

**MINUTES OF LEVELLING UP SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING - WEDNESDAY, 21 JUNE
2023**

Present:

Councillor S Smith (in the Chair)

Councillors

Boughton

Hoyle

B Mitchell

Thomas

P Brookes

Humphreys

D Scott

Wilshaw

In Attendance:

Alan Cavill, Director of Communications and Regeneration

Sharon Davis, Scrutiny Manager

Vikki Piper, Head of Housing

Jodie Stephenson, Democratic Services Senior Advisor

Councillor Lynn Williams, Leader of the Council

Councillor Mark Smith, Cabinet Member for Levelling-Up Place

Councillor Paul Galley, Chair, Scrutiny Leadership Board

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

2 PUBLIC SPEAKING

There were no requests from members of the public to speak on this occasion.

3 EXECUTIVE AND CABINET MEMBER DECISIONS

The Committee noted the decisions taken since its previous meeting.

4 FORWARD PLAN

The Committee considered the contents of the Council's Forward Plan July 2023 to October 2023, relating to the portfolios of the Cabinet Members whose responsibilities fell within its remit and noted the upcoming items.

5 LEVELLING-UP INTRODUCTION

Mr Alan Cavill, Director of Communications and Regeneration, provided the Committee with a detailed update with regards to the history of Blackpool's journey within the Levelling-Up pilot.

Mr Cavill explained that the Council and partners had worked hard to win Blackpool's status as a national Levelling Up Pilot in March 2022. A strong working relationship with the Department of Levelling-Up, Homes and Communities (DLUHC) and Homes England had been embedded and produced tangible results, which provided everyone with

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confidence that the partnership would continue to develop.

Work had begun with other government departments to push and test their response to making levelling up work right across government. He explained that in the coming months further commitment was expected across government to deliver on Blackpool's ambitions over an extended period of time.

The next strategic target was to secure a financial commitment to the first phase of physical housing intervention at scale via Homes England. In parallel, the Council would be working with Government to review capacity and governance arrangements to ensure Blackpool would be in the right position to deliver a wider programme of holistic regeneration, and start to truly level up for residents and businesses.

He advised that the 'Team Blackpool' ethos encompassed the partnership working with the Pride of Place Partnership, alongside commitment from civil servants and agency officials notably from the DLUHC and Homes England. The joint working had proved invaluable in terms of the support the Council had received.

The Committee raised concerns with regards to inflation pressures on the funding awarded to Blackpool and whether it could potentially cause issues for the developments in hand, in terms of failure or cut back.

Mr Cavill advised the Committee that the Council had been realistic with regards to inflation, and there had been a reasonable contingency incorporated from the outset. He added that a repeat investment plan would be undertaken to establish where the projects sat in terms of market inflation pressures.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Lynn Williams advised that the Levelling-Up pilot had prioritised developing the needs of the local economy by providing local people the skills and jobs they needed to have better lives.

Members enquired as to how the Council defined outcomes and goals and measured success. In response, Mr Cavill explained that all projects had been and would be analysed on a project by project basis. He advised that a number of economic factors such as the cost of living crisis, would have an impact on the wider economy. Future performance indicators would be developed in partnership with the Department of Levelling-Up, Homes and Communities (DLUHC).

Ms Vikki Piper, Head of Housing, added that the Housing element of the Levelling-Up pilot would be a much slower process predicting a period of 10 to 15 years before major changes would be embedded and recognised.

Ms Piper advised that alongside the need for economic growth it had long been recognised that the housing conditions in the inner wards, particularly in the private rented sector (PRS), were amongst the worst in the country. The market was underpinned by rents set at benefit levels and was typified by short tenancies, a lack of quality and a transient group of tenants. Without addressing the poor inner ward housing conditions Blackpool risked not getting the full social benefit of the economic regeneration agenda that was in delivery across the town.

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She advised the Committee that housing failure in the centre of Blackpool was the Council's number one public policy challenge. Sustained intervention and investment was now needed to reverse decline and deliver a better future.

She advised that the Levelling-Up White paper contained an action plan which included:

- Halving the number of non – decent homes by 2030 by introducing a Decent Homes Standard to the PRS.
- Abolishment of section 21 “no fault” evictions.
- Introduction of a new single housing ombudsman.
- Introduction of a new property portal

In response to further questions the Committee was informed that the new development on Grange Park would be 100% affordable rented properties. In addition, it was envisaged that the development was on track to be close to carbon net zero. The Multiversity phase of the project was over budget and this was due to a number of factors, not the ambition to achieve net zero premises.

The Committee also discussed the proposals for the combined authority and the Private Members Bill. In addition, Ms Piper advised the Committee that the Homes England Master Plan had been delayed slightly until around autumn.

6 TOURISM PERFORMANCE

Mr Alan Cavill, Director of Communications and Regeneration provided the Committee with a background to the visitor economy and how performance had been assessed.

He explained that Blackpool used two distinct methods:

- The Annual STEAM Report
- The monthly Visitor Economy Performance Indicator (VEPI) report

In terms the annual STEAM report, this was a tool used by many UK destinations, and was based on trend analysis. STEAM generated an estimate of the overall number of visitors to Blackpool. However, Mr Cavill explained that the data was usually published nine months after the end of the calendar year (2022 due in September 2023).

The monthly Visitor Economy Performance Indicator (VEPI) report was produced in-house with contributions from Blackpool Transport, Northern Rail, a selection of visitor attractions and town centre retailers, as well as town centre and promenade footfall which was measured using mobile phone data.

Given the lag in production of the annual STEAM report, the VEPI reports provided more of a “real-time” flavour of performance against the previous year.

Members discussed the illuminations with a range of opinions discussed and provided an update upon a number of recently made improvements. The Committee was informed that the value of the winter extension of the Illuminations had been proven and had

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increased the economy dramatically, with the October half-term proving a popular time.

The Committee complimented the Winter Gardens Conference Centre and Mr Cavill advised that the centre had successfully brought value to the resort and other business in the town, and was on the right trajectory of growth, however the Committee was advised that this had been achieved at a slower rate than expected due to Covid.

It was queried whether Blackpool had a sufficient number of good quality hotels to accommodate the increased number delegates attending the conference centre. Mr Cavill explained that part of the Blackpool offer it was intended to provide a high standard of local conference accommodation, a large proportion of which must be branded hotels. The number of branded hotels was currently lower than required, however this should improve when the Holiday Inn development was complete.

The Committee discussed the need to develop stronger partnerships with all Blackpool attractions, and would consider this item at the workplanning workshop.

7 TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION UPDATE

Mr Cavill, Director of Communication and Regeneration provided a detailed overview of progress on various projects which had contributed in securing the regeneration of Blackpool Town Centre.

He explained that the Town Centre currently fell short of what was expected with regards to purpose and delivery for the community of Blackpool. Significant progress had been made on the delivery of a number of projects, with further approvals received for the funding of a number of additional projects. Progress had been made on the implementation of the Town Centre Strategy and Action Plan.

The Committee discussed the government's Active Travel Fund, which focused on improving walking and cycling facilities along key routes in the town. Members were informed that bike routes were being developed as part of the Transport Plan. New cycle lanes and traffic systems would aim to encourage cycling and to make it easier for the rider.

Members considered the number of vacant properties in the Town Centre. Mr Cavill advised the Committee that the vacant premises were closely monitored and analysed to see if there was a pattern. He explained that the number of void properties had reduced within the last six month period.

The Committee agreed that it receive rich data relating to vacant premises and suggested the item be considered at the workplanning workshop to determine whether the Committee felt this topic would suitable for a deep dive Scrutiny review.

8 SCRUTINY WORKPLAN

The Committee noted the date of the work planning workshop, and was asked to contribute with suggested items that the Members felt they would like to scrutinise further with the current sea quality concerns raised as a key area for scrutiny.

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The Chair of the Scrutiny leadership Board, Councillor Paul Galley provided the Committee with an overview of the role of scrutiny.

9 DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The Committee noted the date and time of the next meeting as 6.00pm on Wednesday, 4 October 2023,

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 7.50 pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:
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