

# Bellingham community project



regeneration  
in action



## About Bellingham

Bellingham is one of the four most deprived wards in the London Borough of Lewisham, and is among the top 10% most deprived wards in England. It suffers many social problems, in particular low educational achievement and low income levels. Only a quarter of students achieve five or more GCSEs of A\*-C compared with the national average of 53%, while 59% of people of working age claim benefits.

Other measures of deprivation are low birth weights, respiratory diseases and poor nutrition. Teenage pregnancy is also twice as high as the national average and well above levels in the rest of London.

City Parochial Foundation's (CPF) interest in the area is unusual – in the 1930s the Foundation bought the Bellingham playing fields. For many years it proved a great success, leased to and managed by the London Federation of Boys Clubs. But by the early 1990s use had declined in what were now out-of-date facilities, and the lease reverted to CPF.

Over the next 12 years, a variety of community initiatives were adopted at the site and in the surrounding area, culminating in 2004 with the opening of a brand new sports, leisure and fitness centre.

This report is based on an evaluation by Roger Hewitt and Karen Wells (Centre for Urban and Community Research at Goldsmith's College, University of London) of what happened in Bellingham and the lessons that were learned.



## The main findings

Among the principal findings of the evaluation were:

- ▶ Close working between local agencies can produce chain reactions that benefit communities and their environments.
- ▶ Developing a large capital project to serve a community is not impossible but the complexities should not be under-estimated.
- ▶ Large ventures need effective professional management. The important thing is to be able to match this with commitment to social need.
- ▶ It is possible to make a major difference to the 'feel' of a neighbourhood: nearly everyone interviewed in the area said the Centre had greatly improved Bellingham's image.

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# Part one: Rebuilding a community – the story of the Bellingham project

## CPF in Bellingham

During the 1920s and 30s, City Parochial Foundation had acquired a number of playing field sites around London. Recreation areas and facilities were seen as a major need by the trustees of the time when local government had not yet become involved in such activities.

In 1932 the trustees of the Foundation bought the 12 acres of the Bellingham playing fields for £15,000 and the land was subsequently leased to the London Federation of Boys Clubs. The site had six football pitches, a sports hall, pavilion, and men's changing rooms. Bars and meeting rooms were built.

In the late 1980s, CPF trustees realised that some of the facilities at various sites were not meeting current standards. A Playing Fields Sub Committee was established to investigate what might need to be done, and research was commissioned. This led to an appraisal completed in March 1990 by Victoria Kemp of North London Polytechnic. Her report revealed that Bellingham had the biggest problems, principally:

- the fields were not being managed effectively;
- there were severe public open space and playing space deficiencies in the area, and considerable demand for additional facilities by the local community.

Throughout the 1990s Bellingham was consistently overlooked for the special funding initiatives such as City Challenge or the later Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding that targeted need in the north of Lewisham. Lying in the south of the borough, the lack of resources and levels of poverty within the Bellingham Ward remained an unrecognised problem for many years – except to its inhabitants and local community workers.

In 1993, the London Federation surrendered the lease. CPF took the opportunity to review how the land could be used as part of a community development strategy and resolved that the widest possible recreational use should be sought. Some local people had approached Tim Cook, then the Clerk to the Foundation, to ask that the land and buildings be made available to the community.

The Foundation took the decision to encourage the formation of a community enterprise to be known as the Bellingham Community Recreation Project (BECORP) and a social club. A board was formed and included one of those who had approached CPF, as well as other local people and representatives from CPF and the London Borough of Lewisham. Over the following years, the work impacted strongly on CPF's internal operations with Tim Cook and James Varley, then Director of Finance, putting in huge amounts of time and effort into assessing the wide range of options available to the Foundation.

Bellingham eventually became part of a wider CPF 'local areas initiative' based on sites in four London boroughs – the others were St Peter's North in Tower Hamlets, Kilburn in Brent, and at Greenford in Ealing.

Initially the social club was a subsidiary of BECORP and was a success. Membership grew to 400 people, and the project met some of the wishes of the local community. However, over time it emerged that the club was poorly managed, was dominated by somewhat narrow social interests – like many another social club – and consequently was not serving the needs of a wide enough spectrum of local people. CPF saw clear need for a change of direction.

In 1997 Tim Cook was appointed Chair of BECORP (later to change its name to Bellingham Community Project – BCP) and a new member of staff, Julian Rouse, was appointed Project Manager. Initially the board worked to improve the existing facilities. The club was refurbished in early 1998, and began to make a small profit through which it was able to start servicing its debts.

In addition to the social club, car boot sales were held on the playing fields. These were very popular. The site also hosted other community events – many sponsored by BCP and the social club – including the annual Bellingham Festival.

In the first year of Julian Rouse's appointment the facilities were expanded to include a crèche, over 50s bowls, and a weight watchers club.

Nevertheless BCP and CPF had concerns about whether the uses the buildings were being put to, were consistent with their aim to develop the playing fields to provide for the recreational and health needs of the poor in Bellingham.

### Wider community action

The management and expansion of the social club and other community-based activities were complementary to other initiatives by which CPF and BCP sought to impact positively on the wider area. In the mid 1990s a local 'Interagency' group had been formed on the back of a Safer Cities grant made to St. Dunstan's Church. CPF's field officer described it as *"quite local at the time with people coming from small local*

*organisations, and the local councillor might come and the local police. It wasn't an agency forum – it was much more local..."*. With the appointment of Julian Rouse, BCP also became actively involved at this early stage and, when Interagency's initial grant ran out in 1998, BCP was able to provide it with a free home and refreshments at its meetings. Its central aim was, as it remains, to be a forum for all social agencies working in Bellingham to discuss new initiatives, report on projects, share ideas, provide information and 'moral support'.

Within it, BCP came to play an important role in lobbying Lewisham council and in backing the annual Bellingham festival, which it housed during its first four years. It was also through Interagency that BCP and other local groups were able to influence positively further local developments, including Sure Start which subsequently became drawn into the area – a very significant advance.

Similarly, thanks to further funding from CPF, BCP were able to appoint a professional fund-raiser for one year to offer fund-raising advice to community organisations, such as an allotment group, timebank, a small youth group and a black music group, as well as the festival itself. Thus the word 'synergy' is almost unavoidable when examining the interaction of BCP with the other existing and developing agencies within Bellingham during this critical early period and subsequently.

The setting up of the Bellingham Festival itself was also not without its strategic as well as community impacts. It developed to the point where it now provides a space for those organisations involved to showcase their work



to the community and to provide information and consult people. In addition to the stalls and activities various organisations have a presence at the festival, which is now mainly organised by a sub committee of Interagency.

BCP and CPF's concerns over the functions of the social club drew them to the conclusion that the condition of the buildings was such that major investment in repairs and upgrading would be needed, and that its layout was restricting other uses.

Sustainability also needed to be created. The sports hall was not designed as a multi-use hall and could only accommodate badminton and table tennis. Initially it was intended to refurbish and renovate the hall but after the building condition survey this was considered or found not to be practical.

BCP felt that they had, in the words of the Project Manager, *"maximised the site and we made a decision that the only way to go forward was to expand the site"*. A condition survey of the buildings indicated that it would be more cost effective to demolish them and rebuild. In March 1998 the McAlpine, Thorpe and Warrier consultancy was appointed to help write a bid to Sport England for funds for developing new and better sports facilities and another to New Opportunities Fund for a healthy living facility, with associated parking.

Amid these unfolding financial and other complexities, in July 2000, following a number of incidents and prolonged non-productivity, the decision was made to close the social club. CPF then agreed to deal with the debts accrued by writing off a £22,000 debt to itself, and by paying £26,000 owed to Bass the brewers for earlier refurbishments.

The decision to change the composition of the board of BCP to manage its new direction during this period was a critical one in ensuring the future success of the project. If the use of the land and buildings were to be taken in a new, more ambitious direction then BCP would need people with a range of skills and connections, knowledge and experience on the board.

A painstaking audit of the precise range of skills required was undertaken to identify appropriately qualified people. As a result, the director of a private fitness company, a staff member from Health First, and a lawyer joined the board. The latter brought his considerable legal experience to the negotiation of contracts with funding agencies, architects and builders and his firm agreed to provide *pro bono* legal advice in drawing up the building contract.

The chair of the board himself had extensive contacts with key people in the charitable sector on which he was able to draw, and there were others who brought useful and detailed knowledge about Bellingham Ward and its community. As one board member reflected, *"..between the board members you can probably bring in every skill you can think of"*. CPF's input was critical at this stage and, alongside the key appointment of Julian Rouse as Project Manager, the scene was now set for the major developments that were to follow.

## Raising funds

Bids were prepared to go to Sport England, the New Opportunities Fund and other smaller funders for both capital and revenue funding. These were supported by a significant commitment from CPF to provide £1.2m capital and an additional £200,000 revenue funding for the first three years when the new building was open.

This, plus the expertise introduced to the BCP board, gave credibility and considerable weight to all of these applications. Nevertheless, gaps in some of the advice received from consultants, together with an unexpected outcome to one important bid, probably partly resulting from those gaps, were to open up areas of vulnerability that made progress initially rocky.

A senior manager of the New Opportunities Fund was invited to come to the site to discuss the possibility of BCP making an application. Following this meeting BCP applied to the New Opportunities Fund for a grant of £1.5m capital and £300,000 revenue



## The capital funders

Sport England £1.95 million

City Parochial Foundation £1.2 million

London Borough of Lewisham £0.95 million

funding. BCP were charged a substantial fee by their consultants to develop the application, which was successful at the first stage but unexpectedly failed to get through the second stage in January 2001.

After so much hard work over several months, this was a major setback and could have dealt a body blow to BCP's ambitions to develop the new building. Its response was perhaps unusually pro-active: BCP sought feedback and further guidance from the New Opportunities Fund.

A second application with a revised business plan was submitted for £515,000 revenue funding and £70,000 capital funding. This bid was successful. But much more funding was clearly necessary from somewhere.

Lewisham council was also approached and made the initial commitment of a £250,000 capital grant. Lewisham was interested in finding a new home for Ladywell Gymnastics Club and keen that the new development at Bellingham should provide it. Through a long process of lobbying and networking – including a visit to the Mayor by CPF clerk Bharat Mehta and Julian Rouse drawing attention to the fact that the Foundation's contribution to Lewisham projects had topped a million pounds in the previous five years – the council ultimately raised its contribution to £950,000.

The most significant turn of events, however, came when Sport England was invited to Bellingham to discuss the possible developments that the site might lend itself to and which Sport England might be willing to fund. BCP wanted to demolish the buildings and provide a new, purpose-built sports

facility, which was what Sport England proposed. This was a very exciting development. Once the suggestion was made to build a leisure and lifestyle centre it seemed to BCP and the Foundation that it was absolutely right – the logic was plain for everyone to see.

## Design and build

If raising the funds was a difficult task, the next stage of designing and building the Centre was also a steep learning curve. Initially a design team, including the architect, engineers, and quantity surveyors were appointed.

However, there are drawbacks to traditional procurement methods for large building projects, particularly when funders are unlikely to be sympathetic to any unforeseen increase in the costs. The better course in such a case is to use a design-and-build package where any oversights in the costings remain the contractor's responsibility – this was the advice of a newly appointed building project manager. The decision was made to take that route.

The project manager proved to be an effective appointment as he was able to provide BCP with technical expertise and information in support of grant applications and to attend meetings with funding agencies in addition to his project management responsibilities.

The builders who were appointed after a tendering process were relatively new to the UK market. This led to some difficulties that might have been avoided with a more established firm. In any event, the board's legal expert, recognising the possible problems that could ensue if the UK branch of this German firm folded, insisted that the building contract be negotiated directly with the parent company.

His detailed knowledge of contract law was very valuable here since *"if the contract hadn't been robust it could really have tipped things over the edge"*. There was a point towards the end of the contract when the contractors

demanding that BCP meet additional unanticipated costs of £120,000. This was partly resolved by BCP's lawyers who persuaded the electricity company to fast track the installation of a sub-station that was holding up the building work.

The leisure centre ultimately took three years to design and build at a cost of £4.4 million pounds, and eventually opened its doors in April 2004 as the Bellingham Leisure and Lifestyle Centre. There were many twists and turns on the way to completion – it was, after all, an extraordinary undertaking, hinging on a number of individuals who were crucial to its success, on some key appointments, and on the long-term commitment of CPF which was willing to take risks when others may have more cautiously drawn in their horns.

## Spreading the benefits – other community work

As already indicated, alongside debating and planning the future of the playing field site, CPF has been involved with a range of community developments – working alongside other agencies and local people through BCP – mainly as part of its Local Areas Initiative. Since then, a number of other projects have been developed, which have helped improve other parts of Bellingham and not just based around the Leisure and Lifestyle Centre.

### - Bellingham Green regeneration

The Green is a circular piece of land, the hub of a wheel of six roads that meet at this point. It had been landscaped in the early 1990s by Lewisham council. But that landscaping made the space difficult to survey from any single point and there was a widespread perception that alcohol and drugs use, sexual activity, and the threat of attack to passers-by were concealed in these hidden spaces. Consultation with Lewisham Council and the Community started in early 2000.

Interagency, of which BCP is a key member, campaigned to have the Green redesigned and levelled. During this regeneration, the Environment Division of Lewisham's Regeneration Directorate worked with

Bellingham Interagency to redesign the Green and provided £650,000 for the costs. The Green reopened in May 2001.

Bellingham Green is an example of landscaping and design successfully dealing with the under-use and the anti-social use of an open space. One Sure Start worker described it as *"the hub of the community"*. Most people said that prior to the redesign, they had avoided the Green for fear of being robbed or attacked and that they would not let their children play there.

Now many people feel that the space is well used by a range of age groups, with the facilities providing something for everyone. The Green now has an under-fives centre (a Sure Start project), a basketball court, a sensory garden, seating areas, a graffiti wall, and a sheltered seating area (intended for young people to use). In the summer there are organised games two evenings a week.

All areas of the Green are visible from any point within that space. It is well lit and there are call posts that link the caller directly with the community wardens. The regeneration included double-glazing the windows of the houses surrounding the Green so that residents would not be disturbed by noise from young people.

Community wardens patrol the area from 10 am to 7 pm. Many very positive comments about the new design of the Green were made by residents and a wide range of people claimed to make regular use of this space.

### - Community learning

BCP and Sure Start successfully raised funds from the Department for Education and Employment to refurbish a building on Randlesdown Road and provide offices for themselves, Action for Jobs and Community Education Lewisham. This grant, with additional funding from the New Opportunities Fund also paid for the hardware costs of an IT suite with 15 terminals.



## Involving residents

At an early stage in the development of the plan for the Centre, a consultation process took place. Community activists have a clear memory of events: one reported, for example, that the decision to develop the Healthy Living Centre (as it was first called) came from 'planning for real' events where there was *"massive input from local people"*. These had involved mapping programmes and open days.

There were three open consultation meetings that adopted a 'wishing tree' approach as well as identifying what people did not want to see. These were very well attended and were run by BCP and Health First.

People wanted an affordable Centre, and it was from these events that the decision was made to have a 'Bellingham card' with very low rates for Bellingham residents. Otherwise they felt *"it would have been outsiders coming in"* and it *"wouldn't have been fair"*. City Parochial Foundation was also keen that the Centre should not be seen as *"something we just thought of from up here"*.

A postal survey questionnaire was distributed to 2,500 households within easy walking distance of the site, to which 598 people responded. 68% of the respondents did not know the site well or at all. The most frequently mentioned needs were for exercise classes (57%) and a holiday activity programme (57%). Nearly half (49%) wanted a fitness gym and a similar number (51%) wanted an indoor adventure play area. A third wanted complementary therapy and consultation and more than a third (38%) wanted a pre-school crèche. 42% wanted a floodlit all-weather playing area.

Later, during the evaluation by Goldsmiths College, some people remembered the lido that was once part of the local landscape and said they had hoped that a swimming pool was going to be built, although there is no record of exactly how many expressed that view at the time. The third who wanted complementary therapy were also to be disappointed because, like the swimming pool, it was not thought to be financially viable. Furthermore, for both there were fairly local alternatives available.

Community Education in Bellingham is staffed by a full time tutor/administrator who is very appreciative of BCP's support, particularly its positive response to fundraising for new courses. BCP helped Community Education develop a funding application for a course to 'build your own computer' which has proved very popular.

### - Youth centre

Prior to its demolition, the building that had housed the social club, had also been used by Lewisham Youth Service to run a youth club. It operated for 18 months and had a membership of about 80 young people per evening.

BCP leased part of its land to the Leisure and Lifestyle Centre to build a new Youth and Community gateway building to meet an evident need for youth services in the area. Funding for the new site was provided by Active England (£470,000), Sure Start's Children's Centre funding (£500,000) and Lewisham Council (£650,000) and this opened in spring 2007. BCP's success in raising these funds can be seen as a tribute

to their capacity to construct and maintain connections between different agencies. The building has a purpose-built nursery for 20 babies aged 2-18 months old, a reception, a multi-activity hall, changing area and a small computer training room as well as ancillary offices. BCP believes that the new youth and community centre will function as a gateway to the Leisure and Lifestyle Centre, encouraging young people to make more use of its facilities. Both the youth centre and the Leisure Centre will work hard to ensure that their roles and facilities are as complementary as they can be.



## Part two: Bellingham Leisure and Lifestyle Centre

### What the Centre provides

The core facilities at the Centre have been increasingly well-used since its inception. They provide a good range of what people expect from a modern health and fitness centre of this kind.

When the Centre opened in April 2004, an early event was an Open Day directed at Bellingham ward residents. 88 people attended and took part in free activities including karate, gym, group exercise classes and free junior activities including Rascals, Street Beat and football coaching. By the end of 2005 the Centre had 1,013 members from Bellingham ward, of which 841 were junior and 172 adult members. Clearly, however, the Centre attracts other users from Lewisham and beyond. By early 2007 the membership had risen to more than 10,000 members and the per annum site visits have grown from 14,000 before the redevelopment

to over 250,000. These are very positive figures.

The Centre is managed by Greenwich Leisure Limited (see panel).

### The gym

The gym at Bellingham is called a Wellness Premier Fitness Centre; this is a generic name that is used across all of Greenwich Leisure's sites. The Fitness Centre has cardiovascular equipment, a cardio theatre, resistance equipment, heart-rate training, a recovery area and free weights. The GP referral scheme includes personal training in using the gym. Supervised sessions lasting one hour are run for 11 – 15 year olds on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday after school and on Sunday afternoons.

## How the centre is run

As the building neared completion it became apparent that the board and the staff at BCP did not have the time or skills that would be necessary for the successful operation of the site. The appointment of a first rate team with wide experience and an established approach to the management of large sports and fitness facilities was undeniably required for an enterprise on this scale.

About eight months before completion, the board accepted a recommendation by Julian Rouse that the management of the site should be contracted out. Three firms made bids for the contract. The board eventually appointed Greenwich Leisure Limited, a social enterprise, which was selected because – among its other merits – it had a strong commitment to community outreach. Board members were concerned that the Healthy Living Centre could become just another leisure centre rather than a community resource. Hence, and in keeping with the wishes of locals, a concessionary rate was introduced.

The contract requires Greenwich Leisure to encourage local residents to use the Healthy Living Centre through offering the reduced prices for Bellingham residents.

Community outreach work which the Wates Foundation agreed to support for three years is being carried out by a Community Development Officer. Several new community initiatives have already started working with local agencies. These include Action for Jobs to provide courses for their clients at the Centre, a drugs awareness project based at the Centre over the summer of 2005, a Community Sports Leaders course for students at Catford High School and a GP referral scheme.

The Community Sports Leaders course leads to an award. It is offered to students as part of their year 11 P.E. Students who attend this course are offered advice about working in the leisure industry. Greenwich Leisure have links with London Leisure College that offers training for school leavers.

### **Rascals**

The soft play area, Rascals, is widely used and virtually all the parents of under-twelves that spoke to the researchers made regular use of it. It has on average 90 users per day. On a weekend this number can rise to 125. The weekend user figures do not include birthday parties with 15 attendees per party. With the increased usage of Rascals over school holidays and weekends it is estimated that there were some 52,490 child visits in its first year.

Accessing the Centre for their children did not necessarily mean that parents were using it for their own health and fitness needs. In other words, even getting people through the door is no guarantee that they will either be aware of what is on offer or that they will access classes and other facilities. However, there is a clear opportunity to build on Rascals to attract parents to take advantage of those other facilities themselves.

### **Football pitches**

There are four pitches of different sizes, three grass and one artificial, which are available for booking. The Centre also provides free football on the multi-use games area to the local youth on three nights per week. These are well attended by a very mixed multi-ethnic group of users. Currently the Centre supports the local youth community team South East United with free use of the games area and half price pitch hire. South East Utd players are made up of local young people between the ages of 13 and 17.

An initial experiment in free coaching sessions – part of Millwall Community Scheme 'Estates Football' – came to an end and a fee-based football-coaching scheme for 5 – 11 years did not attract sufficient users. However, with so many children in the area and wide popularity of football skills, the potential for such activities is clearly there.

### **Tennis and netball**

There are tennis and netball courts at the Centre and regular tennis coaching courses. Sure Start has recently begun offering netball to their members using the Centre's courts.

### **Fitness/health classes**

Classes are offered at three levels (beginner, intermediate and advanced) in aerobics, circuit-training, Pilates, steps, tri-class and jazz dancing. Classes can, of course, change in response to expressed needs and the facility that the Centre provides is well suited to a variety of uses.

### **Ladywell Gymnastics Club**

Ladywell Gymnastics Club is one of the country's leading gymnastics clubs with 650 members and has its own dedicated space within the building. It provides courses for children from age 2 to age 15. It also offers adult sessions. Classes are taught in blocks of ten weeks or eight weeks. All members must have a Club uniform after completing their first course of lessons. BCP recently raised funds to provide subsidised places for Bellingham children.

### **Junior fitness**

Junior gym sessions are run three times a week with an additional two Street Beat (junior group exercise) classes per week. More than 70 children attend these sessions. The Centre has also started to make links with local secondary schools in offering gym sessions to their pupils. Catford High School currently bring forty girls in two different sessions. One of these is directed at young women wishing to gain employment in the leisure industry. The Community Sports Leaders Award students have question and answer sessions with fitness instructors and Centre staff about their careers and experiences within the industry.

### **Crèche**

A crèche is available at a cost per two-hour session.

### **Holiday play scheme**

This is offered from 9 am to 5 pm, Monday to Friday in the school holidays and available at a subsidised rate for local residents.

## Part Three: Evaluation – the main findings

After Bellingham Leisure and Lifestyle Centre had been open a year, CPF and Bellingham Community Project (BCP) jointly commissioned the Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths College, University of London, to conduct an evaluation of the community development work carried out over the previous decade, to assess the issues that arose during the planning and building of the Centre, and to identify lessons that could be learned.

### Community development

The years since 1993 proved to be an exercise in commitment to the area involving hard work, savvy and more than a little tolerance to risk. Overcoming initial inertia was a major problem. Nevertheless once a start had been made, a synergy with local groups, organisations and activists was

created which helped attract further resources to the area.

CPF's support to the Bellingham Community Project throughout this whole period was exemplary.

The various ways in which the Foundation used its status in the charities field, and gave BCP access to first class expertise, have also been very significant in the development of BCP's work.

### Impacts upon the community

While the uptake of the facilities at the Centre during its first year was very positive over all, one of the aspects of the Centre that the researchers were asked to look at was its impact on different groups of people in Bellingham, for example young people, older

## Evaluating the project

In April 2005 City Parochial Foundation and Bellingham Community Project (BCP) jointly commissioned the Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths College, University of London, to conduct an evaluation of the Bellingham Leisure and Lifestyle Centre and the community work that had been carried out in the area. The main purposes of the evaluation were to:

► assess the impact of the Bellingham Project and the

Foundation's local area initiative on Bellingham specifically and Lewisham in general;

- identify the lessons that might be learned by BCP and the Foundation from this project;
- identify and assess the role of the Foundation in the development of BCP initiatives in Bellingham;
- report back to partners and local people on the Project's achievements.

## Methodology

A qualitative methodology was adopted combining in-depth interviews with staff, board members and managers of related local services, and interviews with local residents. 19 such interviews were conducted.

In addition five focus groups were held involving Centre users.

A household door-step survey was conducted in three streets - Randlesdown Road, Brookehowse Road and Knapmill Road, all close to the Leisure and Lifestyle Centre. This involved a brief questionnaire, designed to sample knowledge and use of the Leisure and Lifestyle Centre among locals and to engage in conversations

about the Centre and their health and leisure needs. 68 questionnaires were completed over three occasions – two daytime and one evening.

This research was augmented with a full review of materials including minutes of meetings of the BCP board and the Foundation's minutes on decisions relating to Bellingham. The business plan prepared by the McAlpine consultancy for BCP to support their initial funding application for a Healthy Living Centre, was reviewed as was the review of the business plan prepared by KPMG, and the business plan prepared by Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL) in support of their bid to manage the Centre.

people, people on benefits and low income and members of black and minority ethnic communities. Here the researchers comment briefly on how the Leisure Centre has impacted on these groups.

### **- Young and older people**

Many people the researchers spoke to felt that there was not enough in Bellingham for the young or older people to do. Certainly the researchers became aware of just how many older people there are in the area during the daytime part of their door-stepping exercise. Children and young people are everywhere in evidence. Thus a clear opening exists for the Centre to make a very positive impact on these groups.



The over-fifty club is running more activities for older people through BeGO (Bellingham Golden Oldies). BCP has raised the funds to run social events every week as well as Tea Dances fortnightly which attract over 40 people per event.

Membership of the leisure centre by people over 55 has now increased from 17 to 150. Other activities for older people are chair-based exercise and line dancing. BeGO is also organising a coach trip to Brighton in the summer. The Centre also has a GP referral service in place. While not exclusively for older residents these are clearly of benefit to older people. The Centre has a meeting/café area that is currently under-used and could potentially be used as a lunch club for older people. This could itself become a route to more direct fitness and health involvement.

Young people have always been a focus for the Leisure and Lifestyle centre due to Rascals and the holiday activities clubs other activities which are now supported through the Bellingham Gateway building which runs a youth club four nights a week as well as facilitating the local Scouts, Beaver groups and Girl Guides. The Gateway building also offers holiday activities throughout the year for 12 to 19 year olds. Sure Start has also been a major success within Bellingham in providing facilities and services for under 5s which are now being transferred over to the Children's Centre programme.

For young people the Centre offers a special category of membership. Local youth league teams have increasingly started to use the football pitches and the Centre also offers a junior group exercise class. Offering basketball at subsidised prices to teenagers is also being considered.

The Healthy Living Centre is now also working in partnership with other groups. Over the Christmas period they provided ice skating, Santa's Grotto for the local children as well as a holiday football course. These were free of charge to the local community as the facilities were given over free by GLL and the activities were sponsored by Neighbourhood Management and SureStart.

While there is thus provision to some level for both older people and the young, the researchers encountered many older people in the course of conducting the survey, who knew little or nothing about the Centre. Among these, however, there were certainly some that could clearly make use of provision given the right information, encouragement and individual support in getting to classes.

In the wake of issues such as children's and teenager's use of tobacco, alcohol and drugs, any local intervention aimed at including young people will inevitably raise strong hopes and expectations. While meeting these may be daunting, there is every reason why such contemporary needs should be kept high on the agenda.

### **- Ethnic minorities**

Statistics show that use by people from ethnic minorities has now reached 48%. Bellingham Ward has a population of 13,642 (Census, 2001). Nearly two thirds (62%; 8,420) are white British. The next largest ethnic group, slightly more than one in ten, is Black British: Caribbean (12%; 1,602), followed by Black British: African who account for slightly less than ten per cent of the population (9%; 1,225). BCP and GLL might consider whether people from ethnic minorities, particularly British Caribbean and British African are adequately represented among users. Better ethnic monitoring would help in identifying any areas of special need.

At the same time, BCP recognises the need to engage more black and minority ethnic people in the management of the project.

### **- Families on benefit**

Because attendance/membership records do not include data relating to this dimension, it is impossible to know how many users are on benefit. However, from the doorstep experience the researchers were left with the clear impression that the very poorest families on the estate believed that they could not afford attendance, other than, in some cases, to use Rascals. How far this belief was based in fact is an issue that could be established by community outreach work.

## **Managing the Centre**

The balance between long-term financial viability and local community commitments is not an easy one to strike. On the one hand Greenwich Leisure needs to be realistic and, to some extent, 'hard-headed' about ensuring that the attendance levels are sufficient in quantity and distribution across different membership categories over the long run. At the same time this need has to be balanced with the need to ensure that the local community is served.

There is, however, plenty of room for imaginative community outreach work and hopefully there may well be no contradiction between the two. The researchers found some evidence of anxiety about the priorities of the Centre's management among some locals. The pricing structure as represented in the Centre's initial information booklet, was also considered confusing by many the researchers spoke to. Nevertheless, as measures become better known and practices and policies develop, these should be ironed out.

Local opinions and impressions concerning what was on offer, the researchers found, were frequently faulty or were true of provision at an earlier point. This is probably fairly normal but there is clearly an important and on-going role for needs-assessments to sample local and other user needs and wishes. It would also be useful to develop a

consistent approach to communication between the Centre and the local community if the Foundation's fundamental concern to improve the quality of life for the least well off is to be served by this provision.

CPF's final approval to the £1.2 million capital grant to BCP made that approval subject to the Centre being self-financing within five years, including appropriate staffing, contingency and sinking fund, adequate plans for youth provision, confirmation of funding by other significant funders and *"unresolved conviction that the proposed development would benefit the community in Bellingham"*.

How that expectation will unfold in the future is difficult to say with certainty. However, the appointment of GLL has provided sustainability within the contract for ten years and the New Opportunities Fund revenue funding BCP are giving GLL as a management fee over the first five years will help to keep core costs low for Bellingham residents. Nevertheless, it is clear that other funds will need to be constantly raised for the very deprived.



## Lessons from Bellingham

- ▶ As with the original Community Centre at Bellingham, it is important to be able to think creatively in order to achieve really significant change.
- ▶ Close working between local agencies can produce chain reactions that benefit communities and their environments.
- ▶ In striking a balance between long-term viability and community benefits, good local knowledge is a vital ingredient.
- ▶ Developing a large capital project to serve a community is not impossible but the complexities should not be under-estimated.
- ▶ To make a success of it, a strong reputation and a good existing asset base is probably essential – land is of fundamental importance in the regeneration process.
- ▶ There were significant deficiencies with some of the advice leading to both delays and bid failure. With very large projects, the triangulation of advice (several opinions) should be used to safeguard against oversights and poor judgement.
- ▶ Having a well-networked executive team with a range of pertinent skills and areas of expertise is also essential. Sound legal advice and a first class grasp of contracts and contract law is particularly invaluable.
- ▶ With tight budgets and several different funders it is crucial to avoid over-spends. Appointing a very good build-project manager and taking the 'design and build' route can help in achieving this and in making significant savings.
- ▶ It is more advisable, however, to make an early appointment of a project manager who can then advise about the appointment of other consultants and an appropriate procurement route when undertaking a large capital build.
- ▶ Projects should not be started unless adequate funds – with contingency – are in place: a pitfall that BCP avoided.
- ▶ It is important to understand the risks of the building process and regularly update the Risk Register.
- ▶ Large ventures need effective professional management. The important thing is to be able to match this with commitment to social need.
- ▶ It is possible to make a major difference to the 'feel' of a neighbourhood: nearly everyone the researchers interviewed in the area said the Centre had greatly improved Bellingham's image.
- ▶ The youth centre and the Leisure Centre will have to work hard to ensure that the roles and facilities of the Healthy Living Centre and the Youth Centre are as complementary as they can be.
- ▶ There will be a recurring need to raise funds to ensure that the Centre can provide subsidised support to the least well-off local residents.
- ▶ There needs to be a consistent and continuing communications and consultation policy to ensure the needs are heard and considered if the Centre is to meet the needs of all local residents, particularly those who are disadvantaged.
- ▶ Ethnic monitoring needs to be improved.

# Conclusions

**Bellingham Community Project is a very innovative and efficient organisation. The decision in 1997 to change the direction of BCP and expand its vision was a risky one. However, the risk paid off: with only one full time and one part time member of staff, BCP raised funds to design and build a first class Healthy Living Centre in Bellingham and acted as the crucial element in stimulating other agencies to work in the area. The vital support by CPF across the contours of this risk represents a distinctive and possibly unique intervention.**

**It is also apparent that, in the broader frame of all of the activities of BCP, it has been a catalyst for numerous regenerative activities, each with their own knock-on benefits. The Healthy Living Centre is perhaps the most visible of these, yet the composite effects of BCP's activities over the past ten years – in many instances pre-dating national and local government interest in the area – has been to nourish other organisations and energise regenerative activity across a wide front.**

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**About  
City Parochial  
Foundation (CPF)  
and  
Trust for London  
(TfL)**

Established in 1891, CPF is one of the largest independent charitable foundations in London. It aims to enable and empower the poor of London to tackle poverty and its root causes, and to ensure that its funds reach those most in need.

Its sister body TfL, set up in 1986, aims to support small and emerging voluntary and community groups.

Occasionally, they fund research – as with this report – when it increases knowledge of these areas of work or other aspects of poverty in London. A particular interest is in work which has a clear application to policy and practice.

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