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**OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITIES AND ENGAGEMENT PORTFOLIO**

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**Purpose of Report**

1. Further to the content of my last report to Council, the following are the main areas of work under my Communities and Engagement Portfolio:

**Talking Together**

2. Engagement activity around the Council's medium term financial plan has yielded hundreds of comments via letter, email and phone. On 10 February a Talking Together event about the budget was held. The emphasis was very much on listening to the views of local people. A number of issues were raised, including concerns over the future of the Mayor's Charity Shop and South Park aviary, bus routes, cycle training and Council tax. More than 48 members of the public attended the event. The Council's commitment to responding to messages heard through community engagement activity was seen in the way that initial budget proposals were modified in the light of feedback from both the Talking Together event and wider engagement activity.
3. The Connecting with Communities team worked in partnership with the Community Foundation to stage a lecture and debate with Manfred Hellrigl from the Bureau for Future Questions in Austria on 19th March. I chaired the event at the Dolphin Centre. Its purpose was to stimulate some fresh thinking in Darlington around issues relating to building social capital and a thriving third sector. Both of these issues are vital for the effective delivery of Darlington's Local Area Agreement.
4. Planning is underway for a further round of Talking Together in April/May which will be focused on civil parking enforcement and the emergent parking strategy.

**Community Development**

5. Work continues on the delivery of the final weeks of Community Partnerships' 2008/9 action plans and on finalising plans for 2009/10.
6. Partnerships are beginning to work more closely with the Police on the PACT (Police and Communities Together) initiative; this is the police's themed approach to community engagement. For instance, at their January meeting, the Bank Top Community Partnership identified three policing priorities:
  - (a) Parking in Neasham Road and adjoining streets;
  - (b) Disorder in Eastbourne park and other named hotspots;
  - (c) Damage to vehicles in Eastbourne Road and St John's Crescent.

7. Northgate and Branksome & Cockerton West partnerships have worked together to develop a bank of sessional play workers (who have been subject to Criminal Records Bureau checks) to help deliver playscheme activity at different times during the year. This development is significant because it will help to bring certainty to playscheme activity planning and some continuity to the sessions themselves.
8. The long-term sickness absence of two members of the Connecting with Communities team has compromised the team's ability to meet its targets for both income and numbers of volunteers with community partnerships this year. It is likely that new ways of measuring the team's performance will be suggested as part of the Connecting with Communities Review, which will soon be brought to a conclusion by the interim Asst Chief Executive.

## **GOLD**

9. After extensive consultation and the close involvement of GOLD members, GOLD is changing the way it functions to become more outcome-focused and to give a louder and clearer voice to Darlington's older people. The Council's Champion for Older People has been instrumental in helping other GOLD members to understand the importance of making improvements to the existing arrangements. Nominations are now being received for election to the new executive group, which in future will commission pieces of work from task and finish-style groups of members (and co-optees). Ongoing work on the health and positive images agendas will continue. After six and a half years GOLD will have its first AGM on 31st March.

## **Voluntary and Community Sector**

10. Work to refresh the Darlington Compact has begun. Evolution has been working together with the Darlington Partnership Chief Executive, Voluntary and Community Sector Liaison Manager and Policy Advisor to develop a provisional project plan. Exploratory engagement work with "duty to cooperate" partners is in train with a view to final adoption by September 09.
11. The Voluntary and Community Sector Liaison Manager has been advising Branksome Community Association, with a focus on financial liabilities and governance issues.
12. Work continues with "duty to cooperate" partners on the development of a commissioning strategy which will take account of the different aspects of commissioning, including involvement of the third sector at all stages of the commissioning and procurement processes.

## **Welfare Rights**

13. Further development work on the Big Lottery-funded Legal Advice Network Darlington (LAND) project has been carried out, with final modifications to the partnership agreement and business plan having now been made.
14. The Welfare Rights Manager continues to contribute to the Council's Financial Inclusion working Group.

15. 48 new enquiries were opened during February, an almost 50% increase on this time last year. The total ongoing live caseload of complex ongoing cases stands at 144.
16. The team's work on social inclusion for people with mental illness was furthered with another advice surgery took place at Middleton St George secure psychiatric hospital on 27th February.

### **Equalities**

17. The Acting Head of Connecting with Communities continues to work closely with the Disability Equality Scheme Steering Group and Impact Assessment subgroup. The latter is working to support and challenge the Council's approach to disability equality impact assessment. Currently, the main focus is around Civil Parking Enforcement and Home to School Travel.
18. Preparatory work for the development of a Single Equalities Scheme in advance of the adoption of a Single Equality Act is underway. The proposed scheme will bring together the Council's existing Race, Gender and Disability Schemes to enact in policy the more joined-up approach to equalities that the Council has been taking in practice for some time now.

### **Democratic Engagement**

19. As demonstrated by much empirical evidence, the greatest propensity for non-participation in established democratic and electoral processes is within the 18-24 age group. One of the key aims of this Council's democratic engagement work is, therefore, to raise awareness of these processes in children and young people. Linking in with the requirements of the Citizenship Curriculum, 'Town Hall Treasure Hunts' for Key Stage 2 pupils have previously been provided on an ad hoc basis, however a rolling programme of these events is now being established and it is hoped that every Primary School in the Borough will allow their pupils to participate in this activity. Since the last meeting of Council, a total of 90 pupils from Heighington Primary School (9<sup>th</sup> February 2009), St. John's CE Primary School (5<sup>th</sup> March 2009), Heathfield Primary School (19<sup>th</sup> March 2009) and the Education Village (23<sup>rd</sup> March 2009) have all taken part in the Treasure Hunt and its related activities. It is hoped that providing a greater understanding of these processes to young people will encourage increased engagement in the democratic process in later life.
20. An event, entitled 'Breaking Down Barriers', intended to raise awareness of the opportunities available to young people to make a positive contribution to society, and confront discrimination and inequality, took place on Thursday, 26<sup>th</sup> February 2009 at the Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College. Staff from the Democratic Services Section attended the event to advise those students approaching 18 years of age of the electoral registration process and the different methods of voting. The event was also supported by a number of partner organisations, including eVOLution, Gay Advice Darlington, and Darlington Football Club.

### **Member with Portfolio for Communities and Engagement Portfolio Councillor Jenny Chapman**