

10 November 2014

**Overview of the work of the
Community Action Team and the
use of targeted interventions**

**Report of Terry Collins, Corporate Director, Neighbourhood
Services**

Purpose of the Report

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

Background

- 2 At its meeting on 3 April 2013 the Safer and Stronger Overview and Scrutiny Committee heard a report from council's Environment, Health and Consumer Protection team on the progress and future activity of the CAT following an initial pilot in 2012.
- 3 The CAT is a small, proactive team consisting of members of the Environmental Health and Consumer Protection Team who are responsible for delivering Community Action Schemes at identified locations within County Durham. They work alongside Planning and Housing Officers, Neighbourhood Wardens, Police and Community Support Officers, and Fire and Rescue teams and with local communities. The aim of the Community Action Schemes is to bring together key partners with specialist skills, as well as local residents, to tackle local housing and environmental issues.
- 4 In February 2013 the CAT began a two-year work programme visiting ten communities across County Durham. Locations were chosen geographically across the county in each of the Local Multi-Agency Problem Solving (LMAPs) – part 2 areas, against a set criteria based on health deprivation, visual environmental degradation, commercial buildings, high level of private rents and existing community groups operating within the area. Communities visited were: Coundon Grange/Eldon Lane, Murton, South Moor, New Shildon, Trimdon Station/Deaf Hill, Grange Villa, Spennymoor, Leadgate, Easington Colliery and the team is currently working in Durham city.
- 5 In each location an 8-10 week programme took place. Each initiative was split into three phases: Engagement/Priority setting, Action and Review, and Exit/Feedback. There were opportunities for the community to get

involved through a residents' meeting, drop-in sessions, and a community litter pick in some projects. 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, and in some locations bi-weekly, walkabouts of the area, test purchasing of alcohol, home fire safety checks, 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 letter outlining the action that had taken place, the exit strategy, ways to contact the council and partner agencies and a survey. A similar letter and survey was also sent to landlords.

Key findings from the 2013-2014 Programme

- 6 In the first 18 months, up to 29 June 2014, the team carried out a total of 1263 pieces of casework, which includes follow-up work in previous project locations. Core casework related to rubbish accumulations and defective drainage, with housing disrepair and open to access properties also being investigated. There were 282 legal notices served and 76 works in default were required where there was non-compliance with notices.
- 7 Table 1 – Comparison of casework in CAT project areas up to 29 June 2014

Location	Casework	1st walkabout	Notices	Work Default	In
Coundon Grange/ Eldon Lane	168	61	43		28
Murton	65	38	10		3
South Moor	234	148	62		20
New Shildon	111	56	17		3
Trimdon Station/ Deaf Hill	144	64	31		6
Grange Villa	153	126	71		6
Spennymoor	100	73	41		9
Leadgate	65	35	7		1
TOTAL - 2013-14	1040	601	282		76

- 8 Improving housing standards and removing rubbish accumulations were identified as priority issues in all locations, with empty/derelict properties being chosen in six out of eight of the projects.
- 9 There were between 6 and 12 additional partner activities carried out per project which included 27 test purchases of alcohol, 84 mini health checks for residents, 255 home fire safety checks, 22 untidy sites tackled by planning colleagues, 107 empty homes were pursued by housing colleagues.
- 10 Throughout all the projects there was a low number of private housing cases reported, despite this being a priority in all locations. A private

housing survey was done in New Shildon to offer assistance to tenants, however there was a low interest shown.

The Keep Warm, Stay Safe initiative in Grange Villa improved 22 properties comprising 20 owner-occupiers and 2 let properties. This was funded by Public Health England with the £52,800 spend being used to improve the domestic heating systems and health and safety within the properties e.g provision of hand-rails, producing the anticipated outcome of contributing to health improvements for the residents.

- 11 Website statistics show there were a total of 773 page views, with 493 unique views, on the main CAT webpage in 2013. Positive press articles have been published for all projects and the CAT has remained high profile in Durham County News, Buzz and member briefings.
- 12 Establishing good links with residents, businesses and community groups in each area was vital to the success of each project. Initial resident meetings had a mixed attendance with an average of 17 residents attending each meeting. Drop-in sessions were linked in with local community events and between 13 and 50 residents attended sessions in each area. There were 84 health checks carried out at drop-in sessions across all projects.
- 13 At the end of each project partners were invited to give feedback and development suggestions at the final partner meeting. The feedback received was very positive on the joint working opportunities and the specific interventions that had taken place during each project. Community engagement was highlighted in 4 projects as an area which could be improved; however, it was noted that many agencies struggle with this in the locations chosen for the CAT projects.
- 14 The resident survey response returns were approximately 5% per area. Key findings were:
 - 73% of residents felt the issues identified at the residents meeting were appropriate for their community.
 - 56% of residents felt the Community Action Team made a difference to their area.
 - 81% of residents are now more inclined to bring to the council's attention issues that the Community Action Team tackled.
- 15 The landlord survey response returns were low, however some useful comments were received which have helped improve the programme.
- 16 The feedback from landlords and residents highlighted the following issues as barriers that prevented them from being able to quickly respond to specific issues identified by the CAT aimed at helping them to effectively maintain their properties:
 - a. Fly-tipping in back yards by people not connected to the property
 - b. residents moving rubbish between properties
 - c. bins going missing
 - d. cost of replacing refuse and recycling bins

- e. cost for landlords to dispose of tenant waste at household waste recycling centres
- f. cost of pest control
- g. landlords who don't live locally struggle to manage their property and tenants
- h. criminal damage to properties

Key findings from the summer review period 2014

- 17 From 30 June – 30 August 2014 the CAT undertook a period of review. A desktop review was carried out and five of the busiest project locations were revisited with partners on review walkabouts in: Horden, Coundon Grange/ Eldon Lane, South Moor, Grange Villa and New Shildon. The purpose was to look at the sustainability of the work carried out and address any ongoing issues.
- 18 In each of the five locations partners, elected members and community representatives welcomed the CAT team back to the area and were keen for further action to be taken. The number of housing and environmental issues found on each review walkabout was lower in each location than the initial walkabout at the start of each original project. However, in three locations there were still significant numbers of rubbish accumulations found.
- 19 Table 2 – 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
Horden	153	52	-66%
Coundon Grange/ Eldon Lane	61	45	-26%
South Moor	148	88	-41%
Grange Villa	126	35	-72%
New Shildon	56	19	-66%

- 20 A number of changes that have occurred in the previous two years that partners, landlords and agents report may have had an impact on the disposal of rubbish and led to an increase in the turnover of tenants in properties:
- a. change from weekly to bi-weekly bin and recycling collections,
 - b. increase in number of 2-bedroom empty properties following changes to the benefit systems,
 - c. increase in Council Tax to 150% for properties left empty longer than 6 months leading to landlords feeling pressured to occupy properties and allowing tenants to move into properties without reference checks,
 - d. tenants' being paid benefit money directly leading to some tenants moving frequently to gain financial benefit.
 - e. The current legal system does not encourage private tenants to come forward with disrepair issues as there is little security in

tenure. Anecdotal information suggests that tenants often move into sub-standard properties as this is the only type of property they can secure; landlords of these properties tend to do less initial checks on potential tenants.

- 21 The exit strategies were largely followed, however there remains a need for further monitoring of previous CAT project locations following exit.
- 22 Further review walkabouts are planned in January 2015 for the project areas that were not visited.

Next Steps

- 23 The Community Action Team has now drafted a programme for 2015-16 and will visit ten communities over this period, which may include revisits to 3 previous project areas though this remains under discussion.
- 24 The emphasis when choosing locations has changed to focus on areas of greater need rather than following a geographical route round the county. This is due to projects in the more deprived areas of the county providing a higher caseload.
- 25 New data available on percentage of empty properties in an area and percentage of private tenants in receipt of benefits in an area has been combined with health deprivation data and public health complaint data to create a dataset to determine future project locations.
- 26 The revisit projects will build on the original projects and aim to target resources further e.g. interventions may focus on specific properties where there has been a history of non-compliance or the top ten landlords. In addition previous areas will be revisited during scheduled review periods.
- 27 The barriers identified by landlords and residents will be given further consideration and may be taken forward through a focus group which is part of the 'Environment in Community' group.
- 28 During the programme the CAT has made new partner links with the council's Family Link team and Groundwork North East and Cumbria. It is anticipated that these new links will support the CAT when working with vulnerable families in the community and enable the CAT to leave an environmental legacy as part of the exit strategy in each location.

Recommendation

- 29 Members of the Committee are asked to note information contained within the report relating to the overview of the work of the CAT and the use of targeted interventions and comment accordingly.

Background Papers

None

Jennifer Jones, Senior Environmental Health Officer Tel: 03000 261006
Jennifer.jones@durham.gov.uk

Appendix 1: Implications

Finance – None

Staffing – None

Risk - None

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty – None

Accommodation - None

Crime and Disorder – None

Human Rights – None

Consultation – None

Procurement – None

Disability Issues – None

Legal Implications – None

Risk and Legal - None