

# Summary: Local Working Group Pilot

12 – 16 September 2016

## Introduction

As part of the Dacorum Borough Council's commitment to evidence based decision making, a pilot was set up to test the concept of a 'Local Working Group'.

This involved bringing together 23 staff from different teams to work alongside each other for one week.

During this week 75% of their time would be spent doing their day job in a co-working space. However, 25% of their time would be used to collaboratively work on solving issues related to a geographical area covering two relatively deprived wards in Hemel Hempstead.

## Aims of the week

Due to inherent restraints on the way the council is structured it was unlikely that the pilot would prove to be a model that could be introduced wholesale across the council.

However, the model did aim to test a number of principles that could inform how we work within and across teams. In particular, it sought to look at:

- The benefits of building cross-service cooperation
- Using different perspectives to develop new solutions to local issues (and teaching service design skills to a cross-section of Council staff at the same time)
- To learn lessons about sharing working space ahead of the move to a new open plan building

## Collaborative working elements of the week

Monday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introductions, key local information, staff working together to predict resident answers to questions about what they liked and didn't like about the area</li><li>• Group lunch</li><li>• (Public neighbourhood action meeting for the locality, where residents answered the same questions as staff had answered earlier in the day. The group did not attend this meeting.)</li></ul>
Tuesday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Comparing what staff and residents said, picking out common themes and differences</li><li>• Walk around the locality, looking at issues raised in the public meeting and a tour of one of the Council's Adventure Playgrounds</li></ul>
Wednesday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Clustering issues raised into common themes, staff choosing issues they wanted to work on over remainder of the week</li></ul>
Thursday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Workshop on understanding service users, their motives, and participation barriers for the issues identified</li></ul>
Friday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Brainstorming potential solutions, and first steps in testing the best ideas</li><li>• Group debrief (led by a different member of staff to avoid skewing results)</li></ul>

## Immediate impact

Overall staff were positive about the pilot and felt that it had useful outcomes for their usual work.

- 80% of participants agreed that they had 'found areas where [they] can productively work with staff from other teams'
- 67% 'expect to positively change some aspect of how [they] work' as a result of the week
- 73% 'have learnt tools that will help [them] to think about new solutions to problems'

There were also some immediate tangible outcomes ranging from staff training each other on how to make better use of software to finding a way through planning permission for painting a large adventure playground security fence to make the facility more inviting.

## Ongoing impact

Before the pilot began all participants were asked to complete a survey about working with others at Dacorum. This asked staff how far they agreed with statements such as 'I actively seek to work with others across Council departments to get the best results for customers' and 'Across the Council we praise others for a job well done'.

Participants will be asked to complete the same survey again three months after the pilot in order to see whether their perception of cross-department working has changed at all. The questions were chosen from the staff survey so that we can reference responses to a wider set of data on staff perceptions.

## Ongoing work

The group are taking forward two projects exploring cross-departmental ways of tackling two of the issues that came out from resident and staff input over the week; reducing fly tipping in communal bin areas and increasing youth participation in community activities.

## Suggestions/lessons learned

In the longer term a number of suggestions for future working, especially in light of the upcoming move to the Forum have been made. These include:

### Working together

- **Repeating 'area walks'**. Staff found it very useful to see the reality of an area, and exchange information across service areas which came out naturally when they were in the location of an issue. For staff without an area focus it was an eye-opener just how many different teams contribute to different aspects of a community. Meanwhile some staff who do have a focus on the area had not had the opportunity to see some of the locations that they were advising residents on/placing residents in, and found seeing the area and input from other teams very valuable. For example they are now able to describe the community facilities available, and reassure potential tenants that despite perceptions of the area it actually has a relatively low crime rate.
- **Including the basic structure and functions of the Council as part of the induction process/training**. During the week it became clear that many staff didn't know some of the

other services that the Council provided. As they understood other roles, staff spotted opportunities to work more effectively together and became more positive about DBC and our impact on residents. Some of these benefits could be replicated by training in how the Council works when staff join.

### Developing solutions across services

- **Establish an approach to non-service specific issues.** Having a cross section of the Council allowed us to look into issues that cut across several different teams, such as fly tipping on DBC Housing land and community participation. Often working in 'silos' restricts this type of cooperation, and means that we are not well prepared to deal with issues that do not fall neatly into a single service area. Issues which do not fit our existing services could go to the Improvement and Innovation team, or another group to pull together the right mix of expertise if necessary.

### Preparing for open plan working

- **Provide staff with an opportunity to meet other teams** in their zone before we move to the Forum (e.g. through zone based Christmas lunches).
- **Standardising or clarifying working practices across the organisation** before we move to avoid disputes, particularly around flexible and home working. Having staff working in different ways caused some frustration and this problem is likely to be amplified when staff work in an open plan environment.
- **Asking teams to consider how they will communicate remotely** in case they are not sitting together, as one of the teams which was relocated for the week had a couple of issues of missed communications.
- **Actively encouraging staff to periodically work alongside other teams**, not all staff are likely to make the most of the opportunities for collaboration provided by the new working arrangements. Most of the pilot group however did find that there were benefits in terms of developing IT skills, exchanging knowledge, and getting outside support more quickly; this suggests that it may be worth encouraging staff to sit somewhere else once a week or more once the move has happened.