

COUNCIL
31 MARCH 2022

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

Safer Streets Programme

2. Work is ongoing with regards to the three Safer Streets programmes. The majority of Safer Streets 1 is now complete; Safer Streets 2, all the additional cameras have been installed. The Safer Streets 3 project is also progressing which has a focus on violence and intimidation against women and girls in public places. A multi-agency group is progressing the areas of work covering education, engagement, marketing environmental improvements and multi-agency response team.
3. Further Home Office funds have been secured to open a multi-agency hub to support the violence against women and girls' agenda and for other community groups to have access to. Premises have been identified in Skinnergate and DBC Estates are progressing this.

Civic Enforcement Service

Environmental Crime

4. The back lanes project continues to extend into new streets: Wolsingham Terrace, Craig/Vine Street, Lansdowne Street and Eldon Street. Pilot areas have been a success and have largely remained clean and free of bins.
5. A case of prolific fly tipping was heard in court on 15 February 2022. The accused pleaded guilty to all three offences put forward. The Service is seeking a Criminal Behaviour Order (CBO) to which the accused contests and therefore sentencing and the CBO application will be heard on 17 May 2022. Publicity and media will take place following sentencing.

Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)

6. Civic Enforcement are working closely with businesses, CCTV and police in relation to recent increases in ASB in Darlington Town Centre, particularly around the Dolphin Centre and Cornmill Centre. Several young persons have been identified and interviewed, with a total of 5 Acceptable Behaviour Agreements, 3 warnings and one final warning issued, along with Banning Notices. Referrals for preventative work with the Young Peoples' Engagement and Justice Service have been completed and a good level of engagement noted.

7. A review of the Public Space Protection Order is underway, with a view of taking a report to Cabinet in June 2022.
8. File preparation is underway to apply to the Courts for a premises closure order for a residential address. Alongside this, an injunction application will be made following a successful closure, to prevent the occupant moving into another property within the ward area.

Trading Standards

9. Trading Standards has seen an uptake in intellectual property (counterfeit) crime within and outside the Borough, particularly sales online and through the use of online marketplaces. Through effective partnership working and intelligence sharing, Trading Standards is able to monitor this activity and undertake enforcement action against the most prolific illegal traders as required.
10. Trading Standards continues to benefit from the relatively high profile the service has within our community. There has been an increase in the number of direct reports of illegal trading via the online reporting form on the DBC Trading Standards page, as well as receiving a good flow of requests for service from traders seeking legal compliance advice. Whilst it is important that consumers and traders make use of the Citizens Advice Consumer Service helpline, so that important intelligence is captured nationally, it is reassuring to note that Trading Standards' partnership with the local community is strong.

Private Sector Housing

Private Rental Sector Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard (MEES)

11. As part of the project to improve the Private Rental Sector Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards, Private Sector Housing have identified approximately 100 non-compliant properties across Darlington. Many landlords have taken action to comply with the regulations and where landlords have failed to engage, compliance notices have been served. The main aspect of this project is to contact and engage non-compliant residential landlords to ensure compliance with the regulations.

Energy Awareness sessions

12. Private Sector Housing are currently working with Northern PowerGrid and the Green Doctor Team to deliver 32 energy awareness sessions at various hubs around Darlington to be held between March and May. These sessions will advise residents in relation to how they can reduce their energy bills, make their homes warmer by being more energy efficient, maximise their income and potentially access grants and other support following the rise in energy costs in April 2022.

Community Resilience

Darlington Open Water Safety Group

13. The Community Resilience Officer has commenced drafting a water safety policy for the group to consider. Input will be sought from DBC departments and external partners.
14. Zurich (DBC insurers) have been tasked to conduct a review of the Council's water safety policies/procedures. This will assist in identifying any potential gaps and implement best practice learnt from previous reviews. It is anticipated the review will take place towards the end of April 2022.

Community Cohesion

15. The first meeting of a Community Safety Partnership Cohesion Group was held on 11 February 2022. The group is required to implement actions contained within the current Community Safety Partnership Plan 2021-2026: Priority 4 Building Strong and Cohesive Communities.

PREVENT / CONTEST

16. The Publicly Accessible Locations (PALs) pilot will begin on 1 April 2022 ahead of future legislative requirements. The pilot will enable us and other authorities across the North East prepare and assess public locations for the risks associated with the potential for terrorist activity. In preparation for this, two workshop sessions were held in March. The Council has the support of Graham Wakeman, Counter-Terrorism Security Advisor, for the duration of the pilot.

Licensing

Pavement Cafes

17. The Business and Planning Act legislation, which allows a streamlined process for Pavement Café licences has been extended until September 2022, however, a recent government circulation indicated they would like to see this legislation be made permanent. Licensing have now issued licences for all those premises that have applied using a light touch approach. Fewer premises have applied this year, due to the lifting of Covid regulations and pavement cafes do not form part of the business model for some venues. On 8 March 2022, Licensing presented a draft of the reviewed Pavement Café Policy to the Licensing Committee, which was approved for public consultation. The consultation will remain open until 1 May 2022.

Taxis

18. COVID-19 restrictions have led to a decrease in the number of licensed drivers, as demand reduced and many have taken other employment opportunities, particularly in home delivery services. This has impacted on taxi operators not being able to meet demand, which has led to complaints by the public to the taxi companies.

Licensing is currently working with operators to speed up the application for new drivers and encourage current licensed drivers to return to the trade, whilst adhering to our policy and statutory requirements. There are early indications that drivers are returning to the trade, however, it will take some time to recover from the loss of over 100 licensed drivers from the period preceding COVID-19 restrictions.

19. The trade sought an increase in taxi fares due to the financial pressures they are under and the Licensing Committee approved this increase, which will see the average fare for a 2 mile day time journey rise from £5.80 to £6.30. The fare increase was subject to a statutory public notice in a local paper for 14 days, with no objections received. Therefore, the increase will take effect in April 2022, following the recalibration of taxi metres and a new table of fares printed for each vehicle.
20. Licensing are aware of the problem with availability of wheelchair accessible vehicles. Whilst there are many reasons for this, we continue to work with all stakeholders to improve the situation wherever possible. It will require legislative changes to mandate that all vehicles are wheelchair accessible. The newly published 'Levelling Up White Paper' has created an opportunity for this to be discussed widely, as it seeks to introduce taxi licensing into our regional transport plan.
21. A new online automated taxi licensing application system is in the final testing stages before hopefully going live in April/May 2022. Delays in the system have been beyond the control of the Council, but when introduced it will make the process faster and more efficient without compromising public safety.

Caravan Sites

22. New regulations came into effect in 2021 requiring holders of caravan site licences to nominate a person who manages the site to be entered on a 'Fit and Proper Person Register.' Darlington currently has 19 licensed sites and in conjunction with Private Sector Housing, are currently assessing these applications following consultation with key partners. A register of fit and proper persons will be made available on the Council's website, as required by the regulations.

New HMRC Requirements

23. From 4 April 2022 any person applying for, or renewing, a taxi driver licence, taxi operator licence or a scrap metal licence, will be required to prove they are registered to pay tax with the HMRC. This requires a code generated by them and an application cannot be processed without that verification. All affected licence holders have been sent letters and an information campaign has been developed with the communications team.

Crime and Disorder

24.

Darlington	Pre-COVID 01.04.2019- 31.01.2020	01.04.2021- 31.01.2022	% Increase/decrease
Crime	10654	9186	-14%
Incidents	27470	25264	-8%
ASB	3118	2763	-11%

25.

DARLINGTON TOWN CENTRE	Pre-COVID 01.04.2019- 31.01.2020	01.04.2021- 31.01.2022	% Increase/decrease
Crime	1670	1176	-29%
Incidents	2696	2118	-28%
ASB	440	239	-45%

Councillor Jonathan Dulston
Stronger Communities Portfolio