
OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY AND PUBLIC PROTECTION PORTFOLIO

Purpose of Report

1. The following were the main areas of work under my Community and Public Protection Portfolio:

Housing Benefit Fraud Sanction

2. The Housing Benefit section has recently successfully prosecuted 6 people for benefit fraud. The vast majority of people who claim Housing and Council Tax Benefit are honest and the system is designed to help the most vulnerable people in Darlington meet their housing costs. However, there are a small minority of people who deliberately attempt to defraud the Council. Trained Housing Benefits staff investigate all suspicions of benefit fraud reported to the Council. Where appropriate and after a thorough investigation, the Council will impose a sanction on those people found to have committed benefit fraud. Since April 2006, over 30 sanctions have been imposed by the Housing Benefits section, including 15 formal cautions, 10 administrative penalties (fines) and 6 successful prosecutions resulting in penalties ranging from a £200 fine to a 250 hours community punishment order. In addition, any overpaid benefit will be recovered in full. A further 5 cases are due to be heard at the magistrates court in the New Year and a further 8 cases are being prosecuted as part of joint investigations with staff from the Department for Work and Pensions. The successful results achieved in the last 9 months and the ongoing actions by Housing Benefits staff demonstrate the Council's commitment to stamping out benefit fraud.

Private Sector Housing

3. At Social Affairs and Health Scrutiny Committee on 5 December 2006, Members endorsed the new Private Sector Housing Strategy and mandatory licensing arrangements for houses of multiple-occupation and other privately rented accommodation throughout the Borough. The new licensing arrangements introduced following the publication of the Housing Act 2004, have contributed to improved accommodation standards in privately rented housing demonstrated by continued and sustained attendance at the quarterly Private Sector Housing Forum events. In excess of 50 attended the event in September 2006 and increased subscription to the Landlord's Accreditation Scheme, which now has 22 members after being launched in February 2006. The Housing Renewal Team continue to work hard to raise awareness of the minimum required standards in privately rented accommodation and are, on hand to assist and advise private landlords how best housing improvements can be made. This includes the introduction of a new Financial Assistance Policy providing loan assistance targeted at those areas identified as having the poorest privately rented housing stock, and, to undertake essential remedial repairs to meet the Decent Homes standards. The new loan policy is now fully developed and will be formally launched early in 2007. It will be administered through the existing partnership arrangements with the Care and Repair

Affordable Housing Supplementary Planning Document

4. In partnership with Planning colleagues, Housing Officers have been undertaking a series of consultation events with key stakeholders, members of the public and voluntary sector bodies to ascertain local views on the proposed new strategic approach to deliver more affordable housing to meet local housing need. Consultation events have been held at Darlington College, Darlington Football Club and various locations in the community to canvass views. The review has examined the current approach to delivering affordable housing provision in Darlington and examined new means of generating greater proportions of affordable housing through planning gain and exception sites which may be offered for future development. The Supplementary Planning Document is an integral part of the new Local Development Framework and specifically focuses on affordable housing. Following the analysis and gathering of data to inform the review, a report is scheduled to be submitted to Cabinet for approval in March 2007 before being formally adopted.

Nuisance and Anti Social Behaviour

5. Housing Officers have taken a number of tenancy enforcement actions recently to deal with nuisance and anti social tenants. The Courts have awarded 3 Anti Social Behaviour Injunctions with a power of arrest if the tenants do not comply with the terms of the order. All 3 cases were in part linked to drink related anti social behaviour when the tenants were using inappropriate behaviour. One of the cases was particularly disturbing because the tenant pushed the Housing Officer whilst he was descending the stairs of the flat. Immediate action was taken to terminate the tenancy. The tenant has since left voluntarily. In another case concerning the tenant and her boyfriend's serious anti social behaviour we were awarded outright possession in 14 days by the Court. The tenant left the property prior to the eviction date. Three other tenants have signed undertakings that their behaviour will improve and that they will not do anything or cause anything to be done which in the opinion of the Council is likely to cause nuisance, annoyance or harassment to others residing in, visiting or offering services in the locality.

ASBO

6. An adult has been handed an interim Anti-Social Behaviour Order after residents in his street have complained bitterly about the litter, noise nuisance, all night street parties and alcohol related nuisance caused by the individual. The interim order prohibits the man from drinking in a public place, congregating in a group of 3 or more, playing loud music at any time, leaving or depositing litter. A breach of the interim Anti-Social Behaviour Order can result in imprisonment, a fine or both. The final hearing is scheduled for 21 December 2006.

Dispersal Order

7. The Dispersal Order in Nightingale Avenue continues to be successful. Large groups of youths no longer congregate in these locations and since the order was agreed in late October, Uniformed Wardens and Police have received a significant reduction in calls relating to Anti-Social Behaviour.

Peabody Street

8. Following the success in obtaining a Crack House Closure notice against the occupant of 20 Peabody Street due to persistent anti-social behaviour and drug use within the property, Darlington Borough Council's Anti-Social Behaviour Team have successfully obtained a two year injunction preventing the tenant from entering Peabody Street or surrounding rear lanes.
9. The injunction also prohibits the tenant from moving back into her property at the end of the 3 month Crack House Closure Notice and provides the residents of the street, who have suffered hugely due to the noise and abuse from the tenant and her visitors, some much need respite; returning their quality of life.

Motorbike Nuisance

10. A male was stopped by Uniformed Warden on two occasions in the Firthmoor area of the town causing a nuisance on a quad bike and a mini-motor on separate days has been successfully prosecuted by Darlington Borough Council Uniformed Wardens.
11. The person eventually pleaded guilty to riding his mini-motor on the pavement on the Firthmoor estate in a dangerous and reckless manner and was fined £50 and was fined £75 for riding a quad bike in the area of Maidendale House in a dangerous and reckless manner. He was also charged costs of £100.

Fly Tipping

12. A Darlington man has been successfully prosecuted for disposing of household waste on the Bridal Way near Arch Deacon Newton and Staindrop Road. A quantity of tree's, shrubs and general refuse was dumped at the location and the offender received a £200 fine at court and was ordered to pay £100 cost.

Improvements to Council Housing

13. The following improvements have recently been undertaken to areas of Council Housing:-
 - (a) Following extensive consultation with residents at Heatherwood Grove the hard landscaping has been significantly improved at a cost of around £115k. The access roads have been provided with a tarmac finish which is a more appropriate and robust surface for the vehicles that use it. Additional car parking has been provided. Signage has been improved and the handrails and drying areas upgraded.

- (b) Around 100 flats at Bank Top have had high specification new aerials fitted at a cost of over £20k. This is part of an ongoing programme in preparation for digital television.
- (c) A number of particularly large trees have recently been removed at Cockerton and a very high Leylandii hedge at Firthmoor as part of Housing's £25k Tree Programme. Whenever an inappropriate tree is removed a replacement tree is always planted of an alternative type and location.

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Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Community
and Public Protection