

**COUNCIL
24 SEPTEMBER 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.

Community Development

2. In an effort to support communities to become more resilient in 2012, the Council worked with local employers to help them align and focus their corporate social responsibility activities. 'Darlington Cares' was formed by the Council and five private sector employers. It is a self-funding with contributions to its cost from its membership. It now has 26 employers as members and last year delivered 15,000 hours of employer supported volunteering focused on the environment, social justice and education. The support it has been able to provide across the town has been increasingly valued and a number of the initiatives it has developed have been shortlisted as finalists in national awards schemes.
3. As a consequence of lockdown, employers were unable to release their staff and volunteering ceased. Work is now underway to restart volunteering with great care being paid to risk assessments with specific precautions in place to accommodate Covid 19. Many of the members are eager to re-engage and volunteering programmes have tentatively resumed.
4. The Council has worked with Darlington Cares and Darlington Citizen' Advice Bureau to develop a Uniform Exchange Scheme. The Council's web team noticed that towards the end of July that there had been an unprecedented spike in searches on its website for assistance with buying school uniforms and early in August approached Darlington Cares and CAB Darlington to assist in delivering a scheme.
5. The scheme has attracted donations of second hand uniforms dropped off at a number of community-based donation points. All items of second hand clothing are checked for quality and are then laundered to ensure they are Covid safe and also so children can go to school proud of their uniform.
6. Since putting a request out for donations two weeks ago, around 4,000 articles of uniform have been donated with more continuing to arrive. 422 families have requested uniform and are in the process of being helped.

Equalities

7. On the weekend when the first Darlington Pride Weekender was due to take place, the community pulled together to host a virtual Pride Weekender. The event consisted of a programme of virtual content provided by members of the community who wanted to support the event. In total there were 46 videos posted, from councillors, businesses and DBC staff and members of the LGBT+ community. As well as music, poetry, dance and artistic content, there was signposting for young

people and a highlight on mental health.

8. The event met the council's public sector equality duty by fostering good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who don't. Over the three days contributions were shared by DBC Councillors, CDDFRS, NEAS, Darlington OS, the Alzheimer's Society, YPOP, Stonewall, Arcus, More in Common and more. Darlington Borough Council commissioned Tracks Darlington to produce 3 virtual gigs involving local singers, a band and a poet. Each gig also incorporated messages on why Pride is important and signposted to relevant LGBT+ services. Over the course of the weekend the page had a reach of 20,000 people.

Corporate Marketing Function

9. Following a trial which started in February 2019, a small permanent corporate marketing function is being established within the communications team to strengthen the impact of key corporate campaigns and marketing activities. Some of the priority areas include enhanced promotion of the town centre, Darlington as a visitor destination, response to localised COVID issues, strengthening Street Scene related campaigns, helping to increase the uptake in fostering, and reinforcing our campaign to keep Locomotion #1 in Darlington. The team will also enhance the profile of the council within the local community by further highlighting the services provided by the council and its ambitions for the borough. Recruitment of the new team is underway with the aim of having it up and running in the autumn.

Community Safety

Darlington Community Safety Partnership (CSP) Action Plan 2020-2025.

10. Following a period of consultation, the priorities for 2020-2025 have been identified as:
 - (a) Protecting and Supporting Vulnerable People;
 - (b) Promoting Safer Places;
 - (c) Violent Crime and Domestic Abuse; and
 - (d) Building Strong and Cohesive Communities
11. Work is underway to finalise the details in the plan.

Water Safety

12. A life-saving campaign to highlight the dangers of swimming in open water was launched in Darlington on Friday 10 July with the backing of community safety leaders.
13. Darlington Borough Council, Durham Police and County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service, have pledged their support to Safe Durham Partnership's 'Dying to be Cool' campaign.

14. Led by Durham County Council, this year's campaign comes on the fifth anniversary of the death of teenager Cameron Gosling, from Crook, who died from cold water shock after he jumped into the River Wear near Bishop Auckland, on 5 July 2015. His family has supported the campaign each year, urging youngsters to think twice before going into rivers or any other open water before acclimatising first.
15. Sadly, at around 17.10 hours on Monday 17 August 2020 Anas El-Rifai entered the River Tees in the area of Broken Scar, Darlington and after getting into some difficulty in the water went missing.
16. Emergency Services attended the scene and following a comprehensive search recovered the body of Anas at around 23.30 hours the same day.
17. Our thoughts and condolences are with Anas's family at this incredibly sad time.

Home Office Violence and Vulnerability Group (County Lines - 100 licences)

18. Darlington Borough Council's Community Safety Team has recently joined the Home Office Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation (EGVE) Group.
19. The purpose of the group is to bring local areas together and discuss emerging issues, share new and effective practice, useful documents and offer support to all EGVE areas.
20. The teleconference is also a forum to share interesting issues, new funding opportunities and the latest Home Office updates.
21. As part of the membership, Darlington Borough Council has been offered 100 free licences for the Violence and Vulnerability Unit on-line training course. The course has been developed to provide frontline practitioners with basic knowledge and information about 'county lines', gangs and exploitation. It is designed as a simple, low cost solution to equip frontline workers with the information they need to recognise and understand exploitation issues in their everyday work. The Community Safety Team are currently in the process of co-ordinating the delivery of training.

Home Office Safer Streets Fund

22. Following an application for Home Office funding from the Safer Streets Fund, Darlington has been awarded £298,918 to support target-hardening and crime prevention measures in the Northgate and the North Road area of Darlington.
23. The funding is designed to improve security in areas particularly affected by acquisitive crimes such as burglary, vehicle theft and robbery. The money will go towards measures proven to cut crime. These will include window locks, internal lights timer, double locks on doors and external lights on a sensor.
24. The initiative went live in August 2020 and will be completed by 31 March 2021.

Purple Flag

25. After a rigorous assessment process, Darlington is the first town in the North East to be awarded Purple Flag status in January 2020, a standard awarded to those places that offer safe and enjoyable nights out.
26. Due to COVID-19, the presentation of the award has been delayed, however, the Council, along with other organisations and businesses from across the town centre, are now required to complete the renewal process which is due for assessment in October 2020.

This will involve a similar procedure to the initial accreditation, but it is accepted that progress will have been hindered by the pandemic. The result of the renewal process will be announced in January 2021.

Love Parks

27. Following an expression of interest, Darlington's North Lodge Park was selected by Keep Britain Tidy to participate in a national initiative designed to reduce low-level anti-social behaviour and littering.
28. Darlington is one of only eight sites nationally to support the initiative which will involve a campaign to reduce littering in parks, alongside perceptions surveys of visitors and litter/waste monitoring to gather feedback on its effectiveness.
29. A range of campaign materials have been provided by Keep Britain Tidy to be displayed in the park and a digital toolkit will be made available to be utilised throughout by colleagues in communications.
30. During the campaign, Keep Britain Tidy will be carrying out public perception surveys with analysis and reporting of the campaign in September 2020.
31. The Council will engage with local members and stakeholders throughout the intervention, with a view to increasing public perception of the issues and to increase confidence in the community.
32. The campaign was launched nationally on Friday 24 July 2020.

Civic Enforcement Service

Environmental Crime / Back Lanes Project

33. Following easing of lockdown, the Back Lanes Project is operational, and plans are in place to recruit an officer to drive this project forward. Early results of the project are starting to show, with the back lanes cleaner in certain areas and several fines being issued each week for littering, dog fouling and fly tipping.

Responsible Dog Ownership Project

34. Following on from the dog Public Space Protection Order, a new exciting project has been implemented and will involve the dog walking business. The project aims to promote responsible dog ownership across the Borough and challenge/address irresponsible ownership. The first meeting of the newly formed group took place on

Thursday 6 August, with initial actions agreed as:

- (a) looking at the ease of reporting lost and found dogs;
 - (b) studying other successful dog walking schemes to empower our dog walking communities; and.
 - (c) working with local vets to promote our process for lost and found dogs.
35. The innovative project has already gained keen interest from bodies such as the Kennel Club and an article will be published in the next One Darlington magazine.

CCTV

36. Following the deployment of new CCTV equipment, we have very quickly seen positive results in terms of apprehending fly tippers in Darlington. The equipment is frequently moved around the Borough into hotspot locations and has been key to the issuing of £400 fines. The first Court case is listed for September, with a number of other complex investigations ongoing.

73 Longfield Road

37. A premises closure order for 73 Longfield Road is awaiting a Court date. The occupants have been involved in drug dealing and serious nuisance for some time. It is hoped that the closure order, if granted, will bring some respite to the local residents.

Trading Standards

38. Acting on information received, Trading Standards issued a press release to warn residents that individuals claiming to be ex-offenders were selling goods door-to-door in the Borough. It was reported that some of the doorstep sellers were threatening and abusive. Trading Standards advised residents not to buy from these individuals as they were likely to be part of a team of scammers working in the area. Investigations are ongoing.
39. Two areas within Darlington have been identified that may benefit from being designated as No Rogue Trader Zones. These zones are clearly defined areas where residents have expressed a view that they would prefer not to be cold called at home by traders selling goods and services door-to-door. The aim of the zones is to give residents the confidence to say no to uninvited salespeople and to warn rogue traders and cold callers that they are not welcome. A consultation is underway with residents within those areas.
40. Trading Standards has responded to requests from local traders for advice and information on complying with trading standards laws covering goods such as toys and personal protective equipment.
41. Trading Standards alerted residents and traders to a key point within Health Protection regulations: that, if requested to do so by shop staff, consumers are allowed to remove their face covering for age identification purposes, including when buying age restricted products such as alcohol. The team advised that shops must keep within the law and have effective systems in place to prevent sales of

age restricted products under the minimum legal age. If a face covering is not removed and shop staff cannot check the consumer's age and may refuse the sale.

Private Sector Housing

Northgate Initiative – Empty Homes

42. The Empty Homes Action Plan has three key objectives around reducing the number of long-term empty homes, using legislation to bring empty homes back into use and incorporating a risk-based approach in targeting problematic empty homes. Since the start of the project, through work carried out jointly by the Private Sector Housing Team and Council Tax Section, the following has taken place:
- (a) There has been a reduction in the total number of empty properties from 177 (7.73 per cent) in December 2019 to 149 (6.48 per cent) in June 2020.
 - (b) There has been a reduction in the number of empty properties over six months from 108 (4.72 per cent) in December 2019 to 95 (4.13 per cent) in June 2020.
 - (c) There has been a reduction in the number of empty properties over two years from 36 (1.57 per cent) in December 2019 to 35 (1.52 per cent) in June 2020.

Energy Efficiency

43. An Energy Efficiency Action Plan has now been written to assist the aims of the initiative. The plan has four key objectives focussed on improving the current energy ratings through: enforcement, confirming information submitted in the Exemptions Register, identifying private rented properties that do not currently have an Energy Performance Certificate and providing support to those people living in fuel poverty around energy related behaviour.
44. As at December 2019, there were 148 properties in Northgate with either an F or G rating, with 69 of these being listed as rented properties. There has been an improvement in these figures as of March 2020, (the last set of issued figures) and this has improved to 142 properties in Northgate being registered as being either F or G, with 30 of these being listed as rented properties.

Warm Homes Fund

45. Approval was sought from Cabinet in early December 2019 to participate in a Tees Valley Partnership to deliver the Warm Homes Fund Project. Participation in the project will deliver energy efficiency improvements for qualifying residents in the Borough which will include the Northgate Ward. The funding (£5,500,000 in funding across the partnership area) will:
- (a) install 1000 boilers and provide gas connections across the area;
 - (b) install 200 Air source heat pumps - renewable heating provision in rural areas; and
 - (c) assist 10,000 households with fuel poverty issues.

46. The project was initially anticipated to commence in February 2020, however, due to COVID-19 this was delayed. The appointed contractor, Marshall & McCourt, have produced a set of Safe Working Practices in line with government guidance for their engineers to ensure a safe working environment in each property. The instructions will be issued to all employees and accompanied by specific training.
47. The project will be up and running in the near future.

Innovation and Enforcement Grant/Stock Condition Survey

48. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government awarded Darlington Borough Council £59,300 to support enforcement training and the completion of a Stock Condition Survey in Darlington.
49. Although the training element of this project has been delayed due to COVID-19, work has now commenced on the 'Data Warehouse' and current data sets include EPC data, Asylum Seeker properties, list of residential empty properties, completion certificate building control, gas installations, electrical Installations, solid fuel installations, environmental health service requests (noise, etc.), residential parking permits, school admissions, free school meals, tenancy deposit data and Council tax information.
50. The Stock Condition Survey will improve local knowledge of communities and housing standards in the private sector, enable intelligent targeting and proactive inspections to tackle unsafe and poor-quality housing and identify the worst landlords who will be challenged through effective and robust enforcement. This will provide improved and healthier living conditions for the most vulnerable across Darlington.

PREVENT

51. Two Education sector Prevent webinars were held on 9 and 14 July. These were hosted by Darlington Borough Council, with assistance from Durham County Council, but delivered by the Durham Police Prevent Team. All Darlington schools (and Durham) were invited and attendance was approximately 40-50 school headteachers/safeguarding leads per three-hour session. The sessions were very well received and as a result, further 'information videos' and regular newsletter-style updates are planned by the team.
52. The Community Resilience Officer continues to provide advice to the Council's recovery team in relation to Prevent and, in particular, mobile hostile vehicle mitigation in and around pavement cafes and street events.

Community Resilience

Road Safety Scheme for Schools

53. As we have now had confirmation that schools will re-open for the Autumn term. We are awaiting responses from the pilot schools as to how, and when, they would like to launch the scheme.

Community Engagement

54. It was decided to hold a 'Virtual Pride' event this year and it proved to be very successful.
55. Across the week/weekend in August there were video performances from singers/entertainers, video messages of support from local Councillors and Council employees, emergency service personnel and national celebrities, as well as pictures/videos of last year's event shared by people who had attended. These were all hosted on the 'Darlington PRIDE weekender' Facebook site that was set up and was linked from the Council's website, Arcus website and many others.
56. The Community Resilience Officer has joined the 'More in Common Darlington' group and is working with them to coordinate events/publicity for Hate Crime Awareness week, which will take place on 10-17 October. This will involve linking up with 'Celebrating Communities' and UNITY as well as other groups representing different communities within Darlington.
57. The Community Resilience Officer organised for the Crown Prosecution Service to host an information/consultation/Q+A online event for people in Darlington which took place on 18 August. This event was publicised via the Council's website, UNITY Group, Arcus, DAD and Healthwatch.

Licensing

58. The Licensing Department were aware that a government incentive would be introduced to increase the use of outside space (Pavement Cafes) for the hospitality industry in order to aid recovery, under the new Business and Planning Act. A great deal of preparation was carried out prior to implementation so that businesses could take advantage at the earliest opportunity. As a result, it was possible to immediately issue an additional eleven licences following the mandatory seven-day consultation period. The Licensing Committee agreed that no fee would be paid for pavement café licences issued under this Act, valid until September 2021.
59. The digitisation process is ongoing, with staff continuing to convert paper records. The procurement process for an on-line taxi licensing system (IDOX) has commenced and it is hoped that it will be in place by late 2020 or early 2021. In addition to this, an electronic workflow monitor called 'Enterprise' will be introduced to manage all licensing applications with greater efficiency.
60. The first draft of the revised taxi policy has been approved by the Licensing Committee for public consultation. This decision coincided with the Department of Transport issuing new statutory minimum standards. These changes had largely been anticipated and already featured in the revised policy.
61. Darlington's Licensing Act Policy is due to be reviewed by January 2021, however, concerns have been expressed nationally that with the closure of many licensed premises it will be impossible to adequately consult with the hospitality industry. The Local Government Association (LGA) considered that under the current circumstances it would be considered acceptable to delay renewing Licensing Act policies, a view that was supported by the Home Office. Licensing will seek approval from the Licensing Committee to delay implementing a new policy until

April next year.

Crime and Disorder

62. There has been a 19 per cent decrease in the number of reported crimes during the period 1 April to 31 July 2020 compared to the same period in 2019/20. This equates to a decrease of 774 crimes. Crimes showing an increase include: Racially Aggravated Crime and Public Order. All other categories of crime are showing a significant decrease.
63. There has been a 21 per cent increase in the number of reported anti-social behaviour incidents in Darlington during the period 1 April to 31 July 2020 compared to the same period in 2019/20. This equates to an increase of 269 incidents. Incidents showing an increase include: Alcohol related ASB, Drugs related ASB and Youth/alcohol related ASB. However, if COVID-19 related anti-social behaviour incidents are removed, there would be a 14 per cent increase in incidents. This equates to an increase of 187 incidents.
64. There has been a 60 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 94 incidents. If COVID-19 related anti-social incidents are removed, there would be a 62 per cent decrease. This equates to a decrease of 98 incidents.

**Councillor Jonathan Dulston
Stronger Communities Portfolio**