
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. 450 comments were received through the Talking Together programme about Planning the Future of Darlington. In addition, we also talked to people representing particular local interests, such as the Darlington Association of Parish Councils, the Town Centre Traders Association, and the Greener and Prosperous Darlington Theme Groups of Darlington Partnership. All comments received will be taken into account in progressing the Local Development Framework which will guide the use and development of land in the borough.

Community Development and Fair Share

3. The Council continues to work with the County Durham Community foundation to support the delivery of the Big Lottery-funded Fair Share programme in Northgate and Central wards. Recent developments have included:
 - a. the evaluation of Darlington's first four International Days with the development of plans for engaging Darlington's minority ethnic and minority nationality communities in a more sustainable way in the future;
 - b. the installation of play equipment at Albert Hill play area, though troubleshooting work is still being completed on site;
 - c. Council community development workers supporting the involvement of a culturally diverse group of women in a Lottery-funded quilting project as part of the North Lodge Bandstand project.
4. I was pleased to chair a consultation session with elected members to examine ways to improve the Council's support to Community Partnerships on 17th March.

Third Sector Development

5. An initial workshop has been held with representatives of the third sector and NHS to discuss the work programme for the Targeted Support Fund commissioning work. This will support the development of the new business model with the third sector. This will increase mutual understanding between the public and third sectors and develop more effective measurement of tenders in terms of social clauses and added value. This will be undertaken through an "action learning set" approach which will enable joint learning to take place and

inform the way that the two sectors do business together. Funding of £25,000 is available to support this work which is supported by the Office of the Third Sector and the Department of Health.

6. Work is underway to scope the development of a Community Asset Strategy as part of the Advancing Assets programme. This is the fourth round of the programme which is funded by Communities and Local Government and delivered by the Development Trusts Association (DTA) in partnership with Community Matters, the Local Government Association and Action with Communities in Rural England. This will enable the Council to develop a strategy to deal with requests for long-term leases and asset transfer requests. This strategy will enable the Council to look at maximising the use of community buildings but also to ensure that organisations making requests have robust and sustainable governance arrangements in place.

Welfare Rights

7. The benefit take-up achieved in the year to 31st March 2010 is expected to be in the region of £920,000 (with actual figures as at 26th March set at £904,331). The current caseload is higher than the regional average, even when taking into account the change from Incapacity Benefit to Employment Support Allowance (ESA), which is taking an average of 20 weeks to deal with compared to 8 weeks for attendance allowance cases. This change also accounts for the fact that average awards are lower and appeals are taking significantly longer to hear.
8. During the year 111 clients were represented at tribunal hearings and of these 67 were successful. This represents a 60% success rate for 2009/10 compared to 76.5% during 2008/9. National comparators are not yet available but success rates for ESA are anticipated to be lower than under the former Incapacity Benefit. Indications currently show they may be as low as 30%.

LINK

9. LINK is planning a personalisation event in the Dolphin Centre on 12th May in the morning. The aim of this event is to explain what the personalisation agenda means for people and what direct payments are. The plan is to encourage people to think about the type of services they may want to purchase in the future. This information can then be shared at an event to highlight to providers the types of services that may be required from them in the future. This event includes presentations by Adult Social Care officers explaining what the personalisation agenda can mean to individuals. It also includes case studies of what it has been like to have a personal budget and the changes that this has made to the lives of individuals.

CAP

10. The Community Advice Partnership (cap) has now submitted the first six monthly return to the Big Lottery and is awaiting their response. As planned, work has commenced on the development of a joint referral process that can be shared with the wider network of advice providers.
11. The annual review of this partnership and risk assessment based on the Partnership toolkit used by the Council has been undertaken. Action plans will be developed to address those

risks that need additional work to mitigate them. Overall the review showed robust governance arrangements are in place and that these are complemented by clear and effective review mechanisms.

Democratic Engagement

‘Democracy Matters: Be Heard’ – e-Newsletter

12. The first issue of a new e-Newsletter entitled ‘Democracy Matters: Be Heard’ was produced by the Democratic Services Section in April. The e-Newsletter was placed on the Council’s website, and notifications were issued via Facebook and Twitter, signposting those residents signed up to these sites to the newsletter. The initial issue provided some basic introductory information about the role of Councillors and Ward Surgeries, and provided particular focus on electoral registration and postal voting in advance of the Parliamentary General Election.
13. It is intended that the e-Newsletter will be produced on a quarterly basis, and future issues will include a focus on areas such as the role of Scrutiny, the role of the Standards Committee, the role of Cabinet, and the new duty in relation to Petitions and the provision of an e-Petitions facility.

Town Hall Treasure Hunts

14. The promotion of the Town Hall Treasure Hunts has continued, and two events have been held since the last Ordinary Meeting of the Council:-
 - a. Monday, 22nd March 2010 – Heathfield Primary School;
 - b. Wednesday, 31st March 2010 – Holy Family RC Primary School.

Community Engagement Activities (Web Based)

Facebook and Twitter (Corporate)

15. Council profiles have been established within a number of social networking websites, two of which are Facebook and Twitter. There are currently 617 people following the council by Facebook and 221 via Twitter. These channels of communication have proven to be very powerful ways of engaging with new audiences, and have led to an increase in the number of visits to the council website. The council is using these channels to promote;
 - urgent information such as school closures,
 - council meetings
 - local events
 - public consultations
 - council initiatives
 - news stories
 - jobs
 - council videos and images
16. Since the launch of the council profiles (January 2010), we have posted over 400 messages via these channels.

Young Parliament Election

17. The web team worked with the Youth Service to help promote the Youth Parliament elections during February/March 2010.
18. An election page was set up on the eVibe website (<http://www.darlington.gov.uk/eVibe/schemes/youthparliament.htm>) listing the candidates and their manifestos.
19. The Youth Service supplied a series of messages that were published onto the Council's Facebook and Twitter profiles. The messages were supported by links to the eVibe Youth Parliament page. Messages went out approximately every 3-4 days for 2 weeks leading up to the elections then more frequently during the week of the election.
20. 3,297 votes were cast, possibly the highest in the North East and in the top 15 nationally.
21. At the time of the elections approximately 23% of our Facebook followers were aged 13-17 which would have been the target age of the campaign.

Website Statistics 2009/10

22. The Council's websites are very powerful tools. They provide information about services, the ability to conduct business within the council online (such as eForms or online payments), and the opportunity to promote council activities.
23. During 2009/10, the council websites were visited 1,679,950 times, with a total of 5,221,792 pages viewed. There was a 5.84% increase in the number of visits to the website when compared to 2008/9. This equates to an average daily increase of 252 visits, and over 600 page views.

Discussion Forum Statistics 2009/10

24. By 15th April 2010, 177 people had registered to participate in the online discussion forums that are established by the council. Forums cover a broad range of issues such as budget proposals and cycling in the town centre. They are usually requested by a council service, set up by the web team, and monitored by the communications unit. To date, 12 forums have been created, and they have been viewed 16,938 times.
25. Forums are created using two components, threads and posts. A thread is a line of conversation that relates to the discussion forum. The council or a member of the public can establish this. A post is a comment that has been added to a thread by the council or member of the public.

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Cabinet Member with Communities and Engagement Portfolio