

28 January 2015	ITEM: 21 (ii)
Council	
Cabinet Member Report - Communities	
Report of: Councillor Richard Speight	
This report is public.	

I am pleased to present my first report to Council as Portfolio Holder for Communities. A role that involves responsibility for a wide range of services including community development, equality and diversity, and welfare reform. All of these services share the community strategy objective for building pride, responsibility and respect to create safer communities.

I am very pleased with all we have achieved over the last year and will highlight the achievements I feel are most notable and of which I am most proud, not least given the expectations for these services to deliver so much on extremely restricted budgets.

My report is divided into three broad headings:

- Community Development
- Equality and Diversity
- Welfare Reform

1. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The aim of this service is to help ensure that communities in Thurrock are fully able to develop their skills and confidence to improve local life. This may be through taking voluntary action in a neighbourhood, developing a service to respond to local needs or engaging residents in decision-making.

Invariably, much of the team's work depends on a close relationship with the voluntary, community and faith sector as conduits into communities.

Thurrock has a strong CVS and this relationship underpins positive communication between communities and the Council to help ensure the Council considers its impact on communities and organisations in all we do. Our commitment to working with partners, especially the voluntary sector and community sector, has increasing significance and is fundamental to achieving our collective aspirations for the Borough and building resilient communities through these times of increasing demand and decreasing resource.

This year the team have co-ordinated the Council's response to the Public Service Social Value Act 2012 (PSSVA) ensuring that our commissioning activities maximise the community benefit that we can realise. Working with the community and voluntary sector through their development, the Council's first social values framework, and an accompanying Commissioning, Procurement and Grant Funding Strategy with the Voluntary Community and Faith Sector, were each

adopted by Cabinet in November 2014.

The Community Development and Equalities team has previously overseen the delivery of the Voluntary Sector Development Fund which is the management of grants to the voluntary sector. The total value of the fund is £432,600. In July 2013 Thurrock CVS took on the role of administering the fund in recognising their role in being best placed to develop the sector, and to make the best investment decisions in partnership with the Council.

This year's budget discussions have highlighted the need for the Council to maintain its investment into the Voluntary Sector Development Fund in 2015/16, however grant funding in 2016/17 is proposed to be reduced by £75,000 with a further reduction of £25,000 into 2017/18. The Council's decision to delay savings to the voluntary sector reflects our recognition of the important role local organisations play in supporting some of our most vulnerable residents.

The savings proposal to Cabinet in July 2014 also presented an overall reduction of £1.3m in voluntary sector grants and contracts from 2015/16-17/18.

At a special meeting of Corporate Overview and Scrutiny in October 2014 the voluntary sector presented an alternative budget proposal where a number of options were highlighted with the purpose of reducing the scale and impact of Council savings overall. This has led to a reduction in proposals impacting on the sector by £249,000. In addition a number of recommendations were made to enable a stronger working partnership for the future. These are being worked through via the Joint Strategic Forum – a partnership with the voluntary sector.

Strong relationships must underpin our work with communities – if we are to truly encourage people to take action to improve their own lives, they must feel confident that the Council is there to support and recognise this effort. Last year we evaluated our approach to the Compact with Braintree's Compact using the East of England Peer Review. The Compact has continued to frame a number of conversations around how we work with communities over the last year – not least in relation to one of the most exciting initiatives I am pleased to be responsible for - Community Hubs.

The initial success of South Ockendon Community Hub has spurred a partnership between the Council, voluntary sector and communities to implement a roll out programme of Community Hubs.

It is easy to revert to thinking about buildings when we speak of Hubs but I want to use this opportunity to stress the role of Hubs as enablers. At one level, Hubs will enable a better, more co-ordinated expression of the assets in an area and the services and resources available to residents as required. At another level however, Hubs will bring people together as they express what they would like to see in the future. The Hubs therefore hold a great opportunity to spark community led action – and possibly even a blossom in micro enterprise and local delivery of more activity to build thriving communities.

Throughout the development of the Hub programme, as well as through the recruitment of Local Area Co-ordinators in Adult Social Care, Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) has been embraced in Thurrock as a concept to underpin our approach to community development and engagement. I am particularly encouraged to see how ABCD has helped to speak up Thurrock –

recognising our assets and strengths as a foundation for the future.

A key principle of ABCD is to ensure that people are able to help themselves using the assets and informal associations around them first and before traditional service models. Often, not knowing what is available locally is a key barrier – something Hubs will help address. However, community builders within local areas can help to highlight and grow opportunities at a grass roots level, therefore further enabling a more sustainable approach to community service.

There are many partners involved in various strands of community development. These projects are all underpinned by 5 common themes, they are: place based, strength based, relationship driven, citizens in the lead and social justice. The brand of 'Stronger Together' was agreed and adopted to cover all of this activity. In December 2014 the Stronger Together website went live which contains information on all these projects, the website was co-produced with the Council and organisations within the voluntary sector. The web address is www.strongertogether.org.uk.

In November 2014 I was delighted to hear the news that the Department for Communities and Local Government awarded Thurrock a grant of £550k to support the hub programme. This grant will help the Council to take the next step in preparing Hubs, training residents and helping our service providers change the way they work. Furthermore, the grant is demonstration that the success of Hubs is recognised nationally as well as in Thurrock.

The final Community Development success I wish to highlight is the Council's Volunteer Programme. A great deal of effort has been taken to ensure that Thurrock Council has a robust offer available to residents who want to give their time. Over 250 volunteers are currently active in a range of roles across a number of services. Our pride in this role is expressed through hosting a volunteer manager network for staff supporting volunteers, a volunteer network and annual events to celebrate and thank volunteers giving their time to the Council. We are always looking for new ways in which to capture the enthusiasm of residents to volunteer with us. When an appropriate placement is not available, we are lucky to have a thriving Volunteer Centre in Thurrock based at ngage. I would particularly like to welcome our recent partnership working with ngage that has enabled us to secure £15,000 funding to develop a volunteer Timebank for Thurrock. This will enable people to help each other within their community. People offer services to other Timebank members and chose what services they would like to receive in return. Of course if a member does not want to receive any services themselves they can donate their time credits either to the community pot or an organisation/charity that they would like to support. Timebank is used to encourage civic engagement, with credits being offered as an incentive to get involved with activities. Our first mini-timebank has been established at the Chadwell St Mary Hub, not only do the members bank credits for themselves by helping the local community they also donate some of their credits to the Thurrock community pot. Timebanking is a fantastic achievement and I look forward to seeing it thrive through 2015/16 and beyond.

2. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

The Community Development and Equalities Team has worked to support our communities and residents through stronger joint working between our community

partners and this has strengthened our ability to tackle social exclusion, and create communities in which everyone can participate. The team have supported the work of the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) through attendance at the Police Independent Advisory Group (IAG) and supported active partner working in relation to hate crimes. I am pleased to say a member of this team has attended the training provided by the Police and is now an independent Hate Crime Ambassador, enabling them to offer support to individuals who may wish to report an incident.

The framework for Equality Impact Analysis (EqIA) has been reviewed this year with a wider Community Equality Impact Assessment launched in September 2014 that, in addition to new policy and strategy development, has been applied to each of our budget savings proposals.

A review of staff forums supported the Council's wider aims to maintain and develop staff engagement, particularly in light of our Shaping the Council programme. Six staff forums were launched in December 2014 with a range of online platforms to ensure flexibility specific to the needs of those wishing to participate. A new governance model has helped to increase the scale and influence of forums and their ability to shape policies, strategies and initiatives affecting our workforce.

The team has delivered a number of events to support the bringing together of communities, these include the very successful and sixth Big Lunch in Grays Town Park that attracted over 1,000 visitors in July 2014. A very successful WW1 commemorative event to mark World War One was held at Tilbury Fort in August with re-enactments and a replica plane from WW1 fly over of which the turnout far exceeded our expectations.

A refurbishment programme was put in place to get all of the war memorials that Thurrock Council are custodians of refurbished in time for Remembrance Day. This was achieved in partnership with Housing and was closely followed by a funding application to secure money to refurbish all other memorials across the borough to a high standard.

In April 2014 Cabinet agreed to establish a Fairness Commission for Thurrock based on a great deal of evidence into levels of inequity in the borough. The priorities for the commission include ensuring fair access to services and opportunities, ensuring equal life chances, building stronger and cohesive communities and involving residents and listening to their views on fairness in Thurrock. I hope that all councillors will promote the work of the emerging Fairness Commission to bring a new focus and influence to the equalities agenda so that Thurrock can truly be a fair place of access to opportunity, enterprise and excellence where all individuals, communities and businesses flourish.

3. WELFARE REFORM

The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced significant changes to the welfare benefits system from April 2013. Central government abolished a number of benefits, such as Council Tax Benefit and some aspects of the Social Fund and Community Care grants, and passed the responsibility for this support to Local Authorities.

The Council rose to the challenge and officers worked closely with Southend Borough Council to develop the Council's Essential Living Fund (ELF). This replaced the crisis loans and community care grants which were part of the Social Fund. This is primarily a non cash scheme, with close links developed with TRUP, a re-cycling charity, to provide white goods and re-used furniture to some of the most vulnerable residents within Thurrock. The scheme also provides supermarket vouchers to assist with the purchase of food and provides a facility where fuel can be topped up.

The Council also developed the Local Council Tax Support Scheme (LCTS) as a result of the government abolishing Council Tax Benefit; this meant that a scheme was developed whereby for the first time people of working age would have to make a contribution towards their Council Tax.

A local scheme was developed that offered some protection to families with children, thus disregarding child benefit and child maintenance, offering a further additional income disregard of £25 per week to those who were working but still qualified for LCTS. This has proved to be a well balanced scheme that the Council has elected to continue with the same principles of the scheme for the third year as agreed by Cabinet in December 2014.

Other reforms involved the Council taking action necessary to implement the benefit cap and benefit reductions that affected people receiving Housing Benefit.

The Council has also worked with internal and external stakeholders such as Job Centre Plus, to prepare for the introduction of Universal Credit. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has now announced that Universal Credit will be rolled out nationally from February 2015 and in Thurrock from March 2015. This will initially impact on new single Job Seekers Allowance claimants: it is envisaged that there will be very little or no immediate impact to the Council's Benefits Service. It is also worth noting that the government has made no plans on how pensioner claims will be dealt with under Universal Credit.

Financial Information:

(A Motion agreed by the Council on 23 January 2013 requires the Cabinet Member to cover all finance and budget issues of their portfolio that they consider relevant, including (but not limited to): fiscal management; budget responsibility of the Cabinet member; receipts and actual spend vs. predicted spend; the levels of virements and value for money.)

Community Development and Equalities

The Community Development and Equalities team is within the Strategy team in the Chief Executive's Delivery Unit.

Cost Centre	Original Budget 2014/15	Revised Budget 2014/15	Budget To Date 2014/15	Actuals To Date 2014/15	Variance to date 2014/15	Projected outturn 2014/15	Projected Budget Variance 2014/15
DA500 - Strategy Team	649,060	668,019	313,866	297,642	(16,224)	668,019	0
DA501 - Community Development Projects	33,900	48,900	45,311	43,309	(2,002)	48,900	0
DA502 - Voluntary Grants	432,600	432,600	343,881	343,881	0	432,600	0
Grand Total	1,115,560	1,149,519	703,058	684,831	(18,227)	1,149,519	0

Strategy Team DA500

This code includes salary and non-salary budgets for the Strategy Team including corporate and service planning, performance management, research and intelligence which are outside of this portfolio area as well as community development and equalities within it.

There are four posts supporting Community Development and Equalities. The remaining budget funds one Strategy post and covers all other service costs and recharges.

The current Community Development and Equalities team was established following a restructure which concluded in year, with some budgets being amalgamated as a consequence. Overall the restructure resulted in a saving of £125k with some posts shared with the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.

Community Development DA501

This code is used to support specific projects undertaken by the team, for example The Big Lunch and World War One Commemorative events. The base budget is supplemented by external funds – for example a grant from Heritage Lottery Fund in spring 2014 to support the WW1 event at Tilbury Fort. There has been an increase in the amount available to support community projects through reviewing and realigning non salary budgets.

Voluntary Grants DA502

The code is used to pay the funding agreements administered via CVS to support voluntary sector development and delivery.

Welfare Reform Finance

The DWP provided Local Authorities with funds for 2013/14 and for 2014/15 specifically to administer and run a welfare assistance scheme (Essential Living Fund). The amount for direct assistance to vulnerable residents was £369k for each year.