

COUNCIL
28 January 2021

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 Safety

Darlington Community Safety Partnership (CSP) Action Plan 2021-2026

2. The priorities for 2021-2026 have been identified as:
 - (a) Protecting and Supporting Vulnerable People
 - (b) Promoting Safer Places
 - (c) Violent Crime and Domestic Abuse
 - (d) Building Strong and Cohesive Communities

Civic Enforcement Service

Responsible Dog Ownership Project

3. The group are looking at ways to involve members of the public and other professionals. Key achievements for the group include:
 - (a) in December, a vet became a member of the group and will attend meetings;
 - (b) feedback/comments from a recent press article in relation to the work undertaken by the dog warden was extremely positive;
 - (c) focusing on increasing the messages/information available for the public on our dog warden web pages, including seasonal messages etc.;
 - (d) two dog waste bag dispensers in two trial locations in the Denes and Merrybent layby; and
 - (e) focussing on dog fouling, with a noted increase in complaints in the winter months.

Eastbourne Road - Closure Order

4. Preparation for a Closure Order was underway in November for 20 Eastbourne Road due to serious complaints of drug use, offensive behaviour from visitors and threat of arson. The case was resolved without the need to attend Court due to the tenant surrendering their tenancy.

CCTV

Deployable CCTV

5. Six cameras continue to be deployed in various locations around the Borough in order to tackle issues such as environmental crime and anti-social behaviour.
6. An overt dome camera has recently been deployed to John Boulevard Way. The camera was installed in late November due to six reports of fly tipping since August. Since deployment (five weeks ago), there have been no incidents to date.

Back Lanes Project

7. Darlington Borough Council Community Safety have recruited an Environmental Crime Coordinator to deliver the Back Lanes Project, with the successful candidate commencing the role early in 2021.
8. All available legislation is being utilised and the first vehicle seizure suspected to be involved in fly tipping took place recently. The owners are given 15 days to provide all relevant documentation, with a penalty of non-compliance leading to the vehicle being crushed. Full press coverage of this will follow.

Private Sector Housing

9. The team are currently dealing with over 100 requests for service. Over the winter period, the Private Sector Housing team will deal with over 300 cases of housing disrepair, these cases range from drainage requests to general advice covering all housing tenures, including Houses in Multiple Occupation. Assistance is also given to landlords in complying with their legal duties, this has recently included landlords who have been unable to carry out gas safety certificates or complete electrical condition reports in preparation for the changes in legislation in March 2021 due to COVID restrictions.
10. Typically at this time of the year, Private Sector Housing will deal with 30 boiler breakdowns and will arrange for works in default to be carried out where landlords are unable or unwilling to carry out the works.
11. Over the winter, the team also deal with an increase in condensation and mould growth complaints where we will assist occupiers in reducing their fuel costs and increasing the energy efficiency of the property.

Climate Change

Energy Efficiency and Fuel Poverty

12. On 27 November 2020, Private Sector Housing supported Fuel Poverty Awareness Day. Information has been updated online on the various energy efficiency projects and grants available for residents.

Warm Homes Fund

13. Partners have recently identified the potential to provide seven areas across Darlington with a gas supply as part of infill programmes. The Warm Homes Fund

would then be able to provide gas central heating to those eligible under the scheme. Promotion to eligible properties commenced in January 2021.

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

14. £500 million in funding is being provided to local authorities by the Government between September 2020 and March 2022, to improve the energy efficiency of low-income households. A bid has been submitted for Phase 1b delivery of this funding. This bid, if successful, will increase the capital spend to Council-owned properties on energy efficiency improvements but will also enable resources for administrative assistance to improve data quality and support potential energy efficiency projects for all housing tenures across Darlington.
15. A bid has also been submitted for phase 2 of this scheme, which will be allocated through Local Energy Hubs for regional delivery. This phase will operate between June 2021 until March 2022. This will help reduce fuel poverty and support the installation of low carbon heating.

Trading Standards

Investigations

16. An investigation was undertaken by Trading Standards following the seizure of 2,200 cigarettes and 8.9 kg of hand rolling tobacco from a shed on a farm. On 29 October 2020, a Shildon man pleaded guilty at Peterlee Magistrates Court to illegal tobacco offences under the Trade Marks Act 1994 and the Standardised Packaging of Tobacco Products Regulations 2015. He was sentenced to a conditional discharge for twelve months and ordered to pay prosecution costs of £806.66 plus a victim surcharge of £21.00.
17. A Darlington man pleaded guilty at Peterlee Magistrates Court on 29 October 2020 to an offence under the Fraud Act 2006 and to two offences of publishing images which he knew were infringing copies of copyright works under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.
18. This followed an investigation by Trading Standards into the fraudulent and infringing use of a wedding photograph and a photograph of the Darlington 10km run, where copyright is held by others. He was sentenced to two £50.00 fines for each of the three offences, £572.28 costs and a victim surcharge of £32.00.

Illegal Trading Awareness

19. Trading Standards is aware of the significant harm that can be caused by online fraudsters who con shoppers into buying fake, non-existent and often unsafe toys, especially around Christmas time. In a press release issued on 25 November 2020, Trading Standards urged shoppers to beware of these festive fakes and to get to know their rights when shopping online. Local residents were asked to report their concerns about illegal trading - whether online or from a shop - in fake or potentially dangerous toys.

Be A Smart Shopper

20. In a new initiative, Trading Standards had a feature in the November edition of the One Darlington magazine on how to 'Be a Smart Shopper' with the aim of helping residents to understand their consumer rights in relation to obtaining a refund. Another feature is planned which will cover legal rights on the delivery of goods.

Avian Influenza ('Bird Flu') Outbreaks

21. In response to the recent outbreaks, Trading Standards issued an alert via social media to advise bird keepers (whether they run a large commercial farm, keep a few hens in the back garden or rear game birds) of the need to maintain the highest standards of biosecurity and to be vigilant for any signs of the disease in their birds. Keepers were offered advice on simple measures they should take to protect their birds.

No Rogue Trader Zones

22. Two new 'No Rogue Trader Zones' have been created in Darlington by Trading Standards, working in partnership with Durham Constabulary, in a bid to tackle nuisance door-to-door traders and cold callers.
23. These zones add to the existing zones in Darlington which cover High Coniscliffe, Fryer Crescent, Barnes Road, Barnes Close, Kew Rise, Mowden Hall Drive, Conyers Avenue, Conyers Grove and Chester Grove.
24. The aim of the zones is to encourage and empower residents to say 'no' to cold callers and prevent them from returning. Residents, who were overwhelmingly in favour of the scheme when surveyed, received an information pack about the zones. Street signs have been put up around the edges of the zones to alert traders that they are about to enter a 'No Rogue Trader Zone'.

Community Resilience

Water Safety

25. The Community Resilience Officer is coordinating a working group to ensure the Council and other partners (Police, Fire and Rescue, etc.) have appropriate measures in place to prevent open water incidents happening and to respond effectively to those that do. The first meeting took place in January 2021.

Home Office Violence and Vulnerability Group (County Lines)

26. All nominated persons have now been sent an e-mail invite to the online 'county lines awareness' training which they can then complete at a time convenient for them.
27. The County Lines Locality Review is now scheduled for 10 February 2021. Requests to attend have gone out to all organisations who may be able to contribute to this review – education, health, enforcement, etc.

28. The Community Resilience Officer is developing a training package for Council staff (Academy 10 and hard copy). Expected completion date – end of February 2021.

Community Engagement

29. 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.

Unity Group

30. Phillippa Scrafton (a member of More in Common Darlington, LGBT forum and a Stonewall employee) has been appointed as the new chair, with Councillor Sajna Ali as the new deputy chair. The Police are now represented by Chief Insp. Vicky Martin. It was proposed that attempts should be made to set up a Unity youth group, as there is no direct representation from young people on the current Unity group. It is hoped that utilising Teams/Zoom-type technology may attract more young people to engage.

LGBT Forum

31. The Community Resilience Officer is working with South Park Bowls Club to organise an 'inclusivity event' in May. The Bowls Committee is very keen on encouraging new members and is trying to open the sport up beyond the stereotype of older, white men.
32. As the site is Council-owned, they are linking with the Community Resilience Officer through the forum to progress plans.

PREVENT

33. Channel Duty guidance was updated on 2 November 2020. A meeting was held with partners in November to establish how this impacts on the CONTEST Silver Board and the Council's Channel Panel.
34. A CONTEST Silver Board sub-group has been formed to look at training across both Darlington and County Durham. This should ensure consistency across what is one police force area and also reduce any duplication of resources.
35. It has been agreed that the current procedure for making a Prevent referral should be ended and replaced with the National Prevent Referral Form, which should be completed and sent directly to the Durham Police Prevent team. This change is scheduled to happen in March 2021, so appropriate meetings with Children and Adult Services, and others, are now being arranged to ensure a smooth transition.
36. A counter-terrorism local champions event focused on Channel referrals of people with Autism was held online 4 Dec 2020 with DBC champions attending. Total attendance across Darlington and Durham areas was approximately 40.
37. No Tension Monitoring reports received since last report.

Home Office Safer Streets Fund

38. Launched in Darlington on 7 September 2020, the Safer Streets Fund supports target-hardening and crime prevention measures in the Northgate and the North Road area of Darlington. The qualifying criteria has been expanded due to fewer than average burglaries as a result of COVID-19 and now includes residential burglaries backdated to 1 June 2020.
39. The following recent actions have been undertaken:
 - (a) 275 properties visited by beat team PCSOs
 - (b) 166 have accepted the offer of safer streets interventions.
 - (c) 26 properties have been completed and 27 properties are currently having work undertaken.
 - (d) All other properties are in the process of being contacted (voicemail or letter left at property) or are yet to be contacted.

Licensing

Taxi Policy

40. The revised Taxi Policy received approval by Full Council on the 26 November 2020 for implementation on the 1 January 2021 in line with statutory requirements. This policy was generally well received by the trade since some requirements in relation to vehicles have been relaxed without compromising safety as a result of improvements in technology over the years. Importantly, all vehicles will comply with Euro 6 engine standards by April 2023 to help reduce emissions.
41. Driver standards will be enhanced with the incorporation into the policy of new statutory standards produced by the Department for Transport to protect children and vulnerable adults.

Licensing Act Policy

42. Darlington's Licensing Act Policy was due to be reviewed by January 2021, however, concerns were expressed nationally that with the closure of many licensed premises it was impossible to have a meaningful consultation with the hospitality trade.
43. In October, 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, however, following a further lockdown period and the introduction of a tier system, the target date of April now seems unrealistic and a further extension will be sought from the Licensing Committee. This will be in line with recently received government guidance from the Policing Minister, Kit Malthouse, as a result of this nationally recognised issue.

COVID-19 Intelligence Sharing

44. The Council's Licensing department hold intelligence sharing meetings with Police, Environmental Health, and Public Health in relation to licensing issues concerning COVID-19, which facilitates identification of problem premises enabling early interventions to take place. These meetings along with regular meetings with the North East Strategic Licensing Group (NESLG) enables the sharing of best practice to take place and allows a coordinated approach in response to changes to regulations/guidance.

IDOX Online Taxi Licensing System

45. Installation of a new on-line taxi licensing system from IDOX, has commenced and it is hoped this will be fully functional by Spring 2021. In addition to this, an electronic workflow monitor (Enterprise) will be introduced to manage all licensing applications with greater efficiency.
46. Testing of both systems is currently ongoing, though additional work has been required to incorporate the new taxi policy changes and to new driver standards required by the Department of Transport.

Animal and Unlicensed Dog Breeding

47. Animal welfare related issues are becoming more prevalent following the introduction of new animal welfare regulations, particularly involving the unlicensed selling of puppies due to their high value. Licensing have been working closely with partner agencies to ensure compliance with these regulations and are part of a regional forum to share best practice.
48. Unlicensed dog breeding is a cross organisational and cross border issue often linked to organised crime. Licensing now have access to a new national intelligence database administered by Trading Standards, which is being used very effectively.
49. Officers are also now liaising much more closely with Environmental Health to ensure noise complaints of dogs barking are not linked to illegal dog breeding. Joint visits have taken place where this is suspected, along with appropriate disruption activities.

Crime and Disorder

50. There has been a 16 per cent decrease in the number of reported crimes in Darlington during the period 1 April to 30 November 2020 compared to the same period in 2019/20. This equates to a decrease of 1,351 crimes. The only crime showing an increase is Arson (this equates to 14 crimes). All other categories of crime are showing a significant decrease.
51. There has been an eight per cent increase in the number of reported anti-social behaviour (ASB) incidents in Darlington during the period 1 April to 30 November 2020 compared to the same period in 2019/20.
52. This equates to an increase of 198 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 a six per cent increase in incidents. This equates to an increase of 158 incidents.

53. There has been a 55 per cent decrease in the number of reported crimes in Darlington Town Centre during the period 1 April to 30 November 2020 compared to the same period in 2019/20. This equates to a decrease of 732 crimes. All crimes are showing a significant decrease.
54. There has been a 55 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 187 incidents. If COVID-19 related anti-social behaviour incidents are removed, there would be no change in the figures, due to there being only 3 COVID-19 related incidents.

Councillor Jonathan Dulston
Stronger Communities Portfolio