

Commercial in Confidence



INVESTORS IN  
PEOPLE UK

Investors in People  
Post Recognition Review

**EAST HERTS COUNCIL**

on behalf of



**Assessor:** Jeannette Stanley  
**Last date on-site:** 10 April 2008

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This report confirms the verbal feedback given to East Herts Council (EHC) on 10 April 2008, following an analysis of evidence gathered during on-site interviews as well as a review of the documents submitted for its first post-recognition Investors in People (IIP) review; the Council was first recognised in January in 2005. EHC currently employs 360 people under the managerial leadership of its Chief Executive, three Directors and 12 Heads of Service.

Since the 2005 recognition EHC has undergone a significant amount of change including strategic management and structural changes. A restructure of all Heads of Service positions has also been conducted as part of the change management process to develop competency and consistency within the Council. To develop effective leadership and management capability all Directors and Heads of Service have taken part or are still undergoing the *Excellence through Leadership* development programme. Additionally EHC is undergoing a cultural change with a view to becoming more customer-focused to ensure the Council continues to work towards being an Excellent Authority.

It is only fair to state that at this stage of the organisation's evolution insufficient time has passed for the new structure to have become fully embedded; gaps have been identified and pockets of inconsistencies exist where cultural matters still need to be addressed. As result EHC has temporarily fallen below the IIP Standard's requirements due to these inconsistencies and the retaining recognition process has been entered to allow the Council sufficient time to return to the Standard. The areas of weakness identified were relative to five indicators that in turn have an impact on evidence supporting other indicators. The evidence supporting the Standard is outlined within the body of this report.

Based on both verbal and written feedback EHC is required to develop an action plan to address the areas in which it does not meet the Standard. The action plan should clearly set out what actions will be taken by EHC with specific, measurable, achievable and time-bound milestones identified, to be approved by the assessor and the Regional Recognition Panel by 10 July 2008.

Following its approval the action plan should be implemented. Periodic review visits are required to monitor achievements of the action plan timed to the expected achievements of the milestones and to be no longer than 12 months following the last date on-site.

## 2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The summary below represents the IIP findings within the context of identified strengths and areas for development. I was extremely impressed by the Chief Executive's commitment to continuous improvement, openness and transparency; many areas of good and excellent practice were noted.

### Key strengths

- Strong leadership and clarity of direction provided by the Chief Executive - welcomed by employees
- Extremely robust corporate planning, monitoring and review mechanisms for corporate performance and service delivery
- A top-level commitment to openness and transparency e.g. the Chief Executive's open-door sessions
- A commitment to developing leadership and management capability including the introduction of the *Excellence through Leadership* Development Programme
- The development and introduction of HOST networking
- *Team Brief* feedback mechanism
- The use of quality circles, transformer groups and project teams to further encourage employee involvement
- An emerging culture of empowerment
- A strong team ethos in many areas supported by a commitment to providing high-quality customer service
- Regular staff updates and full staff briefings
- Regular staff surveys
- The introduction of flexible working

### Areas for development

The main areas for the Council to focus its attention are in connection with developing and supporting middle management capability in line with the cultural changes and restructure. Some of the middle management tier perceive they are without the necessary resources, including time, to manage and develop their teams in a consistently effective manner. These managers felt the impact of role changes, staff shortages, long-term sickness and other work-related pressures have all affected their ability to provide supportive actions for their teams, resulting in a fragmentation of communication, disruption of team meetings and an inconsistent application of the PDRS process. Although interim managers have been bought in to try to resolve these pressures.

### Actions required

Some managers need to proactively involve people when agreeing team and individual objectives at a local level and at a level appropriate to their role in the development and achievement of service / departmental plans. The reinstatement of regular team meetings, feedback on individual contributions

and an effective application of the PDRS scheme could help address this issue (indicators 1 and 6 not met)

Some managers need to demonstrate they actively support and are committed to the PDRS process to establish and take ownership of team learning needs and development plans. (indicator 2 not met)

Some managers also need to be able to explain how the development plans when implemented will achieve team and organisational objectives and how they will measure the impact on team and corporate performance. (indicator 9 not met)

It is important that managers are directly involved in the planning and evaluation process in terms of training and development. A consistent application of the PDRS scheme, coupled with meaningful discussions during these occasions could help to address this matter.

It is also important that a consistent approach is adopted by line-managers when it comes to evaluating learning outcomes from their staffs' development and reviewing their impact on team performance. Currently there is an over reliance on the HR department to evaluate learning outcomes at team / departmental levels. (indicator 9 not met)

Additionally, managers need to demonstrate they have created a culture at a local level of continuous improvement, in which people are encouraged and where everyone receives the support, learning and development they need to improve their own and others' performance. (indicator 3 not met)

Supportive line-management, together with face to face team briefings, should directly link corporate goals to team level which should then be further devolved to the individual level through the PDRS and one-to-ones.

### **3 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY**

As this was the Council's first review against the current IIP Standard it was agreed that the review objectives would be to:

- Compare EHC with all evidence requirements of the IIP Standard
- Identify and provide feedback and encouragement of good practice, as well as any opportunities for continuous improvement that would be helpful to the Council and its people
- To seek feedback from people below senior management level on their development needs (client request)

It was agreed that I would gather evidence through:

- 1:1 interviews
- Group interviews
- Examination of relevant documents
- Visits to Hertford, Bishops Stortford and Buntingford

## 4 GENERAL FINDINGS RELATING TO THE IIP PRINCIPLES

### Principle 1 Developing strategies to improve the performance of the organisation

#### ***Strategies for improving performance***

#### ***Strategies for learning and development***

#### ***Strategies for managing people***

#### ***Strategies for leadership and management***

#### **Comments**

There is without doubt a genuine commitment to improve and enhance the performance of EHC in line with its overriding aim to *improve the quality of people's lives and preserve all that is best in East Herts*. Discussions with members of the Corporate Management Team (CMT) and Heads of Services revealed that the Council has developed a number of strategies in order to achieve its aims, underpinned by measurable objectives and a raft of performance indicators which are clearly defined within the East Herts Council CPA Improvement Plan, the Corporate Strategic Plan and all Service Plans. The planning cycle is led by the Members, Chief Executive and the senior management team and reflects the activities of the Council setting out budget requirements to meet service delivery.

EHC has also developed a series of extremely comprehensive monitoring and review processes within its planning that include information arising from self-assessments, performance management, as well as external audits. Regular CMT, SMG and DMG meetings ensure that Heads of Service pick up on priorities and actions across the Council, as a whole. The plans are regularly reviewed at corporate level to assess actual performance against established goals and targets. The depth of process was impressive.

The strategic plans are communicated and shared with staff to ensure people are clear about what the Council is aiming to improve and realise its vision. This is achieved through a wide range of consultations with staff at all levels including UNISON. Major consultation exercises also take place with the public, external agencies, stakeholders and strategic partners to ensure that all planning undertaken is in line with the Council's vision and that corporate aims reflect local needs. Regular meetings at Council, SMG, DMG and within service sections contribute to the development of EHC's plans.

The Council's *Team Brief* provides a cascade of decisions from CMT meetings on a monthly basis to DMT (Departmental Team Meetings) and departmental news is added. Heads of Service are expected to continue the cascade to middle managers. Team "briefers" are instructed to conduct their briefings face to face with staff to incorporate local matters and to include opportunities for people to feed back. There were areas within the Council that demonstrated this was consistently occurring and people were able to

confirm they are directly involved in discussing and agreeing corporate and team objectives.

However, within some areas the communication process has become fragmented and people were unable to confirm that they are actively included in team discussions or directly involved in the decision making process at a local level that is appropriate to their role. Consequently in those areas interviewees were unable to confirm they are encouraged to contribute ideas to improve their own and others' performance; neither did they believe their managers are genuinely committed to making sure this happens or that everyone receives appropriate support and development.

Discussions with the Chief Executive revealed that it is people who clearly make a difference by translating a commitment to continuous improvement into actions which requires having "*The right people in the right place as it's through people that we'll deliver*". Following the Council's major restructure all Directors and Heads of Service have taken part or are still taking part in the *Excellence through Leadership* Development Programme to support the change management process, as well as the necessary cultural changes in terms of behaviours required to both modernise the Council and to assure effective leadership and management capability. The cycle of corporate and senior management meetings actively promote and support the continuous improvement cycle.

The Corporate Training Plan is developed annually and circulated throughout the Council communicating opportunities for developing leadership and management skills, personal development, maintenance and mandatory training such as Health & Safety, for examples. Resources to support the Council's learning and development plans are identified and provided both centrally and within the directorates. It has been recognised and is currently being addressed; that accurate, monthly financial reports could be used to better effect for providing a clearer understanding of how resources are being invested in staff development to target the budget at actions that will have the most impact from a finite set of resources.

It is understood that the PDRS process is expected to inform and drive corporate and team development objectives plus individual learning and development plans. There was much evidence to demonstrate that in some areas of the Council excellent line-management is provided with regular, meaningful PDRS taking place. In these areas people were able to explain how they are directly involved in agreeing objectives for learning alongside anticipated improvements in performance. However, pockets exist where interviewees were unable to confirm they are given the opportunity to review their performance, discuss their learning needs and agree future objectives owing to insufficient time, pressures of work and lack of support. Some stated that would appreciate more commitment from their managers on a more regular basis.

## **Principle 2 Taking action to improve the performance of the organisation**

*The effectiveness of leadership and management*

*Recognising and valuing contribution*

*Encouraging ownership and responsibility*

*The effectiveness of learning and development*

### **Comments**

Interviewees were extremely positive in their responses to questions about the leadership within the Council; the Chief Executive is believed to be a particularly effective role model in terms of her commitment and enthusiasm for openness and transparency. The introduction of surgeries, full staff briefings and open-door policy are welcomed and valued. People also stated there is now a greater clarity of direction coupled with a commitment to developing management capability.

The top-level commitment is believed to have had a positive impact on workforce stability; for example, section heads were able to confirm that significant improvements in both morale and performance have been achieved where the new organisation's structure has become fully embedded. Additionally, the HOS group is functioning more cohesively, has grown in confidence and inconsistencies in management practice have been eliminated at meetings between Heads of Service resulting in a stronger integrated approach to service planning.

Discussions with the Chief Executive and members of the SMG revealed a clear understanding that the Council's success depends on the time, efforts and ideas that its people put in to helping deliver its services and achieve its objectives. To meet the IIP evidence requirements people need to feel that what they do both makes a positive difference and are appreciated by their manager. Employee awards, professional and career development opportunities, effective line-management support, constructive feedback provided in meetings, PDRS, emails and informal discussions were put forward demonstrating recognition occurs and that reward methods certainly exist.

However, evidence to meet this particular area of the Standard was patchy. Cultural matters still need to be addressed to ensure that what people individually contribute is appreciated and they are able to take part in the decision making process at a level appropriate to their role, such as through qualitative PDRS discussions, team meetings and one-to-ones. Employees need to have the opportunity to discuss and review individual and team performance, as well as evaluate learning and development. Although line-managers **want** to be thorough in terms of people management, lack of time, pressures of work and interim-management posts have impacted on how EHC currently meets IIP requirements.



In terms of learning and development, people were able to confirm that their basic training needs are met for essential skills and that mandatory training is taken very seriously within EHC, for example the induction programme for new employees involves both an introduction to the Council, as well as Health & Safety awareness. Induction at the local level is more informal. For those who undergo a change of role such as taking on management responsibilities support is provided in terms of appraisal skills and interview techniques. The first phase of the *Excellence through Leadership* programme has been part-evaluated and has already informed improvements for the next cohort. Generally, most interviewees recognised that the HR department consistently encourages people to develop themselves.

Examples of effective learning and development include Professional CPD courses, NVQ qualifications, WRAP accredited courses, PACE interviewing skills, acting-management posts, Train the Trainer, Rising Stars, mentoring, coaching and shadowing opportunities to name but a few of the many learning activities necessary for this complex and diverse organisation. Limited budget, lack of encouragement and time constraints were mentioned as barriers to effective learning and development on a number of occasions. Training actions could be better monitored and recorded in some local areas and will help embed the continuous development culture.

### **Principle 3 Evaluating the impact on the performance of the organisation**

#### ***The impact of learning and development on performance Continuous improvement of the approach to managing and developing people***

#### **Comments**

EHC measures its performance through a series of indicators defined within the performance management process, to include a review of actual performance against that projected. Risk management strategies are implemented and rigorously monitored. Council Members, the Chief Executive and Directors constantly monitor the progress of the corporate plan, as do the Heads of Services in terms of service area plans.

A developing culture of continuous improvement and empowerment is emerging. People were able to confirm that the Council is noticeably more customer-focused, is moving forward and that morale and working practices are improving. The PDRS scheme at the time of the IIP assessment was under review to both streamline the process and to better assist the service planning process. SMARTer objectives could tighten the process even further, as well as a need for greater consistency and improved quality of delivery.

The potential benefits of the Council's investment in the *Excellence through Leadership* programme are yet to be fully realised as the second phase of the programme is still currently underway. Already the SMG is more cohesive, is confident in generating improvements in business relationships across the board. A review of the first phase has effectively informed changes for improving the second phase of the programme which has been opened up to include aspiring Heads of Service.

In terms of evaluation at the team and individual levels, it was established that training and development may be evaluated within departments when goals are reviewed and reset. There is also formal three-part evaluation process of training and development in place. Almost all of those interviewed stated that, when used, the pre-training and evaluation form is completed jointly between themselves and their respective line-manager at the pre-training stage. There were too many inconsistencies to demonstrate line-management involvement at stages 2 and 3 to show that learning outcomes are consistently evaluated, applied in practice and or that the development opportunity made a difference, thus helping managers to establish a valuable return on their training budget.

Neither did there appear to be an effective, overall organisational assessment or evaluation of the impact of development actions; based on knowledge, skills and behaviours of staff. This could come from the results of the review and analysis of the evaluation forms, were they to be conducted fully within department, as well as at organisational levels. Albeit there is evidence of senior managers' understanding of the broad costs as an element of the training budget is devolved to the directorates. It is also important to understand evaluation as a method of improving communication.

Finally, EHC has made much progress in a relatively short period of time, given the significant amount of strategic leadership and structural changes. I understand that changes can be very difficult in such a diverse and complex organisation where much is outside the leadership's and management's control when it comes to planning and budgeting in terms of people management. However, although these matters still need to be fully resolved, the Chief Executive has laid a solid foundation on which to continuously improve performance as well as move the Council forward.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

Having conducted the review in accordance with IIP UK and The Assessment Network's guidelines I confirm that East Herts Council has temporarily slipped below the Investor in People requirements and has entered the Retaining Recognition process for not consistently meeting the IIP standards in all areas.

## **6 NEXT REVIEW**

As previously outlined the Council is required to develop an action plan to address the areas in which it does not meet the Standard. The action plan is to be approved by the assessor and the Regional Recognition Panel no later

than 10 July 2008, and a progress review of the action plan should take place no later than 10 April 2009.

## **7 QUALITY ASSURANCE**

The Assessment Network Ltd is responsible for the quality assurance of this assessment and will invite a representative from East Herts Council to take part in a quality assurance questionnaire. The questionnaire was devised by IIP UK with the objective of receiving client feedback in order to provide a consistent approach to the assessment and recognition process. Further details will be supplied by The Assessment Network in due course.

*My thanks go to EHC for the accommodation kindly provided over the review visits. Thanks too go to all those who took part in the interviews for their openness and honesty. Special thanks go to Helen and Peter in HR for all their efforts to ensure a trouble-free assessment.*

*Jeannette Stanley, IIP Assessor, 20 April 2008*