
OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITIES AND ENGAGEMENT PORTFOLIO

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 Talking Together programme about Planning the Future of Darlington programme has now come to an end. Fifty-four people attended a dedicated event at the Dolphin Centre where the tough financial decisions being faced by the Council and its partners. The Council's budget proposals were presented followed by further budget presentations by NHS Darlington, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service and the Police Authority. Debate then took place on the various options with questions from the floor to the range of speakers. An additional 295 people contacted the Connecting with Communities team in writing, by email, phone and via the online forum. On the night some separate engagement with staff and partners around the Early Years Service was agreed and carried out at two separate events a week later. Feedback on staff and public views from this Talking Together programme was fed directly into a Cabinet report 16 February 2010.
3. The Money Matters project (part of the North East Empowerment Partnership-funded Amplifying Voices programme) has delivered eleven engagement events in target wards and secondary schools in late February and early March. The purpose of the project was to provide free information and advice to those who are affected by the recession. It uses interactive drama as a tool to get people talking about finances in a relaxed atmosphere and is the result of close partnership working between the Council, Darlington Credit Union, Darlington Citizens Advice Bureau, Shontal Theatre Company, NHS Darlington and Community Advice Partnership. The project has built on some early pilot work in summer 2009. It has been innovative in its use of government funding to provide incentives for local people to open an account with Darlington Credit Union.
4. Five public engagement events around the Local Development Framework happened in February at the Dolphin Centre; YMCA, Middleton Street; Alderman Leach School and St Andrew's Church Hall, Haughton Village. Lively debate took place around issues such as businesses and jobs, shops and services, meeting housing needs, transport and the environment.

Community Cohesion

5. Government Office North East has offered support to north-east local authorities to increase capacity for work on the community cohesion agenda as part of a national programme supported by Central Government. As a first step the Campaign Company will work with the Connecting with Communities team to identify target communities in Darlington that

may benefit from this cohesion profiling work. Engagement sessions with local people will happen in March/April. Intelligence gathered from this work is likely to inform the community safety, democratic renewal and community engagement agendas and, in particular, how we engage most effectively with residents on these issues.

Third Sector Developments

6. Work has commenced on the targeted support programme to support third sector commissioning. This is a national programme that is being led by the IDeA and IVAR (Institute for Voluntary Action Research) on behalf of the Office of the Third Sector. The aim of the programme is to encourage primary care trusts and local authorities to work with the third sector to increase skills and capacity for commissioning services. The programme will last one year and will support the development and implementation of the Council's local business model.
7. The third sector strategy has now been in place for two years and implementation has taken place. A meeting is planned with representatives of both the Council and third sector to look at the key priorities for the next few months pending the outcome of the Connecting with Communities review and other reviews impacting on work with the sector.

Community Development

8. Both the North Lodge band stand project and the Skerne Park Community Centre CCTV project were approved by January Cabinet. The team completed funding applications for both projects and are working alongside community groups to manage and deliver the projects.
9. The GOLD team has arranged a training away day for volunteers on 23 March 2010. A Celebration event will be held on 16 March to encourage more active members and the AGM will take place on 21 April.
10. A new PACT for older people has been agreed by the police and meetings will commence in March. A task and finish group are meeting on 2 March to feed into the Local Transport Plan. Both actions are in response to the CQC inspection of Adult Services.

Welfare Rights

11. During December, £32,363.23 in additional benefits were secured for clients. The total for the year to date is £697,372.29 (78% of profile target). Twenty new enquiries were opened during December and 29 enquiries were closed.
12. A new Welfare Rights Manager, Sarah Andrews, started work on 1 February. She brings enormous experience to the role, having previously managed another welfare rights service in Tees Valley. The Welfare Rights team is now fully staffed.

LINK

13. LINK presented their first report to Health and Well Being Scrutiny Committee on the 16 February 2010. This report looked at access to GP's in Darlington with particular reference to patients with learning disabilities who have higher rates of physical illness and a greater

likelihood of premature death. LINK members will continue to work with the PCT and GP practices to support the implementation of the recommendations in the report. These recommendations include spreading best practice, maximising peer support and developing and implementing improvement plans where necessary.

14. The second LINK AGM will take place on 4 March at 5:30pm in the Central Hall at the Dolphin Centre. A number of new members have joined recently and it is hoped to continue this recruitment drive.
15. Work is ongoing with neighbouring LINK to look at services provided at a regional level and a joint event is planned to take place with the Tees Valley, Esk and Wear Valley Trust on the 26 February 2010. This will be held at Stockton and will include presentations and workshops on crisis services and the delivery of mental health services to learning disabled people.

LAND

16. It has been agreed that the project formerly known as LAND will become 'cap' (Community Advice Partnership) and a deed of name change has been developed for signature by all partners. This has been undertaken to increase take-up of services as some people were put off by the term 'legal' in the original name.
17. Work is ongoing to develop wider partnership working with a range of organisations that provide advice to the residents of Darlington. The aim of this work is to ensure that there is improved understanding of services offered by each partner and that residents therefore have improved access to these services.

Democratic Engagement

18. Democratic Services has developed a new strategy 'Democracy Matters: Be Heard' which, establishes a structured framework for the continued improvement of democratic engagement, and identifies the mechanisms and tools to support this development. It responds to the Council's duty to promote public awareness of the electoral and democratic processes, and the new responsibilities identified within the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009.
19. The strategy has six key objectives and focuses on the recognised drivers for improved democratic engagement, including voter turnout and electoral participation, public perception and awareness, legislative changes, and demographic disparities.
20. The Action Plan appended to the strategy, identifies key actions and events that will be undertaken during next eighteen months.

Town Hall Treasure Hunts

21. The promotion of the Town Hall Treasure Hunts has continued, and four events have been held since the last Ordinary Meeting of the Council:-
 - Friday, 29th January 2010 – Reid Street Primary School;
 - Tuesday, 2nd February 2010 – Reid Street Primary School;

- Monday, 15th March 2010 – Heathfield Primary School;
- Thursday, 18th March 2010 – Harrowgate Hill Primary School.

22. The ‘Town Hall Treasure Hunt’ provides an opportunity for young people to come into the Town Hall and undertake a range of fun activities, including a Treasure Hunt, where pupils are able to explore the Council Chamber and Committee Suite looking for answers to questions on local democracy. Pupils also play a game of 'Democracy Blockbusters' and participate in a task whereby they are invited to 'Build their own Councillor'.
23. The children also visit the Mayor’s Parlour and they are presented with an activity booklet containing information about councillors, the role of the Council and elections.
24. 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.

‘Question Time’ Event – Tuesday, 9th February 2010

25. A-Level Politics and Citizenship students at the Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College had the opportunity to question a cross-party panel of councillors at a ‘Question Time’ style event held on Tuesday, 9th February 2010.
26. To prepare for the event over 70 of the students visited the Town Hall the previous week and received a presentation on local democracy and the democratic structure of the Council. The students also had the opportunity to visit the Council Chamber.
27. On the day itself and in a format similar to the BBC television programme of the same name, Councillors Mike Barker, Gill Cartwright and Jenny Chapman responded to questions from students on a variety of topics. Each Councillor was given approximately two minutes to respond to a question, and the opportunity to answer first, second or third was rotated by the independent Chair to ensure an impartial and fair approach.
28. This was the third successive year that the Democratic Services has worked in partnership with staff at the college to provide students with this opportunity. The event was attended by approximately 90 students, and aimed to raise awareness of the role of locally elected councillors, and the local democratic process, in a challenging and interactive manner. The feedback received from both staff and students at the college has been extremely positive.

‘Make a Difference’ Event – Monday, 15th March 2010

29. Democratic Services were invited to an event entitled ‘Make a Difference’, at the Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College on 15th March 2010. The event was organised by students from the College, and was aimed at those aged between 16 and 18 years old.
30. The purpose of the event was to encourage young people to engage in activities whereby they can make a difference within the community and a positive contribution to society. The Democratic and Community Engagement Officer provided information on how young people can have their say via the formal democratic processes, and raised awareness of the electoral registration process and the different methods of voting available.

Darlington Borough Council Website - Launch of Facebook and Twitter

31. Darlington Borough Council's Facebook and Twitter pages were formally switched on at the beginning of January 2010.

They are mainly being used to feed the public information about:-

- Council services affected by severe weather
- Jobs at the council
- Council events
- News stories
- Council videos

32. As of 25th February, 133 people had signed up to receive Council information via Twitter and, 493 people had signed up to receive Council information via Facebook (33% male, 29% aged 24-34 years, 23% aged 13-17 years, around 50% are Darlington residents).

33. The important announcement web page (provides public alerts relating to school closures and changes to Council services in bad weather) was promoted via Facebook and Twitter and was viewed 20,917 times between 1st and 11th January 2010. Whilst credit for this usage cannot be solely attributed to Twitter and Facebook, it is likely that they played a significant role in increasing public awareness of this web page. Historically, this page has only been viewed a handful of times per day.

34. The provision of some information (such as school closure notifications) can be fully contained within the Facebook and Twitter notifications so this does not generate a visit to the corporate website.

35. Throughout January 2010, the Facebook and Twitter profiles generated at least **500 visits** to the website but this figure is likely to be much higher due to how these systems work (statistics cannot be gathered for some systems).

36. Facebook and Twitter have proven to be an effective (and low cost) way to promote our website. The figures seem to indicate that once people have been made aware of our website via Facebook and Twitter, a large proportion of the future visits that they make to the web site are carried out directly and by-pass the Facebook and Twitter systems.

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Cabinet Member with Communities and Engagement Portfolio