

BLACKPOOL'S BACK!



• TOURISM'S ON THE UP **P4**



• HEALTHY PROSPECTS **P6**



• ALL SET FOR A BETTER START **P8**

Blackpool Council and its partners are looking at the big picture for the UK's number one resort and local people are taking a leading role

Blackpool Council

A special supplement produced by 

Closing the health gap

Joined up action and a renewed focus on public health are helping Blackpool to tackle inequality

Dig a little deeper into Blackpool's health statistics and the full extent of the challenges facing the town soon become clear.

Despite improvements in life expectancy over the last decade, the gains have been lower than those seen across England and Wales as a whole.

That means a growing gap between Blackpool and many other parts of the country. But the divide within the town is even starker.

In a town that's one of the smallest local authority areas in England – around 13.5 square miles – men in the most affluent communities live on average around 11 years longer than those in the poorest areas.

However, the tide is turning. The movement of public health into the local authority has seen a renewed focus on tackling those inequalities in recent years.

Dr Arif Rajpura, director of public health, says a more joined up approach to lifestyle issues like smoking, excessive drinking, inactivity and unhealthy diets are paying dividends. Working closely with public protection colleagues and the police, his team have pushed public health up the agenda.

In terms of smoking, a great deal of work has been carried out to prevent underage sales, stop illicit tobacco coming into the town and all playgrounds are now smoke-free.

The town are also campaigning for the introduction of minimum unit pricing to stop super strength lager and cider being readily available for less than the price of a bottle of water and have even lobbied the Government to change the law to include a public health consideration as



Night Safe Home Bus

a licensing objective. Public health is heavily involved in a review of pubs and bars and has the opportunity to voice its concerns. And other measures have been adopted, such as a ban on any alcohol-related advertising on council premises, billboards and literature. 'It's an important line in the sand,' says Dr Rajpura.

As chair of the Fairness Commission he is at the forefront of efforts to change habits and make it easier for local people to access the support they need.

The latest success story is funding from the Plunkett Foundation to open a community shop in Grange Park, a particularly deprived area. It will provide cheap, good quality, healthy food and the aim is to also open a community farm opposite.

Joint working between public health and environmental

health is tackling obesity problems head on through better access to leisure facilities, parks and green spaces and work to improve the range of shops selling healthy food. Another example is the Night Safe Home Bus which brings together key staff to offer support on the promenade and keep night-time excesses contained.

Zoning and smart management of the town has a part to play in the programme of cultural change in Blackpool too. Take the council owned Tower Lounge venue within Blackpool Tower. A cash cow, the bar was a popular 'vertical drinking' space with tourists looking to have a good time. The problem was, it sat slap bang in the middle of Blackpool's family area and within the family friendly Blackpool Tower complex.

The Tower will lose a long-time earner but it will gain a new family-friendly restaurant in the space and, it is hoped, encourage the likes of stags and hens who want to enjoy themselves to gravitate to other well-managed areas. But it is the council's wider activity around housing, early intervention and building resilience that will really make inroads into inequality, he says.

'We have some of the biggest challenges in the country. Looking at it from a holistic point of view, the longer term plan must be about the wider determinants of health, education, housing etc.

'We need good jobs for local people. That means creating jobs that are going to be targeted at the most deprived sections of the community, including the most marginalised part of society. Previously we have looked at economic output, but it doesn't really tell you anything – the inequalities agenda is central to everything I do.'



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Flats on the Queen's Park Estate have been replaced with family homes

Entering the market

Fed up with Blackpool's 'damaging' private rented sector, the council has decided to intervene to kick-start the regeneration of its inner wards

Blackpool Council's approach to its housing problems in many ways reflects its overall approach to taking the town forward. Faced with year on year austerity, it has had to decide what kind of local authority it wants to be, explains chief executive Neil Jack.

'In terms of strategy and vision we wanted something more overarching as to how we see the town in 10 years' time. So it's about what we are positively going to do rather than what are we going to cut.'

Realistic goals that can be delivered are at the heart of this new approach. 'When you engage with the community there's no point having a grand vision that sits there like a dream. There has to be a sense of achievability about it. We need to have ambition but with a roadmap to get there. That can be long term but you have to be able to get there.'

The decision to set up a housing regeneration company is a perfect example of how the council's playing the long game. Starting out with £26m from the Lancashire LEP Growth Deal, it will buy up and refurbish properties with the aim of addressing some of the most damaging aspects of the local private rented sector.

Blackpool has 3,000 HMOs located at the heart of the town alone – former guest houses that were converted into flats and bedsits as the tourism industry shrunk. It has left the resort with population densities akin to an inner London borough coupled with a concentration of people with multiple issues.

Council leader Cllr Simon Blackburn describes it as a 'false, damaging rental market' where rents are set by the level of housing benefit. Some 80% of private rented properties are occupied by people receiving housing benefit compared with 30% nationally. Analysis of new housing benefit claimants shows 85% come from outside the borough – around 4,500 households each year – and that 70% of these move into rented accommodation in the inner wards.

Mr Jack compares this distorted housing stock with the redundant mills you might find in some of its Lancashire neighbours.

'Our housing is our mill. If we were a different type of northern town it would be a giant mill in the centre that's been closed for 40 years. What we have is housing stock that's not needed. The market didn't respond to change and these properties gained a new purpose which

is highly detrimental to the town – HMOs. That stock has to be addressed because it acts as a drag on the town, the economy and local communities. Communities are damaged by the transience it attracts. When you bring people with a lot of issues into one small area it makes all those issues worse.'

The company, which will be wholly owned by the council, is in the process of being set up. Once up and running it will buy up properties from the open market and transform them into quality flats and family homes.

The hope is it will gradually transform neighbourhoods and attract better landlords to the town. One option, says Cllr Blackburn, is to create a portfolio of refurbished properties and then sell it to a pension fund. The council's company would remain as landlord and have the receipts to start the whole process again.

'If we keep doing that, we will change the landscape. It becomes self-perpetuating, the real change starts. If you had the confidence in the town and the market you would come to Blackpool and buy up flats, spend money on it and bring it back to being a beautiful townhouse and have change out of £200,000. It's about raising the feel of the whole place.'

Council companies

Blackpool has a long-held and proud tradition of using wholly owned companies with private sector and community representation on its boards.

Its current companies are:

1. **Blackpool Transport Services** – runs local buses and a fleet of new trams that were introduced 18 months ago
2. **Blackpool Entertainment Company**

– runs the Winter Gardens (which includes the Empress Ballroom, Opera House and Pavilion Theatre)

3. **Blackpool Operating Company** – runs the Sandcastle Waterpark, the largest indoor waterpark in the country
4. **Blackpool Coastal Housing** – arm's length management company (Almo) that manages the council's social housing stock of 5,500 homes

5. **Housing Regeneration Company** – in process of being set up since January, using money through the Lancashire LEP Growth Deal

6. **Blackpool, Wyre and Fylde Economic Development Company** – a business support and campaigning vehicle to co-ordinate strategic economic development work which is jointly owned with neighbouring councils



Number One Bickerstaffe Square, the council's new offices

The drive for efficiency

Blackpool Council's move to new offices last year was as much about breathing life into a run-down part of town and promoting fresh ways of working as it was saving money. Number One Bickerstaffe Square in the town's new central business district, close to Blackpool North station, brings key staff closer to local people and through co-location promotes more joined up working. The intention is to make the council feel more accessible and approachable to residents.

It has also ushered in more modern, flexible working practices that enable the council to use facilities more efficiently.

Relocating around 1,500 staff to Number One Bickerstaffe Square and a number of community-based locations has also enabled the council to vacate buildings that are in poor condition and are costly to maintain.

Steve Thompson, director of resources, explains that these kinds of efficiencies could soon be multiplied through discussions with public sector colleagues across the Fylde coast. 'We're now looking at property assets they own or influence to map them and see where it would be appropriate to dispose, acquire or swap assets. Can we employ assets better by selling or renting them to the others or using them better ourselves?'

Similar thinking has shaped the search for greater efficiency and more effective ways of working elsewhere. The council has had a shared revenues and benefits business with a neighbouring authority since 2008 and shares its property and asset management service with the hospital, which saves costs on both sides and allows the NHS to 'piggyback' on the local authority's procurement framework agreements.

In areas like human resources, ICT and payroll, Blackpool is selling services to other councils and health trusts.

We have had a successful 14-year agreement with Advanced Business Solutions (formerly Cedar) that provides a fully integrated financial management information system to the council and some of its schools, academies and wholly owned companies with the platform capability to deliver to other prospective customers.

'We have lost £68m from budget over the last four years and have increasing demand in areas like social services,' says Mr Thompson. 'The only chance of dealing with this is to collaborate and work in partnership with other parts of the public sector, private and third sector to increase efficiency and create more effective services.'



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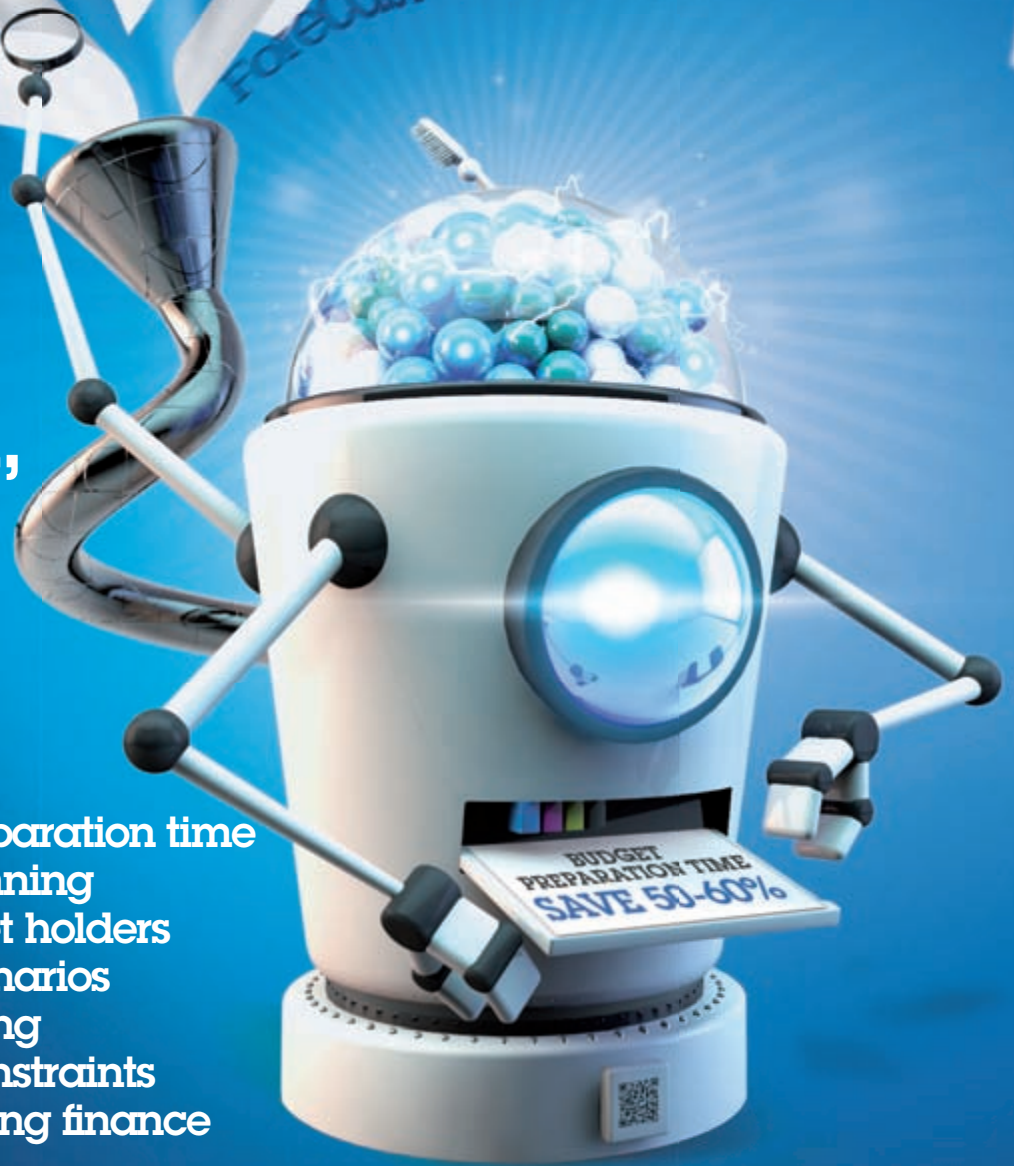
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Taking the lead

A new leadership programme is helping to boost morale and inspire staff to go the extra mile for local people

The adage 'strength through adversity' might easily be applied to Blackpool Council. In order to make savings it has lost almost 40 senior managers over the last three years as part of a 30% cut in the authority's workforce. It's now a much smaller organisation at a time when the demands on council services are growing. The big question for councils like Blackpool is how do they motivate and support staff to 'do more with less' and embrace changes across the organisation?

Blackpool has long regarded itself as a learning organisation and has undergone five peer reviews since 2011 in an effort to make improvements and try out new ideas. That ethos led to it commissioning a new leadership development programme last year designed to develop skills, empower staff and unite them around a common set of values. The programme was based on Real World Group's (RWG) evidence-based model of Engaging Leadership, and run by RWG and North West Employers Organisation. What sets it apart is it includes elected members and 'aspiring leaders' in more junior roles, as well as the corporate leadership team and the next tier of senior leaders.

'We have taken a high number of senior managers out and you can't do that without thinking about how you support those who are left,' explains deputy chief executive Carmel McKeogh. 'The demand gets higher

'We have taken a high number of senior managers out and you can't do that without thinking about how you support those who are left.'

Carmel McKeogh, deputy chief executive.

and the pressures we are under as an organisation and as a town are huge.

'We need to make sure all of our leaders have a common purpose and understanding of what we are trying to achieve. That's why we came up with the council values. They were developed by the staff because and the workforce have very different roles it can be difficult for people to see how they fit in sometimes—the values have been key to drawing the workforce together.'

Participants take part in a range of activities, from techniques for building resilience within their own teams to using the well-researched TLQ 360-degree tool which assesses how "engaging" leaders are to get feedback from all those around them to gauge their strengths and needs. It has given junior leaders more exposure to elected members and given them an insight into how they work and their role within the council.

More unusually for an organisation of this type, and a reflection of the genuine commitment of the leader, Cllr Simon Blackburn, to embrace learning, he and his executive also took part on 360-degree feedback. They utilised iGovernance, which is specifically designed for elected member roles in guiding the council forward in collaboration with senior managers.

Feedback from staff on the leadership programme has been overwhelmingly positive. A survey last month found three-quarters felt changes had empowered them to take more of a lead role and 73% felt more supported. Participants also made a range of comments in focus groups around the ways in which the programme recognised their needs as leaders in today's more austere times, lifted morale, increased a sense of shared culture, as well as leading to more collaborative working.

'We are still a learning organisation and committed to making Blackpool Council a great place to work despite the budget pressures,' says Ms McKeogh. 'The organisation is very different from the one it used to be. There's much more engagement with the staff and managers are much more involved and closer to the teams.'

'The message we were trying to get across to our managers is, you can come in, do your job and go home or recognise that you are in a privileged position and do more.'

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Ten students signed up to the first year of Project Search in 2014

Project Search

Part of Blackpool Council's management philosophy urges senior leaders to give opportunities to young people, apprentices and people with disabilities. One flagship programme that has really taken off across the council is Project Search. Working

in association with Mencap, the authority has, in the first year of the project, taken 12 students from local schools and colleges, with varying degrees of learning disabilities, and given them opportunities in the workplace. After undergoing intensive training in all aspects of council life

and while continuing their education in their new classroom, they've become everything from communications assistants and cleaners to apprentice mechanics. Almost all have earned permanent roles with the remaining students choosing to go back into education.

Protecting and involving local people

Being Britain's biggest resort brings with it many challenges. Blackpool is a magnet for late night revellers from far and wide and the way the council approaches their behaviour sends out a strong message to local people.

The nature of the town's economy means it has a high number of licensed premises, tattoo parlours, sun bed outlets and shops selling legal highs.

The council's public protection and public health teams along with the police have worked closely together to combat problems some of these types of business can attract. For example, community protection orders have been served on shops selling legal highs after several incidents of young people being hospitalised.

A crackdown on sun bed operators found 60% were selling their services to underage customers and 70% had equipment that failed light emission tests. They were subsequently taken to court and prosecuted.

Public space protection orders will soon be used to enforce the kinds of behaviour the town expects from those visiting the town.

The prevalence of HMOs – another side product of being a resort – together with low rates of car ownership have created problems around litter, flytipping and a lack of recycling.

That's why a mobile household recycling centre called Rover was introduced. Since launching in 2013 it has won numerous awards, more than 10,000 residents have used it and over 59,000 items have been collected.



'We are trying to put people at the heart of the services we provide,' explains John Blackledge, director of community and environmental services. 'Local people are part of driving service improvement and development. There's no better way of delivering frontline services than by engaging and empowering our communities.'

'It helps them understand the way the town works and not think that everything is done for the tourists.'

New community forums around issues like antisocial

behaviour and out of hours noise are engaging local people in finding ways to deal with the flip side of being a large resort. With high visitor numbers for around two-thirds of the year, highways is another key area and it too has a forum made up of taxi drivers, disabled groups, hotel associations and other parties.

'Before we make any decisions about highways we go to the forum to involve them, agree a communications plan for anything we do,' says Mr Blackledge.



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VISIT **BLACKPOOL**



With 17 million visitors flocking to Blackpool last year, Britain's best-loved seaside resort has boldly claimed "Blackpool's back!" But just how has this remarkable seaside mecca achieved such a renaissance and how does its re-energised local council ensure that local people are at the forefront of their revival?

Take a look at the numbers and you'll be in no doubt that Blackpool is indeed back. Be it a family day at the seaside or weekend trip to see the magical Mamma Mia, 17 million visitors descended in 2014. They're not just on a nostalgic day out these days too. Overnight stays are up by 300,000 – a staggering 30% and the value of the tourism economy is estimated at a huge £1.3bn. Having a smash hit musical in town helped, of course. Mamma Mia's 12-week run at the Opera House within the council-owned Winter Gardens complex last year marked the resort's first summer season in a decade and drew in 100,000 visitors alone, grossing £3m at the box office.

Celebrity endorsement doesn't do any harm either. Last month it was Samuel L Jackson tweeting selfies to his five million followers while on location in Blackpool making Hollywood film director Tim Burton's latest blockbuster. A few weeks earlier, award-winning actor Timothy Spall was filming a movie based in town.

The success of last summer brought back fond memories of the quite incredible tourism foundations on which Blackpool was built. From small beginnings in the 1840s when a railway first connected the resort with the industrial mill towns of the north, it exploded as the first – and most popular – working class seaside holiday destination, powering the economy to this day and making the town a landmark the world over.

But while tourism remains the number one industry and Blackpool continues to be an incredible place packed with can't miss attractions; globalisation and the contraction of the domestic tourism market has left behind problems.

The town once boasted more guest beds than the whole of Portugal but from having 5,000 hotels, guesthouses and other holiday properties it's now down to 1,400 with many having been converted into HMOs. Too few of those remaining are at the top end of the spectrum and while the town is 'on a



Blackpool's back

Blackpool's vital statistics

The UK's No.1 resort with 17 million visitors last year

£1.3bn – value of tourism to local economy in 2014

15,000 theatre seats on sale during the summer – more than anywhere in the UK outside London

£350m invested in the promenade

But...

30% of children live in poverty

25% of working age adults are unemployed

Life expectancy for men is the lowest in England

13,500 young people aged 16-18 have mental health problems

journey' towards turning that around, the town's storied history – and in particular its HMO housing – has brought with it social problems too.

Life expectancy is low at 74.3 years for men – the poorest in Britain – and not much better for women at 80.1 years – the third lowest. Alcohol is very much at the forefront of those problems with town having the second highest alcohol mortality rate in the country. Meanwhile linked to that, male-on-female domestic violence levels are three times the national average with almost 100 women out of every 10,000 affected

by domestic violence in some form. Couple those numbers with high levels of transience, low wages and low educational attainment and there's a huge challenge to face up to.

In working through those challenges, Blackpool Council is using a range of innovative, interesting and transferable tactics which, it believes, are key to arresting the negatives and continuing to build on the positives, even in spite of some of the most severe cuts in the country.

And what has emerged is a way of working that maximises every asset at its disposal, interlinking pretty much every part of the council's operation with those of its partners in the public and third sectors. That has been coupled with a shift towards far greater engagement with the community and an emphasis on building the resilience of local people.

Council leader Simon Blackburn sums it up as a rejection of 'the Blackpool excuse' – the idea that the town has unique problems that are nigh on impossible to resolve. 'All the problems we've listed exist in other places, from Lambeth to Liverpool. You can't use that as an excuse for poor performance. It just means you have to work twice as hard.'

With finances tighter than ever, more of the same simply won't work, he says.

'We have cut £68m and are going to cut another £58m. If the cuts stop at that, I will plait fog. Expect it to go up! Whether we want to run around after people

Blackpool Council Values

Blackpool Council's vision is underpinned by a set of values that were developed by the workforce through a series of staff conferences. They define the standards, behaviours and culture of the organisation and inform the way it makes decisions, the way it works and the way the council develops and provides services to the people of Blackpool.

They ensure:

- Staff are accountable for delivering on the promises they make and take responsibility for the council's actions and the outcomes achieved
- Staff are committed to being fair to people and treat everyone they meet with dignity and respect
- They take pride in delivering quality services that are community focused and are based on listening carefully to what people need

- They act with integrity and is trustworthy in all dealings with people and are open about the decisions made and the services offered
- Staff are compassionate, caring, hard-working and committed to delivering the best services that they can with a positive and collaborative attitude



Blackpool is shaking off its image as somewhere to escape to, explains...

Simon Blackburn, council leader

Often people come here because of relationship breakdowns. That's how I came here. I was standing at a railway station and decided to come here because it was June and knew Blackpool would be busy and I'd be able to get a job. It was the late 1990s and I had three job offers by the end of the first day. I'm still here – but I was incredibly lucky.

For some people though it doesn't work out like that. Some come bringing with them fond memories of happy holidays as wide-eyed children but they struggle to find work, have no money, find themselves living in an unpleasant house where the landlord – who doesn't live in Blackpool and has probably never even seen the property – prefers housing benefit tenants because he knows he'll get paid. You still have all the problems you had, but you are here and you are skint, have no friends or family, with no one to help when things get tough.

That's why we're making changes – like intervening in the housing market – so that Blackpool isn't viewed as a place to escape to.

We have been importing people with problems for years that we can ill afford to support and who are not best served coming here. By changing the town, boosting the economy and building the resilience of our communities we will be able to offer better support the people who are already here.'

But the council's two-pronged vision is designed to drive the local economy forward while enabling residents to make the most of the opportunities that creates and involve them in improving local services.

Community engagement is key. Work by the public health and public protection teams, along with the police, to address the negative sides to tourism – litter and alcohol related antisocial behaviour in particular are a concern to locals – is vital to both reassuring residents and promoting Blackpool as a family resort.

Increasing and restoring civic pride is an important and difficult task, particularly given the high levels of transience, but one thing that might help is the Blackpool Museum.

The brainchild of Cllr Blackburn, it has received backing from the Heritage Lottery Fund and, based in the Winter Gardens, will tell the story of the world famous seaside resort. It will be another draw for visitors but, more importantly, is about nurturing a sense of identity and pride.

'My kids don't have a particular sense of civic pride even though they're from here,' says Cllr Blackburn. 'I want this museum to work with schools and help kids to understand what it is to live in and be from Blackpool. There's the Blackpool that everyone remembers, the history of entertainment and so on – but the back-story is how local people serviced that economy.'

'It will also look at the future of Blackpool and how it continues to evolve.'

making things better for them or not is academic. We are not going to be able to. We have to find another way of doing things.' Nowhere is this new approach more evident than in Blackpool's approach to health. Keen advocates for devolution, in an era of greater integration and a focus on prevention, Blackpool has placed itself at the cutting edge with three innovative, multi-agency programmes.

Better Start – a £75m programme spanning the next 10 years in partnership with the NSPCC (see page 8) – is building on the council's highly regarded early years work by supporting vulnerable children during a critical period from pre-birth to school age.

From simple things like trying to help families form healthy eating habits to the tough task of making sure children's social and emotional development are on track through a revolutionary programme of work with parents, it is hoped the idea will ensure children arrive at the school gates ahead, not behind where they should be.

Together with the town's acute trust and clinical commissioning group, it is also part of the NHS' new Vanguard initiative (see page 6), which targets the 3% of the population with intensive conditions who are constantly in and out of hospital. Intensive support will help them better manage their conditions.

The third project Fulfilling Lives, meanwhile, has seen Blackpool receive £10m from the Big Lottery Fund to help to seek out and tackle the problems of multiple and complex needs – those with a combination of substance misuse, crime, homelessness and mental health problems.

Blackpool is trying to build stronger people, families and communities in turn reducing demand on public services and improving health and wellbeing.

The reasons for the town's rollercoaster ride of ups and downs are complex but one of the key aspects, clearly, involves rejuvenating the economy and despite the resurgence reducing the over-reliance on tourism and the public sector, which have been hit hard – the council included – in the last five years.

Tourism will always be the lifeblood of the town and continued investment in the public realm and the

council acquiring key assets such as the Tower reflect a more proactive approach to pushing it onwards and upwards. Blackpool recognises the need for continued investment in quality attractions which pull people into the town.

But plans for a new specialist energy college, an emphasis on training and the supply of labour to high-tech industries in surrounding boroughs like aeronautics, nuclear power, chemical production and renewable energy, a brand new Enterprise Zone at Blackpool Airport and even efforts to develop a supply chain of young, vibrant theatre performers show that stepping stones towards greater economic stability are in place.

Fluctuating fortunes are part of life, says Cllr Blackburn, and being able to absorb them is as important for local people as for the town itself. Too many people in Blackpool 'fall over or drop off the edge over things you might expect them to cope with', he says.

The town has long been a haven for people down on their luck. Many find themselves living in run-down former guesthouses converted into bedsits, struggling to find a decent job. Blackpool Council is working on a number of fronts to close off that well-trodden path, for example by using a new private housing company to reshape the housing stock (more on page 11). But it remains committed to helping those already living in the town and building their resilience is pivotal to that.

Cllr Blackburn paints a vivid picture of a typical new arrival, shaped by the fact that he was once one of them (see box). He's clear that by getting to people at an earlier stage and giving them the support they need – whether it's through Better Start or via house visits from multi-agency transience teams – there will be a pay off in terms of better lives and diminishing demand on public services.

Talk to senior staff at the council and an issue that often surfaces is the uneasy relationship local people have had with their town over the years. It revolves around a sense that the town is for visitors and the council has been focused on serving tourists.

Blackpool continues to reign as the UK's number one resort. But it's not resting on its laurels - in fact it's aiming higher



Red Arrows performing at Blackpool's annual air show

Alan Cavill, the man in charge of tourism in Blackpool, has reason to be upbeat. Back in 2008 visitor numbers to Blackpool had dropped to around 15 million and it was clear the town needed a new strategy. Last year it was back up to an incredible 17 million and all the signs are that 2015 will see this upward trend continue. So what's behind the resurgence?

A £1m TV and internet campaign was launched last year using the slogan 'Blackpool's Back' designed to market the town as a family holiday destination. It proved to be a big hit and is believed to have played a large part in boosting the number of overnight stays. Given the average overnighter brings in £100-130 compared with £25-30 for a day tripper, it's a critical trend for the local economy.

Stroll along the famous promenade and the public realm investment is plain to see. Some £350m has been ploughed into the prom and new tramway to transform much of the golden mile, complete with touches that are uniquely Blackpool like the Comedy Carpet – a piece of public art containing the catchphrases of 900 comedians who've performed in the town's many venues.

These changes fit in with one of what Mr Cavill describes as the five key ingredients for a successful resort. The first, of course, is reasons to visit. Five years ago the council made the shrewd decision to buy into some of the town's most prominent attractions so that it could invest and run them differently. It then put a number of them – including Blackpool Tower Eye, Blackpool Tower Dungeon, Blackpool Tower Circus and Madame Tussauds – in the hands of Merlin Entertainment, which runs world famous attractions across the globe.

The investment, development and marketing that have resulted from the partnership since then has played a major role in re-establishing Blackpool as a family resort. The Winter Gardens, another acquisition, has gone from being open 50 days a year to 364.

'It's not just about making money, it's about making a statement about what the resort is about,' says Mr Cavill. 'It's a year-round place and there's always something to do and it's very high quality.' The famous illuminations, which run from the beginning of September to November, have long been a way to extend the season and are themselves undergoing investment to continue their appeal. Around 80,000 people applied for the 20,000 tickets available for the illuminations switch-on. To make sure the level of demand doesn't exclude local people, some 8,000 are reserved for residents. But the town knows it has to

work hard to be associated with much more than the stag and hen weekend crowd. That's why the council and its partners pulled out all the stops to bring Mamma Mia to the town for an extended stay, something that tends to only happen in major cities.

It's also why Blackpool now says 'no' to film and TV makers if the content doesn't fit the bill. 'We have a much bigger and more strategic focus on marketing and that includes what's filmed here,' explains Mr Cavill. 'We've been a place for filming awful, negative things. When

BY 2016-17 BLACKPOOL IS AIMING TO:

Boost the value of its tourism economy by £50m

Increase the proportion of visitors staying overnight in the summer from 43% to 48%

Take the number of jobs directly supported by tourism from 24,050 to 25,500

Attract 3.5 million visitors to Blackpool Illuminations – an extra 500,000 people

Maintain its status as the UK's #1 resort

things like that get filmed elsewhere they don't tend to have identifiable architecture, but we do. Therefore the problems they are portraying become associated with Blackpool in a way that wouldn't happen if they were filmed somewhere else.' The recent visit of a Hollywood production crew suggests it's paying off.

The second ingredient is having a wide range of accommodation. Blackpool could once boast more guest beds than the whole of Portugal but from having 5,000 hotels, guesthouses and other holiday properties it's now down to 1,400 with many having been converted into HMOs. Too few of those remaining are at the top end of the spectrum and the town is 'on a journey' towards turning that around, says Mr Cavill. 'In 2007 we had around 800 bed spaces that were three star or better and we now have about 3,000. But it's still short of where

we need to be out of the 69,000 beds on offer.' Next up is the food and beverage offer. A new national restaurant chain is due to launch its first venue in Blackpool very soon. With launches normally the preserve of big cities, it's a sign of growing confidence in Blackpool and a major coup. Couple that with other quality, middle-market national brands, like Prezzo, which has just applied for a license at a prime town centre location, and Pizza Express, and the town centre is already looking a bit tastier.

'We now have companies wanting to launch their new restaurant brands in Blackpool,' Mr Cavill says. 'They see Blackpool as a great place to do it.' But he admits the challenge is to offer something original that fits with the need for 'shock and awe about the place.'

The fourth ingredient, the physical environment and the warmth of welcome, has in part been addressed by the new look prom and will be further boosted by a Blackpool Tourism Academy that is being set up to put 5,000 people through world host training. Ambassadors are being introduced to car parks and digital mapping and street animation will add to the visitor experience.

The fifth and final element, the ease at which people can get to the resort, is being tackled via new electronic signage to welcome and direct visitors and a new parking strategy is currently being worked on. The railway line is due to be extended in the near future, the tramway is due to be extended from the promenade to Blackpool North train station to create a totally integrated transport network and the council is constantly working with colleagues across Lancashire to improve access via the M6.

With tourism accounting for more than a third of the local economy and a further third made up by the public sector, greater diversification is needed in Blackpool. It remains a long-term aspiration for the town but for now its 'economic success or failure is down to our performance as a resort,' says Mr Cavill.

The council recently published a resort place-making prospectus called Destination Blackpool for investors that spells out how much it's already changed, the sheer scale of its offer and a route map for future development. But as much as the local authority is shouting about the town to the outside world, its primary focus remains working to ensure local people benefit from the investment that comes in.

Nothing sums that up more than the launch later this month of the Blackpool Challenge. Chaired by leading educational academic, Professor Sonia Blandford, it will see a new partnership formed to try to raise educational

On the up

attainment. GCSE results are way below the national average and chief executive Neil Jack accepts 'our schools aren't delivering for our young people'. With six out of the town's seven secondary schools now academies, it has been difficult for the council to influence changes and improvement – something this new initiative will help to address. It will also complement work taking place through Blackpool's HeadStart programme, a Big Lottery Fund scheme involving the council and its partners to provide support to 10-14 year olds and prevent them developing mental health problems later in life. It involves working with pupils struggling with emotional issues, both at school and during their free time. Shaped by a young person's steering group, it will operate across seven schools over the next year and there are plans to bid for further funding to extend the programme to every school in Blackpool.

'We know our children do pretty well at primary school,' says leader Cllr Simon Blackburn. 'But at secondary schools performance is dreadful. Something

happens in this transition. They seem to go backwards and we don't know why that is. But Blackpool Challenge and HeadStart we will help us to find out and do something about it.'

The council's Youthability Hub is one way it is supporting school leavers, providing what it describes as 'a more comprehensive pathway into employment, education and training for 16-24 year olds'. Through a combination of drop in centres, tailored advice sessions and a wide range of other support, the aim is to break down the barriers young people face on leaving statutory education.

At the other end of children's education journey, the council has funded free breakfasts for every primary school child since 2013 after an evaluation of the pilot phase concluded it had a significant positive effect on children's likelihood of eating healthily. 'It's about giving kids the best start to the day and set them up for learning as well as giving them some balance and structure,' explains Delyth Curtis, director of people.

The council has also sought to address the town's low pay economy head on by both becoming a Living Wage employer and, via Blackpool's Fairness Commission, a champion for the campaign.

The Commission – which is led by the council, police, the NHS, Blackpool Young People's Council and representatives from the community and the private sector – has worked on a number of fronts to tackle inequality in the town. For example, its 100 Acts of Kindness campaign was launched last November to encourage everyone to 'do their bit' to help others.

But in the Living Wage, the council and the Commission know they can make a substantial and lasting difference to people's lives.

Cllr Blackburn said: 'It has been adopted by the council and its wholly owned companies and we are trying to encourage other employers to do the same, which is very difficult in Blackpool with a prevalence of minimum wage jobs. But with around 2,350 council staff signed up and with more to come we hope it has already had an impact.'

A winning combination

In terms of impact and vision for Blackpool, it was hugely significant that the council purchased some of the town's key attractions. It was a bold and positive step and a great one for Blackpool in terms of its visitor economy and the future of the town.

For example, as a local authority they have the ability to tap into funding that a private operator wouldn't be able to do.

Also, being in public ownership gives a sense of protection over important local assets and because of the council's role there's a duty to not only ensure they succeed but also make sure the community are engaged in them. It feels like Blackpool Tower is owned by the people now.

What Merlin has brought is credibility that underwrites the value for money for people visiting the town. Despite its long history as a resort, Blackpool had never had an international attraction brand operator like Merlin before and through our link up with the council it's allowed us to bring recognised brands like The Dungeon and The Eye. These are brands people



Kate Shane, general manager of Blackpool Tower Attractions, believes the relationship between Merlin Entertainment and the council is taking the resort into a different league

know and trust. It's brought in investment and put the brakes on visitor decline – the volume of visitors is increasing and has done so year on year. It's also created jobs for local people.

Traditionally the Tower all but closed in the winter but now it's open 364 days a year and the same goes for Madame Tussauds and Sea Life.

So it's rejuvenated what would otherwise be a fallow time for businesses here. The family offer in the town has never been stronger. You just have to look at the work the council has done in terms of purchasing attractions and also supporting other key attractions in the resort, like Blackpool Zoo and the Pleasure Beach, as well as the improvements to promenade and headlands.

From my perspective, the relationship between Merlin and the local authority means I not only have a great team here, I have a team at the council where there are experts in things like asset and utility management as well as community engagement. It's a symbiotic relationship that works for us both.



Healthy prospects

Boosting the health of its most disadvantaged communities is a key priority in Blackpool. That's why local agencies are taking a fresh approach that gets to the root causes of deep-seated problems

Faced with seemingly impenetrable health problems in some of its poorest wards, Blackpool has decided to tackle the issue door to door. Over the last few years multi-agency teams made up of everyone from housing environmental health officers to the police and community health workers have been visiting homes in South Shore – one of the most deprived areas in the UK. These 'transience teams' reflect the high levels of churn in the town with some wards seeing 40% of their population change every year. It means significant numbers of people go under the radar despite usually being in need of some kind of support.

But the teams are also a sign of how the council and its partners have prioritised the health of local communities and sought to find new ways to reach them before problems become worse.

Chief executive Neil Jack draws a parallel with the way the fire service moved from a focus on putting out fires to preventing them. 'The police are moving the same way and we have the same goals in terms of these communities,' he says. On a recent visit he describes how they found a young woman and her son living in 'a perfectly nice flat' but it was too cold. She had a fan heater on all day in one room and her son's bedroom was too cold for him to use until bedtime.

The council intervened there and then and made the landlord get the heating back up to a safe and legal standard straight away. The woman's teeth were also in an extremely poor state and she was referred to a dentist for emergency assistance. 'She would have stayed there until they got ill, spent a fortune on fuel or moved,' he says.

'They are minor things at that stage but could become part of a snowball effect towards a crisis. Most only come onto our radar when the crisis has emerged and by that time there's less opportunity to change it.' By bringing together so many parts of the public sector into one team 'it enables us to address everything in one hit', he says, using selective licensing to gain entry to

'We have merged functions into one care offer for all of our children and young people across the town.'

Delyth Curtis, director of people.

properties. Numerous issues have been unearthed, with some in need of advice while for others 'a longer term handholding is needed'.

Pore over Blackpool's health stats and it's easy to see why 'healthy communities' features so prominently in the council's annual plan. It has the lowest life expectancy for men in England and rates of cancer and heart disease are well above the national average. In some parts of the town as many as half of residents smoke and an estimated 28% of local people drink alcohol 'to hazardous levels'.

But improvements are being seen across the board – largely thanks to longstanding and strong relationships between the council, clinical commissioning group (CCG) and acute trust and coordinated responses this has fostered. A concerted focus on public health issues is paying off. For example, smoking in pregnancy has dropped from 42% in 2007 to below 30% and the proportion of smokers across the town has fallen significantly.

Those foundations are gradually being built on through multiagency working like that seen in the transience teams. The same can be said in social care

– which has embraced the national move towards greater integration with health through a complete restructure and the formation of a new people directorate.

'We have merged functions into one care offer for all of our children and young people across the town,' explains Delyth Curtis, director of people. 'It creates a seamless pathway – moving from disparate services to fully joined up paths of care and extended for early intervention to targeted support.'

Blackpool CCG is part of a Vanguard group with Blackpool Council, Fylde and Wyre CCG, Blackpool Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, Lancashire County Council, Lancashire Care NHS Foundation Trust and the local voluntary and community sector. One of the Government's first wave of 29 Vanguard areas tasked with testing out new ways of working, its vision is 'to create new models of care, wrapped around local people, spanning across all health and social care services'.

In Blackpool it has resulted in something called the extensive care service, an initiative designed to target and support the 3% of the town's population with intensive conditions. The aim is to end the 'revolving door, in and out of hospital' nature of their lives by helping them to manage their conditions at home and in the community, says Karen Smith, deputy director of people.

'There are 3% of residents taking up a substantial percentage of the resources because of their needs. So it's trying to address that in a way that's better for everyone.'

A typical example of the kind of person it's designed to support would be a 77-year-old woman with lung disease, heart condition and high blood pressure, she explains. 'If she gets a cold and becomes breathless it becomes a hospital condition, it's stabilised and then she is discharged. They are not going to get better in terms of the treatment they receive in hospital. It would be better provided at home. We can bring together the



Pupils at Devonshire Primary School in Blackpool during the launch of the council's free breakfast scheme

right professionals to do that, manage that condition closer to home and help them to understand and manage that condition.

'It means round the clock provision – otherwise you have a GP who sees someone on Friday and is concerned about what will happen over the weekend. Perhaps they have no family or friends to keep an eye on them, so a hospital admission seems the only safe option. So it's about having a plan in place with support at home, and the right people to call in if help is needed.'

This preventative approach is being taken more widely, for example through enhanced primary care that brings a greater range of resources into GP surgeries

relating to areas such as social care and voluntary sector support.

Ultimately, these changes – combined with the town's broader focus on building resilience – are as much a necessity for those running local services as for the people they help. Blackpool is seeing increasing demand in social services and healthcare, for example it has three times the national average for childcare proceedings and the highest number of looked after children per capita in England. It means an ever-growing gap between the resources available and the extent of services required.

Blackpool Council is investing in housing and

regeneration schemes in some of its most deprived areas to improve the physical environment, in particular the range of quality of homes available. It is also ramping up its enforcement activity to curb antisocial behaviour and tackle blight caused by littering and flytipping.

But the council and its partners have decided that reversing the damaging health trends seen in some of its communities during a period of extended austerity requires a radically different approach. By pooling resources, working together, focusing on prevention and empowering local people, Blackpool has more than a fighting chance to improve outcomes for disadvantaged local people.



Being a responsible corporate parent

When children leave home their family ties remain all-important – and it's no different for Blackpool's care leavers. That's why they will soon have a 'home from home' in the middle of town – complete with a kitchen and other facilities – where they can get advice, learn life skills and keep in touch with support workers.

The care leavers' hub will provide young adults with a place to drop in as they make the transition to independence.

The project is part of the council's efforts to further develop its corporate parent offer. With some 468 children in care at the time of writing, it makes up a major part of the local authority's social care work.

A conference is planned for this summer to capture feedback from young people around how the council and its partners

can improve their provision. It will come hot on the heels of a celebration event at the Pleasure Beach staged to mark the achievements of looked after children.

And in keeping with its wider efforts to engender a sense of responsibility among the workforce, the council is asking staff to go the extra mile.

'We want to create a council whereby every officer is aware of their corporate parenting responsibilities,' explains Delyth Curtis, director of people.

'We plan to create a group of key staff to mentor looked after children. It's about support outside the formal care system.'

'We're looking to build on work in areas like early years, special educational needs and post-16 in terms of focusing on outcomes, transformation and achievement of our most disadvantaged.'



All set for a better start

Blackpool is embarking on a new programme designed to make a difference to children before they are even born. Its success could have major implications for families across the UK and beyond

To say Blackpool's Better Start initiative has created a buzz amongst its leaders is something of an understatement. Over the next 10 years Better Start will put Blackpool at the cutting edge of early years development, transforming the lives of disadvantaged children across the town in the process.

Led by the NSPCC in a wide-ranging partnership that includes everyone from the council, police and community groups to parents, doctors and health visitors, its work is expected to have national and international implications.

In a nutshell, Better Start is about helping families from before their children are born until they reach school age in a comprehensive way that breaks intergenerational cycles of poor outcomes. That means forming healthy eating habits and making sure children's social and emotional development is on track by the time they enter the school gates. It also means working with expectant mums around issues like smoking and drinking alcohol during pregnancy and providing extra support for mental health problems.

The programme has received £45m from the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) and, through the 'Bank of Blackpool', has leveraged £30m by pooling budgets from across the local public sector. From September it will begin working with families in seven key wards using the town's network of children's centres as delivery arms. Over time it will extend support to other areas of Blackpool.

But to simply describe Better Start as a programme is only telling half the story. In reality, it's an entirely new way of working that brings partners together under a common set of objectives and values.

At its heart sits the new Blackpool Centre for Early Child Development - one of four cornerstones on which the scheme stands, along with public health,

evidence based intervention and re-framing/system transformation - which provides the leadership and strategic direction for Better Start and ensure all partners are actively engaged in the delivery and co-production of services. It will be a hub of research, particularly around areas where there are gaps in support such as domestic abuse in pregnancy and infancy.

It now has links into Harvard's world-renowned Centre on the Developing Child and has drawn in leading academics from across the globe, some of whom are members of its expert advisory group.



The evidence-based approach brought by Better Start will include supporting parents with additional needs through four new programmes for those who have or are experiencing, substance misuse or trauma.

Merle Davies, the centre's director, says what sets the programme apart is its 'whole town' nature. When decisions are being made about areas such as housing or leisure facilities or parks, the impact on young children and their families will be a key consideration. While its work is focused on 0-3s, its all-encompassing nature is spinning off into other areas, including activities designed to build resilience among 10-14 year olds - a programme called HeadStart.

'Better Start is building on the teams that are already here and it's drawing together everything that's happening in the town,' she says. 'It's reframing how we think about some of the big issues in Blackpool. It's not about professionals coming in and "doing to" the community, it's very much alongside and in co-production with the community.'

'We're shifting the power balance so that more services and support are delivered by the community themselves. They want to do things themselves and want to upskill. Our communities really understand how important it is to support families that are expecting and having children. Building resilience in our communities is critical to what we are doing and so this power shift is really important.'

In practice that will include recruiting and training local people as community champions and creating a new mentoring service run by those who have been through Better Start themselves.

The centre is located at the heart of the council's new offices, close to the chief executive and the team responsible for public health - another of those cornerstones. Universal campaigns and targeted



Families celebrate the launch of Better Start

interventions will be used to change lifestyles and empower communities to address issues themselves.

One of the barriers to joint working across the public, voluntary and community sectors has been the lack of a common language around early child development, something which Better Start will introduce via its work with the Frameworks Institute in Washington DC.

Blackpool is a natural setting for a comprehensive and ground-breaking programme of this nature. It has the need – breastfeeding rates are low and 30% mothers are still smoking at the time of birth – and a track record for innovation in early year's intervention.

The learning that comes out of Better Start will be disseminated to practitioners in local government and elsewhere via the NSPCC's national network of sites.

For Ms Davies, who previously led early intervention work at the council, it's an opportunity to finally get to the root cause of so many issues that put pressure on local provision and can ultimately destroy lives.

'We knew we had some excellent early intervention

'Our communities really understand how important it is to support families that are expecting and having children.'

Merle Davies, director of Blackpool centre for early child development

services but we weren't making an impact on long-term outcomes because we weren't getting in at pre-birth stage. It was clear that to make a difference we had to change what was happening at this critical stage of a child's life.

'The BLF money has given us the opportunity to really go for the transformation that needs to take place. If we don't do this now it will never happen.'

For Blackpool Council's chief executive, Neil Jack, Better Start sums up the new approach being taken in the town as a whole.

'A lot of money has been spent over the years but things have not moved on. We don't want to design services to treat need – we want to eliminate the need.

'I don't want there to be any looked after children – I want to be in a position where we don't need to create services for looked after children. So it's about lifting some of the weights off the backs of our families, taking that pressure off and allowing them to progress.'

Find out more: 01253 476789 or betterstart.cccd@nspcc.org.uk

The Better Start pledge



Children, young people and their families will be at the heart of everything we do:

1. There will be 'no wrong door' – equitable service will be accessed no matter which agency is first contacted
2. Service will be delivered in and through the universal services rather than through separate specialist services
3. We will 'hold the baton' – the service will work with the family rather than just refer them on
4. Relationships will be at the centre of our work relationships before tasks
5. Services for people, not people for services' – services will be flexible enough to meet need wherever and whenever children and families need them
6. Services will be experienced as 'seamless' by children and parents
7. There will be a single point of contact - children and families will not be required to struggle through the maze of services, but will have a named individual contact
8. There will be clear, simple lines of accountability