

Council - 9 January 2012

Communities and Partnerships –Portfolio Holder’s Report

The services in this portfolio are designed to promote safer, stronger communities, where local people are engaged with decisions that affect where they live and where council services respond to customer needs. I am pleased to report continuing strong and effective progress against these objectives.

We have enforced high standards in licensing to protect the public from harm. We have prosecuted private hire drivers “plying for hire” and often the consequential lack of motor insurance and we have tackled illegal street trading and drivers, driving private hire or hackney carriage vehicles whilst suspended. We have worked with the police to provide advice and guidance to pubs and clubs to improve compliance with the licensing regime at club premises and we are preparing for changes to the licensing regime for pubs and clubs which are expected in 2012.

The street pastors were launched in March 2011 and have been welcomed by the public and police. They are volunteers recruited through local churches and their role is to engage with local people and provide a caring, listening and calming influence to help make the town centre a safe and welcoming place at night.

We have worked with the police to intervene to prevent “doorstep crimes” saving residents from extortionate costs and a lot of distress. New legislation came into force in October prohibiting the sales of cigarettes and tobacco products from automatic vending machines and officers have been working to ensure that businesses are aware of the changes.

We are also working with the CAB, who in 2012 will be taking over the first line advice calls from the national service “Consumer Direct”, to help ensure that there is minimal loss of service to local residents during this transition.

We have successfully prosecuted a wide range of people and businesses whose unacceptable actions are damaging to local communities. This includes fly tipping, noise pollution, unhygienic food preparation, environmental hazards and underage sales of alcohol and cigarettes.

We launched a major publicity campaign on dog fouling. Over 500 posters and 31,000 leaflets have been distributed around the Borough including 25,000 delivered to every primary school child to take home and warn of the dangers of dog fouling.

The National Food Hygiene Rating Scheme was officially launched in Walsall on 1st April 2011 giving residents for the first time the ability to see whether the, shop, pub, takeaway or restaurant they use is taking the necessary steps to protect their health. So far over 500 of Walsall’s food businesses have been entered onto this database with 75% achieving satisfactory or better results. It is already clear that this information is driving businesses into providing better services, improving their profitability and reducing the health burden on society from food borne illness.

We continued to tackle anti social behaviour across the borough – one of the critical issues that have been highlighted by all the area partnerships as a priority. Effort has focused on:

- new night-time 'ASB tours', an effective tool in recognised hot-spot areas
- better information and case management with partners
- more training on parenting to support parents of young people involved in ASB
- situational improvements such as gates, barriers etc in some recognised hot-spots
- new arrangements to support vulnerable and repeat victims of ASB
- ordering of new surveillance cameras for area partnerships
- closer working between the ASB team, area managers and other enforcement staff.

Walsall's domestic abuse strategy 'A Time for Change' has been launched and forms a significant piece of work to reduce the incidence of domestic abuse improve the support for victims.

Area partnerships are now making a real difference to the lives of local people. We have increased our engagement with communities and voluntary and community groups to tackle local problems. Other service providers such as police, fire and housing are integral to this work. We are reviewing the Area Community Plans to ensure that they continue to be fit for purpose and up to date and help us identify successful solutions that can be applied in other parts of the borough.

We have worked hard to provide more information to residents using social media, for example, we have had dedicated 'Twitter Days' in each Area, highlighting all of the work Council services and partners undertake in an Area during just one day. This was a very popular means of communication, with up to 11,000 followers during one day.

The progress regarding dealing with scrap metal and metal thefts has resulted in a national on-line e-petition, which has over 45,000 signatures. We need 100,000 to get this issue debated in Parliament. There has been regional and national coverage of this problem, with a call for non-cash payments to be made. Walsall is working with local dealers and scrap yards to resolve the issue.

We have recently re-launched the Street Champions initiative, encouraging more residents to become the eyes and ears of the Council in reporting issues affecting their neighbourhood. This has been shown to be a very effective way of encouraging people who want to be more involved in tackling local problems.

Voluntary and community organisations provide a vital role in Walsall and the council has protected the core funded provided to these – in contrast with so many other local authorities. We have strengthened the way the council works with individual community organisations by clarifying lead responsibilities and establishing a single database. This means we are now better informed about the many ways in which support is provide to local groups and we are better placed to help. We have been carrying out fact finding visits to other local authorities to see how the voluntary and community sectors work in these areas and how they are supported and to learn from this experience. We will be using this best practice to inform how we support the sector in the future.

In the last 12 months The First Stop Shop has again seen heavy footfall with over 308,000 visitors. The team are currently working hard to implement the recently announced reforms to national blue badge (disabled parking) scheme. We are

reviewing existing procedures in order to improve the overall customer experience and minimise fraud.

The First Stop Express has been busy during the year, helping promote new initiatives and engage with residents and communities. In 2011 it has been used to help promote campaigns such as cancer screening, digital switch over, road safety and fostering and adoption, while also assisting West Midlands police, social care, and environmental services and anti social behaviour unit to meet and consult with residents on a variety of issues and topics.

The contact centre answered over 268,000 calls in the last year. We have improved the service by co-locating the adult services initial response team, adding more services so customers need to make fewer calls, and introducing a new call back service for callers unable to get through at peak times which has helped in significantly reducing abandoned call rates.

Councillor Ali
Cabinet Member for Communities and Partnerships