

Agenda Item No: 15
Report To: Cabinet
Date: 14th July 2016
Report Title: Looking After the Town Centre:
A review of T-CAT's role and its needs
Report Author: Policy & Performance Manager: Kirsty Hogarth
Portfolio Holder: Town Centres Focus & Business Dynamics: Cllr Galpin



Summary:

The Town Centre Action Team (T-CAT) was formed three years ago with the intention of having a flexible and reactive resource to keep the town centre attractive and well-looked-after. This review is to check that T-CAT is achieving what it set out to do and is providing extra worth to the town centres.

Key Decision: NO

Affected Wards: Town centre wards

Recommendations: **The Cabinet, in acknowledging the positive contribution and value of T-CAT, be asked to approve the following recommendations in respect of continuing and improving the service:**

(i). That, in the interests of better service integration and synergy, and support to the Corporate Plan, T-CAT should be re-located to the Environmental & Contracts Team and that management responsibilities should transfer to the Environmental & Contracts Manager.

(ii). In support of recommendation (i), the agreed budget for T-CAT should transfer to the Environmental & Contracts service, to be managed and monitored by the Environmental & Contracts Manager.

(iii). Once the T-CAT Team has settled into its new service location and the synergy between T-CAT, Biffa and Aspire is better understood, the size of the T-CAT team should be reassessed in line with Ashford's growth.

(iv). In support of the Corporate Plan and its underpinning principles, that the Environmental & Contracts service should consider the best way of raising T-CAT's profile once they are settled into the Environmental & Contracts service.

Policy Overview: In line with delivery of the Council's Corporate Plan: 2015-2020

Financial Implications: Transfer of budget to base budget for Environmental & Contracts – and possible increase in terms of lease vehicle and, eventually, workshop/storage facilities.

Contacts: kirsty.hogarth@ashford.gov.uk – Tel: (01233) 330413

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Purpose of the Report

To determine the way forward for T-CAT by agreeing the four recommendations on the front page of this report.

Background

1. The Town Centre Action Team (T-CAT) was formed in October 2013 to reflect the aspirations of ABC Members to have a vibrant and well-looked-after town centre. This would not only help in attracting visitors, but also in encouraging business location, development and investment and helping to ensure the town centre economy remains buoyant – all of which would underpin the Council's corporate and business planning processes.
2. Since that time, T-CAT has extended its role, to encompass work in both Ashford (as the 'urban' centre) and Tenterden (the rural centre), ensuring that the two towns remain clean and tidy, with street furniture kept in state of good repair.
3. T-CAT's efforts have also been extended through the type of work that the Team now does, expanding to include support to the council's economic development function: fitting out/decorating shops (particularly in Park Mall), supporting the monthly Farmers' Market (setting up and dismantling), plus constructing planters and bus stop 'libraries'.
4. For some time now requests for T-CAT's support and work have been increasing (from both Members and Officers), although there have been various staff changes over the last two years that have left T-CAT substantially under-resourced. Recent recruitment re-establishes the original Team's size, but this – in turn – leads to various questions.
5. The purpose of this review, therefore, is to look at T-CAT nearly three years' on, establishing whether it is fulfilling its original intentions – both strategically and operationally; whether it is fit-for-purpose; and what, if anything, needs to be changed. This report aims to look at those aspects and provide some firm recommendations, in the first instance to Management Team and, subsequently, to Cabinet.
6. During the course of the review, consultation took place with officers, councillors and the T-CAT Team itself. As the report states, all the feedback has been positive, and there is no doubt that T-CAT fulfils a role that 'adds a little extra' to the town centre and provides services that we would not otherwise have. As shown in the next section (relating to costs and benefits), T-CAT's 'worth' cannot be quantified in specific monetary terms. However, there is no doubt that the T-CAT team have provided services and support that would not have existed without them and which have brought much

added-value to the town centre. Without exception, that has been the view of people interviewed for this review, and T-CAT when it was fully staffed was a welcome sight on Ashford's streets.

7. The conclusion of this review is that T-CAT should continue, but that operational changes (to be determined by management) should provide a clearer focus for the Team and more clarity for Members on T-CAT's role.

The Way Forward

Costs, Benefits & Finance

8. The annual cost of T-CAT to the Council is £120,000 (not including support costs). £95,000 of this is made up of the Team's salaries; the rest is in costs for equipment, materials and vehicles.
9. In terms of measuring T-CAT's value-for-money, at this stage (with the Team having been consistently under-staffed and supported by staff from other areas - principally Parking Services) it is not possible to conduct a valid analysis in any scientific sense, so the 'worth' of T-CAT cannot be quantified in specific monetary terms. However, there is no doubt that the T-CAT team have provided services and support that would not have existed without them and which have brought much added-value to the town centre. Without exception, that has been the view of people interviewed for this review, and T-CAT when it was fully staffed was a welcome sight on Ashford's streets.
10. Some of T-CAT's added value has come from the 'just' jobs (which needed to be done quickly) ... addressing unsightly fly-tipping in the town centre, for example, or clearing glass or other dangerous debris ... or are things that would have cost the council a lot of money if done by others on a one-off basis.
11. T-CAT has also provided a 'creative' service, by doing jobs that would never, otherwise, have been done at all. This includes making planters for various parts of the town centre, as well as bus-stop libraries: both initiatives of their own that have brightened not only the physical environment, but also the lives of people visiting the town centre or waiting for buses! Additionally, T-CAT is involved in some educational work, including Safety At Work week, Clean Sweep events and providing Sir Litter Not at community events such as Create and the Stanhope Fun Day.

Finance for T-CAT was originally provided by New Homes Bonus; this is expected to continue through the lifetime of the MTFP to 2021.

12. **Recommendation: To make sure the agreed budget transfers to Environmental & Contracts, along with the T-CAT Team, under the management of the Environmental Contracts & Operations Manager.**

A more structured approach

13. The first point to give a more structured approach to T-CAT is the proposal to move the T-CAT Team from their current location, in Health, Parking & Community Safety to the Environmental & Contracts Team.
14. When the concept of T-CAT was first proposed, it was intended to be part of the Environmental Team; with the reforming of Environmental & Contracts to include both street cleansing (Biffa) and landscape services/grounds maintenance (Aspire), it is a logical move to have T-CAT in the same service area, in order to be able to support both those functions, and to complement them as well. By making this move, it will also give greater support to the Corporate Plan – particularly to priority 4: Attractive Ashford - in helping to improve the presentation of the borough.

15. The following diagram shows the 'fit' between the service areas:

IMPROVING THE PRESENTATION OF THE BOROUGH



Pride, Ownership and Responsibility

16. Each of those service areas - Landscape Services (now called Aspire), T-CAT and Biffa – is responsible for part of the presentation of the borough, ensuring that high standards are maintained in street cleansing, grounds maintenance and overall presentation of the public realm.
17. **Recommendation: That T-CAT should be relocated to the Environmental & Contracts Team and that management responsibilities should transfer, accordingly, to the Environmental & Contracts Manager.**
18. As stated earlier, the original purpose of setting up the T-CAT Team was to improve the appearance of Ashford Town Centre, making it a more attractive place to visit, to shop, to do business, to live ... and to invest. These aspirations are all part of the Corporate Plan, which T-CAT helps to fulfil at a very operational and 'on the ground' level.
19. There is no doubt that T-CAT has fulfilled this agenda, and feedback – from Members, Officers and the public – has been extremely positive.
20. Since its inception, T-CAT has covered many areas of work – from the regular, general maintenance issues (such as painting or repairing street furniture or removing graffiti), through to the innovative and creative issues, such as building bus-stop libraries and fitting out shops in Park Mall. Within those parameters, there have also been many other duties, including supporting the Farmers' Market (erecting & dismantling it), removing fly tipping, and providing a general reassuring presence in the high street.

21. Some of the work T-CAT has covered, however, has been work that should have been undertaken by the Council's contractors who are paid to carry out certain duties under contract. This has obviously not been acceptable.
22. T-CAT will no longer carry out anything that has a contractual obligation – unless there are exceptional circumstances. This is a message that will be reinforced by officers managing the process, as it is vital that the council is satisfied its contractors are doing what they are supposed to do, and what they are paid to do. In terms of value-for-money, financial accountability and transparency this is also important.
23. One of T-CAT's strengths has been flexibility: both in terms of team members' ability to 'turn their hand' to various skilled and unskilled functions, and in terms of being around to pick up urgent issues that need resolution.
24. However, and as demonstrated by the contractual duties that T-CAT has covered in the past, flexibility can be a two-edged sword, so that the team has undertaken tasks designated to be carried out by others. Perhaps more importantly, T-CAT has not always been able to be clear about its agenda, or who sets it – because those issues have never been specifically defined - which has led to uncertainty about tasks they should, or should not, be carrying out, and to some difficulty in prioritising those tasks.
25. With a variety of people managing or tasking T-CAT over the last three years, it has become apparent that there should be a more structured approach to tasking T-CAT overall. This means that the Team should have a schedule of works, which will list the regular tasks to be covered (whether on a daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annual – or other regular - basis) and the inspections needed to catalyse some of that work.
26. Such a schedule would not limit the flexibility of T-CAT: a schedule of works would give a defined set of tasks to the Team, while allowing it still to remain reactive for necessary 'just-in-time' or 'one-off' jobs.
27. In parallel with this, it is important to ensure that T-CAT is properly tasked by an identified line manager. This will reduce any conflict about priorities or the nature of tasks to be undertaken, as well as have the benefit of ensuring that T-CAT are available as-and-when required for the tasks they are supposed to be carrying out.

T-CAT's Size & Location

28. Various issues and questions have been raised during the course of this review of the T-CAT Team – one of which is the size of the Team. Originally staffed by four FTEs, a fifth post was agreed to be funded (from the Parking Services budget).
29. The Team, however, has not been at full strength for some time now; personnel difficulties and staff sickness have resulted in only two or three of the four officers being present at any one time. This has meant that this review is not in a position to judge what the optimum size of the T-CAT Team should be, as there is no evidence base to show whether four staff were

sufficient, or whether it needs five to fulfil a role with which Members are happy.

30. When this review first started, there were only two Members of the original Team still in post, and they needed to be supported by a temporary member of staff, as well as various staff from Parking Services.
31. Additionally, with Ashford's growth already in train (via the new college and the planned Elwick Place and Commercial Quarter developments), some thought should be given to the future requirements of T-CAT, in terms of servicing a wider area and a night-time economy.
32. **The next recommendation, therefore, is that over the next six to 12 months, the service monitors carefully the tasks designated for T-CAT, together with the 'fit' of the Team with the street cleansing and grounds maintenance teams, and then reviews the size of the Team according to the Council's requirements.**
33. In terms of the Team's location, the review has identified four locations that T-CAT works from. They are based in the Ashford Monitoring Centre, which is an arrangement that suits everyone. Ashford Monitoring Centre will continue with the administrative function for T-CAT as it fits well with public reporting mechanisms.
34. The Team's equipment, however, is based in three separate locations: a container in Vicarage Lane, a storage/workshop area in Edinburgh Road and a garage in Brookfield. Because of parking and storage constraints, this is not ideal, although it is all – currently – free.

In an ideal world, T-CAT would be based at the new depot, where it would be best-placed to support the new Grounds Maintenance Team – ASPIRE. The costs of the new site, however, have meant that space is limited and it is, therefore, proposed that T-CAT retain their current workshop and storage spaces, with a view to identifying some shared space capacity within the new depot once ASPIRE is up and running.

Transport & Equipment

35. The other issue to be considered is that of a replacement vehicle for T-CAT. It is important that the Team has the use of an appropriate vehicle – i.e. one that is suitable for all its needs.

The type and specification of the vehicle remains an issue for the managers of the service, but it is important to note that the T-CAT Team requires a vehicle that is practical, able to carry large pieces of equipment or materials and can be left loaded and secure.

Raising T-CAT's profile

36. T-CAT's profile started off high and T-CAT over the three years since its inception has received a lot of positive publicity.
37. Some of the most recent publicity, however, has been due to one of the T-CAT members of staff (the supervisor) informing the Town Centre Regeneration Manager of T-CAT's work and asking her to publicise this.
38. There is no doubt that a high profile is beneficial: to T-CAT in motivational terms, to the Council in reputational terms, and to the town centre retailers and the public in 'feel good' terms.
39. This review recommends, therefore, that, once the Team has settled in to its new location with Environmental & Contracts, there should be a management review on how to keep T-CAT's profile high within the town centre.

Recommendation: To consider the best way of raising T-CAT's profile once they are settled in with the Environmental & Contracts Team.

Portfolio Holder Comments:

Councillor Galpin is the Portfolio Holder with responsibility for Town Centre Focus and has commented as follows:

This report describes some of the positive outcomes that are attributable to the activities of the TCAT team. TCAT has often become the resource of first resort and consequently is frequently taken away from its key objective. The report covers how this can be overcome and a new model for relating to other contractors will be most useful. T-CAT is emblematic of the success of Ashford town centre and I commend all involved.

Contact: Kirsty Hogarth

Email: kirsty.hogarth@ashford.gov.uk