

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

**8 March 2018**



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

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

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**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 6 March 2017. It is therefore considered timely for the committee to receive a further update at the meeting on the 8 March 2018 and 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 Community Action Team in the previous year
- 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 Team 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

5 A further programme was then planned for the following year:

2017/18

- New Kyo
- Wheatley Hill
- Dawdon
- Chester-le-Street Central
- Spennymoor (where the team is currently working)

6 In each location, an 8-10-week programme took place. 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 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 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 usually 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 2015-2018 Programme

7 The team carried out a total of 2048 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 205 legal notices served and 93 works in default were required where there was non-compliance with notices.

8 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
<b>TOTAL - 2015-16</b>	<b>376</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>36</b>

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
<b>TOTAL - 2016-17</b>	<b>764</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>50</b>

Table 1.3 – Comparison of casework in CAT project areas up to 23 December 2017

Location	Casework	Notices	Work In Default
Easington Colliery	278	135	41

New Kyo	163	40	10
Wheatley Hill	93	37	8
Dawdon	189	37	5
Chester-le-Street	88	9	0
<b>TOTAL - 2017-18</b>	<b>811</b>	<b>258</b>	<b>64</b>

Table 1.4 - Percentage increase of casework in CAT project areas from 2015 to 24 December 2016

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

Table 1.5 - Percentage increase of casework in CAT project areas from 2016 to 23 December 2017

Year	Casework	Notices	Work In Default
<b>TOTAL - 2016-17</b>	<b>764</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>TOTAL - 2017-18</b>	<b>811</b>	<b>258</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>% INCREASE</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>28%</b>

- 9 As tables 1.4 and 1.5 show the CAT workload and output increased significantly between 2015-16 and 2016-17 and slightly in the past year. There are several reasons for this:
- There were 5 projects carried out in the year 2017-18, with only 4 projects compared the previous 2 years;
  - 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.
- 10 Removing rubbish accumulations was identified as a priority issue in all project locations, with improving housing standards and empty/derelict properties also being chosen in several of the projects.
  - 11 There were a number of 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.
  - 12 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.
  - 13 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.
  - 14 At the end of each project partners were invited to give feedback and development suggestions at the final partner meeting. The feedback received continues to be very positive on the joint working opportunities and the specific interventions that take place during each project. Community engagement remains an area that could be improved; and new approaches are being tried to attempt to combat this. It is, however, 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 it is common in areas with a high tenant turn over - people are reluctant to invest in communities where they may not be staying 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.
  - 15 New approaches have been tried in the past year to further engage with residents. These include:
    - a. distributing 'action letters' to residents at the start of the 'action' weeks to let them know the project priorities and how they can get involved;
    - b. continuing to try different approaches to holding 'drop-in' events for residents - such as inviting residents to join us on walkabouts or officers going along to popular community activities to speak to residents.

- c. offering to mark numbers on residents' bins to deter against bin theft and give residents more responsibility over their bins;
- d. offering to carry out rat surveys of individual yards to look for any evidence of pests or drainage defects; and
- e. offering to carry out dampness surveys of individual homes.

This door knocking work is usually done at the same time as the Fire and Rescue Service offer residents 'Safe and Wellbeing' checks of properties. The response from residents engaged in these activities has been positive – and advice about other environmental matters is often given as the activity is taking place.

It is acknowledged that the take up is still relatively small, but the activities do specifically target those in the geographical focus area. The best engagement through these activities was in Dawdon where 10% of households in the focus area either had their bins marked or drains surveyed. And at least 5 other residents talked to us about their concerns in the area, despite not wanting to take part in the activities we offered.

- 16 The resident and landlord survey response returns continue to be low, however we continue to seek views and some useful comments have been received which have helped improve the programme.
- 17 Feedback from landlords and residents has 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 review period 2017-2018**

- 18 From 31 July – 24 August 2017 and 2 – 21 January 2018 the CAT undertook a period of review. A desktop review (comparing in-house and partner service requests) was carried out and several project locations were revisited: Coundon, New Kyo and Wheatley Hill. Horden and Easington Colliery were not revisited as part of the review as other initiatives were taking place during the review periods. The purpose was to look at the sustainability of the work carried out and address any ongoing issues.
- 19 The number of housing and environmental issues found on the review walkabout was lower than identified in the initial walkabout at the start of the original project.

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

<b>Location</b>	<b>Original project 1<sup>st</sup> walkabout</b>	<b>Review walkabout</b>	<b>% Change</b>
Coundon	85	28	-67%
New Kyo	77	44	-42%
Wheatley Hill	53	25	-53%

- 21 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.
- 22 The exit strategies were largely followed however, there remains a need for further monitoring of previous CAT project locations following exit.
- 23 Any barriers identified by landlords and residents are referred to senior management to raise awareness and open departmental discussions.
- 24 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.
- 25 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**

- 26 The Community Action Team will begin the 2018-19 programme in April 2018 visiting four new areas. The number of initiatives per year has been reduced from five to four to allow more time in each area for project work and partner activities. It is anticipated that this will enable better resident engagement which will in turn, embed the enforcement work that takes place and lead to sustainable change.
- 27 The focus when choosing locations continues to be on areas of greater need rather than following a geographical route round the county. This is established through a dataset of deprivation, empty homes, median house price and percentage private rented in receipt of housing benefit. This data was scrutinised and combined with EHCP public health complaint data to establish the project locations.
- 28 Potential locations were excluded where the CAT has visited in the past year, there is less than 10% private rented in receipt of housing benefit, and where Public Health team data/intelligence show that the area is not environmentally degraded.
- 29 Two of the four areas chosen for the next programme take in selective licensing areas. These areas have not been visited by the Community Action Team in the past, despite ranking highly on our criteria for a number of years. The Community Action Team plans to work closely with the Private Housing Initiatives team whilst working in these areas.
- 30 During the 2015 – 18 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 2018 – 19.
- 31 As the CAT goes into its sixth 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.
- 32 As part of Adult & Health Services, it is hoped that the CAT may 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**

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**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