

<b>5 July 2010</b>		<b>ITEM</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee</b>			
<b>Community Engagement</b>			
<b>Report of:</b> Leroy Richards, Policy, Performance and Partnerships			
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b>		<b>Key Decision:</b>	
All		N/A	
<b>Accountable Head of Service:</b> Tasnim Shawkat, Head of Legal Services, Finance and Corporate Governance			
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Lorna Payne, Corporate Director of Community Well-being			
<b>This report is</b> Public			
<b>Purpose of Report:</b> This report proposes that Corporate Overview and Scrutiny set up a cross-party working group to develop an approach to community engagement.			

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Community engagement is a priority for the Council as well as being a key policy area nationally. The Council is working with its partners across the local strategic partnership to develop a draft Community Engagement Strategy which aims to set out an overarching, strategic approach to community engagement. A key objective of the community engagement strategy is to support Councillors to be leaders for their communities.

The Regional Empowerment Partnership along with the Council commissioned a diagnostic into community engagement in Thurrock. The result of the diagnostic work is appended to this report.

It is intended that Corporate Overview and Scrutiny, set up a cross-party working group that will listen to comments and evidence from other local authorities where community engagement has been successful. Comments received from the cross-party working group will feed into the Community Engagement Strategy and brought back to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the autumn.

**1. RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**Agree to set up a cross-party working group or task and finish group to:**

- 1.1 Develop a Community Engagement Strategy for Thurrock taking into account the recommendations from the recent diagnostic report;**
- 1.2 Suggest proposals for the role of elected members in community engagement;**

Comment [sj]: PLEASE CLICK THIS BOX ONCE and enter the date of the meeting (in font 16, not capitals)

Comment [sj]: Please leave this for completion by Democratic Services

Comment [sj]: PLEASE CLICK THIS BOX ONCE and enter the name of the Committee you are reporting to (in font 16, not capitals)

Comment [sj]: PLEASE CLICK THIS BOX ONCE and enter the title of your report (in font 16, not capitals)

Comment [a j]: Please enter the name and job title of the person who will be presenting the report

Comment [sj]: Please enter details of any Wards and Communities affected by the report. If this section is not

Comment [sj]: Yes/No/Not Applicable – a 'Key Decision' is generally one affecting more than 2 wards or above 650,000

Comment [sj]: Please state the Head of Service's name and job title

Comment [sj]: Please state Director's name and job title

Comment [sj]: State whether your report is Public or Exempt. If Exempt (i.e. not to be given to the public or discussed in

Comment [sj]: Briefly set out the purpose of your report

Comment [sj]: Please provide a summary of the key points in your report

Comment [sj]: The recommendations should be set out in bold in the form of the decision that the decision

- 1.3 Identify what support elected members need to undertake their community engagement role effectively;
- 1.4 Explore the most effective ways for engaging with residents for example area based working and devolved budgets;
- 1.5 Provide input into a Thriving Third Sector strategy.

2. **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND:**

2.1 Community engagement is about making sure that people can participate and engage in many different ways. From attending public meetings, to focus groups, participatory budgeting events, community events and much more. There are different levels of engagement which is often referred to as the 'ladder of participation' or 'the spectrum of engagement'. They range from information giving at one end of the spectrum to co-production as well as partnership working at the other end. The role of local government in this context is to provide opportunities for local people to get involved in issues that matter to them.

3. **ISSUES:**

**A Community Engagement Strategy**

- 3.1 Thurrock Council and its partners have come together under the local strategic partnership to develop a draft Community Engagement Strategy. Voluntary community and faith sector groups have been involved in developing the strategy through meetings held by the Community Involvement Board (Engagement Group). Thurrock Community Engagement Network (TCEN) has led on seeking input and involvement from the LSP programme boards.
- 3.2 The draft community engagement strategy proposes three key objectives: to develop and support communities and local people to get involved; to support Councillors to be leaders for their communities; and to establish a coordinated, efficient and value for money partnership approach to community engagement.
- 3.3 The role of elected members in influencing policy is an important factor in the decision making process, particularly where there are local implications arising from decisions. Members represent the people at ward level and are arguably closer to people and communities, therefore, there is a democratic legitimacy for members to lead on community engagement activities.
- 3.4 A recent diagnostic report commissioned by the Council and the Regional Empowerment Partnership (REP) concerning community engagement in Thurrock, recommended a sign off and launch of the Community Engagement Strategy. The task group will be asked to further develop the Community Engagement Strategy taking into account the recommendations from the diagnostic report.

Comment [s]: You should briefly explain why the report is on the agenda - See para. 5.3 and 5.4 of the report writing guidelines.

Comment [s]: Other headings may be appropriate. The report should outline the reasoning that leads to its recommendations and **must** include:

1. a brief summary of options considered;
2. consultation outcomes
3. a risk assessment.
4. Whether the responsible cabinet members have been consulted/contributed to the report (NB professional and political advice must be clearly distinguished)

- See para.5.5 of the report writing guidelines.

### **The Role of Elected Members**

- 3.5 The Local Government White paper 2006 described local councillors as 'democratic champions' and the 'bedrock of local democracy'. This quote acknowledges the key leadership role played by elected members as community leaders and champions of democracy in their local area. The Coalition Government also confirmed their commitment to localism and have said that they will introduce legislation in the autumn that will devolve more powers and funding to ward Councillors.
- 3.6 The role of elected members in influencing policy is clearly critical to the decision making process, particularly where there are local implications arising from decisions. Members represent the people at ward level and are arguably closer to people and communities. Therefore, there is a democratic legitimacy for members to lead on community engagement activities.
- 3.7 Many local Councillors play an important role in their local communities by representing a community's interest on voluntary sector bodies and/or by becoming school governors. The elected Members role in engaging with local residents varies from identifying particular groups who might be vulnerable to exclusion; to mobilising residents to develop local campaigns, for example, to prevent a hospital closure. However, since the Local Government Act 2000, and the abolition of the old committee system, there is a perception that many backbench councillors have become disempowered from local decision making. The task group will be asked to suggest proposals for the role of elected members in community engagement.

### **Support for Elected Members**

- 3.8 Elected members will need support to carry out their function to be leaders for their communities. This might include having up to date information about their ward or locality such as neighbourhood profiles; are made aware of forthcoming issues in their area; have the skills they need to engage with and capture the views of constituents; and have appropriate officer support for ward level engagement activities.
- 3.9 The task group will be asked to identify what support elected members will need in order to carry out their community engagement role effectively.

### **Area Working**

- 3.10 There are currently no formal mechanisms for area based working in Thurrock. Community forums are the main network used to engage at the local level, however, the structure and set up of Community forums does not allow democratically elected members to lead on community engagement activity and resolve local issues at the ward level. It is fair to say that community forums work well in some areas and perhaps not so well in others.
- 3.11 Recent inspection letters have made comments concerning area working and some of these are listed below:

- “Engagement at Community level is not strong” (**Annual Audit Letter 2009**).
- “There have been genuine approaches to reach out, such as through community fora, but these are not all representative of the communities they serve and have not been fully effective” (**Annual Audit Letter 2009**).
- “Visibility of councillors in leading the way on connecting with communities is not high given the strong change agenda” (**Access to Services 2008**).
- “The community involvement board (CIB) set up through the LSP, does not have a clear role and focus on the area's improvements.” (**Access to Services 2008**).
- “Community fora have not proved an effective vehicle to engage local neighbourhoods. Membership is not representative of the people in the area; attendance is low, so they are not effective in supporting engagement with the Council or having a clear local impact.” (**Access to Services 2008**).
- “The benefits are that the fora provide a sense of place, and using their allocated budgets have made small neighbourhood improvements. In some instances the fora has strong presence in a neighbourhood, encouraging greater resident participation though this is not common.” (**Access to Services 2008**).

3.12 Area working is a way of encouraging involvement from local people in council decision-making and a means to provide project funding to improve their area. Many residents feel disengaged with regards to local issues that affect their lives. This new way of working will allow local people to work with councillors to identify the issues that matter most to residents and find ways to deal with these issues. The Task Group will be asked to recommend the most effective method for area based working.

### **Devolved Budgets and Power**

3.13 There are a number of ways that councils can devolve budgets to the ward level that would involve and empower local people. Generally speaking, it will be for elected councillors to decide how the budget is spent subject to any specific instructions from Council, Cabinet or Scrutiny. The opportunity to spend money locally enables members to provide a real interface with the community and help them to understand the communities’ needs and priorities. The task group will explore how devolved budgets and power has worked elsewhere and recommend how it could work in Thurrock along with area based working.

### **A Thriving Third Sector strategy**

3.14 Third sector organisations play a vital role in community engagement having developed many networks with grass roots organisations. The Coalition Government have indicated that they intend to enhance the role of the third sector by devolving power. Elected member input will be needed to shape the aims and objectives of any future Thriving Third Sector strategy in Thurrock.

## **4. Terms of Reference**

4.1 The terms and reference of the cross-party working group will be developed by the group before the first meeting. As a guide, the broad aims of the group will be to:

- Review the role of elected members in community engagement
- Review the Councils engagement activities including area working, devolved powers and devolved budgets

Outcomes Required:

- To recommend a model for area working in Thurrock
- To recommend what support elected members will need to undertake their community engagement role effectively.
- To recommend a community engagement strategy for Thurrock.

5. Evidence gathering timetable

Report to Corporate Overview and Scrutiny	5 July 2010
Scoping the review	July 2010
Evidence gathering	Two or three meetings in August
Chair's report to Corporate O&S	September 2010
Cabinet to decide on recommendations	6 October 2010

6. IMPACT ON CORPORATE POLICIES, PRIORITIES, PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

6.1 This report supports the Council's vision and particularly focuses on the fifth priority which is to build pride, respect and responsibility in Thurrock's communities and its residents.

7. IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Funké Nana**  
 Telephone and email: **01375 652 451**  
**fnana@thurrock.gov.uk**

There are no direct financial implications arising out of this report. The cost of implementing this plan will be funded from existing resources. Any resource implication will be identified as part of the final report by the task group.

7.2 Legal

Comment [jj]: This should include any consultation with Ward Members and Shadow Portfolio Holders, as well as any public or statutory consultation

Comment [aj]: Please refer to Section 5.7 of the Report Writing Guidelines

Comment [sj]: This section should always be completed – if they are dealt with fully in another part of the report, they also need a brief cross reference here. The names and job titles of the officers providing the implications should be provided in full – see Guideline 6.1 and please note Democratic Services Deadlines and ensure that officers providing implications are given 5 clear working days to work on the report. Authors can write implications but they must be signed off by the appropriate officers

Comment [sj]: See Guideline 6.2

Comment [sj]: See Guideline 6.3

Implications verified by: **David Lawson**  
 Telephone and email: 01375 652087  
**dlawson@thurrock.gov.uk**

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

**7.3 Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Samson DeAlyn**  
 Telephone and email: **01375 652472**  
**SDAlyn@thurrock.gov.uk**

The evidence provided in this report suggests that the Council does not have adequate structures in place to engage with marginalised communities. This approach to improve community engagement will enable the Council to develop a draft community engagement strategy that will improve opportunities for engagement for all communities in Thurrock.

**7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Section 17, Risk Assessment, Health Impact Assessment, Sustainability, IT, Environmental**

A risk assessment will be carried out as part of the service delivery process for the team and any risks will be managed through this process.

**8. CONCLUSION**

8.1 This report articulates the process to develop a strategic approach to community engagement in Thurrock. The initial steps to develop a draft community engagement strategy involved the Council, voluntary community and faith sector partners, NHS South West Essex, Thurrock Thames Gateway DC, and LSP programme boards. It is important that elected members get involved in further developing the strategy as they have a legitimate political mandate to represent citizens and communities at the ward level. This report therefore suggests that Corporate Overview and Scrutiny set up a cross-party task and finish group in order to involve members.

**BACKGROUND PAPERS USED IN PREPARING THIS REPORT:**

- Draft Community Engagement Strategy

**APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT:**

- Community Engagement Diagnostic Report

Comment [sj]: See Guideline 6.4

Comment [sj]: This should inform the recommendations in the report

Comment [sj]: See Guideline 8. If any Papers are to be placed in the Members room that relate to this report, you should also list them here

Comment [sj]: List the Appendices referred to in the Report

**Report Author Contact Details:**

**Name:** Leroy Richards  
**Telephone:** 01375 652175  
**E-mail:** lerichards@thurrock.gov.uk

**Comment [sj]:** Insert the full contact details of the author of the report