

**Environment and Sustainable
Communities Overview and
Scrutiny Committee**

8 March 2019



**Work of the Community
Action Team and the use of
targeted interventions**

**Joint Report of Lorraine O'Donnell, Director of Transformation and
Partnerships and Ian Thompson, Corporate Director of
Regeneration and Local Services**

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide members of Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update on the work of the Council's Community Action Team (CAT) and the use of targeted interventions.

Executive summary

- 2 During 2018 the CAT team carried out a total of 987 pieces of casework, which includes follow up work and review work in previous locations. As well as casework, each project has an action plan with an average of 35 actions to be undertaken by the team and partners per project.
- 3 For each project undertaken an analysis was carried out to determine the type of property creating the greatest workload, which influenced the actions taken in the exit strategy.
- 4 Previous project locations were reviewed by carrying out a desktop evaluation of exit strategies and revisiting project locations to look at sustainability of the work carried out and address any ongoing issues.
- 5 The review of exit strategies showed that the majority of actions are carried out by the team and partners. However, a few actions have had

to be delayed, or are no longer possible due to changing partner resources or priorities.

- 6 The review indicates there continue to be complex issues in these communities, which is exacerbated by high tenant turnover and absent landlords. As a short-term project, the CAT seeks to make an impact in each area while recognising that long-term improvements would most likely require policy change at a strategic or national level.

Recommendations

- 7 Members of the Committee are asked to note information contained within the update report on the work of the CAT and the use of targeted interventions and comment accordingly.
- 8 That the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive a further update on the work of the Community Action Team at a future meeting.

Background

- 9 The Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee originally received an overview on the Community Action Team (CAT) and the use of targeted interventions at its meeting on 10 November 2014. Following that meeting the committee has received further updates on their work with the last update provided to the committee on 8 March 2018. It is therefore timely for the committee to receive a further update at its meeting on 8 March 2019. Arrangements have been made for Jennifer Jones, Senior Environmental Health Officer to attend the meeting and deliver a presentation focusing on the work of the CAT in the previous year.
- 10 The CAT is a small and ambitious team consisting of members of the Environmental Health and Consumer Protection department who are responsible for delivering Community Action Schemes at identified locations within County Durham. They work alongside Planning Officers, Private Sector Housing Officers, Neighbourhood Wardens, Police and Community Support Officers and Fire and Rescue Teams and with local communities. The aim of the CAT is to bring together key partners with specialist skills, as well as local residents, working proactively to tackle local housing and environmental issues.
- 11 Since the CAT began operating in 2013 it has carried out 29 projects covering 25 locations in degraded communities across County Durham. Locations were chosen geographically across the county against set criteria based on deprivation, visual environmental degradation, commercial buildings, high level of private rents and where existing community groups were operating within the area.

Time was allocated within each programme to review previous schemes.

- 12 Originally, an 8-10-week programme took place – however the project length was extended for each location to 11 weeks for the 2018-2019 programme.
- 13 Each initiative was divided into three phases:
 - Engagement, Intelligence Gathering and Priority setting,
 - Action, and
 - Review, Exit and Feedback.

There were opportunities for the community to get involved through a residents' engagement event, drop-in sessions, and usually a community activity such as a litter pick. Partners met during the engagement period, carried out a walkabout of the area and, following input from the community, prioritised 3-4 issues. A strategy was put in place to carry out targeted interventions in the action period. Partners carried out a variety of interventions including weekly walkabouts of the area, litter clearance, waste carrier licence checks, and talks to local schools. At the end of each project, an exit strategy was put in place with partners. Residents and community groups received a feedback letter at the end of each scheme outlining the action that had taken place, the exit strategy, ways to contact the council and partner agencies, and a survey inviting project feedback.

Key findings from the 2018 Programme

- 14 The team carried out a total of 987 pieces of casework in 2018, which includes follow-up and review work in previous project locations. Core casework related to common issues such as rubbish accumulations and defective drainage, with housing disrepair, fly tipping, and open to access properties also being investigated. There were 226 legal notices served and 27 works in default required where there was non-compliance with notices.

Table 1.1 – Comparison of casework in CAT project areas up to 23 December 2018

Location	Casework	Notices	Work in Default
Spennymoor RV	158	33	2
Dean Bank	262	86	10
Willington	162	21	1
Easington Colliery (partial RV)	226	53	8
TOTAL – 2018	808	193	21

Table 1.2 – Change in casework in CAT project areas from 2017-2018

Year	Casework	Notices	Work in Default
TOTAL 2017	811	258	64
TOTAL 2018	808	193	21
CHANGE	- 0.004%	-25%	-67%

- 15 Each location had different characteristics: Spennymoor was a revisit (RV) project, which the team had previously visited in Spring 2014. Dean Bank had just ended its selective licensing designation when we carried out the project. Willington was a new project. Easington Colliery was a partial revisit, with a larger focus area taking in new areas of Canada and the selective licensing area, Wembley, as well as the A and B streets that had previously been visited at the start of 2017.
- 16 It can be seen from Table 1.1 that Dean Bank generated the largest workload and Easington Colliery the second largest workload. Spennymoor and Willington had a similar workload, with slightly more legal notices being served in Spennymoor.
- 17 Table 1.2 shows that the workload from the 5 projects carried out in 2017 (Easington Colliery, New Kyo, Wheatley Hill, Dawdon and Chester-le-

Street) generated a similar quantity of casework to the 4 longer projects carried out in 2018.

- 18 There is a reduction in the number of notices served and work in default required between 2017 and 2018 as shown in Table 1.2. This indicates an improved level of compliance from residents/owners/landlords. We believe that this is due to the team previously working in two of the areas, and having the contact details for many of the landlords in two areas due to the selective licensing scheme. This meant that when landlords/owners/residents were contacted they were quicker to respond to what was required of them to address the issue. In the two areas where we had contact details, at the start of each project, all licensed (or recently licensed) landlords were able to be notified that the CAT team would be working in the area. Whereas we are only usually able to notify the accredited landlords of this.
- 19 As well as tackling casework, each project had an action plan with an average of 35 actions tackled by the team and partners per project. This includes actions such as test purchasing of alcohol, home fire safety checks, tackling untidy sites, bin marking and working to bring empty homes back into use. This compares to an average of 27 actions per project in 2017 when shorter projects were carried out.
- 20 We have continued to work with Groundwork North East and Cumbria. They carry out 20 weeks sustainability at the end of each project, working with schools and community groups.
- 21 Positive press articles continue to be published for each project.
- 22 In the past year we have continued to develop the project and try new approaches:
 - a) At the start of each project we are delivering initial letters to residents in the focus area instead of leaflets
 - b) We are using picture icons in our resident letters (initial and feedback) to make them easier to read.
 - c) QR codes were introduced at the end of the year. These enable residents to electronically complete our engagement and feedback surveys.
 - d) We are now holding more resident surgeries per project during the action weeks, which are one hour long. These shorter surgeries make better use of partner resources and encourage better resident participation.
 - e) Social media has been used to provide advice about our priority topics.
 - f) The 11 week projects allowed us to tackle additional project work through alternative enforcement approaches:
 - i. In Spennymoor we carried out a door knock to offer residents bin marking and dampness surveys

- ii. In the Willington project we carried out a joint initiative with the Business Energy Efficiency Team and Trading Standards speaking to high street businesses about illicit tobacco and promoting free energy audits to improve energy efficiency.
- iii. In Willington we carried out a downpipe survey of the High Street. As part of the exit strategy the Town Council agreed to fund drainpipe covers for 9 properties. We co-ordinated the installation of these as part of our exit strategy.
- iv. In the Dean Bank project we carried out visits to local letting agents with the Private Sector Initiative team to encourage better letting practices.
- v. In Dean Bank and Willington, the food team carried out an evening of action – visiting all takeaways that were due for inspection on the same evening. This resulted in improvements being made to the takeaways.

23 For each project in 2018 we carried out a casework analysis to see which type of property gave us the greatest workload. This influenced the action taken in the exit strategy. Table 1.3 shows the totals from all the projects.

24 Table 1.3 - Analysis of Rubbish Accumulation Casework per project in 2018

	Landlord and Tenant	Social Tenant	Owner Occupier	Empty Landlord Tenant	Empty Social Tenant
Spennymoor	59.6%	1.9%	17.3%	21.2%	0.0%
Dean Bank	59.0%	6.0%	6.7%	21.6%	6.7%
Willington	53.8%	7.7%	15.4%	23.1%	0.0%
Easington Colliery	50.7%	1.4%	14.5%	33.3%	0.0%
2018 Collated	56.6%	4.3%	11.4%	24.6%	3.2%

* These figures are for rubbish accumulations actively dealt with, where detailed ownership information was obtained by the CAT. Cases referred to other teams have been excluded as the ownership information was not collected.

25 In all projects the rubbish accumulations in the occupied private let properties gave us the biggest proportion of work in the project – as highlighted in light grey in Table 1.3. This is different to what we thought at the start of each project, as we believed the empty properties would be subject to more fly-tipping, but this was not found to be the case – see figures highlighted in dark grey.

26 The higher proportion of Landlord and Tenant properties featured in Table 1.3 is also a reflection of the areas chosen to work in. CAT project locations usually have a high proportion of privately let property, compared to social housing.

- 27 It should be noted that the ‘empty’ properties in Table 1.3 are categorised as those that have been empty longer than 6 months – therefore a property that has been empty less than 6 months would be categorised as occupied. As such, the figures for occupied private lets include both occupied and recently occupied properties.
- 28 At the end of each project all residents in the focus area receive a feedback letter summarising the project, providing useful contact information and inviting them to complete a survey. The feedback received from residents in 2018 shows that awareness of the team has improved with 84% of residents knowing that CAT was operating in the area, 71% of residents knowing how to contact CAT, and 59% felt that CAT had made a difference in their area.
- 29 Partners continue to give positive feedback at the end of each project, as well as suggestions for improving future projects. In the past year community engagement has improved, however there is scope to develop this further.

Key findings from the review periods in 2018

- 30 From 17 September – 8 October and 31 December 2018 - 20 January 2019 the CAT undertook a period of review. A desktop review of exit strategies was carried out and several project locations were revisited: Dawdon, Spennymoor, Chester-le-Street and Dean Bank. The purpose was to look at the sustainability of the work carried out and address any ongoing issues.
- 31 On each review walkabout, the number of housing and environmental issues found was lower than identified in the initial walkabout at the start of the original project. See table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1 – Comparison of casework found on the original project walkabout compared to the review walkabout and the % change by location

Location	Original project 1 st walkabout	Review walkabout	% Change
Dawdon	80	37	-54%
Spennymoor	50	20	-60%
Chester-le-Street	68	43	-37%
Dean Bank	161	83	-48%

- 32 The figures in Table 2.1 indicate that the work carried out by the CAT is having lasting effects in each area. The project model which combines enforcement work with community engagement is believed to provide a much-needed role of education along with a zero tolerance approach.
- 33 During the review walkabouts, rubbish accumulations were the most common type of issue found. Although the number has decreased on the review walkabout it does show that domestic rubbish accumulations in terraced rear yards continues to be an issue across the project areas.
- 34 The review of exit strategies shows that the majority of actions are carried out by the team and partners. However a few actions have had to be delayed, or are no longer possible due to changing partner resources or priorities.
- 35 It is clear from the review periods, that there continue to be complex issues in these communities to contend with, which are exacerbated by high tenant turnover and absent landlords. As a short-term project, the CAT seeks to make an impact in each area while recognising that long-term improvements would most likely require policy change at a strategic or national level.

Next Steps

- 36 The Community Action Team plan to continue with their 11 week projects, visiting four locations in 2019: Cockton Hill Road, Grange Villa, Crook central and Eldon.
- 37 The project in Grange Villa will be a re-visit project, following an original project in 2014. The project in Eldon will be a partial re-visit project, with previous projects having been carried out in Coundon Grange/Eldon in 2013 and 2015.
- 38 Project locations continue to be chosen through a combining and scrutinising our EHCP public health complaint data with a dataset of deprivation, empty homes, median house price and percentage private rented in receipt of housing benefit. This allows us to establish locations with greatest need. Some locations continue to rank highly in terms of these indicators.
- 39 Potential locations were excluded where the CAT has visited in the past 4 years, there is less than 10% private rented in receipt of housing benefit, and where the Public Health team data/intelligence show that the area is not environmentally degraded.
- 40 Groundwork North East and Cumbria have worked in partnership with the CAT projects since 2015. They have enabled CAT to leave an environmental legacy through working with schools and community

groups in each location as part of the exit strategy. This partnership will be extended into 2019.

- 41 As the CAT goes into its seventh year in operation it continues to bring great partnership working capabilities. It is viewed by partners as an effective way to focus on some of the more deprived areas of the county, achieving local improvements in housing and environmental issues whilst making use of limited resources. Through each project's exit strategy, partners highlight where greater strategic approaches are needed to make long-term improvements.

Background papers

None

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Challenges to statutory notices served by CAT officers and partners

Finance

Recovery of work in default costs through debt management strategy or by way of land charges register

Consultation

Not applicable

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable

Human Rights

Not applicable

Crime and Disorder

Most issues tackled are statutory responsibilities for the local authority under the Altogether Safer objective of the Council Plan

Staffing

None – CAT officers are part of the Environment Protection team within EHCP

Accommodation

Not applicable

Risk

Not applicable

Procurement

Not applicable