

## Community Projects Team Restructure

The Community Projects Team has already expressed concern (email 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2011) over the fact that “the part time nature of the new posts does not give enough officer time to deliver on the engagement/ partnership element of the work.” The restructure and reduction in FTE to 50% does indeed raise issues about the capacity of the team to deliver corporate priorities.

### 1. Consultation/Engagement

Capacity to deliver is particularly relevant to the new post of Engagement and Partnerships Officer (consultation) where it is proposed to absorb many of the tasks from the current post of Performance & Improvement Coordinator. The proposal is to add a substantial proportion of tasks from a deleted post to a post which retains core tasks from under the previous structure. This raises questions about capacity which are further compounded by the fact that the new post will be at 50% FTE.

One of the council’s short and medium term (i.e. by 2013) outcomes is to **undertake a review of Community Engagement to enhance opportunities for community involvement and engagement with the council.**

The above outcome is the responsibility of the Task and Finish Group on Public and Community Engagement guided by the Community Projects Team Leader. The T & F Group has not completed its work. Discussions continue on what will replace Community Voice which was one of the main ways the council consulted and engaged with residents in each of the five towns in the district. It would appear to be premature to reduce all three Engagement and Partnerships posts to 50% FTE until decisions have been reached as to how the council intends to engage with local residents. Have the views of members of the T & F Group been obtained on the proposed restructuring of the team specifically responsible for public and community engagement?

How will a team of three part time officers help deliver the corporate short/medium term outcome (i.e. by 2013) of **enabling the local community to influence decisions, to assist in the delivery of services?**

## **2. Local Strategic Partnership**

The importance of sport and physical activity will be highlighted in the year of the Olympics. Residents' expectations regarding the council's contribution to sport will inevitably be raised over the next twelve months. A commitment has already been made to work with the community sports network and hold a second Sports Awards event in 2012. A sports summit and a festival focussing on disabled sports are also planned to take place over the next twelve months. Promotion of sport and supporting the community sports network, albeit with a "light touch," will make demands on the resources of the Community Projects Team.

Working with partners such as Herts Sports Partnership clearly remains a priority for the council which has a longer term (i.e. by 2015) outcome **to work with our LSP partners to provide efficient, effective and sustainable services which meet identified local needs.**

The team will still have a significant partnership role to play following a review of the LSP structure with its new focus on the three priorities of vulnerable people, economic development and community safety.

## **3. Localism**

The Government has placed the idea of Localism at the heart of its agenda. The Localism Bill will radically change the face of community consultation.

The Localism Bill creates new rights to challenge the way local services are provided, purchase important community assets and to create neighbourhood plans. Towns, villages and neighbourhoods will have more say about what happens on their patch. Neighbourhood planning groups will need to find out what local people really think if their neighbourhood plans and development orders are to truly represent their communities.

Under *Leading the way, working together*, a longer term (i.e. by 2015) corporate outcome is **to continue to work to transfer management of community assets such as community centres to local people as opportunities arise.**

The Planning Policy Team leads on policy around localism, However, there may be occasions when additional resources will be required to consult residents on specific issues.

#### **4. New Homes Bonus and Community Infrastructure Levy**

A key part of the localism agenda is the New Homes Bonus and the Community Infrastructure Levy. A report on the new homes bonus and the community infrastructure levy (CIL) was approved by the local development framework executive panel on 7 July 2011

Council agreed <http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/index.jsp?articleid=24683> that one quarter of the New Home Bonus will be allocated to projects in communities where the new homes are built, such as improving playgrounds or parks. Apart from skills in funding and consultation, the Community Projects Team has developed expertise in the development and funding of play areas and sports facilities.

The Government expects local councillors to work closely with their communities – and in particular the neighbourhoods most affected by housing growth – to understand their priorities for investment and to communicate how the money will be spent and the benefits it will bring.

A corporate outcome in the short and medium term (i.e. by 2013) is to **“improve democratic engagement by supporting and developing the skills and knowledge of local councillors as democratic champions and community leaders.”**

Is it intended that the Democratic Services Team will be exclusively responsible for achieving this outcome? Will the Democratic Service role of identifying, implementing and delivering Member development/training programmes be enlarged to take on work resulting from the distribution of the New Homes Bonus? The report to the LDF Executive Panel acknowledged that defining what neighbourhood wishes are, and how the New Homes Bonus might be allocated in accordance with these wishes will *“require a lot of detailed ongoing work.”* Is the Community Projects Team expected to contribute to this important work of helping councillors understand the needs of their communities?

## **5. Transport**

Transport has not been specifically mentioned in any of the new job descriptions. Currently work on transport subsidies and community transport is undertaken by the Community Projects Team. There are reasons to believe that in the next year or so, the issue of rural transport will become increasingly important.

The Executive Member for Planning Policy and Economic Development transport and planning has indicated that that rural transport will be a priority in the near future. It has been suggested that efficiencies resulting from a reassessment of bus subsidies be used to develop a rural transport hub within the district.

A short and medium term (i.e. by 2013) outcome under Corporate Priority - Pride in East Herts is to develop a practicable and pragmatic Transport Strategy and action plan. The Parking Manager in conjunction with the Parking and Transport Task and Finish Group is responsible for the development of the Transport strategy. However, will the community projects team have any responsibility for the *implementation* of the action plan? If so, this needs to be recognised in the restructure.

At this year's rural conference, consultation by the Parking and Transport Task and Finish Group revealed that a significant majority regarded improved public transport as a priority outcome and many delegates made it their top priority. I understand that the emerging position from the work of the Task & Finish Group is that there is a concern and need for improved public transport, particularly among our rural communities in particular. As with the engagement T & F Group, should the Transport and Parking T & F Group be allowed to finish its work before a decision is made to reduce the capacity of the team?

## **6. Conclusion**

The contribution of the community projects team to council priorities is highlighted by the fact that two Task & Finish Groups are currently examining work that is central to the role of the team or where the team makes a significant contribution. A final decision on the restructure should if possible await the final report of both T & F groups.

The team recently lost two members of staff and has been reduced from six to three and half FTE i.e. a reduction of nearly 50%. Team members responded positively to this decrease in resources and have continued to ensure that minority groups and the vulnerable have access to council services. *A further reduction in FTE hours on a scale of 50% is unrealistic at a time when the demands on the team are likely to increase as a result of localism, implementation of the council's engagement and transport strategies and the Olympics.*

Under the proposed restructure the achievement of the council's short and long term outcomes for consultation/ engagement will present a real challenge for three part time officers. The possibility that the team may be required to help deliver the corporate outcome of the improvement of democratic engagement (particularly regarding localism and the allocation of the New Homes Bonus) should be considered.

It seems likely that the work of the team may remain linked in some way *to all of the short/medium and long term outcomes* of one of the five corporate priorities, ***Leading the way, working together***. [www.eastherts.gov.uk/index.jsp?articleid=11550](http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/index.jsp?articleid=11550)  
The number of democratic services and community engagement staff *directly* responsible for delivering responsible community leadership outcomes is currently ten i.e. 2.9% of the workforce of 350. The restructure will result in a reduction to 7.5 staff. In effect, 2.1% of the workforce will be expected to deliver one out of five corporate priorities. Similarly, I expect that a tiny proportion of staff will be required to not only co-ordinate the council's contribution to the LSP, but also help deliver a substantial part one of the three LSP priorities.

***Leading the way, working together*** focuses on delivering responsible community leadership that engages with our partners and the public. Whilst colleagues from across the council contribute towards responsible community leadership, the Community Projects Team plays a major part in the delivery of this priority. Further explanation as to how a depleted team of part time officers will support the delivery of a key corporate priority would be helpful.

**V Belinis – Endorsed by the Community Projects Team**

**14<sup>th</sup> Oct 2011**