
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. Talking Together events have been undertaken during November to seek the views of the public on the Medium Term Financial Plan. These events complemented the Council's work on impact assessment by capturing the views and opinions of the general public. Further Talking Together communication channels are open now via website, Facebook, freepost, email and telephone. A further round of engagement activity is planned for the New Year, on publication of the Council's annual budget and revised Medium Term Financial Plan.
3. Town Centre Fringe consultation has now been completed for this phase and has proved very successful with participation from a wide range of people. Since the last report consultation has taken place at the Clifton Centre, Bondgate Methodist Church, Forum Music Centre and at McNay Street Children's Centre Fun Day event. In addition, there were a number of 'walkabouts' for targeted groups, including Pensbury Street residents, DAD members, Social Club for the Blind members, YMCA members and Northgate residents. There were also two Talking Together 'walk abouts' for the general public. The series of engagement activities for Town Centre Fringe have engaged over 700 residents in total.
4. Connecting with Communities continues to support IPPR North, participating in a quick mapping exercise of engagement and empowerment in Darlington to feed into the overall North East picture. This is consistent with the Council's move to the production of a Single Needs Assessment that looks not only at data but also the impact service change has on individuals and communities of identity or place.

International Day

5. Over 90 people were involved in delivering International Day from a range of communities in Darlington. The event included dance, food and music from a range of different cultures and backgrounds including West Indian, Bangladeshi and Polish communities. The event was successful in further embedding joint working across diverse communities and in addition to those involved over 300 people attended the event at the Forum.

Impact Assessment

6. Work is under way to more fully understand the impact of the budget proposals on Darlington residents. As well as looking at the equalities impact of particular proposals, engagement activity has also focused on other important issues, including poverty, sustainability, health and safety, partner impact and impact on our ability to deliver One Darlington: Perfectly Placed. A variety of techniques have been used to progress this work.

Community Development and Fair Share

7. The Connecting with Communities Team are looking at a number of ways to support local communities and stakeholders to work together to unlock new ways to deliver services that may be hit by the budget proposals.
8. Discussions have taken place with the Chairs of Community Partnerships to discuss what short-term activity can be undertaken that will help to make local communities more resilient to the potential changes ahead.
9. The Fair Share Panel has met and agreed the priority outcomes for the remaining period until March 2013. These outcomes are in line with the Sustainable Community Strategy and developing stronger, more resilient communities in the Northgate and Central Wards. Proposals have been submitted by the community for the £329,336 of funding that remains and a decision is awaited in the Autumn in relation to these applications moving forward. Contingency arrangements are currently being put in place should either of these building projects be unsuccessful.

GOLD

10. The Tea Dance was held on 10th August and over 500 people attended the event. A number of local businesses provided sponsorship support and the YMCA 'V' involved group supported GOLD on the day, which helped to further embed the inter-generational work taking place. Evaluation showed that people had accessed services that would improve their quality of life specifically because of the input from the variety of information stands.
11. GOLD also held a Positive Health day on the 6 October enabling 90 taster sessions for alternative therapies to be undertaken as well as more traditional health checks including blood pressure and input from the Falls Service to prevent ill health.
12. GOLD is currently involved in consultation regarding community pharmacies and day care services. This will inform the service reviews currently taking place within both health and social care.
13. The Older Persons PACT is continuing to work well and has resulted in a number of issues raised by residents being addressed including speed of traffic and litter due to black bags being put out early.

Welfare Rights

14. The change in the benefit system from Incapacity Benefit (IB) to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) has had a significant impact on the Service. The result is that awards are lower but cases are taking significantly longer to process as the Tribunals Service is now setting appeal dates 4 to 5 months in advance (compared with 3 months in 2008/09). To put this into context, the amount of time spent on an Attendance Allowance (AA) and Pension Credit claim, is currently approximately 6 weeks, resulting in an average gain of £161 per week. An ESA appeal, which will take approximately 20 weeks, will result in an average gain of £81 per week. Despite the above changes during September, £60,333 [£31,386] in additional benefits was secured for clients.
15. Partnership working with other organisations is continuing to develop with work taking place with Middleton St George Hospital, to support disabled people with mental health issues, the Parent Partnership for disabled children and their families, St Theresa's Hospice and Anchor Housing. The above work helps to broaden access to the services that the unit offers and helps reduce the impact of the economic climate on these vulnerable groups.

Third Sector Development

16. The new Darlington Compact was launched at eVOLution's AGM on 28th October and partners are now looking at ways to implement the principles in these very difficult times.
17. Work has begun to look at the potential impact of budget proposals on the third sector and to look at ways to minimise this. It is important that the cumulative effect of proposals is identified as some groups will be affected by a number of different proposals.

LINK

18. LINK has sent a response to the Health White Paper in relation to the introduction of Healthwatch which incorporates LINK's current role in dealing with public involvement in health and social care. The new Healthwatch service will include Advocacy and Complaints as part of the specification and this needs to be set up during 2011. Discussions will need to take place shortly to agree the commissioning and procurement process for this new service.

Community Advice Project (CAP)

19. The launch of the CAP project took place on 26th October at Darlington College. The event was organised with Darlington NHS and 40 advice providers were in attendance with information stands. These partners included the NHS, Police, Fire and Rescue, voluntary and community groups and the local authority. The private sector has helped by sponsoring part of the event. A range of activities were available on the day from cookery demonstrations to laughter workshops - all aimed at improving health and well-being.

Democratic Engagement

Local Democracy Week 2010 (11th to 17th October 2010)

20. As part of Local Democracy Week (LDW), children and young people in Darlington participated in a number of activities aimed at raising their awareness of politics and local democracy. Activities for the week began early (20th September), with Members and Officers visiting schools and other youth organisations to promote 'I'm a Councillor, Get me out of here!'
21. In the lead up (6th October), five Members also attended a 'Political Speed Dating' event at Hurworth School – Maths and Computing College. The 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.
22. LDW was officially launched on 11th October 2010 with the annual meeting of School and College Councils held in the Council Chamber. Later in the day, 15 Primary Schools were represented at a special meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee, in the Council Chamber.
23. Alderman Leach Primary School received a visit during the week from the Democratic Engagement Officer, who spoke about democracy and the decision making process, and pupils from the school also 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 participate in a number of democracy-themed games and activities. The following schools have also participated in a Treasure Hunt:-
 - (i) 4th October (Year 5) – Skerne Park Primary School;
 - (ii) 4th October (Year 6) – Skerne Park Primary School;
 - (iii) 18th October (Group 1) - Heighington Primary School;
 - (iv) 18th October (Group 2) - Heighington Primary School;
 - (v) 15th November (Group 3) - Heighington Primary School.
24. As part of Hummersknott School and Language College's 'Democracy and Citizenship Day' on 13th October, four 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, the provision of arts and culture, anti-social behaviour in Darlington, and wider national issues.
25. Students at Darlington College also had the opportunity to receive information about voting and electoral registration during a 'Student Conference' held at the College on 13th October 2010.
26. Children and young people questioned a Panel comprised of members of the Darlington Partnership Board at a 'Darlington Debate' style event, held on 13th October 2010 at the Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College.

‘Democracy Matters’ Roadshow Events

27. Democratic Services attended the Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College on 30th September and Carmel RC College on 5th October, to raise awareness of the democratic process and electoral registration for young people approaching 18 years of age.

‘I’m a Councillor, Get me out of here!’ 2010

28. As part of this Council’s approach to Local Democracy Week 2010, six Members of Darlington Borough Council, participated in the national ‘I’m a Councillor, Get me out of here!’ initiative. ‘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:
 - (i) break down barriers between Councillors and young people;
 - (ii) engage young people in local democracy;
 - (iii) provide the opportunity for Councillors to find out how young people feel about local issues, their concerns and enthusiasms; and;
 - (iv) increase the links between Councils and schools.
29. 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.
30. 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.
31. The website went live on 4th October and children and young people were able to ask those Members involved questions, who subsequently answered them on-line. All questions and answers then appeared on the website so that participants could read what had already been asked and answered. The children and young people were also given the opportunity to vote for the Member they wanted to win the event.

32. On 11th October the Member with the fewest votes was 'evicted', and each day thereafter a further eviction took place. At the end of the week, Councillor Joe Lyonette was declared the winner at the 'Tea with the MYP (Member of the Youth Parliament)' event.
33. The 'I'm a Councillor' event received coverage in the local media, and during the second week of the event The Northern Echo provided an update on the evictions.
34. 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 (449), and also the highest number of votes cast (593) and questions submitted (513).

Council's Website

35. The Council's annual web survey was carried out during September and the response rate increased by 125 per cent this year in comparison with the previous year. The increased response rate was primarily through use of social network profiles such as Facebook and Twitter, a link to the survey on the Council's homepage, advertising banners throughout the website and the use of 'Survey Monkey' to deliver the survey. 73 per cent of people who responded feel that the website is good or excellent with a further 23.7 per cent stating that the site is satisfactory. The results of the survey are still being analysed but early indications are that the problems previously experienced with navigation around the website appear to have significantly reduced from last year.
36. There are a number of developments underway to improve the Council's online services including the development of a range of on-line forms that will enable people to report problems (this will involve fully automated integration into back office systems); a creation of the website that will work on mobile phones; improvements to the search function; and enhancements to the MyDarlington+ system.

Councillor Andy Scott
Cabinet Member with Communities and Engagement Portfolio