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**OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITIES AND ENGAGEMENT PORTFOLIO**

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**Purpose of Report**

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work under my Communities and Engagement Portfolio:

**Taking forward the Third Sector Strategy**

2. The Voluntary Sector Liaison Manager, Mary Hall took up her post on the 10th December 2007. In taking forward actions in the Third Sector Strategy, Mary has established a review group to review the assessment criteria for strategic grants in preparation for the next round of grants which will be allocated in 2008/2009. Mary is also working closely with CVS and a review of the existing Compact with the Voluntary and Community Sector will commence in the next few weeks.

**Community Engagement Highlights**

3. Extensive consultation undertaken during the summer and autumn months has informed the draft Sustainable Community Strategy. Further consultation is underway on the draft strategy, which will conclude on the 31st January 2008.
4. Running in conjunction with consultation on the Sustainable Community Strategy is consultation on the Core Strategy ‘ Issues and Options’ (Local Development Framework). A range of community engagement activity has been planned for January and February including attendance at the next Talking Together events.
5. Consultation has started on the MTFP. A budget panel comprising 30 residents has been established. The Town Crier has run two articles providing opportunities for residents to comment on budget proposals. Wider resident consultation is/will be undertaken at the forthcoming Talking Together events taking place in January/February. A one-day awareness raising session took place in the Cornmill when staff gave out consultation leaflets advising residents on how they could make their views known. In addition a workshop with representatives of Community Partnerships and the voluntary and community sector took place on the 17th of January 2008. Key partners will also be able to ‘have their say’ at Darlington Assembly on the 31st January 2008.
6. The first Cabinet in the Community meeting was held on 15<sup>th</sup> January at Holy Family School.

## **Website Development**

7. Running alongside the redesign of the corporate website is the development of the Connecting with Communities website. It is expected that the CwC pages will be operational by the end of January 2008 and will include a Community Engagement diary. The CwC website will provide interactive opportunities for residents to have their say as well as promoting forthcoming consultation events. A key part of the site will be the feedback section, which will outline how consultation has been used.

## **LINKs**

8. Since the last update in December 2007 expression of interest advert was issued providing an opportunity for organisations to express an interest in being the host organisation for Darlington's Local Involvement network. Seven organisations have expressed an interest in tendering. Four working groups comprising staff from the local authority, PCT and representatives from the voluntary and community sector have been established. The procurement group, which includes voluntary and community sector representatives, is well underway and is overseeing the procurement process. The other three groups for governance arrangements, communications and who should be involved in LINKs will report their recommendations to attendees at a LINKs seminar taking place at the of February in the Dolphin Centre. The recommendations from these groups will provide the framework for the work programme of Host organisation.

## **Talking Together**

9. The next round of Talking Together has commenced, and the Council are taking the opportunity to enable residents to have their say on the Medium Term Financial Plan, Sustainable Community Strategy and the Core Issues document. The next phase of Talking Together will take place at the end of April and beginning of May 2008, the focus of which will be on waste management.

## **Community Partnerships**

10. Members may recall that a lottery bid of £125K was successful for the refurbishment of North Road bandstand. At the time of the last report an announcement was still awaited from Northern Rock as to whether a further funding application for £125k towards the bandstand refurbishment would be successful. Unfortunately this bid was not approved. Community development workers are working with the Funding Team to identify further sources of funding.
11. Members may be interested to note that a review of Community Partnerships and support provided by Community Development workers is to commence in early February and to conclude July 2008.

## **Welfare Rights**

12. As outlined in December's report the unit has an annual target of £780,000 to increase benefit take up. At the end of December performance stood at £508,427. The unit has also been successful in winning 75% of welfare benefit appeals.

### **Gender Equality**

13. The Council's first Gender Equality scheme was approved by Cabinet in December, taking forward the council's work on equalities.

### **Support to the Voluntary Sector**

14. Funding was approved by Cabinet to support the Citizens Advice Bureau to enable it to develop a sustainable medium term business plan.

### **Meetings**

I visited Darlington Association on Disability to talk with staff and volunteers about their work.

I have attended meetings of the Voluntary Sector Steering Group, the Community Partnership Steering Group, the Local Strategic Partnership Board, CVS board, CVS Chair's Forum, the Age Concern AGM, the Corporate Governance Review Group.

I am Chair of Newblood Live, based at the Forum Music Centre, and have supported the group in providing opportunities to young people to perform and enjoy new music.

**Councillor Jenny Chapman**  
**Cabinet Member with Communities and Engagement Portfolio**