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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:

**Community Engagement**

2. A second Talking Together event on Dog Control was held at the Central Hall, Dolphin Centre on 30<sup>th</sup> September. The main target audience for the September event was those 89 people who had attended the first event back in May. The fact that only 25 people attended this second event was seen as indication that the first event did much to alleviate the concerns of many of those present. As well as an informal question and answer session there was the chance to break out into locality-focused workshops to see what the proposed dog control orders would mean on the ground in particular neighbourhoods. Comments received at these events, together with over 40 emails on the subject from members of the public, will be fed into the decision making process.
3. A Talking Together about Renewable Energy event was held on 8th October. 31 people attended, representing communities as diverse as Middleton St George, Bishopton, Little Stainton and Great Burdon. A busy programme of presentations and workshops covered issues like the future energy mix in Darlington, wind energy issues, the energy requirements of new developments. Public views from the session will be fed into the next Local Development Framework.
4. In Central Hall, on 24th November at 6pm we were Talking Together about the Local Transport Plan.

**Third Sector Developments**

5. Work is ongoing to formally agree the Compact that has been developed with 'duty to involve' partners within the Darlington Partnership. This includes codes of practice on resources, volunteering, involvement, partnership and equalities. As this is the framework for how we work with partners, discussion is taking place throughout all of the scrutiny committees prior to discussion at Cabinet in December.
6. Darlington continues to be involved in a number of regional events including an inter-faith regional conference to discuss the role of faith in policy development and service delivery. We have also sent representatives to the Tees Valley Consortium meeting that discusses issues of common interest to the third sector and local authorities, including the national performance indicators and engagement of the sector with regional bodies.
7. Darlington representatives have also been invited by the IDeA to speak at a North of England event aimed at spreading good practice following our partnership improvement

plan work with Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA). This will be held in York but is aimed at authorities throughout the North East, Yorkshire and Humberside.

### **Community Development**

8. Connecting with Communities and the Policy Unit have worked together to submit a bid for government funding for intensive local engagement. The bid has progressed to the final round and the final submission will have been made by 31st October. The proposal is that the funding will be used to facilitate intensive work with BME communities in and around the Northgate and Central wards by a short-term community development worker who will work as a temporary part of the Connecting with Communities team. In October engagement work with relevant ward members and other stakeholders will be carried out to ensure that there is an agreed approach to this very useful but potentially sensitive area of work.
9. A busy fourth annual International Day was held on 18th October at Forum Music Centre. The network of communities and individuals who supported this event will be important contacts for the intensive local engagement work described above.

### **Welfare Rights**

10. During August 31 new welfare benefits enquiries were opened and 52 closed. £101,798 in additional benefits were secured for clients. Overall performance is expected to drop as the service runs with reduced levels of staff in August, September and October until a new manager is appointed.

### **LINK**

11. At Central Hall on 14th October Darlington's Local Involvement Network held an event aimed at helping people to speak their mind about health and social care services. Views will help to steer the future work of the LINK.

### **Council's Website**

12. The Council's website is currently attracting an average of 4,339 visits (1,954 visitors) and 13,946 page views per day. To support users, an ongoing feedback link has been established within the footer of most of the web pages. This gives visitors an easy way to inform the web team if they don't understand the information on the page, if the information appears to be inaccurate or if the functionality within the page is not working correctly.
13. The Web Team has also been undertaking work to ensure that the website is accessible to people with disabilities. This has involved discussions with Darlington Association on Disability, a subscription to a monitoring service and feedback from individuals with specific accessibility requirements. Plain English training has also been undertaken by team members and key web editors with a view to ensuring that information is easier to understand and thereby encouraging more visitors to the Council's website.
14. The introduction of 'Google Search' has improved navigation around the 1,500 plus pages on the website to find the information and 'YouTube videos' and Google Maps' have also

been enabled to present information in a user-friendly way within the web pages.

15. The audio version of the Town Crier is now being published onto 'ITunes' as a podcast to provide people with a convenient and alternative approach to accessing Council information. Another alternative way to get involved is the new on-line discussion forum created to encourage more people to have their say; this service is moderated by the Council's Communications Team.
16. The second annual public survey of the website has just been completed and the web team will be utilising the feedback, along with broader research and consultation with stakeholders to determine the web action plan for 2010/11. One of the questions was 'How would you rate the Darlington Borough Council website?' There were 5 possible responses to the question [1] Very Poor, [2] Poor, [3] Satisfactory, [4] Good, [5] Excellent. A score of 4 was achieved.

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

17. Between 1 April and 30 September 2009, the Council received 274 complaints, 273 were initially dealt with at stage one and one was initially dealt with at stage two of the Council's Procedure. Fifteen of the 274 stage one complaints were escalated to stage two following a stage one investigation. The Council also received 220 compliments and 89 comments.
18. The following is a breakdown by department:-

<b>Department</b>	<b>Complaints</b>	<b>Comments</b>	<b>Compliments</b>
Chief Executive's	75	3	7
Children's Services	11	3	10
Corporate Services	27	11	49
Community Services	161	72	154

### **Democratic Engagement**

#### **Local Democracy Week 2009 (Monday 12 to Sunday 18 October 2009)**

19. As part of Local Democracy Week, children and young people in Darlington participated in a number of activities aimed at raising their awareness of politics and local democracy. Activities started as early as 24th September, with Members and Officers visiting schools and other youth organisations to promote 'I'm a Councillor, Get me out of here!' (See below).
20. Five Members attended a 'Political Speed Dating' event at Hurworth School – Maths and Computing College on 8<sup>th</sup> October. The five Members rotated around five tutorial groups, spending ten minutes with each group, to explain their role as a councillor and taking questions from the pupils.
21. Local Democracy Week was officially launched on 12<sup>th</sup> October with the Annual Meeting of the Council of School and College Councils held at Hummersknott School and Language College, and later in the day students at Darlington College also had the opportunity to

receive information about voting and electoral registration during a ‘Student Conference’ held at the College. Fifteen Primary Schools were represented at a Special Meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee, held in the Council Chamber at the end of a packed first day.

22. During the week, pupils from Skerne Park Primary and Mount Pleasant Primary Schools took part in ‘Town Hall Treasure Hunts’. The ‘Town Hall Treasure Hunt’ is an interactive event where children receive a tour of the Council Chamber and Mayor’s Parlour, and take part in a number of democracy-themed games and activities.
23. As part of Hummersknott School and Language College’s ‘Local Democracy Day’ on 15<sup>th</sup> October, three Members participated in a ‘Question Time’ style event based on the television programme of the same name. Students submitted questions for the Members to respond to. The themes involved youth provision and facilities in the town, and anti-social behaviour in Darlington.
24. Children and young people also had the opportunity to have their say during a number of intergenerational and Area Forum meetings held during the week, facilitated by staff from the Youth Service.

#### **‘Are you Registered?’ Events**

25. Democratic Services Section attended the Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College on 29<sup>th</sup> September and Carmel R.C. College on 1st October to raise awareness of the democratic process and electoral registration in young people approaching eighteen years of age.

#### **‘I’m a Councillor, Get me out of here!’ 2009**

26. As mentioned above, as part of this Council’s approach to Local Democracy Week 2009, six Members of Darlington Borough Council, including myself, participated in the national ‘I’m a Councillor, Get me out of here!’ event. ‘I’m a Councillor, Get me out of here!’ is a two week, on-line event which utilises internet communication technology that children and young people are familiar with, and aims to:
  - (a) break down barriers between Councillors and young people;
  - (b) engage young people in local democracy;
  - (c) provide the opportunity for Councillors to find out how young people feel about local issues, their concerns and enthusiasms; and;
  - (d) increase the links between Councils and schools.
27. Every Primary and Secondary School in the Borough was invited to participate in the event, as well as relevant youth organisations, and the response the Council received was very positive. The website was fully moderated by our partners in the event, Gallomanor Communications Ltd., and this ensured that the site was completely secure for young people.
28. Each Member received their own set of individual web pages on the ‘I’m a Councillor, Get me out of here!’ website, on which they posted their youth manifesto and a brief profile. Access to the website for children and young people was regulated by individual Access Codes, which were distributed by teachers and officers. The website was also fully

moderated by our partners in the event, Gallomanor Communications Ltd., and this ensured that the site was completely secure for young people.

29. The website went live on Monday, 5<sup>th</sup> October and children and young people were able to ask those Members involved questions, who answered them on-line in their own time. All questions and answers then appeared on the website so that participants could read what had already been asked and answered. Members also engaged in 'live chat' in chat-rooms, and the children and young people were given the opportunity to vote for the Member they wanted to win the event.
30. On Monday, 12<sup>th</sup> October, the Member with the fewest votes was 'evicted', and each day thereafter a further eviction took place. On Friday, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2009, Councillor Doris Jones was declared the winner at the 'Tea with the Member of the Youth Parliament' event.
31. The 'I'm a Councillor' event received a large amount of coverage in the local media, and during the second week of the event The Northern Echo provided a daily update on the evictions. The event was also highlighted on Alpha Radio and was featured on ITV's regional early evening news on Friday, 16<sup>th</sup> October (which also featured students from Mount Pleasant Primary School).
32. Initial post-event evaluation produced by Gallomanor has revealed that this Council's involvement in the event proved highly successful. Darlington Councillors attracted the highest number of 'Registered Users' nationally (567), and the second highest number of votes cast (701) and questions submitted (746) nationally.

### **'Claim Your Voice'**

33. Staff from the Democratic Services Section also attended an event entitled 'Claim Your Voice', which was held at The Forum Music Centre on 27<sup>th</sup> October 2009. The event was organised by Tees Valley YMCA, and was aimed at those aged between 16 and 25 years old. The purpose of the event was to provide information, and raise awareness, with regard to democratic and electoral registration processes.

### **Town Hall Treasure Hunts**

34. In addition to the Town Hall Treasure Hunts held during Local Democracy Week, the following Town Hall Treasure Hunts have been undertaken since the last Ordinary Meeting of the Council:
  - (a) Wednesday, 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009 – Skerne Park Primary School;
  - (b) Thursday, 29<sup>th</sup> October 2009 - Children from Sadberge Village;
  - (c) Friday, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2009 (am) - Alderman Leach Primary School;
  - (d) Friday, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2009 (pm) - Alderman Leach Primary School;
  - (e) Monday, 16<sup>th</sup> November 2009 - Heighington Primary School.

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