications Team and other service areas to progress the corporate Channel Shift agenda. This enables customers to access certain services themselves online. The first objective is the Bulky Matters collections where furniture items are removed and recycled.

Risk Services

A revised structure for Risk Services was implemented from 1 May 2015. The service will now comprise the three teams of Internal Audit, Corporate Fraud and Risk and Resilience. The restructure has seen the Senior Risk and Insurance Officer, Business Continuity Officer and Emergency Planning Officer take on more generic roles as Risk and Resilience Officers and an increased capacity in Corporate Fraud with a focus on high-risk areas such as insurance fraud.

The service has been involved in the investigation into a former employee who fraudulently obtained £18,000 from the Housing Options service. This resulted in a guilty plea and a suspended sentence was given by the Crown Court.

An independent actuary has been appointed to undertake a review of the Council's self-insurance reserve to help determine whether adequate provision is being made to pay for future claims.

The Council's Annual Governance Statement has been prepared and approved by the Corporate Leadership Team. This was considered by the Audit Committee on 18 June.

Legal Services

The Queens Park Compulsory Purchase Order was confirmed on 7 April 2015 and notice of confirmation has been published. A General Vesting Declaration could be made after 16 June 2015. The Royal Mail Hawking Place delivery office hybrid agreement completed and stage 1 monies have recently been refunded as the stage 1 standard has been met. Work relating to the development agreement for the proposed Energy College is ongoing.

The surrender of the telecommunications mast on the former Syndicate Nightclub has been completed. Other completions include the lease of leisure facilities at Stanley Park and the lease for the use of the former Ponden Mill premises as a restaurant. The Service has advised in connection with the contract for the musical, CATS, which is to be performed at the Opera House. A new deferred payment agreement for accommodation charges has been drafted and those that have completed are being registered as required.

The Corporate Legal Service has now litigated various cases under the recently introduced Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. It obtained an anti-social behaviour injunction under this legislation in an application on behalf of the Council and a neighbouring authority and a similar injunction that related to the Council as provider of housing. Additionally it acted on the obtaining of a Criminal Behaviour Order for breach of a Community Protection Notice that had been served under this Act.

Staff and Public Communications

The summer edition of 'Your Blackpool' will be distributed mid-June. It will include contact details of the Councillors, a guide to events and activities taking place over the summer, details of the Council couch consultation events and a profile on the new high ropes course at Stanley Park.

Residents are being encouraged to sign up for an electronic version of Your Blackpool that is distributed once a month.

Communication has gone out to staff thanking them for their efforts during the very busy election period.

The Council collection of bulky waste service has now gone online as part of the channel shift programme. It has been live for a month and despite not being promoted at all, 26% of orders have been received online this month.

It was foster care fortnight (1 to 14 June) and we ran a campaign to encourage potential fosterers to attend our tea party events at Stanley Park. The long service awards for foster cares also take part during foster care fortnight. This year we celebrated 500 years of fostering and the tower was lit up in recognition of the years Blackpool foster carers have dedicated to fostering.

Human Resources (including Schools)

Social work recruitment

The recruitment of Social workers, Advanced Practitioners and Team Managers remains challenging both locally and nationally.

We continue to work very closely with children's services to continue to improve the local situation and have begun joint working with health and education partners to promote professional roles within Blackpool.

Step up to Social Work

Blackpool in partnership with Blackburn with Darwen and Lancashire has been successful in a further bid to deliver the Step Up to Social Work programme.

This is a 14-month training programme designed to enable high-achieving graduates or career changers with experience of working with children and young people to become qualified social workers at the same time as gaining intensive hands-on experience.

Payroll

Changes to Teachers and NHS pensions

The required changes to the above schemes have now been implemented.

Employee Development and Training

The team is currently arranging a number of important events and conferences including:

Staff Conference – 19 October

Children's conference – 30 June

The Blackpool Challenge event – 22 June

Strategy Development and Research

We have undertaken a comprehensive representative survey of residents' views and satisfaction with Council services, allowing people to tell us about their priorities for Blackpool over the next few years. The top three priorities are Street Cleaning, Tackling Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour and Regeneration. Areas of good performance identified were around the visitor economy, improving health and wellbeing, whilst areas for improvement were keeping Blackpool clean and giving young people the best start in life.

Democratic Governance

Thursday 7 and Friday 8 May saw the Polling day and Counts for both the Local Election and also the two parliamentary constituencies of Blackpool North and Cleveleys and Blackpool South. This is the first time both elections have coincided since 1997 and created a huge logistical exercise with regard to planning and carrying out the support for both types of election. The Returning Officer used over 600 people throughout the election period in supporting the process and it was certainly an event that brought together staff from all across the Council and colleagues from the Police, Health, Blackpool Coastal Housing Limited, Blackpool Transport Services Limited, Sandcastle Waterpark, the Winter Gardens and Blackpool and Fylde College and many others who were just employed for the election. All this ensured the process was efficient and professional.

On behalf of all the candidates who stood at the elections could I pass on my thanks to those involved.

Blackpool Museum Project

The Community Engagement Team is working with groups across the town to gather memories and stories about Blackpool, which will add to our historic collections and inform the development of the Museum. They have collected memories in Glasgow, Bolton and Bradford and attended Dementia week events and the International Dance festival. The team is also developing plans for a major public consultation event in the Winter Gardens on the August Bank Holiday weekend, which is open to all.

The Museum team has also recruited and inducted 41 volunteers who will be supporting the Museum team across a range of tasks on the project.

In April, the project team appointed interpretative designers who have since been working closely with the museum team on developing the exhibition design based on research, investigation of the collections and community feedback. Specialist museum and interior designers Casson Mann bring formidable experience having worked internationally and for organisations such as the V and A, Imperial War Museum, Science Museum and the Natural History Museum.

The Round two submission to the Heritage Lottery Fund, our major funder, is scheduled for February 2016.