

COUNCIL
16 JULY 2020

OVERVIEW OF STRONGER COMMUNITIES PORTFOLIO

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work undertaken under the Stronger Communities Portfolio.

Equalities - COVID-19 and Impact

2. Throughout the pandemic, work has been underway to monitor the likely equality impacts on Darlington. As early as March we were mapping the areas where the risk of loneliness was highest, and we have continued to map the impacts of the pandemic itself and the side effects on different wards.
3. We are developing a good insight into the likely impacts of COVID-19 with particular attention being paid to equalities, which focuses on the different protected characteristic groups. National and local data continues to show that the impacts are affecting different groups differently and a detailed matrix has been maintained throughout to record impacts and guide advice.

Equalities Training

4. The Equalities training programme has been paused due to the Coronavirus pandemic meaning face to face training is not currently possible. Face to face training will not resume until at least September, but work is ongoing to look at bringing these sessions back digitally. Trial sessions will be set up in the coming weeks.

Website Accessibility

5. The accessibility and usability of the corporate website has always been of high importance to the council and there has been a rolling programme of developments and improvements for a number of years. With physical access to many council services being restricted during the COVID-19 lockdown, the need for a highly effective website has been more important than ever before.
6. Recently (since January 2020), a lot of work has been underway to make the website more user friendly for a wider range of people, and to meet a number of Government standards that will be enforced from September 2020. The most notable work has involved :-
 - a redesign of the home page, making it more task focused so people can quickly access the most popular services and the latest news from the council.
 - ensuring the code that sits behind the website meets strict web accessibility standards (WCAG 2.1).
 - making good progress with fixing existing documents to make them accessible, and continuing to ensure that all new documents meet the new standards as much as possible.

- Working to ensure all pages are written in plain English.
- Page owners being identified and systems are being put in place to ensure pages are regularly reviewed and updated as required.
- looking at options to commission some manual testing of the website using various assistive technologies to help us better understand what else can be done to help people easily access the information they need.

Community Safety

General comment - The role and responsibilities of Community Safety during COVID-19

7. Members of the Community Safety Team were deployed to support the work of the Darlington Community Support (Outreach) Hub between 25 March and 3 May 2020. During this period the Outreach Hub provided vital support to shielded, isolated and vulnerable members of the community through the provision of urgent pharmacy requests, food and welfare support.
8. The department was also instrumental in the development and growth of an emergency food supply which was distributed to those restricted by the pandemic.
9. On 4 May 2020, Community Safety personnel (with the exception of Civic Enforcement) returned to their daily tasks and local services have continued to be delivered efficiently through a combination of office based and virtual working activities.
10. On 1 June 2020, members of Community Safety were briefed and directed to provide additional support to town centre users to promote a safe and secure environment for residents, retailers and visitors.

Civic Enforcement Service

11. During the initial stages of lockdown, Civic Enforcement was utilised by the Outreach Hub to assist with distribution of urgent supplies, however, their role also extended to tackling anti-social behaviour, working closely with the Police to enforce social-distancing and provide high visibility patrols throughout the Borough to promote reassurance in our communities.
12. As the pandemic evolved, the role of Civic Enforcement remained flexible to include other duties including the supervision of the Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC) (following opening), the policing of the town centre after the easing of lockdown and dedicated patrols to tackle environmental crime within the Borough.
13. CCTV and dog warden services remained unchanged throughout this period.
14. In order to support the staff at the Household Waste Recycling Centre and assist in the management of traffic levels, Civic Enforcement Officers carried out traffic management duties for several weeks. Feedback from staff at the HWRC and members of the public was exceptional.

Deployable Cameras

15. New covert camera kit has been ordered during this period to support the fight against fly tipping and back lane waste in Darlington. Six dome cameras are now available, four of which are currently deployed: two at the HWRC, one at Lakeside for nuisance motorcycles and one remains at Fryers Field for the monitoring of anti-social behaviour.

Closure Notice

16. A Closure Order application for 38 Forster Street has been compiled and submitted to obtain a Court date. The occupants of the property have been causing nuisance to other residents in the street due to numerous (up to 80 per day) visitors purchasing drugs.

Environmental Crime

17. COVID-19 has partly restricted the investigation of environmental crime, however, Civic Enforcement Officers have continued to obtain witness statements over the telephone and seize evidence where possible. A number of £400 Fixed Penalty Notices have been issued for fly tipping offences during the period.

Road Safety Scheme for Schools

18. A decision was taken to consult with all schools involved in the pilot to ascertain the best way forward for them individually once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted to some degree, and more pupils return to school. Once the views of the schools have been considered, a decision will be made on how to launch the scheme.
19. Designs for the programme's posters, leaflets and banners have been completed and orders will be placed once the group has made a decision on the launch.

Community Engagement

20. The Community Resilience Officer has maintained contact with Arcus (LGBTQ+), Darlington Association on Disability and the UNITY group via e-mails/telephone calls and information from Police Community Cohesion Officers.
21. No increase in reported hate crime has been recorded during the reporting period (due to COVID-19 restrictions or otherwise). Concerns have been raised that 'disabled priority' areas in shops, bus stands, etc. may lead to a rise in hate incidents/crimes, however, Police/PCSOs and CEOs have been made aware of the proposed changes and will ensure patrols are targeted to the appropriate areas.
22. The Community Resilience Officer had previously organised for the Crown Prosecution Service to attend a number of consultation / information events with Darlington groups, however, these had to be cancelled due to the lockdown. In June, an alternative online event took place in lieu of this.
23. During the reporting period, discussions between DBC and Arcus have taken place regarding the potential to hold a 'Virtual Pride': finding a way to mark Pride without

having a parade and live Market Place event.

Trading Standards

24. On 5 June 2020, Trading Standards issued a press release warning to people trying to sell products falsely claiming to protect against COVID-19, stating they would be tracked down and stopped, regardless of where the attempt at trading took place.
25. A Darlington seller advertising face masks on eBay, which claimed to be 'reusable' and with 'virus protection' was identified by a Trading Standards Officer, following a sweep of online selling platforms. After informing eBay about the problem items, they were removed from sale within 48 hours.
26. Following complaints from members of the public, Trading Standards issued a cease and desist warning to a trader operating in Darlington. Based on information obtained, the team believed that the trader was making unsubstantiated and misleading claims about the deterrent effects of a property cleaning service they were offering to protect against COVID-19.
27. Trading Standards seized more than 249 packs of illegal cigarettes and 11 packs of hand rolling tobacco following a routine visit to a Darlington store. The visit was to investigate the alleged sales of cigarettes to under-age children, however, an empty cigarette gantry gave the officers cause for concern. A thorough inspection of the premises was carried out resulting in the location and seizure of the illegal goods. The trader received a warning about under-age sales and an investigation into the illegal goods remains ongoing.
28. On 4 May 2020 and following an investigation, a letter of warning was sent by Trading Standards to a Darlington car dealer in relation to the commission of unfair trading practices. The team will continue to monitor the trading activities of this car dealer.

Private Sector Housing

29. Reactive service requests reduced at the start of lockdown which allowed two officers to be seconded to the Darlington Community Support (Outreach) Hub assisting in setting up outreach and dispatch functions for the initial six weeks of the response. Requests have since increased to the typical volumes usual for this time of the year.
30. Following government guidance, the Private Sector Housing Team have adapted well to carrying out property inspections, including physical property inspections with restrictions and using remote ways of working in order to comply with the statutory duties the team enforce.

The Northgate Initiative

31. Northgate Ward has one of the highest concentrations of private rented property in the Borough. The Private Sector Housing team continue to focus on making residents and landlords aware of what constitutes a decent and safe home and

what remedies are available to them should their home not meet these standards.

32. Work has been undertaken to promote the changes in legislation that occurred at the end of June 2020. The new regulations require landlords to have the electrical installations in their properties inspected and tested by a person who is qualified and competent, at least every five years. The Regulations apply to new tenancies from 1 July 2020 and existing tenancies from 1 April 2021.
33. Work continues to be undertaken to reduce the number of long-term empty properties in the ward. Private Sector Housing are working with Council Tax to identify and target empty properties to ensure they are returned to use. Since the project commenced in December 2019, 13 long-term empty properties in the area have been returned to use. The overall percentage of empty properties has decreased from 7.73 per cent to 6.48 per cent (28 properties).

PREVENT

34. Durham Police Prevent Team, and counter terrorism units nationally, advise that there has been an increase in online radicalisation as well as other online fraud and scams. A campaign advising on the dangers of online radicalisation ('Who is talking to your child online?') aimed at parents and carers went out to all Darlington schools in May in an attempt to negate this increase in online activity.
35. A tension monitoring package that includes a new form, toolkit and toolbox talk presentation is now available on the intranet and tension monitoring is now a standing item on the Multi-Agency Problem Solving Group agenda. One tension monitoring report was received in relation to COVID-19 and this related to telephone calls and comments made about members of the Chinese community (or those perceived to be from the Chinese community) and the likelihood of them spreading the virus. No similar reports have been received since.

Eyes & Ears

36. The original plan to deliver 'Eyes & Ears' presentations to staff and sessions to the public in community venues has been postponed and consideration is now being given to how the scheme could be rolled out as a PowerPoint / online package / Academy 10 module until we are able to deliver as originally planned.

The key issues and themes are:

- (a) Fuel Poverty
- (b) Safeguarding - children
- (c) Safeguarding - adults/older persons
- (d) Social isolation and loneliness
- (e) Child Exploitation
- (f) Stray / Dangerous Dogs

- (g) Environmental Crime
- (h) Safety – adults with health problems
- (i) Anti-Social Behaviour
- (j) Community Tensions

Licensing

- 37. At the beginning of the lockdown period, Licensing staff were largely redeployed to establish the Community Outreach Hub whilst maintaining the licensing function. Although demand for licensing applications reduced in the early stages, a high level of telephone calls and e-mail enquiries from concerned businesses were received. Many of the issues raised have been resolved by shared learning with other local authorities, partners and professional bodies.
- 38. The Licensing team are now assisting with the recovery plan for Darlington and the licensing office has been adapted to safely accommodate customers by appointment when authority is given to open once again.
- 39. The lockdown period has highlighted the pressing need to digitise the licensing processes. Staff have been working on a rotation basis to maintain the licensing function and begin the process of digitising our paper-based files. Work has been undertaken on a new system for online taxi licence applications and a system called IDOX has now been approved. Process mapping and development work has commenced in conjunction with IT, to introduce the system as soon as possible.
- 40. The first draft of the Taxi Licensing Policy is almost ready for the Licensing Committee to approve for consultation. A number of changes have been proposed which is hoped will be looked at favourably by the trade without compromising safety standards. A new vehicle age policy is proposed in line with the North East Strategic Licensing Group in response to our requirements to reduce emissions. This policy is due for implementation in January 2021.
- 41. Work has commenced on the new Licensing Act Policy, which again is due for implementation in January 2021. This policy will be updated in light of the new Section 182 guidance issued in 2018, however, the main change will be to reflect the 2016 Immigration Act.
- 42. A draft Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy has been produced and consideration is being given to any learning from the pandemic experience which may be prudent to incorporate into the final document.

Crime and Disorder

- 43. There has been a 22 per cent decrease in the number of reported crimes during the period 1 April to 31 May 2020 compared to the same period in 2019/20. This equates to a decrease of 457 crimes. Crimes showing an increase include: Burglary and Public Order. All other categories of crime are showing a significant decrease.

44. There has been a 42 per cent increase in the number of reported anti-social behaviour incidents in Darlington during the period 1 April to 31 May 2020 compared to the same period in 2019/20. This equates to an increase of 256 incidents. However, if COVID-19 related anti-social behaviour incidents are removed there would be a 26 per cent decrease in incidents. This equates to a decrease of 160 incidents.
45. There has been a 69 per cent decrease in the number of reported anti-social behaviour incidents in the Town Centre during this period compared to the same period in 2019/20 and this equates to 59 incidents. If COVID-19 related anti-social incidents are removed there would be an 82 per cent decrease. This equates to a decrease of 70 incidents.

Data Analysis

46. The Systems and Data Analyst adapted the Daily Briefing to include incidents that were specifically related to breaching COVID-19 regulations.
47. A dashboard was designed for COVID-19 related incidents to record the increase/decrease in the number reported during the lockdown period.

Flood and Water Management Act

48. The Council is working in partnership with Northumbrian Water and the Environment Agency on a study to identify the impact of flooding in Darlington; this will inform the management and response to flood events and inform any investment that may be needed. In addition, the Council has commissioned further work to understand the impact of various scenarios on the culverts and bridges that exist across the Borough and how they would cope under various scenarios in terms of flood intensity and their capacity. This will also assist in the management of flood events and prioritisation of investment and response.

**Councillor Jonathan Dulston
Stronger Communities Portfolio**