
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:

Improvements in the Housing Benefits Service

(a) Use of Mobile Working Technology

From 1 November 2006, the Housing Benefit Section is introducing mobile working technology, to improve their service to vulnerable customers and achieve efficiency savings. Following a successful bid for funding from the Department for Works and Pensions, Visiting Officers are being equipped with hand-held devices and document scanners.

Information about a customer's claim for benefit is uploaded into the hand-held devices directly from the Benefits System to allow easy access to information about a person's claim in their home. This will alleviate the need for bulky paper files being assembled before a visit is undertaken. Electronic claims for benefit can be completed in a customer's home and supporting documents scanned by the Visiting Officer. Where appropriate, a customer's entitlement to benefit can also be calculated and a decision made during the visit.

On return to the office, the forms and documents are downloaded from the hand-held devices and document scanners directly in the Benefits core systems. It is anticipated that the introduction of this technology will:

- Improve customer service, giving the person all the information they require about their claim at the visit.
- Improve the speed of processing claims for benefit.
- Reduce the amount of fraud and error entering the system, and
- Reduce the amount of administrative support currently required for home visits, generating efficiency savings for the section.

The introduction of the electronic forms will also be available to front-line customer service staff at the Town Hall and will also shortly be available on the Council's website for on-line applications.

(b) Joint Working with the Pensions Service

The Housing Benefit and Supporting People Sections have entered into a joint working agreement with the Pensions Service. For the last few years, the Housing Benefits Section has operated a Service Level Agreement with the Pensions Service covering such issues as joint benefit take-up campaigns and the exchange of information. This has produced many successful results, particularly around improving the financial situation for vulnerable older people in Darlington.

However, in a bid to make further improvements, a joint working arrangement will enhance the existing relationship between the organisations. Training on the completion of Pension Credit forms and access to Pensions Service Information will be given to Council staff, enabling them to identify potential under claiming of benefits and allowing all claims for benefit to be made on one visit to the customer.

In addition, Pension Service staff will be able to access Council data to identify older people not in receipt of Pension Credit or other welfare benefits where these could be claimed. Older people in sheltered housing will also be targeted for help with their support costs through the Supporting People grant.

Improvements in the Housing Options Service

2. The following improvements have been made in helping address issues of homelessness:
 - (a) Darlington has become the first local authority in the North East to reach the Government target of reducing the use of temporary accommodation by 50%.
 - (b) Compared to the first six months of last year, there has been a very significant reduction of 55% this year in the 3 main causes of homelessness. This is due to a move to a casework approach for preventing people from becoming homeless. Where appropriate Discretionary Housing Benefit Payments are also maximised so that homelessness or threatened homelessness can be avoided.
 - (c) The Landlord Accreditation Scheme is now becoming well established with regular well-supported Landlords Forums and newsletters. A stronger working relationship with landlords has led to a reduction in Notices to Quit and other actions intended to get tenants to leave.
 - (d) A very successful Homelessness Forum was held on 19th September 2006 with involvement from the Government Office North East.

- (e) An official Rough Sleepers Count was undertaken on 14th October 2006, overseen by a representative from the Department for Communities and Local Government and supported by observers from a number of local voluntary sector organisations. All areas of the Borough where there had previously been reports of anyone rough sleeping were particularly targeted. No rough sleepers were found. This compared with previous year's estimates in consultation with the voluntary sector of 7 in 2004/05 and 5 in 2005/06. This demonstrates that the development of a wide variety of supported accommodation schemes in Darlington for a range of client groups has been effective in tackling rough sleeping issues.
- (f) A 'Back to Training or Work' event held in September at Maidendale House in conjunction with the Department for Works and Pensions has received some very good reviews.

Improvements in the Repairs and Maintenance Service

(a) Use of Mobile Working Technology

Opti-time, an appointments and workforce management system, went live on 2nd October 2006 after a period of testing and piloting. All operatives and inspectors have hand-held devices, which are updated continually through the day and allow the operatives work to be scheduled more efficiently. They update the handhelds devices at the end of each repair and the tenant also signs that the job has been satisfactorily complete on the same device. As emergency repairs are received the work force planner is able to see which operative has the capacity to do the work and transmits the order to them. Each time a tenant reports a repair an appointment is created. Tenants are now give a choice of availability, with the last appointment commencing at 6.00 pm. A Saturday morning service is also available. By using the technology, managers are able to better plan the human resources, to direct appropriately skilled operatives to the nearest geographic location. As repair jobs are pre-planned, materials are now pre-ordered creating further efficiency. During the first 3 weeks over 1000 appointments were made.

(b) Reductions in Repair Orders Being Varied

By keeping the number of repair orders that need to be varied to as low as possible tenants receive a more convenient service by having the job completed at the first visit and the Council benefits from efficiency savings. Two initiatives in particular have been introduced to help improve performance in this area. A repair diagnostic tool, known as Locator Plus has been implemented which helps both Officers and customers to correctly identify faults. Tenants can access this from the Council's web-site. The number of job descriptions and cost rates available for ordering repairs has been reduced to around 600 from 6000. This has been achieved through redefining descriptions and combining items which, makes the system user friendly and reduces the likelihood of error.

ASBO

3. A 16-year-old youth was brought to our attention for continuously causing problems for staff at Eastbourne School, Eastbourne Sports Complex and reception staff at Central House Gladstone Street.
4. The anti social behaviour included being verbally abusive, refusing to leave premises, throwing missiles and being aggressive, and was affecting Darlington Borough Council staff and residents throughout the Borough and was backed up with previous and ongoing criminal activity and convictions.
5. Since November 2005, numerous warnings were sent and several interviews were conducted with the youths and his parents to try to resolve his intimidating and nuisance behaviour.
6. Despite these warnings and the signing of an Acceptable Behaviour Contract (ABC) the perpetrator continued to engage in anti social behaviour and in January 2006 the perpetrator and family moved out of Council housing and moved to privately owned accommodation.
7. From January to June 2006 evidence was collated and a legal file produced in order to apply for an Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) due to several breaches of the ABC.
8. On 5 October 2006 an interim ASBO was granted at Bishop Auckland Magistrates Court, preventing the youth from engaging in any anti social behaviour, nuisance or intimidation, encouraging any others to do the same, attending Eastbourne Sports Complex and Gladstone Street among other prohibitions. The interim ASBO includes all 14 prohibitions and four exclusion zones in total.
9. The ASBO is to be contested and the full hearing will be held at Darlington Magistrates Court on 15 and 18 December 2006.

Dispersal Order

10. The town's first Dispersal Order was signed this week for Nightingale Avenue/ Springfield School. The Order comes into effect on Friday 27 October 2006 and gives the Police and Community Support Officers the power to break up groups of youngsters, and exclude people for up to 24 hours. The order will be in place for three months but can be extended if needed.
11. Residents in the area have had years of anti-social behaviour, they have had to put up with large gangs gathering on an evening, smoking, drinking alcohol, causing criminal damage and being abusive.
12. The order means that groups cannot gather in the dispersal zone if they are causing, or are likely to cause alarm, distress. Police and Uniformed Wardens will patrol the area to enforce the order, which affects people of all ages.

13. Consultation has taken place in the Education Village, letters will be sent home to parents, leaflets will be given to every child and presentations have taken place in assembly. In addition, all residents in the dispersal zone will be provided with leaflets.

Peabody Street

14. Peabody Street was one of the first cases given to the Anti-Social Behaviour Team in November 2005. The complaints revealed that a couple in one of the houses were disturbing residents with all-night parties, rubbish strewn in and around the property and being thrown out of the windows. Gangs were creating a loud noise with intimidating and threatening language that was disturbing residents, and there was also allegation of drug use. This all resulted in many residents feeling unable to continue to live in the street and moving.
15. Letters were sent to the occupant asking her to attend an interview to discuss her behaviour, however she failed to attend our numerous requests and the behaviour continued nightly. To address the behaviour and to give the residents some much needed respite, evidence was gathered and an Interim Injunction was granted to prevent the occupant from causing or allowing to be caused any further Anti-Social Behaviour. The full injunction is to follow and a full hearing was scheduled for 16 November 2006.
16. In addition, on 22 September 2006 the Police executed a warrant for a property in Peabody Street. Class A drugs were seized and a person was arrested. With this information and the evidence that was collated for the Injunction the Police went to Court for a Crack House Closure and the property was closed on Friday 6 October 2006 for 3 months.
17. Currently we are working with the Police and the Landlord to obtain an outright possession order against the occupant to prevent her moving back into the property. At the Injunction Hearing in November, Darlington Borough Council have applied for an exclusion zone as part of the injunction to prevent the occupant from being able to attend Peabody Street in future.

Motorbike Nuisance

18. In April 2006, uniformed wardens whilst on motorbike patrol received information relating to a nuisance motorbike in the Springfield Park area. Having attended the area, the wardens witnessed an orange and black off-road motorcycle being ridden at the top of the park. As the rider saw the wardens he made off at speed along the grassed area heading towards Whinbush Way, however after some time he gave himself up and gave his details to the wardens. The young man was prosecuted for this offence under a local by-law that prohibits motorised vehicles being used without permission on open land and was fined £80 with costs.

19. Also in April 2006, motorbike wardens witnessed a youth riding a motorbike in a dangerous manner on the grassed area near Eggleton View. The motorbike rider attempted several times to engage the wardens in a chase and eventually rode at speed through the children's playing area. The rider was soon apprehended by the wardens and was later prosecuted under the by-law. At court he received a £150 fine and court costs.
20. Darlington DAAT Summary update:

Darlington DAAT has just received its second quarter report from the National Treatment Agency of the Department of Health indicating that it is considered to have retained its green status recognised as delivering high performance across all areas. However the Drugs Intervention Programme (DIP) has struggled to engage and sign post sufficient numbers of individuals from custody into treatment who are considered to be "naive" to treatment. This is subject to a great deal of analysis and debate within the DAAT and at GONE since there is evidence of a high saturation of Class A drug users already in treatment leaving very few in the community unknown to services. Within the Communities agenda, a number of "Insight" community awareness events have been delivered and are planned over the next few months, primarily focussed on engaging parents within schools. Frank information events for young people are being delivered from a number of venues around the town. In relation to the Alcohol Strategy, a proposal for an alcohol treatment service is being considered for future investment, the Licensing Unit are continuing to deliver a high level of performance and the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership CDRP have funded a seasonal alcohol and violent crime information campaign delivered via the radio and other promotional outlets.

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and Public Protection