

Cabinet

18 March 2020

Council Activity Report

Ordinary Decision



Report of Corporate Management Team

Terry Collins, Chief Executive

Councillor Simon Henig, Leader of the Council

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide an update on work to support some of the council's key priorities.

Executive summary

- 2 The report provides an update on progress towards delivering some of the council's key priorities.
- 3 This month's report covers:
 - (a) Tackling envirocrime
 - (b) Helping our towns and villages thrive

Recommendation

- 4 Cabinet is recommended to note the contents of this update.

Background

- 5 The council undertakes a great deal of work across the county.
- 6 This report offers an overview of some key projects.

Tackling envirocrime

- 7 Everybody wants to live in a place that is clean, tidy and welcoming. It's also important that we create the best possible impression for those visiting or travelling through the county.
- 8 To this end, the council works hard to keep the county looking its best and a key part of this work is tackling envirocrime.
- 9 Over the past few years, we have had significant success in reducing instances of dog fouling, fly-tipping and untidy yards and gardens through an approach that prioritises education and utilises enforcement only when other appropriate options have failed.

Responsible dog ownership

- 10 Our Civic Pride team and neighbourhood wardens regularly visit schools in the county to talk about the importance of being a responsible dog owner. We also have a green dog walker scheme, whereby owners sign a pledge to always clean up after their pet and carry extra dog bags for other dog walkers who don't have one to hand.
- 11 However, dog fouling has been a persistent issue of concern for communities in County Durham for many years and is raised at most Police and Communities Together (PACT) and other community meetings as a priority. The issue is also not just one that frustrates communities in County Durham, but nationally there have been significant efforts to bring about a change in attitudes to dog fouling, including the introduction of a law requiring all dogs to be microchipped.
- 12 In 2017, the council introduced a Public Space Protection Order (PSPO). Failing to clean up after a pet was already an offence prior to the PSPO but it also created the additional offences of allowing a dog to stray and failing to keep a pet on a lead. Under the order, dogs are also banned from designated play areas.
- 13 Since the implementation of the order, the number of reported instances of dog fouling has fallen by 45 per cent to 1,295 in 2018/19 from 2,355.
- 14 The council also has a statutory obligation to deal with stray dogs in its area. As well as working to educate the community of the issues raised by strays such as potential danger to traffic and unwanted litters, the

authority included allowing a dog to stray in its PSPO and this has contributed towards a reduction in the number of animals found on the streets.



- 15 In 2015/16, there were 2,127 reports of strays, with 1,180 collected by the council and taken to our kennelling provider, Stray Aid. Between February 2019 and January 2020, the number of strays reported had fallen by 38 per cent to 1,306, while the number of dogs being taken to kennels has reduced by 44 per cent to 658. Despite this fall, we recognise that the issue of stray dogs remains a community concern nationally and locally and will continue to focus efforts in this area of work.

Fly-tipping

- 16 Like dog fouling, fly-tipping has remained a constant concern for communities across County Durham for many years. However, County Durham is performing well when it comes to tackling the problem, particularly when compared to other local authorities and national rates.
- 17 The current fly-tipping rate for the county is 14 reported incidents for every 1,000 people. This is in comparison to 68 per 1,000 population in Darlington; 78 per 1,000 population in Hartlepool; and 48 per 1,000 population in South Tyneside.
- 18 The county is also bucking a national trend of increasing fly-tipping rates in recent years. In 2013/14, there were 852,000 reported incidents. In 2018/19, this had risen to 1,072,000. However, in County Durham, the number of reported fly-tipping incidents fell from 9,004 to 7,268 during the same period.

- 19 This reduction can be at least in part attributed to the authority's award-winning Operation Stop It campaign. Launched in 2014, the campaign has three strands – education and engagement, partnership working and enforcement.
- 20 The education and engagement element sees the council using a wide range of forums to issue messages about the impact on the environment of fly-tipping along with the potential legal consequences of being caught dumping waste. CCTV footage of fly-tipping incidents is often shared on the authority's social media channels and is among the accompanying posts are usually among the council's most popular.
- 21 Partnership working is also a key element of the campaign, with the council utilising close links with Durham Constabulary, Crimestoppers and Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service to deal with incidents and also track down those responsible.
- 22 Whether incidents do occur, the council uses a range of enforcement powers including Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs), seizing and crushing vehicles used fly-tipping, stop and search checks and the deployment of CCTV cameras, often funded by local members or parish councils, in fly-tipping hotspots.
- 23 Over the past three financial years, neighbourhood wardens have issued 56 FPNs, which have resulted in 22 prosecutions of individuals who have failed to pay.



Yards and gardens

- 24 Untidy yards and gardens where residents dump rubbish or unwanted household items can cause a number of problems, from making an area look unsightly to providing a home for rats.
- 25 The number of Community Protection Warnings (CPW) and Community Protection Notices (CPN) issued by the council for unkempt yards and gardens is among the highest in the country, but the authority's proactive approach has resulted in low numbers of prosecutions as the vast majority of people comply with orders at the earliest stages.
- 26 In 2018/19, there were 3,470 reports of untidy yards or gardens. Initial conversations with residents about the need to tidy their properties resulted in 55 per cent complying with the request, with the remaining 45 per cent (1,574) receiving a Community Protection Warning. The council has a number of enforcement mechanisms at its disposal before resorting to prosecution. In only 48 cases, did all methods of enforcement fail, resulting in those responsible being taken to court.

Additional wardens



- 27 The council's neighbourhood wardens play a key role in dealing with envirocrimes and, last month, the authority further demonstrated its commitment to tackling the problem, when it agreed funding for the permanent addition of 11 new wardens as part of its budget for the coming financial year.
- 28 All staff will be employed under general warden duties but each will have special areas of responsibility, with three focusing on fly-tipping.

Helping our towns and villages thrive

- 29 High streets across the country are struggling for a number of reasons including the change in shopping habits to online purchases.
- 30 In County Durham we know how important it is to local communities and the economy to have thriving town and village centres, that's why we're working to support and reinvigorate them to create attractive, sustainable and vibrant central areas.
- 31 Over the next three years, we're committing £2.5million per year to fund regeneration plans in our towns and villages. The money is being used to make environmental improvements, buy up and reinvigorate derelict land and buildings and support local business.
- 32 Our towns and villages programme approved by cabinet in December 2018 has set in place a new focus on regeneration at a local level providing a comprehensive programme of activity to respond to community concerns, local needs and emerging opportunities.
- 33 The first year of activity has seen significant efforts to identify target communities, understand council and partner investment priorities and to bring forward new projects to ensure all areas of the county benefit from a comprehensive, co-ordinated approach to regeneration.
- 34 The programme consists of activities grouped under five themes; housing and community, environment & health, built environment, transport and community and strategic Initiatives.
- 35 So far project activity has delivered a range of improvements including:

Digital High Street

- 36 We've installed the first two town centre Wi-Fi schemes in Bishop Auckland and Stanley which means visitors can now take advantage of free Wi-Fi when they visit the towns. A further three town centre schemes are expected during 2020. In addition to Wi-Fi access, the digital high street programme includes support to local retailers to make the shift online to support their business and is also exploring the development of community-based apps to support independent businesses and community groups.



Stanley town centre Wi-Fi installation

Retail Hub

- 37 One of the key strengths of Durham's main towns is the number of often long-standing independent businesses. Through Retail Hub we are seeking to help the formation of more town centre businesses and help those already trading to grow and thrive. Training, test trading, pop up shops and retail incubation space are just some of the initiatives which form part of the retail hub programme.
- 38 For example, we have supported the development of a pop-up shop in Durham City which has provided an opportunity for local independent producers and retailers to showcase their products. We are now exploring further sites to deliver similar programmes.

Neighbourhood Retailing

- 39 With so many settlements, retail and local services aren't restricted to our town centres. Neighbourhood retail parades in smaller towns and villages can suffer from many of the issues we see in the main towns.
- 40 We have assessed 20 areas across the county and have started programmes in Willington and Sacriston which will deliver business improvement schemes and better car parking for shoppers.



Fosters Opticians in Willington has benefitted from funding to improve its shop front.

- 41 The programme will also link with local housing investment schemes, enhanced environmental improvements and how to deal with buildings and empty spaces which have a negative impact on the area.
- 42 Further assessments and packages of work will be developed in the coming months with delivery aligned to a range of other investments by the council and local partners.

Vulnerable buildings

- 43 We found that local communities highlighted the negative impact that vacant and unmaintained premises have on communities when we gathered their comments through our AAPs.
- 44 Addressing both empty homes and vacant and underutilised commercial premises and land to create new residential opportunities, remodel and reuse commercial premises, or undertake demolition and environmental improvements is a priority.
- 45 For example, villagers in Easington have recently been asked for their views on the future of the former Easington Colliery Primary School which has stood empty since 1997 and has blighted their community for more than 20 years. The results of that consultation are currently being compiled.

Community Focused Housing

- 46 While many areas of the county have seen significant housebuilding in recent years, others have seen relatively little and specific housing needs have been identified in several communities.
- 47 Working with local community groups, property owners and local developers, a range of new housing opportunities have been identified to help continue the process of investment and renewal.
- 48 For example, in Bishop Auckland we're working with the newly formed Canney Communities Community Interest Company to help develop 12 lifetime homes for disabled adults on a previously undeveloped site. Other schemes in Craghead, Crook and Durham city are also progressing, seeking to deliver housing to meet local community needs.

PIC OF CANNEY COMMUNITIES TO BE ADDED

Links with other council plans and activities

- 49 Maintaining the focus on co-ordination and collaboration, the towns and villages programme links with the council's approach to other plans and activities including the proposal to introduce selective licensing for private landlords to improve the standard of private rented property, library and leisure transformation and local environmental campaigns such as spruce up and the community action team initiative.
- 50 The broad range of activities and the strong links forged with partner organisations have also allowed us to develop strong bids for additional resources through the Future High Street Fund and Stronger Town programmes, as well as securing monies under the Heritage Action Zone and Townscape Heritage programmes.
- 51 For example, Historic England awarded Heritage Action Zone status to Bishop Auckland in 2018 to develop a £1.96 million programme of heritage-led growth to create a sustainable, more vibrant, connected and enhanced historic centre. There are more than 50 projects and buildings within the HAZ programme in Bishop Auckland.



Visitors watch a cookery demo from Bake Off finalist, Briony Williams, at last year's Bishop Auckland Food Festival.

52 Bishop Auckland is also one of 100 towns invited to submit a full funding application for the government's £1 billion Future High Streets Fund.

Background papers

- None

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Not applicable.

Finance

Not applicable.

Consultation

Not applicable.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable.

Climate Change

Not applicable.

Human Rights

Not applicable.

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable.

Staffing

Not applicable.

Accommodation

Not applicable.

Risk

Not applicable.

Procurement

Not applicable.