

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL AND CABINET MEMBER FOR TOURISM, ARTS AND CULTURE – COUNCILLOR LYNN WILLIAMS

Portfolio areas of responsibility:

- Tourism and marketing services
- Tourism-based regeneration
- Arts and culture
- Illuminations
- Built heritage
- Planning and land use
- Corporate Services (ICT, HR, Customer First, communications)
- Financial management

Introduction

The cabinet member will present the report to Council and report on any key issues.

Theme 1 – Tourism Performance Update

After an exceptional start to the tourism season in May and the first part of June, on the back of a prolonged spell of good weather and an additional Bank Holiday, visitor numbers have since become more volatile. This is predominantly due to the poor weather over the school holidays in July which has particularly impacted on visitor numbers at outdoor attractions.

The cost-of-living crisis is potentially also a factor, although Blackpool has repeatedly scored extremely well in national surveys on affordability. In a survey carried out by Travelodge at the start of the season, Blackpool was named among the top five staycation destinations alongside Cornwall, Devon, the Isle of Wight, and Whitby. Blackpool was also placed third in UK-wide research carried out by holiday rental company Airbnb showing the places experiencing the biggest spike in bookings this summer. In the latest survey, carried out by finance specialists, RIFT, Blackpool and the Lake District came joint top in league table of the UK's most affordable staycation destinations, based on factors including the cost of family days out and accommodation.

Once again, there has been a significant investment of more than £1m in events and destination marketing for the 2023 season. This includes a repeat of the "Only In Blackpool" marketing campaign developed in partnership with Merlin Entertainments and other resort partners, which included TV and video on demand advertising in Scotland and England, radio

and social media. The TV advert, which ran from mid-June to the end of August again featured resort ambassador, Nigel C Gull.

The major events programme began in August with the return of the two-day Air Show Weekend. With the Red Arrows and Typhoon display teams performing on both days and with the added bonus of a Spitfire and replica Red Arrow within the Air Show village, the event once again attracted record crowds. Mobile phone data shows that the footfall on the Promenade was more than 350,000 across the two days, outperforming what was a spectacular turn-out last year. The Air Show was followed by the annual Ride The Lights and the Switch-On event which this year included a Nickelodeon float parade along the Golden Mile. That was followed by a free-to-access celebration with family entertainment, fireworks and a light projection show on The Blackpool Tower. Singer Sophie Ellis-Bextor performed live on the headland before switching on the lights to trigger a four-month season.

This year's Illuminations display includes three exciting new installations – a reimagined Spitfire Island (on Gynn Square) designed by Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen, and two new tableaux, one by Dr Chila Kumari Singh Burman, MBE, the other by Canadian-born Bruce Alfred who specialises in Native American art. It is the first Illuminations display to be designed by a North American artist and one of the first to be developed using 3D printing technology. The Tower Festival Headland will also see the installation of a Hollywood-inspired illuminated 'BLACKPOOL' sign. All of these new features were built at the Lightworks manufacturing facility.

The forthcoming autumn and winter season will see the return of World Fireworks, Lightpool Festival and seven weeks of Christmas By The Sea running from mid-November to January 1.

Theme 2 – Budget 2023/24

2023/24 is the 13th year of consecutive budget cuts for Blackpool Council and Local Government finances across England are in a fragile state, with at least 23 local authorities reported in the media recently for challenges with their financial standing and there are many others who are known to be struggling. As a result of this climate the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities launched the Office for Local Government (Oflog) in July this year, whose purpose is to increase transparency, foster accountability, and use data to further improve performance and help identify problems at an earlier stage.

The first external financial monitoring report for the council for the current financial year was presented to the Executive on 11 September. The key financial headlines for Blackpool Council as at month three are:

1. The main demand-led pressures are in children's social care, adult social care, and home to school transport. These are common factors across many upper tier local authorities. At month 3 we were showing an adverse project outturn of £5.7m. Though early signs in month 4 show improvements on this position.
2. Earmarked revenue reserves at £32.0m.

3. Ongoing work with the Safety Valve Programme of the Department for Education is making significant inroads to the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant's medium-term financial plan, whose deficit should have reduced from £2.8m to £1.6m by 31/03/24 and breakeven by 2024/25.
4. The new business critical systems of TechnologyOne Financials and Midland HR i-Trent now fully live and functionality being employed to improve strategic financial planning whilst delivering processing efficiencies.
5. The backlog of external audits of the Council's statements of accounts being addressed with 2020/21's having been approved at Audit Committee in July, 2021/22's expected to be approved at November's meeting and 2022/23's expected in March 2024.

Local Government is under pressure financially across England due to demand for social care and significant inflationary pressures, but in the context of those challenges, Blackpool is in a relatively stable position.

Theme 3 – Devolution

Latest position to be presented by the Leader of the Council at the meeting.

General questions / comments

Councillors will have the opportunity to raise questions / comments on any matter in the Cabinet Member's portfolio.