
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 community engagement plan for Darlington's Art Enquiry Group has been approved. Work has started to find out what the aspirations of local people are and how a sustainable arts programme can be developed that ensures arts activity is still accessible to residents of Darlington whatever their background. This work forms the 'Voices and Views' strand of the arts enquiry group work programme and will continue to be progressed in the coming weeks.

Talking Together

3. The budget process has now been finalised but work continues to consult on the implementation of the agreed savings profiles. The team are supporting work in various departments to undertake impact assessments with specific groups and individuals.
4. A drop-in event was held on 21st March to publicise the Tees Valley Bus Network Improvement Project. This project will look at ways to reduce journey times on routes across the Boroughs of Tees Valley. The focus in Darlington for the coming year is the routes around North Road, Yarm Road, Clifton Road, Parkside and Firthmoor.

Voluntary and Community Sector

5. Work has continued to implement the targeted support fund work on commissioning with a workshop to look at social clauses and ways that we can incorporate them in our tender specifications. The workshop included representatives from key voluntary organisations in Darlington and representatives from procurement and commissioning in the Council and representatives from the Primary Care Trust who are leading on commissioning.

Welfare Rights

6. The service is concentrating on helping the most vulnerable residents of Darlington as various changes to the benefits system have increased demand so that it currently outstrips capacity. Work is ongoing with partners to look at ways to maximise the support offered including working with signposting to local solicitors where potential clients qualify for Legal Help.
7. 64 new enquiries were opened in February and 43 cases were closed in the same period. A case allocation date is now fixed in advance with clients and all new referrals to the visual

disabilities team will be offered a benefit check to identify those people eligible for increased benefit when the new rules take effect during April 2011.

8. The Service's benefit take-up target for 2010/11 is £1.26 million. During February, £49,462 in additional benefits was secured for clients. The total for the year to date is £795,312 (69% of profile target) but this must be set in the context of a number of changes. Benefit criteria and processes nationally have changed and these changes have impacted upon the complexity of cases and success rates.
9. CAP is a joint partnership project with CAB, Age UK (Darlington) and Darlington Borough Council and provides improved access to legal advice relating to a range of issues at a generalist level and specialist employment advice. CAP has undertaken two targeted campaigns aimed at disabled people over the age of 75 supported by Lifeline Services and Anchor Housing.
10. CAP Outcome 2 is to achieve an increase of 10 per cent in the proportion of clients reporting reduced indebtedness, family breakdown, homelessness and employment-related problems and enhanced mental and emotional wellbeing as a result of advice given by December 2011. This will improve quality of life for the clients, the clients' immediate families and dependents. Currently, performance is measured by questionnaires completed by clients monthly throughout the year to maximise accuracy. and embed partnership working. So far CAP is slightly over-performing against this target, which in the current financial climate is no mean achievement.

Impact Assessment

11. Whilst initial population level impact work has now been completed for all the budget proposals work is still taking place to understand impacts on groups, families and individuals. Support continues to be provided to lead officers for budget savings to ensure that this level of detailed work takes place and complies with the legal framework in relation to disability impact assessments.

Building Confident Communities

12. Over 50 invitees attended a Darlington Partnership event in Central Hall on the 9th March to look at ways to work in partnership to identify challenges and pressures relating to demography, health, economy, public safety and the environment. Discussion groups then worked together to identify under-used resources that partners could use more effectively. Resources included data, information, buildings and spaces, workers, volunteers, skills, experience, expertise and financial resource. Participants looked in some detail at the challenges surrounding the better use of social capital in Darlington

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Cabinet Member with Communities and Engagement Portfolio