
OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY AND PUBLIC PROTECTION PORTFOLIO

1. The following were the main areas of work under my Community and Public Protection Portfolio:-

Benefits Take-Up Campaign

2. Following a request from Darlington MP, Alan Milburn, a campaign for the take-up of Welfare Benefits and Tax Credits has commenced. Nationally it is widely recognised that millions of pounds of benefit go unclaimed each year by some of the most vulnerable people in society. In particular, older people represent the biggest group who may be losing out on the help with their Council Tax and other benefits. According to recent research conducted by Help the Aged, half the pensioners who do not claim Council Tax Benefit are in the poorest fifth of the population and almost all are in the poorer half of the population. Pensioners who qualify for help with their Council Tax or their rent can get up to a year's benefit 'backdated' automatically.
3. The Benefits Section have been working with their colleagues in Local Taxation to identify people who may qualify for help with their Council Tax, their rent or who may be entitled to Tax Credits or other welfare benefits. Over 12,000 letters have been sent out to residents informing them of the help on offer. In addition, a visiting service is available for residents who want more information or help with claiming. A publicity launch for the campaign by Alan Milburn MP and the Leader of the Council, John Williams took place earlier this month. Further articles will be appearing in the local press. Information will also be sent out in March with all the Council Tax bills for 2005/06.
4. It is anticipated that an additional £50,000 of benefits will be taken up as a result of the campaign and I will report on progress with the campaign later in the year.

Homelessness

5. Homelessness continues to be one of my key priorities particularly at this time of the year. In partnership with First Stop, a Below Zero Project was established which enabled First Stop to open its accommodation during the night when temperatures fell below zero to provide shelter and food for rough sleepers. Housing Officers assisted by meeting some of the costs and providing some volunteers. They are also trying to work with individuals who are willing to accept support and find accommodation.
6. Our Rough Sleepers Initiative, run again in partnership with First Stop has identified around eight rough sleepers in Darlington and work is being undertaken with specific individuals to resettle them into long-term tenancies and address their long-term needs with support from key agencies.

7. This year two Council houses and one flat were identified and furnished to meet the demand from homeless families who required good quality temporary accommodation. Bed and breakfast establishments have only been used in emergency situations for families. From September 2005, when eleven units of accommodation for young people at St George's Hall are completed it is hoped that all vulnerable homeless people will no longer be reliant on bed and breakfast accommodation.
8. Increasingly the work of our Homeless Officers and Tenancy Support Officers is directed towards preventative work and this has resulted in a significant reduction of 32% in the number of homeless acceptance in the first three quarters of 2003/04 when there were 164 acceptances compared to 124 acceptances in 2004/05.

Energy Efficiency

9. Whilst considerable work has been undertaken through time to maximise the energy efficiency of the Council's housing stock, there are particular issues of fuel poverty in the private sector, predominantly in the more deprived wards. This year £30,000 was set aside to attract match funding from utilities companies under the European Energy Efficiency commitment. Over 250 dwellings have been improved so far this year and we are confident of meeting our end of year target of 330 dwellings and attracting £35,000 in additional funding. This year we have targeted older people and other more vulnerable client groups in the Central and Northgate Wards but are aiming to further extend to all eleven of the most deprived wards next year by increasing our level of investment and exploring options to attract considerably more match-funding.

Community Safety Service

10. Ian Thompson, the new Assistant Director – Environmental Services, with responsibility for the Uniformed Warden Service and Rob Jones, the new Anti Social Behaviour and Community Safety Coordinator have recently taken up their posts.

Street Cleaning

11. The pilot exercise in new zonal cleaning arrangements was extended to include the Lingfield, Bank Top, Lascelles and Eastbourne areas. Initial indications are that the quality of cleanliness has improved from a litter classification of 'C' to a 'B'. Managers are currently working on integration of services from refuse and street cleaning, which again will be piloted in these areas before roll out across the Borough. Further work is currently underway with regard to which other services can be integrated into the zonal approach for service delivery.

Councillor Bill Dixon
Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Community
and Public Protection