

**COUNCIL**  
**26 November 2020**

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**OVERVIEW OF STRONGER COMMUNITIES PORTFOLIO**

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

**Community Safety**

**Purple Flag**

2. After a rigorous assessment process, Darlington was 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.
3. 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, were required to complete the renewal process, which completed in October 2020. The result of the renewal process will be announced in January 2021.
4. The renewal application which consists of a renewal document, performance package, Evening and Night-Time Economy Strategy, linked Action Plan, Marketing Plan and a three-minute video clip to highlight the many achievements and attractions in Darlington was submitted to Purple Flag for assessment on Friday 9 October 2020.

**Darlington Borough Council COVID Pandemic Prevention and Compliance Group**

5. Members of Environmental Health, Community Safety, Police and Fire and Rescue are meeting on a weekly basis to promote improved compliance with the restrictions of COVID-19 in Darlington.
6. The group will maintain:
  - (a) an overview of all local information and intelligence to identify threat and risk in our communities;
  - (b) facilitate actions to prevent the spread of the disease and secure compliance with government advice, restrictions and legislation;
  - (c) ensure that all relevant information is shared with the Health Protection Board which is tasked with managing any future outbreak of the pandemic.

**Civic Enforcement Service**

**Responsible Dog Ownership Project**

7. The project has gained interest from members of the public and following the recent article in the One Darlington magazine, people have come forward expressing an

interest in supporting and becoming involved. The group are looking at some key areas initially and have made good progress:

- (a) improving the way in which people can report a lost/found dog – telephone options are currently being improved;
- (b) Interactive bin map – work is currently underway with the ICT department to plot all Council bins on an interactive map, the idea being that dog walkers can check the map on their phone prior to planning their walks;
- (c) The 'We are Watching you' campaign will be utilised as part of both the Back Lanes Project and the Responsible Dog Project, aimed at reminding people that authorities are watching and will prosecute for dog related and other environmental crime.

### **73 Longfield Road - Closure Order**

8. A Closure Order was granted at Court on 16 September 2020 due to alleged drug dealing from the address and the serious nuisance associated with this activity. Although strongly defended, the magistrates were satisfied that all of the tests to grant a Closure Order were met and the property has been closed for three months. (The occupants will not be able return.)

### **CCTV**

9. The Control Room continue to monitor the town centre and parks, ensuring that members of the public and business are adhering to the current COVID-19 pandemic rules.

### **Deployable CCTV**

10. Six cameras continue to be deployed in various locations around the Borough in order to tackle various issues such as environmental crime and anti-social behaviour. An evaluation of the cameras is currently being undertaken.

### **Trading Standards**

11. Following an investigation by Darlington's Trading Standards service, a charge of failing to complete work to a reasonable standard was added to charges brought against Ryan White as part of a prosecution by Durham County Council's Trading Standards service.
12. White was successfully prosecuted on 10 September 2020 in Peterlee Magistrates Court after failing to complete a number of jobs across County Durham and Darlington whilst trading as R&J Landscapes in 2019. He received a fine of £750 and was ordered to pay court costs of £1,526.43 and a £75.00 victim surcharge; all Darlington-based victims received their money back.
13. Veronika Kutkova, who was the owner of the Corner Shop, High Northgate, Darlington, was successfully prosecuted after illicit and counterfeit tobacco products - 7660 cigarettes and 2.55 kg hand rolling tobacco - were found at the premises during Operation Sirenian, a Trading Standards led multi-agency illegal

tobacco operation.

14. Veronika Kutkova was sentenced to 12-month Community Order within 15 days of Rehabilitation Activity Requirement and ordered to pay prosecution costs of £643.80 plus a victim surcharge of £90.00.
15. On 2nd September 2020, the Trading Standards and Animal Health Manager was interviewed and filmed by Tomos TV for BBC One factual documentary series, 'Defenders UK'. The case related to a surveyor who was prosecuted for fraud in respect to a building work project following an investigation by Trading Standards. The programme is due to be broadcast early in 2021.
16. Throughout October, Trading Standards worked with the National Trading Standards Scams Team to support the four-year celebration of the Friends Against Scams initiative. This initiative aims to protect and prevent people from becoming scam victims by empowering people to take a stand against scams.

## **Private Sector Housing**

### **Energy Efficiency and Fuel Poverty**

17. Fuel poverty levels when last recorded in 2018 showed nine per cent of households in Darlington were in fuel poverty, representing 4,402 households; an improvement from 2015 when it was recorded as 14.1 per cent. However, many households have been negatively impacted financially from the COVID-19 pandemic and this is likely to have an impact on fuel poverty over the winter months. Cold weather experienced in the winter months can affect or exacerbate a range of health problems, including respiratory and circulatory conditions, cardiovascular disease, mental health and accidental injury.
18. This is likely to increase the burden on healthcare systems and contribute to excess winter deaths. Estimates suggest that some ten per cent of excess winter deaths (up to 5,000 nationally) are directly attributable to fuel poverty and 21.5 per cent of excess winter deaths are attributable to the coldest 25 per cent of homes.
19. 4.48 per cent of residential properties in Darlington (as of June 2020) are in the lowest EPC bands of F and G.
20. There are a number of projects currently running to assist with energy efficiency and fuel poverty. These projects will aim to assist as many as is reasonably practicable to increase energy efficiency and therefore reduce the effects of fuel poverty.

### **Warm Homes Fund**

21. The programme was re-launched in August 2020 after being on hold since March 2020 due to the pandemic.
22. Targeted promotion is currently underway of those in the lowest EPC bands in qualifying areas. This will assist with both the provision of energy advice, which will be delivered by Citizens Advice, and the provision of gas boilers and air source heat pumps to qualifying residents.

23. Partners have recently identified the potential to provide 167 properties across Darlington with a gas supply as part of an infill programme. The Warm Homes Fund would then be able to provide gas central heating to those eligible under the scheme. Other households in these areas could also benefit from lower fuel costs. There are approximately 2,600 households in Darlington that use electricity as their main source of heating. This is likely to mean that they are using expensive and inefficient electric heating systems. Those using electric heating systems are more likely to be in fuel poverty because running costs are significantly higher.

### **Green Homes Grant - Voucher Scheme**

24. The Green Homes Voucher scheme commenced on 30th September 2020. This is a National government scheme where homeowners and residential landlords can apply for a Green Homes Grant voucher towards the cost of installing energy efficient improvements to reduce energy use or to install low-carbon heating.
25. Vouchers cover two-thirds of the cost of eligible improvements, up to a maximum contribution of £5,000. If someone in the household receives certain benefits, they may be eligible for a voucher covering 100% of the cost of the improvements. The maximum value of the voucher is £10,000.
26. A joint press statement was issued by Private Sector Housing and Trading Standards in October 2020 and this will be followed up by a social media campaign until the scheme finishes in March 2021. The campaign will aim to advertise the scheme whilst informing residents to be vigilant and how to avoid fraudulent traders.

### **Green Homes Grant - The Local Authority Delivery (LAD) Scheme**

27. £500 million funding will also be delivered through local authorities by the Government between September 2020 and March 2022, to improve the energy efficiency of low-income households. This will help reduce fuel poverty and support the installation of low carbon heating.
28. A bid has been submitted for phase 2 of this scheme which will be allocated through Local Energy Hubs for regional delivery. If successful, this phase will operate between June 2021 until March 2022.
29. The primary purpose of the LAD scheme is to raise the energy efficiency rating of low income and low EPC rated homes (those with E, F or G) to result in the following outcomes:
  - (a) tackle fuel poverty by increasing low-income homes energy efficiency rating while reducing their energy bills;
  - (b) support clean growth and promoting global action to tackle climate change;
  - (c) support economic resilience and a green recovery in response to the economic impacts of COVID-19, by creating jobs;

- (d) use learning from the delivery experience to inform the development and design of further energy efficiency and heat schemes.

## **Community Resilience**

### **Water Safety**

- 30. The Community Resilience Officer attended a Microsoft Teams meeting of the Durham Open Water Safety group on 21 October. The multi-agency group was set up several years ago following two drowning incidents within a short period of time in the County Durham area. The group operates best practice by taking a holistic and long-term view to reducing near misses and drownings in open water. This includes oversight of education programmes, identification and prioritisation of risk locations, implementation of safety measures and more. Discussions are ongoing with the Head of Community Safety following the meeting as to how DBC takes any actions/learning forward.

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

- 31. Darlington Borough Council's Community Safety Team has joined the Home Office Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation (EGVE) Group. 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.
- 32. The names of nominated persons to have been sent and they will each receive an e-mail invite to the training, which can be completed at a time convenient for them.
- 33. The level of interest shown was such that the Community Resilience Officer is developing a training package for DBC staff (Academy 10 and hard copy) with the assistance of the HR Performance and Policy Officer, so that all staff will be able to access training if required.

### **Road Safety Scheme for Schools**

- 34. Some schools have reported traffic/parking problems since the new term began and have received support from Civic Enforcement Officers. The schools that have responded have indicated they are still willing to be involved in the scheme but have highlighted COVID-19 restrictions will impact on its delivery i.e. advice leaflets cannot be included in school bags to be taken home, children cannot wear hi-vis jackets or patrol roadways, and visitors cannot come into school to deliver safety lessons. Products will still be purchased and some will be used immediately (banners for roadways, for example) whereas others will be introduced once restrictions are lifted. Schools will be provided with products and guidance and can commence a 'limited' scheme. The official press launch will be undertaken once COVID restrictions are sufficiently relaxed to allow the launch to have maximum impact across the Darlington area and schools.

### **Community Engagement**

- 35. The Community Resilience Officer is maintaining contact with Arcus (LGBTQ+), Darlington Association on Disability and the UNITY group via e-mails/telephone calls and information from Police Community Cohesion officers.

## **Hate Crime Awareness Week (HCAW) 10 – 17 October 2020**

36. The Community Resilience Officer linked with the Crown Prosecution Service (North East), Police and PCVC to share HCAW content across all of their comms media. In collaboration with PCSO Benji Scott, 'talking heads' videos were produced calling for an end to hate crime in Darlington and answering some frequently asked questions. Information was shared with Members regarding the availability of 3 webinars during the week, each session on a different strand of hate crime.

### **PREVENT**

37. Following the two education sector Prevent webinars on 9 and 14 July which were well received, the Community Resilience Officer has worked with the Police Prevent team to provide a PowerPoint presentation, with video links and case studies, that can be sent to all schools to assist with their staff awareness training and improve reporting.
38. The first Prevent Newsletter went out to all DBC staff on the 15 September; this included a two-page brief with links to further information, learning, apps and an update on DBC activity. The newsletter resulted in another member for DBC staff volunteering to become a 'Local Counter-Terrorism Champion' and an induction has been arranged with Police Prevent team. A 'Local Counter-Terrorism Champion' event is planned for late November/December and DBC currently has 7 volunteers.
39. No Tension Monitoring reports received since last report.

### **Eyes and Ears**

40. A joint briefing with the Police and the Community Resilience Officer was delivered to Northgate/North Road Councillors and Councillor Dulston on 6 October looking at how Eyes and Ears will work alongside initiatives including 'Safer Streets', 'Confidence Academy', 'Back Lanes' and 'Street Champions'. A venue is now being sought to deliver the project to a limited number of key participants (due to COVID-19 restrictions), with the following key themes/issues to be explored:
  - (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

### **Home Office Safer Streets Fund**

41. Following receipt of funding to support target-hardening and crime prevention measures in the Northgate and the North Road area of Darlington, the following actions have been undertaken:
- (a) One burglary in first four weeks.
  - (b) 13 properties agreed to receive target hardening products; 4 refused/ were unable to contact.
  - (c) All properties that don't accept/engage still receive a crime prevention advice leaflet as a minimum and are able to contact the Safer Streets administration team if they decide to take part at a later date.
  - (d) A potential underspend has been identified (due to fewer burglaries than average) and the working group is in discussion with the Home Office as to how this funding could be utilised, without deviating too much from the ethos of the scheme.

### **Licensing**

42. For several weeks, the Council's Licensing department have been holding intelligence sharing meetings with Police, Environmental Health, and Public Health in relation to licensing issues concerning COVID-19, which has facilitated early identification of problem premises enabling rapid interventions to take place. This partnership approach and early intervention has seen Darlington's licensed premises largely comply with regulations, in stark contrast to many other northern towns. CCTV continue to pass information of any potential breaches for immediate attention.
43. Licensing has procured a new taxi licensing system from IDOX, which will allow the full licensing process to move online. Installation work commenced on the 5 October and it is hoped that it will be in place by early 2021. In addition to this, an electronic workflow monitor, 'Enterprise', will be introduced to manage all licensing applications with greater efficiency.
44. Consultation for the first draft of the revised taxi policy closed on the 2 October and a report is currently being prepared for consideration by the Licensing Committee. A number of changes will be mandatory as a result of the Department of Transport's statutory minimum standards, issued just as the consultation period began. These changes had largely been anticipated and already featured in the revised policy.
45. 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 Licensing Committee agreed to delay implementing a new policy until April 2021 where it is hoped there will be a clearer picture of what the future may hold for

the hospitality industry.

46. Following the easing of 'lockdown' restrictions, Licensing have been responding to a number of animal welfare related issues, particularly involving the unlicensed selling of puppies. Licensing have been working closely with partner agencies to ensure compliance with the Animal Welfare Regulation 2018 in relation to this issue. The department have recently provided a robust response to a legal challenge from a person who appealed a decision not to grant them a dog breeders licence. This decision has significantly disrupted known criminal activity.

### **Crime and Disorder**

47. There has been a 16 per cent decrease in the number of reported crimes in Darlington during the period 1 April to 30 September 2020 compared to the same period in 2019/20. This equates to a decrease of 998 crimes. Crimes showing an increase include: Racially Aggravated Crime (this equates to 4 crimes), Arson (this equates to 6 crimes) and Public Order (this equates to 43 crimes), this increase is subject to further analysis that is being completed. All other categories of crime are showing a significant decrease.
48. There has been a 10 per cent increase in the number of reported anti-social behaviour incidents in Darlington during the period 1 April to 30 September 2020 compared to the same period in 2019/20.

This equates to an increase of 205 incidents. Incidents showing an increase include: Alcohol related ASB and Drugs related ASB. However, if COVID-19 related anti-social behaviour incidents are removed, there would be an 8 per cent increase in incidents. This equates to an increase of 174 incidents.

49. There has been a 54 per cent decrease in the number of reported crimes in Darlington Town Centre during the period 1 April to 30 September 2020 compared to the same period in 2019/20. This equates to a decrease of 515 crimes. All crimes are showing a significant decrease.
50. There has been a 51 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 118 incidents. If COVID-19 related anti-social incidents are removed, there would be no change in the figures, due to there being only 2 COVID-19 related incidents.

**Councillor Jonathan Dulston**  
**Stronger Communities Portfolio**