COUNCIL
14th MAY 2009

OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITIES AND ENGAGEMENT PORTFOLIO

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 Civil Parking Enforcement has taken place via letter, e-mail, on-line forum and phone. On April 22nd held a Talking Together event about CPE was held. The emphasis was on listening to local people. The main views and concerns have been around the enforcement of parking on pavements, lack of parking for visitors and carers to houses in residential parking areas, congestion in the town centre due to poor parking, lack of a drop-off point outside the Civic Theatre for disabled people, and the enforcement of 20mph zones. Views are being collated and the period of consultation ends on the 7th May. 16 people attended the Talking Together event, 19 people have given their views on-line and 659 people have viewed the on-line forum.

3. Planning is underway for a further round of engagement in May which will be focused on dog control. A Talking Together event is on May 13th at the Dolphin Centre. Connecting with Communities is also providing assistance to Democratic Services to deliver an "Age Well" event at the Dolphin Centre on May 12th. The focus of the event is to help older people be aware of health and social care issues that might affect them.

Community Development

4. Work continues on the delivery of the final weeks of Community Partnerships' 2008/9 action plans and on finalising plans for 2009/10.

5. Partnerships are continuing to work more closely with the Police on the PACT (Police and Communities Together) initiative.

6. 11 Community Partnership volunteers are attending a Take the Lead course which is being delivered by Skillshare North East in Darlington. CwC arranged to bring the course to Darlington. The 10 week course aims to teach people more about how to represent their groups and campaign and influence decisions made by statutory services, and also how local authorities work. All attendees will get a NVQ level 1.

7. Since the last report the Connecting with Communities Team has completed the services plan for the coming year and associated equalities impact assessment. Delivery of this plan may be subject to change following the results of the Connecting with Communities review.

Also it should be noted that since the previous report one of the Community Development workers has been released on early retirement to provide extra flexibility for the review.

GOLD

8. Gold has refocused to ensure delivery against priorities in the Older Persons Strategy and the AGM will be held on April 29th at the Dolphin Centre the first one in GOLD's history. Members have already agreed a new outcome focussed, strategic way of working. Ongoing work on the health and positive images agendas will also continue.

Voluntary and Community Sector

9. A draft timetable and work programme has been agreed for the development of the local Compact. This work is being led by the Executive Director of eVOLution supported by the Voluntary and Community Sector Liaison Manager and the Policy Advisor. The process involves consultation with all key partners from Darlington Partnership and each organisation is in the process of nominating a Compact Champion who will support development of the Compact and associated dispute resolution procedures. The aim is to launch the Compact on 10th September 2009 prior to the AGM of eVOLution.

10. Branksome Community Association held a Public Meeting on 27th April to agree to dissolve the organisation according to Charity Law because of financial and governance issues. Work is ongoing to discuss the future of this building and the services operated from it within the context of the other community centres to form an options paper in the near future. This work is being undertaken in conjunction with Estates and Children's Services.

11. Work continues with the Children's Trust and Procurement Team 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 commissioning and procurement processes.

12. An options paper is being drafted as part of the Strategic Funding Review following one-to-one discussions with the organisations currently receiving strategic grant. This work links to grant and commissioning with the Third Sector and will impact on Darlington's performance against NI007 within the Local Area Agreement: to provide an environment for a thriving Third Sector.

Welfare Rights

13. The Local Advice Network Darlington has now signed off the business plan and partnership agreement with the Big Lottery. A lottery-funded Partnership Development and Take-Up Officer (based within Welfare Rights) will go out to advert very shortly and a LAND Steering Group set up to oversee delivery of the project. The Partnership has applied the Council's Partnership Toolkit and will undertake a review in the near future.

14. Welfare Rights receives external funding from the Legal Services Commission. This was worth £16K in 2007/08 but an extra £10K was secured during 2008/09 due to over-performance on the contract.

15. The benefit take-up target for 2008/09 was £1m. Actual performance was £1,249,824 (07/08 = £717,705) which is 25% above target.

16. Ongoing benefit take-up strategy focuses on disability benefits. However, two specific awareness-raising campaigns were also carried out during the year. These focussed on major changes to sickness benefits and Income Support for lone parents.

17. Welfare Rights helped 705 clients in 2008/9 compared to 549 the previous year. 132 clients (2007/08 - 88) were represented at tribunal hearings, of which 101 (07/08 - 68) were successful. This represents a 76.5% success rate (07/08 – 75.5%) which is significantly above the national average of around 70%.

Equalities & Social Inclusion

18. The Acting Head of Communities has been working with colleagues across the region to develop the criteria for a regional Community and Engagement and Empowerment Programme. It is anticipated that the regional programme may present bidding opportunities to support the Council's work with communities in Darlington.

19. 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.

20. Preparatory work for the development of a Single Equalities Scheme in advance of the adoption of a Single Equality Act is underway. The Bill was published on 27th April 2009 and includes a new duty on public bodies to consider reducing socio-economic inequalities. 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

Town Hall Treasure Hunts

21. Since the last meeting of Council, pupils from two schools have visited the Town Hall to undertake a 'Town Hall Treasure Hunt'. 30 pupils from Heathfield Primary School attended on Thursday, 2nd April 2009, and 15 pupils from Bishopton and Redmarshall Primary School visited on Wednesday, 22nd April 2009.

'Question Time' Event – Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College

22. A-Level Politics and Citizenship students participated in a 'Question Time' event at the Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College on Friday, 3rd April 2009. Students had the opportunity to ask questions of a cross-party panel of local councillors. The Panel was chaired by Gary Hogg, Head of Politics at the Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College, and questions addressed both local to national issues.

Member with Portfolio for Communities and Engagement Portfolio

Councillor Jenny Chapman