

Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

6 March 2017



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

Joint Report of Lorraine O'Donnell, Director of Transformation and Partnerships and Jane Robinson, Corporate Director of Adult and Health Services

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide Members of the 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.

Background

- 2 The Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on the 10 November 2014 received an overview on the Community Action Team and the use of targeted interventions. Following that meeting the committee has received further updates on the work of the CAT with the last update provided to committee on 8 July 2015. It is therefore considered timely for the committee to receive a further update at the meeting on the 6 March 2017 and arrangements have been made for Kelly Gilmore-Craze, Senior Environmental Health Officer to attend the meeting and deliver a presentation focusing on:
 - data from the 2015/16 and 2016/17 programmes
 - our work with partners
 - feedback received from the communities involved
- 3 The CAT is a small and ambitious team consisting of members of the Environmental Health & Consumer Protection department who are responsible for delivering Community Action Schemes at identified locations within County Durham. They work alongside Planning officers, 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, working proactively to tackle local housing and environmental issues.

- 4 In February 2015, the CAT began a two-year work programme visiting identified degraded communities across County Durham. Time was allocated within the programme to review previous schemes. Locations were chosen geographically across the county against set criteria based on health deprivation, visual environmental degradation, commercial buildings, high level of private rents and where existing community groups were operating within the area.

Communities visited were:

2015/16

- Bishop Auckland Town,
- South Moor (revisit),
- Eldon & Coundon Grange (revisit),
- Blackhall Colliery,

2016/17

- Ferryhill South & Station,
- Shotton Colliery,
- Horden Central (revisit),
- Coundon & Leeholme, and in
- Easington Colliery (where the team is currently working)

This programme will end in March 2017.

- 5 In each location, an 8-10-week programme took place. Each initiative was divided into three phases:
- Engagement/Priority setting,
 - Action and Review, and
 - Exit/Feedback.

There were opportunities for the community to get involved through a residents' engagement event, 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, litter clearance, waste carrier licence checks, and talks to local schools. At the end of most projects, 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. A similar letter and survey was also sent to landlords.

Key findings from the 2015-2017 Programme

- 6 The team carried out a total of 1140 pieces of casework, which includes follow-up 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

161 legal notices served and 86 works in default were required where there was non-compliance with notices.

7 Table 1.1 – Comparison of casework in CAT project areas up to 5 April 2016

Location	Casework	Notices	Work In Default
Bishop Auckland Town	53	5	3
South Moor	61	27	7
Eldon & Coundon Grange	140	62	21
Blackhall Colliery	122	20	5
TOTAL - 2015-16	376	114	36

Table 1.2 – Comparison of casework in CAT project areas up to 24 December 2016

Location	Casework	Notices	Work In Default
Ferryhill South & Station	173	58	11
Shotton	77	7	3
Horden Central	336	101	33
Coundon & Leeholme	178	43	3
TOTAL - 2016-17	764	209	50

Table 1.3 – Percentage increase of casework in CAT project areas from 2015 to 24 December 2016

Year	Casework	Notices	Work In Default
TOTAL - 2015-16	376	114	36
TOTAL - 2016-17	764	209	50
% INCREASE	103%	83%	38%

- 8 As table 1.3 shows the CAT workload and output has increased significantly in the last two years. There are several reasons for this:
 - The CAT projects are constantly evolving and open to better ways of working;
 - Work is allocated to partners at the start of each project;
 - The CAT's 'no job is too big or too small' approach means all issues will be considered;
 - CAT are better able to identify and target communities that would benefit from intervention;
 - As the CAT's reputation builds partners & members of the public become more proactive in reporting issues.
- 9 Improving housing standards and removing rubbish accumulations were identified as priority issues in all locations, with empty/derelict properties being chosen in several of the projects.
- 10 There were a number additional partner activities carried out per project depending on the location which included test purchases of alcohol, mini health checks for residents, home fire safety checks, untidy sites tackled by planning colleagues, and empty homes were pursued by housing colleagues. Groundwork North East was also involved in working in most areas with communities to improve the immediate environment within the project area.
- 11 Positive press articles were published for all projects and the work of the CAT has found a 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 residents' meetings have where possible, been linked to existing community meetings, for example PACT meetings, while drop-in sessions were linked in with local community events.
- 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 remains an area that could be improved; however, it was noted that many agencies find this to be a challenge in the locations chosen for the CAT projects. There are a number of complicated reasons for this but is common in areas with a high tenant turn over- why do people want to invest in communities they may not be staying in for the long-term. Following the loss of heavy industry, lack of investment, and recent years of austerity, a lot of people in deprived North East towns and villages feel disenfranchised from 'the establishment'. Consequently, CAT and partner agencies can face considerable challenges when trying to engage with communities though this is no doubt an issue felt throughout various Council & agency Departments.
- 14 The resident and landlord survey response returns continue to be low, however we continue to seek views and some useful comments were received which have helped improve the programme.

- 15 Feedback from landlords and residents highlighted a number of barriers that prevented them from being able to quickly respond to specific issues identified by the CAT namely associated with refuse in yards:
- Fly-tipping in back yards by people not connected to the property;
 - Residents moving rubbish between properties;
 - Bins going missing;
 - Cost of replacing refuse & recycling bins;
 - Cost for landlords to dispose of tenant waste at household waste recycling centres;
 - Cost of pest control;
 - Landlords who don't live locally struggle to manage their property & tenants;
 - Criminal damage to properties.

Key findings from the summer review period 2016

- 16 From 18 July – 14 August 2016 and 03 – 22 January 2017 the CAT undertook a period of review. A desktop review (comparing in-house and partner service requests) was carried out and the busiest project locations were revisited: Coundon Grange & Eldon Lane, Blackhall Colliery, Ferryhill South & Station. The purpose was to look at the sustainability of the work carried out and address any ongoing issues.
- 17 The number of housing and environmental issues found on the review walkabout was significantly lower than identified in the initial walkabout at the start of the original project.
- 18 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
Coundon Grange & Eldon Lane	140	49	-65%
Blackhall Colliery	122	14	-60%
Ferryhill South & Station	173	29	-69%

- 19 The figures in Table 2.1 indicate that the work the CAT do is having lasting results in each area. The use of enforcement work in conjunction with community engagement is thought to provide a much-needed role of education along with a zero tolerance approach.

20 Table 2.2 – A breakdown of casework in each review area.

Location / Breakdown of work	Coundon Grange & Eldon Lane	Blackhall Colliery	Ferryhill South & Station
Food/Noxious Accumulations	21	5	11
Open Access	3	0	0
Drain Defects	5	0	3
Empty Properties	0		0
Other CAT cases	2	0	1
Wardens – inert accumulations	14	4	13
Street Scene Referrals	0	0	1
Clean and Green Referrals	1	2	0
Other referrals	3	3	0
Total	49	14	29

21 The exit strategies were largely followed however, there remains a need for further monitoring of previous CAT project locations following exit.

22 Policy changes at a local and national level continue to impact on the incidence, build-up, and disposal, of refuse, as well as the turnover of tenancies, and instability of the local housing markets:

- Change from weekly to fortnightly bin collections;
- Increase in number of two plus bedroom properties becoming empty following changes to the benefits system;
- 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;
- Tenants often feel afraid of reporting issues of disrepair due to the very real risks associated with the fear of eviction. Anecdotal information suggests that tenants often move into sub-standard dwellings, as this is the only type of property they can secure e.g. no deposit required. Landlords of these properties tend to do less initial checks on potential tenants knowing that in the majority of cases, the income from benefits payments are guaranteed and the likelihood of having to spend money on property maintenance is slim.

23 During review periods, it is evident that certain areas have far-reaching and complicated issues to contend with e.g. areas to the east coast of Durham such as Horden and Easington Colliery. It remains our hope that the CAT will make an impact while working in these areas while acknowledging that long-term improvements are likely to be reliant on policy changes at a strategic or even national level.

Next Steps

- 24 The Community Action Team will begin the 2017-18 programme in April 2017 visiting five new areas. The focus when choosing locations is 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 of work and partners proactively approaching the CAT highlighting areas of greater concern.
- 25 The barriers identified by landlords and residents are referred to senior management to raise awareness and open departmental discussions.
- 26 During the 2015 – 17 programme, the CAT continued to work with Groundwork North East and Cumbria who support and enable the CAT to leave an environmental legacy as part of the exit strategy in each location. This partnership will be extended into 2017 – 18.
- 27 As the CAT goes into its fifth year in operation it brings with it great partnership working capabilities and a wealth of data on some of the most deprived areas in County Durham. The CAT has a dual purpose- to make effective housing and environmental improvements on the ground, and to raise awareness among partners of areas where a greater strategic approach is needed in order to make long-term improvements.
- 28 As part of the newly formed Adult & Health Services, it is hoped that the CAT may have future opportunities to become involved in other aspects of wider “public health” work and develop even greater opportunity for partnership working.

Recommendations

- 29 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.
- 30 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 Papers

None

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Appendix 1: Implications

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

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

Risk – N/A

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty – N/A

Accommodation – N/A

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

Human Rights – N/A

Consultation – N/A

Procurement – N/A

Disability Issues – N/A

Legal Implications – Challenges to statutory notices served by CAT officers and partners