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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 Engagement**

2. A rolling programme of Talking Together–branded engagement activity connected to the development of the Town Centre Fringe continues to be delivered with a walkabout event and workshops planned in July. This follows on from high level consultation in May when more than 70 people gave their views on what should happen around the fringe of the town centre. These comments were expanded by some members of the public who raised concerns about issues to do with graffiti, fly-tipping, vandalism which are being tackled by the Street Scene team. The programme will be facilitated by a number of Council staff who have undergone “Planning for Real” training.
3. Running in parallel with this is a Talking Together programme about transport options, intelligence from which will inform the development of the next Local Transport Plan. There will be a drop-in event in July.

**Community Development and Fair Share**

4. The Councils Community Development Workers continue to work with local residents and colleagues at County Durham Community Foundation on the delivery of the Fair Share programme. Two projects are being worked up to application stage: community centre at Widdowfield Street and a self-build project in North Lodge Park.

**Third Sector Development**

5. Community asset work is progressing with a review of best practice from elsewhere to examine options for assessing how organisations run themselves. This will inform our local draft strategy and enable us to develop a scoring matrix to use when there is a request for a long-lease for Council land or buildings. Whilst using best practice from elsewhere it is important that the matrix meets the priorities for Darlington and is linked to the work on the Council’s new business plan.
6. The Council’s contract to eVOLution has now been agreed and signed by both parties. The outcomes it contains are linked to delivery of NI6 and NI7 the LAA targets relating to volunteering and a thriving third sector. The outcomes will also further support involvement of the sector in supporting work on local priorities and the provision of infrastructure support to the sector including relating to workforce development and providing shared back office support.

## **Welfare Rights**

7. Some of the funding arrangements for the Council's Welfare Rights Unit will change in the future due to rule and procurement changes at the Legal Services Commission. A number of options for future service delivery are currently being analysed, with an eye on how the service may be able to be positioned to engage in more preventative work in the future.
8. During April, £32,188.80 in additional benefits were secured for clients. The change in the benefit system from Incapacity Benefit to Employment and Support Allowance 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 4-5 months in advance (08/09 = 3 months).

## **LINK**

9. LINK is continuing to work on access to GP surgeries with NHS Darlington following on from the recent report that was taken to the Health and Well-being Scrutiny Committee. This highlighted good practice in some surgeries relating to the way that learning disabled people were able to access services. LINK is now working to spread this good practice across other surgeries to improve access throughout Darlington.
10. Information from the LINK event on the 12<sup>th</sup> May to ask what service users wanted services to look like in the future was used to inform a workshop for providers relating to the personalisation of services. Both events were well supported and the feedback was very positive. This engagement work will continue to inform the development of the market and to ensure that services are available to meet the needs of local people in line with the personalisation and choice agenda.

## **Community Engagement (Web-Based)**

11. The number of people signing up to the corporate social network profiles continues to grow. The council's approach to the use of social networks has recently changed so that we can be more responsive to user needs and expectations.
12. Ongoing developments include the establishment of individual Facebook fan pages and Twitter Feeds where there is a particular services or initiative that would be of interest to a defined group of people. The reason for this is because we have received feedback from some users of our social network services that the information being pushed out through the corporate fan page and Twitter feed is starting to become overwhelming. Consequently people were starting to unsubscribe from this method of communication. Talks are progressing with a number of council services that are looking to do more with social network profiles.
13. The discussion forums continue to be used but we are finding that we are receiving a growing amount of feedback about council services from people via the social network profiles. Current statistics are as follows;

### **Facebook:**

Corporate Fan Page = 715 fans

Corporate Jobs Page = 22 fans  
Parent Partnership = 36 fans  
Darlington Duke of Edinburgh Group = 14 fans  
Blue Bag campaign = 28 fans

**Twitter:**

Corporate Feed = 335 followers  
Darlington Culture = 62 followers  
Darlington Duke of Edinburgh = 12 followers

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