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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 Work**

2. Work on budget proposals has currently led to an agreement that self-managing allotment groups will form a forum for sharing good practice and offering support to each other whilst also providing a focal point for other allotment groups to explore self-management. There has also been work on new models of delivery for Tourist Information, Bowling Greens and community transport, some of this has then been used to scope potential options for future delivery of these services. This work has been developed with colleagues in Place who have responsibility for these services.
3. A library needs assessment has been carried out in liaison with the transformation team and library staff in the services for People team. The needs assessment work has resulted in over 3,000 responses to the questionnaires to date, which included both an online and hard copy survey. In addition to this a number of focus groups have been held including visits to a visually impaired reading group, children's centres, schools and The Box youth club. This assessment will form part of the evidence base that will be used to develop an implementation plan for the budget proposals and will ensure that the legal consultation requirements are met.
4. Work has also taken place in specific localities based upon local priorities. The community workers have worked with the planning team to ensure residents of all ages throughout Skerne Park have the opportunity to discuss the proposals for Section 106 funding in the area. This work is using a 'Planning for Real' approach used previously as part of the Town Fringe development process. Community workers are also using an outcome-based approach to work with the Tobacco Control Alliance, local communities and primary care trusts. This will develop a plan to reduce smoking in particular areas starting with North Road and Cockerton West by not simply concentrating effort on giving information and advice but also at reducing access to tobacco houses selling imported cigarettes illegally. This will involve working with a range of partners to look at the role each can play in working with communities to tackle an issue that has been a concern for a long time.

**Fair Share**

5. A feasibility study is now underway through Groundwork for the self-build project in Northgate. This is supported by the North Road Community Partnership working with representatives of the Clervaux Trust, Darlington College, Groundwork and the Countryside and Rights of Way Team. Community Workers facilitated this partnership work and

facilitated discussion about ways that all partners could bring their skills and expertise to the table to give added value to the proposal. Community Workers have worked with proposal owners to develop aims and objectives as part of a funding bid to the Fair Share panel to provide running costs for Northgate and Central Partnerships. The community workers are also facilitating work to apply for a grant to employ a housing worker specifically to work with private landlords in this area which will help to provide support for outcome based work in the area.

### **Talking Together Programme**

6. Feedback from the November Talking Together events has been collated and a summary has been placed on the website together with the revised budget proposals for round two consultation. On 15<sup>th</sup> January consultation took place with children, young people and families to ascertain what the impact of budget proposals may be on this group of residents. The event was attended by 35 people, many of whom were young people, including the Youth MP. Response to the second round of budget consultation has resulted in a total of over 3500 responses of which the overwhelming majority have been in relation to the Early Years proposal.
7. Consultation is also taking place on the Tees Valley Bus Network, which includes an online forum and a drop-in event which is due to take place on 21<sup>st</sup> March between 3:30pm and 7:30pm in Central Hall. This is closely linked to continuing work to develop the third local transport plan.

### **Impact Assessment Work**

8. Work has been undertaken through various channels of communication to look at population-wide impacts of the budget proposals. These impact assessments have then been challenged by cabinet portfolio holders and senior officers to make sure that they are accurate and useful. Some proposals have identified potential savings but implementation plans are still to be fully formulated. For these proposals further work on impact assessments will need to take place as implementation is taken forward. Other proposals have little or no impact and no further impact assessment work will be required in the future unless the proposal is revised. Evidence and summaries of impact assessments will be presented as part of the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan.

### **Third Sector**

9. On 1<sup>st</sup> February a meeting of chief officers from a range of voluntary and community organisations was held together with lead officers from the Council to discuss the Council's budget proposals and the potential for the third sector to develop solutions where the Council is proposing to decommission, review or targeting services rather than providing universal services. It was agreed to continue to work together to use resources within each sector effectively and bring in external funding to support local delivery where possible. There was representation from a range of large and small organisations and this included some regional representation. Work will continue to understand and where possible to mitigate the effects of cumulative funding cuts on the sector as it experiences reductions from a range of sources.

## **Welfare Rights**

10. December 2010 was a very busy month, with 48 new enquiries compared to 20 the previous year and because of changes to the benefit system these also tend to be more complex. 37 enquiries were closed in December leaving a total of 164 active cases.
11. Work continues to broaden the knowledge of social security law by working with Adult Care Teams, Harewood House, Vane House and MIND. Provision has continued to Middleton St George psychiatric hospital funded by the hospital. Further work is planned to roll out take-up campaigns through the cap project as waiting times have now dropped to 3 weeks rather than the 8 week period in recent months.

## **LINK**

12. LINK is continuing to work to engage with GP commissioners to ensure that residents influence commissioning. This is a key challenge for the next twelve months as Healthwatch, the new public and patient involvement mechanism, is developed. Guidance is still coming out about the way that Healthwatch will operate and be governed and local authorities in the North East are meeting regularly to make sure that Healthwatch will meet local need.

## **Darlington Arts Project**

13. Connecting with Communities is providing community engagement advice and support to work that is developing around Darlington's future arts offer. The engagement activity is seen as a way of exploring genuinely new ways of improving quality of life in the borough.

## **Web Team**

14. During January 2011 the Council launched a mobile phone friendly version of the Corporate website in response to changing public trends, and the aim of encouraging more people to use cheaper channels of contact to access Council information and services.
15. Over 90% of the website pages are now designed to work with the latest Internet enabled smart phones and portable devices, providing the public with access to information about Council services whilst on the move at any time of the day. The Corporate website remains as one of the cheapest channels of contact. To access the mobile version of the website, visitors just need to enter the normal website address ([www.darlington.gov.uk](http://www.darlington.gov.uk)) into their phone Internet browser.
16. Working with the Transformation Team, a project is currently underway that is looking to extend the number of Council services that can be paid for online. At the heart of this project is the objective to generate more income for the council by reducing the costs associated with enabling people to pay for services, and by providing people with a more convenient way to pay for services.

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