
**OVERVIEW OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES AND COMMUNITY SAFETY
PORTFOLIO**

Purpose of Report

1. The following were the main areas of work under The Portfolio Holder for Community and Public Protection.

Darlington Housing Strategy 2008-12

2. A review of Darlington's approach to the provision of housing locally to meet all housing requirements across a broad spectrum of housing need and tenure has just been completed. The new strategy maintains strong links with the corporate plan and the sustainable community strategy, "One Darlington, Perfectly Placed". The strategy also seeks to minimise the environmental impact of future housing development by reducing the "carbon footprint" and delivering more efficient, lower energy consuming dwellings through improved design.
3. The strategy focuses on targeted investment in the private sector as well as within the authorities own housing stock. This provides the platform to maximise inward investment into Darlington, through coordinated sub-regional investment bids to the Regional Housing Board for Single Housing Investment Programme (SHIP3) funding for 2008-11 and the prospect of an exciting sub-regional growth bid which offers a unique opportunity to shape our local community for the future and build upon existing infrastructure.
4. The strategy builds upon the strength of existing partnerships and offers the flexibility to explore innovative new solutions to redress imbalances within the existing local housing market and achieve positive outcomes for those local people who are on the margins of owner occupation or for which access to quality affordable housing is still difficult. The quality and the choice of housing options remain high priorities and new models of affordable housing will be developed through the strategy by engaging proactively with planning colleagues to make best use of development site opportunities in partnership with Registered Social Landlords and private developers.

Darlington Public Sector Stock Condition Survey

5. In January 2008, we commissioned a public sector stock condition survey for our 5,500 housing stock. Following a robust tendering process, formal tender submissions and selection interviews from a panel of representatives from the Tenants Board and Housing Services, Savills were appointed. The stock condition survey involved undertaking household inspections of a 10% sample of representative housing types throughout the Borough following a preparatory letter to all Council tenants advising them of the pending work. Early indications suggest that annual investment in public sector housing is ensuring that decency standards are maintained and that current investment priorities are well

targeted.

Tees Valley Strategic Housing Market Assessment

6. The five Tees Valley local authority partners commissioned a comprehensive strategic housing market assessment following a robust tendering process. Arc4 (previously known as David Cumberland Housing Regeneration Limited, who undertook our local housing needs assessment in 2005) were appointed.
7. The role of the strategic housing market assessment is to evaluate and assess the current housing market across all tenures and identify any deficiencies within it, as well as examining the inter relationship which exist across tenures. Through a series of stakeholder questionnaires, hypothesis testing, gathering of secondary data sources, analysing supply and demand data and assessing the effect of neighbouring sub-regions, a picture of the sub-regional housing market has become much clearer. An assessment of the capacity of the housing market to deliver sufficient supply to meet identified housing need and address consumer choice was completed.
8. It is not expected that affordable housing requirements in Darlington will vary significantly from those already captured within the Affordable Housing Supplementary Planning Document. However, to encourage continued economic investment, to retain highly qualified personnel and provide equality of opportunity for all local people the housing product of the future may have to change to maintain sustainable, mixed tenure, and, balanced communities.
9. Full results of the research will be available from May 2008 and will be the cornerstone of future strategic housing policy.

Darlington Dividend Scheme

10. Our reward and recognition scheme, known as the Darlington Dividend Scheme was formally launched on 9 April 2008 at the Arts Centre. Some of the first tenants to apply for membership were invited to receive their discount cards from three members of Darlington Football Club. In order to qualify for discounts at various local and national stores, tenants must have a clear rent account or be complying with an agreed payment plan, have signed a Good Neighbour Agreement and completed a Tenant Profile form. So far over 1000 applications have been received and the scheme will be continually promoted to further increase membership.

Local Housing Allowance

11. The Housing Benefits service has successfully implemented Local Housing Allowance, from 7 April 2008. Local Housing Allowance (LHA) replaces Housing Benefit (HB) for most tenants renting property in the private sector. The change will affect anyone making a new claim for benefit, or changing his or her address.

12. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has introduced LHA to provide tenants with more choice and responsibility about where they live and how they manage their own finances. The two main features of the scheme are:
 - (a) **Choice:** LHA will be paid at a flat rate, based on family size and personal circumstances. Under the previous rules, the rate of HB depended on a valuation made by the Rent Service, based on the location, size and condition of the property. Under LHA, tenants will have greater choice about where to live, without this affecting their benefit. In addition, tenants will also be able to keep some of the excess benefit, where the rate of LHA is more than their rent.
 - (b) **Personal responsibility:** In the majority of cases, LHA will be paid direct to the tenant. Under the previous rules, the tenant can choose to have their HB paid to their landlord. The DWP firmly believe that tenants should be responsible for receiving LHA themselves and paying their own rent, reflecting the way other welfare benefits are paid. Giving tenants responsibility for their own finances will improve their opportunities for accessing work. A safeguard policy has been developed, however, to protect vulnerable tenants who are unable to manage their own affairs.
13. The Housing Benefits service has produced leaflets and forms to inform tenants of the changes, and these are available on the Council's website. In addition, a forum for local landlords was held in March 2008, giving them the opportunity to find out more about the LHA and to raise questions with Housing Benefits staff. Early indications are that both tenants and landlords have been able to successfully access information about LHA from Housing Benefits and Customer Services staff and that claims for LHA have been easier and quicker to process.

Council Tax Benefit Letters and Annual Billing

14. As part of a joint working initiative based on use of the same IT systems, between Darlington Borough Council and Hartlepool Borough Council, the Housing Benefits and Local Taxation Services have been investigating ways in which residents receiving Council Tax Benefit are notified about their Benefit and Council Tax liability.
15. In previous years, residents have received their letters notifying them of their Council Tax Benefit and their Council Tax bills separately. This has generally been accepted as poor customer service and has historically meant that Council staff had to deal with large volumes of queries from residents at that time of year. Previous attempts to merge to two notifications (involving substantial amounts of documentation) have been unsuccessful. However, by working with colleagues from Hartlepool Borough Council, a joint initiative has been developed in partnership with an external company, to automatically merge the documentation together. Although there have been initial costs involved in the exercise, the result has been overwhelmingly successful, with reduced queries from customers, a better service and cost savings in terms of postages etc.
16. The joint working initiative between the Darlington and Hartlepool Councils will continue during 2008/09, to find further ways of working together to improve services.

Enforcement/Waste

17. A fly tip at Amdega is currently under investigation. CCTV footage has been examined but could not be enhanced sufficiently for vehicle details. Enquiries are ongoing with suspect vehicle and working alongside Trading Standards and Housing Benefit Fraud Investigators on other related matters.
18. A supermarket on Yarm Road is being prosecuted by the Council for discarding a number of advertising leaflets within the rear yard of a residential property nearby. The case is currently with Legal Services awaiting a court date.
19. Household waste was found in the area of Summerhouses on the outskirts of Darlington. Following an investigation, a gentleman was found guilty of two counts of fly-tipping and was fined for each offence plus costs of £300 and the £15 victim surcharge.
20. A gentleman from Richmond was fined £200, ordered to pay costs of £100 and a £15 victim surcharge for a fly tipping offence that occurred on Council land in Westminster Road, Darlington.
21. The first Litter Clearance Notice has been issued, to the landowner of the retail site at the town end of Haughton Road due to the untidy condition of the perimeter of their premises. Clearance was undertaken by the management however, should the areas not be litter free and compliant with the Notice over the next 12 months, a Fixed Penalty Notice will be issued on each occasion.

Enforcement/Vehicles

22. A Billingham man was successfully prosecuted for abandoning a motor vehicle at Hundens Lane Allotments and fined £200, ordered to pay costs of £250 plus compensation of £182.12 and a £15 victim surcharge.
23. Two Darlington residents have been successfully prosecuted for riding their bikes on open land. They received a fine of £100 and were ordered to pay court costs of £60 and victim surcharge of £15 each.

PSA1 Performance Summary

24. The table below provides an overview of the 12 month rolling performance compared to the baseline year of 2003/04:

Performance by Crime Type 2003/04 v Latest 12 Months				
	Baseline 2003/04	Latest 12 month incl. Feb 2008	% Change	Target to March 2008
Total PSA1 Crimes:	6987	5972	DOWN 15%	- 21.4%
Theft or unauthorised taking of a vehicle	598	405	DOWN 32%	- 20%
Common Assault (inc on PC)	540	218	DOWN 60%	- 20%
Wounding (serious and other)	352	866	UP 146%	- 10%
Theft from a Person	123	110	DOWN 11%	- 10%
Vehicle Interference	108	111	UP 3%	- 10%
Robbery of personal property	98	59	DOWN 40%	- 10%
Criminal Damage (exc 59)	2574	2430	DOWN 6%	- 25%
Theft from a Vehicle	1637	1090	DOWN 33%	- 25%
Domestic Burglary	606	470	DOWN 22%	- 10%
Theft or unauthorised taking of a cycle	351	213	DOWN 39%	- 25%

25. Based on latest performance data it is envisaged that the CDRP will achieve a 16-17% reduction by March 2008 in PSA1 crimes compared to the 2003/04 baseline. The end of year performance figures will be available mid/end of April 2008.
26. Changes in recording practice have influenced the percentage increase in wounding offences. These changes have now taken effect and it can be seen in Table 2 that the actual numbers of offences is starting to decrease. There has not been any significant increase in wounding offences in the Borough.
27. Performance with regard to the numbers of substance misusers entering treatment continues to surpass targets.
28. The number of repeat victims of Domestic Abuse has increased during the last three years, although the degree of repeat victimisation being reported to police may be a reflection of victims' confidence in local services provision.
29. Complaints regarding anti-social behaviour remain a concern with 6998 complaints being received by police in 2003/04 compared to 10395 in 2007/08 (April- Feb).

Local Area Agreement

30. Within Darlington's current LAA the CDRP has two reward element targets, these are:
 - (a) Percentage of people who say they feel safe walking outside in their area alone in the dark. The baseline for this target is 48.3%, current performance is 48.7% against a 52% target.
 - (b) Number of first time entrants into the Youth Justice System. The baseline in 2004/05 was 311. In 2007/08 there were 211 first time entrants which is well ahead of the 287 target.

Headline Activity during the Last Six Months

Tackling Violent Crime Programme

31. The Tackling Violent Crime Programme continues to be implemented. The following initiatives have been rolled out:
 - (a) Recruitment of taxi marshals
 - (b) Deployment of the passive drugs dog
 - (c) Launch of lollipops
 - (d) Media campaign on Century FM and Bus Backs
 - (e) Operational Order for all officers policing the night-time economy implemented
32. Initiatives continue to be implemented and a full evaluation of the programme will be carried out in April 2008.

Action Week

33. In the last year three Action Weeks have been carried out in Central, Park East and Northgate Wards. 'Weeks of Action' are recommended by the Home Office as an area of best practice for CDRPs wishing to expand their efforts in delivering crime reduction outcomes. A number of community engagement, prevention and enforcement activities were carried out during these weeks by a range of partners. Full evaluation reports containing results and areas for future improvement are available from the Safer Communities Unit.

Vehicle Crime

34. The Offender Management Unit is in place consisting of one Researcher, one PPO Co-ordinator, one Probation Officer, one Drug and Arrest Referral Worker, one Detective Sergeant and six PCs. The team is targeting those offenders causing the greatest harm.
35. Between August 2007 – March 2008 four CRASBOs were obtained.

ASB

36. Between August 2007 – March 2008 13 Acceptable Behaviour Agreements were obtained.
37. All ASB team officers and wardens are now deployed according to issues identified in the fortnightly Tactical Assessment.
38. Hotspots of criminal damage are currently being monitored. Witnesses and residents are being supported to report such crimes.

Domestic Abuse

39. Work is ongoing to develop and establish a MARAC (Multi-agency Risk Assessment Conference) within the Borough of Darlington.

40. Since the development of the Darlington Domestic Abuse Service, in September 2007 the number of victims seeking help, support and advice is in excess of 150 referrals.
41. Funding provided by the Children Fund enabled 68 children and families, from Darlington Refuge and the Domestic Abuse Service, attend the Pantomime in December, at Darlington Civic Theatre.
42. A Domestic Abuse Strategy for 2008/11 is currently being developed.

**Cabinet Member with Portfolio for
Neighbourhood Services and Community Safety**