

Council - 7 January 2013

Public Protection –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.

The work of the Environmental Health Service has continued to focus on its two major areas of concern. Firstly the impact on amenity and health from environmental hazards such as waste, fly tipping, pests, stray dogs and noise. The service has actively pursued those whose behaviour brings misery to the lives of others and indeed the wider community. Prosecutions for fly tipping and noise have been brought before the court, seizures of noise equipment undertaken and litter patrols arranged resulting in the issue of Fixed Penalty Notices. An Environment Day in Walsall Town Centre was organised during which over 600 people were engaged on waste related issues. This was a great success and paved the way for a new Litter Action Plan to reinvigorate the work of the Services involved.

The second aspect is the protection of health through the regulation of food, water, the working environment and animal welfare. Whilst the service continues to educate and coach businesses there have been increasingly frequent occasions where emergency measures have been required to close businesses or prohibit the use of equipment in order to protect public health. The service has continued to develop strong links with colleagues in Public Health and the PCT through initiatives such as Stoptober, Every Contact Counts, Healthy Retailer Award, and the Tobacco Service Level Agreement. It is anticipated that as Public Health join the Local Authority this relationship will develop further adding extra value to the work of both and having greater impact on the health of those living and working in Walsall.

We have continued to prosecute private hire drivers “plying for hire” and often the consequential lack of motor insurance and we have tackled illegal street trading and drivers, driving licensed 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 and we are preparing for changes to the licensing regime for pubs and clubs which are expected in 2012. A key change to the legislation has enabled us to suspend the licence of any premises licence holder who fails to pay the annual fee. This has resulted in a significant improvement in receipt of payments on time and the recovery of all fees due.

The street pastors, that were launched in March 2011, have gone from strength to strength, recruiting more volunteers, enabling them to be out supporting people on more nights.

Summer 2012 saw a significant increase in the number of doorstep crimes and distraction burglaries. We have worked with the police to intervene to prevent “doorstep crimes” saving residents from extortionate costs and a lot of distress. This action is followed up with support visits to any residents who have been affected and awareness campaigns in the neighbourhoods and through all forms of media.

Under age sales of products, particularly alcohol and tobacco continue to be a problem area to which officers give a high priority both in terms of advisory visits to business, enforcement operations and actions..

Officers have also responded to emerging issues. In 2012, this included a problem with the strength of bulbs in sunbeds which has potential long term impacts on the health of users, particularly with the increase in popularity of these products. This work was undertaken in conjunction with the support of Public Health officers in the NHS alongside environmental health colleagues. As well as visiting many private operators to check for compliance, officers worked closely with the authority’s leisure services team to ensure those sunbeds in council operated facilities are safe.

There has been an increase in the value of counterfeit goods offered for sale in the borough and the service has taken part in a regional project to tackle this. As usual, the latest films are to be found on sale when they are only just released for cinema viewing and the latest “on trend” products are to be found on the market, currently this is “Dr Dre” headphones. There has also been an increase in counterfeit goods being offered for sale on the internet which has presented challenges for officers to investigate.

Last November saw the election of a Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC). The Safer Walsall Partnership already has a number of initiatives in place which fit well with the PCC's agenda and we will work with him to ensure the Borough of Walsall remains a safe place for all. Our Community Safety priorities for this year are reflected in the Borough's Community Safety Plan as:-

- Priority 1: Tackle Violent Crime - specific focus on Domestic Abuse, Town Centre Violence and Serious Youth Violence
- Priority 2: Tackle Anti-social Behaviour
- Priority 3: Address Harm caused by Drugs and Alcohol Misuse
- Priority 4: Community – specific focus on Counter Terrorism, Community Cohesion and Public Perceptions
- Priority 5: Tackle Serious Acquisitive Crime – specific focus on reducing Domestic Burglary

Priority 6: Reduce re offending – a cross cutting theme across all other priorities

Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour in the Borough is a top priority and we are developing through the SWP more effective and efficient ways of doing this by working together across agencies, the Police, Walsall Council and Walsall Housing Group. This work includes discussions we are progressing with all Registered Social Landlords' to establish if we can deliver service improvements to those reporting incidents and reduce cost on the public purse at the same time.

The Government has recently published a draft Bill on the future management of anti-social behaviour. The draft Bill takes forward measures to:

- focus the response to anti-social behaviour on the needs of victims
- empower communities to get involved in tackling anti-social behaviour
- ensure professionals can protect the public quickly through faster, more effective powers and proposals to speed up the eviction of the most anti-social tenants
- focus on long-term solutions.

The SWP has established a "Task and Finish" group across partner agencies which is helping prepare for the future changes in ASB management whilst also driving local solutions through pilot work.

Our Community Safety Service, working with police and other partners, responded well to the threat posed by the English Defence League demonstration in September. Work to further enhance community cohesion continues through a range of mechanisms including the Borough's Multi-Faith Forum which has been further supported this year by the introduction of a Faith Development Worker.

A number of organisations in Walsall have been actively working together over the past 18 months to tackle the issues of scrap metal trading. These issues bring considerable problems to Walsall ranging from the theft of metal to sell as scrap to the blighting of residential areas where scrap metal is collected and stored.

Our pro-active approach together with changes in national legislation has resulted in scrap metal thefts reducing by over 50% in Walsall, however the problems associated with rogue metal traders are still significant.

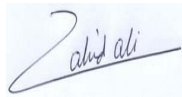
Activities within Area Partnerships tackling scrap metal problems across the Borough are now being focussed along three new priorities for future work:

1. Implementing partnership-led enforcement activity against rogue metal dealers.
2. Supporting the responsible scrap metal trade.
3. Improving support for residents and businesses affected by illegal scrap metal trading.

Under these revised priorities, the Area Plans have been refreshed taking into consideration changes in legislation. It is likely that as legislation gives more power to enforcement agencies to prosecute criminal activity around scrap metal dealing, this work will focus more on the anti-social activities of rouge scrap metal trading.

Finally Safer Walsall Partnership completed in 2012 its first Domestic Homicide Review (DHR). This work was deemed to be an example of effective practice by the Home Office and, as a result, other Community Safety Partnerships across the country have contacted Walsall Council for guidance on their reviews. At the time of writing, the Partnership is reviewing a further two homicides and at a strategic level, is involved in the development of a regional resource hub to support the delivery of reviews across the West Midlands.

The number one priority for local residents is being able to feel safe in their home and in their neighbourhood. The range of services that come under the portfolio of Public Protection have been working hard to address local concerns and make Walsall a better and safer place.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Zahid Ali". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a light blue horizontal line.

Councillor Zahid Ali
Cabinet Member for Public Protection

21 December 2012