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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 and Community Sector Liaison Manager continues to work closely with Evolution on a review of the existing Compact with the Voluntary and Community Sector. An amended timetable to deliver the Compact by the end of the calendar year has been agreed. This gives partner organisations the time necessary to take it through their decision-making processes.
3. Dialogue with Evolution around how to improve the measurement of Evolution's performance has started. The challenge is to reflect the organisation's strategic role more accurately in performance monitoring arrangements for the contract between Evolution and the Council.
4. A survey of third sector has been undertaken by MORI in relation to the LAA indicator NI007, relating to having an environment that the sector can thrive in Darlington. The results are based on only 134 responses. These respondents had to meet certain criteria and this excluded a number of smaller non-registered groups. Only 20% of respondents were accessing support from Evolution or other third sector support bodies. Nearly a third of organisations have no dealings with any local statutory bodies, although 21% of organisations were satisfied that they could influence local decisions. The Voluntary and Community Sector Liaison Manager is working with Evolution to examine these issues further.

**Community Engagement**

5. Work has been completed to report on what the Council has done as a result of recent Talking Together engagement programmes. A Talk Back page will appear in July's Town Crier outlining this.
6. From November 2008 to date there have been ten Talking Together branded community engagement programmes. Well over one thousand people have engaged with these programmes. This includes the 118 people who wrote to us about the proposed budget in February, 80 people who attended the Transport Listening event and the 89 people who attended a Talking Together about dog control event in May. Encouragingly, a growing list of the outcomes of successful engagement activity is being compiled. These range from persuading Arriva to make changes to bus routes to putting in place new traffic calming

devices near St Theresa's School and introducing a code of conduct for cycling in the town centre.

7. A review of these ten Talking Together programmes has been launched and will report with some recommendations on how future programmes can be further improved in terms of effectiveness and value for money.
8. Engagement activity in respect of delivering the Sustainable Communities Act has started and the debate has continued with the Healthy Darlington themed group meeting in Middlesbrough on 10th June in order to participate in regional consultation around tackling alcohol-related issues. Further activity is planned in June.

### **Customer Services**

9. Senior Managers from all departments within the Council participated in a workshop last month with a view to improving the Council's approach to Customers. The workshop, 'Think Customer', focussed on driving down avoidable contact (contact of low or no value to the customer); initial feedback on the new complaints policy (see below); and the launch of a 'Customer Toolkit', a self-assessment approach to customer service excellence. A review of the Council's Customer Charter will also be undertaken as a key element of the Toolkit.

### **Complaints/Comments/Compliments**

10. The corporate Complaints, Compliments and Comments Procedure has been operational since April and the Corporate Complaints Unit (which provides support to Officers; investigates Stage 2 complaints; and is the central contact point for the Local Government Ombudsman;) has delivered tailored training programmes to front line staff, senior managers and Members on the new Procedure.
11. The Unit is in the process of employing an officer to handle both Adult and Children's Social Care Complaints and implementing a complaints IT solution. A new procedure for Adult Social Care complaints, based on new Regulations, is also being developed.
12. Since introducing the new Procedure the Council has received the following:-

Department	Complaints	Comments	Compliments
Chief Executive's	6	2	3
Children's Services	7	2	7
Corporate Services	16	0	17
Community Services	66	39	39

13. Six of the above complaints have been addressed at Stage 2 of the complaints procedure.

## **GOLD**

14. My colleague Cllr Copeland, the Older Persons' Champion, has worked with GOLD to support their new way of working. The new executive group (they are called the GOLD focus group) has now met twice. Brian Jefferson is the chair. New terms of reference are being finalised and ideas for task and finish group work are being worked up. The idea is to help the focus group to examine some of the particular priority issues that affect older people, like accessible parking and access to dementia services.
15. Although a significant part of GOLD's work programme is already agreed and highlighted in All Our Futures, Darlington's Older People's Strategy, the focus group are open to further suggestions about the issues that they should be addressing. The focus group will hold an ideas "drop-in" meeting on Tuesday 14th July.

## **LINKs**

16. LINKs has had its first AGM and published its first annual report on its website. An elected (rather than co-opted) core group is now in place and it is working on a Patient and Public Involvement legacy project around access to stroke services. It is also further developing its own separate work programme.

## **External funding**

17. Connecting with Communities has been involved in a number of funding proposals in recent weeks. These include:
  - (a) taking the lead on a £45,000 bid to Government Office North East for an innovative community engagement activity programme called, Amplifying Voices. If successful the bid will fund a multi-agency partnership approach to delivering engagement activity with first-time engagers and those whose voices are rarely heard. A decision will be received in August;
  - (b) supporting a Children's Services-led bid, called Be Inspired, to deliver inspirational activities for young people and families in several super-output areas in the North Road area. The project already has already received formal support from various community partners;
  - (c) developing proposals with colleagues from other departments for a circa £400k bid called Darlington Together for intergenerational work in Darlington.
18. News on government's response to these bids is awaited with interest.

## **Welfare Rights**

19. Work to deliver the Legal Advice Network Darlington Project continues with recruitment of the first two of six posts that will be hosted variously by the Council, CAB and Age Concern.

20. 40 new enquiries were opened in May, giving a total ongoing “live” caseload of 193 cases. Improvements to caseload allocation and management have been made during April and May. During May alone £85,589 in additional benefits were secured for clients.

### **Meetings**

21. In the weeks since taking up this new portfolio I have attended the following meetings:-

Briefings with several key Council Officers  
The Volunteer Awards Evening  
West End Partnership meeting  
Citizens Advice Bureau  
Evolution  
Salvation Army  
Community Partnership Steering Group  
Shopmobility Steering Group  
Volunteers Steering Group

**Councillor Andy Scott**  
**Cabinet Member with Communities and Engagement Portfolio**