

Thurrock Education Commission

Report: September, 2013

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Foreword

Thurrock is changing and education is an important part of that change. The vision is to create a place of opportunity, enterprise and excellence where individuals, communities and businesses flourish. The borough is on a journey of lifting aspirations, expectations and achievements to meet this vision and transform the lives of people who live in Thurrock.

The Council is unashamedly ambitious for change and impatient for greater improvement. Although there has been significant progress in Thurrock over the last few years, not all young people are served well enough by the current school system. The Council, therefore, courageously decided to set up a Commission to review educational provision and to consider how progress and performance might be accelerated. We were asked to look in some detail at the current context, identifying both strengths and areas for development.

Between April and July 2013, we had the privilege of spending time in Thurrock and talking to a range of people with an interest in education. We are grateful for the time they gave us and were impressed with their commitment and passion for improving the lives of children and young people in Thurrock. A clear consensus of the challenges emerged and we built on this to make a number of recommendations.

We hope the Commission's report will support Thurrock in its determination to accelerate improvement. The success of recent years and the opportunities presented in the area by regeneration and the arts should encourage all involved in education in Thurrock to work together as a proud and confident community in shaping a better future for young people.

Christine Gilbert, Chair of Thurrock's Education Commission.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christine Gilbert". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

Robert Hill

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert Hill". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Remit, methodology and acknowledgements

Terms of reference

Thurrock's Education Commission was established by Thurrock Council as an independent commission to take a longer term look at the future of education in the borough. At the outset of the project in March 2013, the Commission's terms of reference were described in the following terms:

“The Commission will review educational provision in Thurrock to see how progress and performance might be accelerated for children and young people. It will have a particular focus on schools, looking in some detail at the current context, identifying both strengths and areas for development.”

Presentation to launch conference of the Commission

The Commission has been led by Professor Christine Gilbert CBE. Between 2006 and 2011, Christine was Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Education, Children's Services and Skills, at Ofsted. Prior to this, Christine was a local authority chief executive, director of education and secondary headteacher. She is currently visiting professor of education at the Institute of Education and working on a number of local and national projects. These have included chairing an independent Academies Commission, funded by the RSA and Pearson, which produced *Unleashing Greatness: Getting the best from an academised system* in January 2013.

Christine has been assisted by Robert Hill, a former senior government adviser on education and a visiting senior research fellow at King's College, London. Robert has recently carried out a review of the Welsh education system and has written a number of influential publications on school improvement, leadership and partnership. In March 2012 the National College for School Leadership published an authoritative study on the impact and leadership of academy chains prepared by a team led by Robert. He is currently supporting College programmes on the leadership of great pedagogy, the evaluation of teaching schools and, in a project co-sponsored with Ofsted, a study of the characteristics of outstanding leadership in the primary school sector.

Methodology

As Commissioners, we have collected and considered evidence from a wide range of different sources:

- in May 2013 we issued a call for evidence by inviting headteachers to comment on issues relating both to their own school and to broader school improvement issues in Thurrock (see Appendix A);
- through schools, the Council invited all parents and carers to submit their views by responding online to five questions about the quality of education in Thurrock and their priorities for making improvements (see Appendix B). An analysis of the 37 responses received, compiled by Thurrock Council for the Commission, is attached as Appendix C. In addition, the Commissioners also held a meeting with a group of parents of pupils at Warren Primary School in Chafford Hundred, Grays;
- we visited just under a third of all the schools in Thurrock. A list of all the schools visited is shown in Appendix D;
- we held a series of meetings with individuals and groups of governors, teachers, support staff, headteachers, principals, key partners, council officers and councillors;
- we attended scheduled sessions of the headteachers' briefing meetings and the seminar for governors and clerks, both organised by the local authority, and the council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee for children's services;
- we had access to relevant council policies and strategies; and
- drawing on spreadsheets and data summaries prepared by council officers and other statistics published by the Department for Education (DfE), we undertook a desk-top analysis of the performance of Thurrock schools.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to everyone who has made time to see us and share their views. In particular, we would like to express our appreciation to Vivien Cutler, Christine Graves, Sharon Hardy, Lewis Jones, and Lois Seanehia for their invaluable support in providing information, arranging visits and meetings, and taking notes.

Chapter 1: Introduction and overview

Background

The scale of change in the education system is dramatic. This is seen clearly in Thurrock where the majority of schools, both primary and secondary, are now academies and the education landscape is diverse and, some would say, fragmented. The expectation is that schools will use their greater autonomy and independence as academies to lead and manage more effectively, so that outcomes improve for children and young people. The Commission believes the ideal is that they operate as a community of schools, each independent but working best if connected to the rest of the system in Thurrock.

There has been significant improvement in education in Thurrock in recent years and there is much to admire in Thurrock's schools. However, more needs to be done to establish a system where learning and achievement are strong enough for all children to thrive. The Education Commission was set the task of reviewing provision to see how performance and progress might be accelerated. Such improvement is more likely to be sustained if there is broad ownership, both across the community and at school level, and so the Commission engaged a variety of partners in its review. This engagement included considering evidence and information from a wide range of sources, meetings with many individuals and groups, and several visits to Thurrock schools.

The Commission has cross-party support and was launched at an Education Summit, *Ambitious for the future*, in March 2013. This included a passionate introduction from Councillor John Kent, the Leader of the council, and a comprehensive presentation from Graham Farrant, the chief executive, setting out Thurrock's broader ambitions for the future. Councillor James Halden, the shadow portfolio member for children's services, was in attendance and positive about the initiative. Such cross-party support becomes ever more crucial in an area where there is significant political volatility and a fine balance between political parties.

Policy and political context

Thurrock Council's Community Strategy is based round five priorities.

- Create a great place for learning and opportunity
- Encourage and promote job creation and economic prosperity
- Build pride, responsibility and respect to create safer communities
- Improve health and well-being
- Protect and promote our clean and green environment

The first priority has cross-party support across the council. The leader of the Council told the Commission:

“Education is crucial to everything we do – it is our number one priority.”

Cllr John Kent

A similar view was expressed by the shadow portfolio holder for Children Services:

“The number one priority is to encourage young people to stay in education and give them higher expectations.”

Cllr James Halden

So both the main political parties support the creation of the Education Commission and are ambitious for Thurrock’s children and young people. Both are committed to a dedicated £1 million fund to support the implementation of agreed initiatives arising from the Commission’s recommendations. And both parties have agreed that creating a great place for learning and opportunity involves¹:

- ensuring that every place of learning is rated "good" or better;
- raising levels of aspirations and attainment so that local residents can take advantage of job opportunities in the local area; and
- supporting families to give children the best possible start in life.

This bipartisan approach provides a strong platform for building deep and lasting improvement in the education system. Moreover, at a time when local authority finances are under the severest of pressure, it should send a clear and positive signal to school leaders in Thurrock and to the whole community about the seriousness of the Council’s commitment to raising aspirations and attainment.

Thurrock’s population

Thurrock is growing fast: in 2011, its population was estimated to be around 157,000, and it is projected to increase to around 207,000 by 2033. It is also becoming more ethnically diverse, with more than 30 per cent of primary school pupils from a Black or minority ethnic group. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is slightly below the national average, and so is the proportion of children aged 0-15 in income-deprived households. However, it is significant that the majority of these are under 11 years old, and more than

¹ See Thurrock Community Strategy – see http://www.thurrock.gov.uk/i-know/content.php?page=our_priorities

half are under five. The concentration of children living in poverty varies greatly across the borough, with just six of the 20 Thurrock wards accounting for more than half of the total. Generally, these areas also have the lowest attainment.

The proportion of the population that is economically active is slightly higher than the national average but the working population tends to be employed in occupations requiring fewer skills and qualifications rather than in higher-level professional jobs. This reflects the fact that qualification levels of the population of Thurrock are significantly lower than the rest of the country.

Thurrock's unemployment rate is similar to the national figure, though higher than that for the Eastern Region and considerably higher in terms of youth unemployment.

Economic development and regeneration in Thurrock

Thurrock has exciting regeneration prospects with many interesting opportunities for young people. A number of high profile developments in Thurrock have the potential to change the life chances of young people living in the area and their families. The new London Gateway deep-water port and logistics park will generate 2,000 and 10,000 new jobs respectively – requiring skills and qualifications in engineering, ICT, logistics and supply chain management. High House Production Park is home to the Royal Opera House's production workshop, producing the sets and scenery for its Covent Garden stage; it also hosts the National Skills Academy, a new world-class production training venue for theatre, music and live events. This is a rich resource already highly valued by schools. The expansion of Lakeside Shopping Centre is expected to create a further 2,600 jobs, and the construction of a new campus for South Essex College in Grays will incorporate specialist workshop and studio spaces and a range of facilities linked to courses for technology, media and creative arts – including some higher education courses.

Meeting the skill needs of these developments will present local schools and colleges with a considerable challenge in the coming years, but will provide their pupils and students with a huge range of exciting new opportunities.

Schools in Thurrock

There has been much improvement in the educational achievement of pupils in Thurrock over the past six years² and commissioners were impressed with the work underway in many schools. Having lagged well behind average attainment levels, improvement has been faster than national rates in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), and in Key Stages 1, 2

² The summary of the performance of Thurrock schools covers the period up to July 2012. However, the full report also includes some information on preliminary headline results from 2013 tests and examinations.

and 4. Apart from Key Stage 2, Thurrock is now around or ahead of the national figure at each of these key stages. However, whilst Thurrock was approaching the national figure for the proportion of pupils achieving level 4 at KS2 in 2012, the proportion achieving level 5 was further behind. This is significant because pupils achieving at this level are more likely to achieve A/A* grade at GCSE. At KS4, the proportion of Thurrock pupils entered in 2012 for, and the proportion achieving, the English baccalaureate (EBacc) threshold was well below that for England. This is explained in chapter 3. Significantly, the proportion being entered for the full range of EBacc subjects is eight percentage points lower than the proportion achieving level 5 at KS2, which could suggest a lack of aspiration in the curriculum for more academically able students.

There is significant variation in performance between schools, and this is also reflected in Ofsted inspection judgements. Just over half of the primary schools are judged 'good' (up, impressively, from only nine in 2009), but only one is judged 'outstanding'. By comparison, 15 are judged 'satisfactory'/'requires improvement' and two are deemed 'inadequate'; four primary schools are below the DfE floor standard for level 4 in reading, writing and mathematics at KS2. In the secondary sector, half the schools (six) are judged 'outstanding', whilst three are judged 'good' and two 'satisfactory'/'requires improvement'; only one is below the KS4 floor standard. Both the special schools are judged 'outstanding'.

In terms of areas for improvement, analysis of inspection reports for primary schools judged 'satisfactory' or 'requiring improvement' highlights general concerns about assessment for learning, subject knowledge in English and mathematics, consistency in teaching and performance management. In schools judged by Ofsted to be 'satisfactory' or 'requiring improvement', performance management is rarely linked to the impact of teaching on pupils' progress. Schools showing improvement benefit from good governance. In schools on an improving trajectory, high aspirations were invariably evident and senior leaders had amassed an astute understanding of strengths and weaknesses based on perceptive analysis of classroom observations and regular analyses of performance.

The current shortage of outstanding primary schools may well limit the options for school-led support for improvement in Thurrock, so it will be important to support good schools to become better. It is also likely that many good primary schools are continuing to make strong progress on their improvement journey and may be judged outstanding at their next inspection.

Post-16 performance shows that the proportion of students in Thurrock institutions achieving three A*-E grades at A level – including A level equivalences – is higher than the English national figure, but drops below the national figure when the measure is just A levels (excluding equivalences). Although they match their peers nationally at KS4, Thurrock KS5 students underperform quite significantly on average points score per student and per

entry compared with the national average. Students in Thurrock overall gain a comparable number of A Level passes to other students in England, but rely more on vocational qualifications (equivalences) to do so, and gain lower grades. So Thurrock is a long way behind the national average in the number of students gaining three A levels at AAB grades in 'facilitating subjects' (those generally deemed necessary to gain entry at a Russell Group university) – just 1.6 per cent of A level students in Thurrock in 2012 compared with 7.4 per cent in state schools nationally.

Challenges to be overcome

Through its interviews, visits and meetings the Commission has identified six issues that it believes are holding back further and faster progress. Overcoming these challenges will be key to achieving Thurrock's ambitions for the future.

First, there is no overarching educational vision and strategy that is owned by all. All the key players – senior councillors in both of the main parties, senior officers, headteachers and key players such as those based at High House Production Park – are passionate about education and ambitious for the future of the borough's young people. They know that aspirations and expectations have to be raised, and they will not be satisfied until every child in Thurrock is learning and thriving in a school that is good or outstanding. But there is no overarching vision and strategy binding them together or providing a plan for how to deliver the shared goal. The Leader's passionate commitment to education and his interest in schools is hugely welcomed. At the same time, the relationship between schools and local authorities is undergoing a major change as a result of government policies, in particular the rapid growth of academies; the Council and school leaders in Thurrock need to review and agree their respective roles in the future, and the implications of that in practice.

Second, there is a lack of trust between headteachers and the local authority, so the relationship between the Council and heads does not provide the strong platform that is essential for working together to improve schools. Headteachers recognise the willingness of the new Director of Children's Services to listen harder and engage with schools more effectively but they remain sceptical that the department has the expertise or capacity to do this. Much of the problem is historical, and a few services (for example, data and performance analysis) remain highly valued and progress has been made in transforming others (for example, governor services), but issues remain to be resolved. Key amongst these are: creating an effective forum for bringing the Council and headteachers together; planning and providing sufficient school places; and finding effective ways for the Council to recognise and celebrate publicly the progress and achievement of Thurrock schools and pupils.

Third, there are tensions between some headteachers which affect how schools work with and trust each other; some of these arise from the first two challenges. Building relationships will be crucial to addressing all six challenges. Competition for pupils in some parts of the borough exacerbates tensions between schools and the Commission heard examples of schools competing for pupils without regard for the wider consequences. Competition between schools can sit productively side by side with collaboration if goals are shared and relationships strong. The school system in Thurrock is now diverse and very fragmented, with most schools part of a chain, federation or other form of academy cluster. Whilst partnerships of this sort can deliver strong and sustained school improvement, they also have limitations – and unless there is an explicit and shared Thurrock-wide perspective, schools will not all be working to a shared vision. We believe there is considerable interest, and even enthusiasm, from schools about working more collaboratively and the Council should use this as a lever for change and improvement.

There is already considerable evidence that suggests outcomes improve fastest, and children and young people benefit most, when schools work together to lead improvement and when they share concern and responsibility for all the children and young people in the area, not just for their own pupils. This means also ensuring that schools have the school-to-school support they need to improve and not only to share good practice but to create it. If better and more trusting collaboration were to be established, the ambition for all Thurrock schools to be good or outstanding would be more likely to be realised.

Fourth, although there has been significant improvement in Thurrock schools in recent years, to which the Council has contributed, there are weaknesses to be tackled in the school improvement system. Thurrock's current model draws on elements of a school-led approach to improvement but it is not rooted in 'schools leading schools'. Schools themselves need, increasingly, to take on the provision of school improvement services to other schools, with a forensic focus on the development of good teaching and learning at the core of their work. A number of changes are needed to move the current system away from parachuting in expertise and resources to fix a problem and towards facilitating schools to develop networks of support, peer learning and challenge, so that they develop their own capacity for self-improvement. We are convinced there is sufficient good practice in Thurrock schools to enable this to happen.

The role of governors is crucial to supporting and challenging the performance of their schools. As different models of governance develop in the growing number of academies and chains, it will be important that practice and experience is shared. The work of governors is more important than ever in a highly academised system and support for their role should be prioritised.

Fifth, the recruitment and retention of high quality teaching staff is vital, as the quality of teaching and learning remains the factor that has the greatest impact on the progress of pupils – but Thurrock faces the challenge of being located just outside London, so teachers earn less than in neighbouring boroughs. However, Thurrock has much to offer as an area and there should be more pride about what is being achieved in its schools. Many potential applicants know little about Thurrock, so a branding and marketing exercise is required, promoting the borough's major developments and its other benefits as an attractive location in which to live and work. There also needs to be a systematic approach to the full range of teacher recruitment and development opportunities to increase the supply of high quality staff for schools.

Sixth, and last, there is a need to lift aspiration across the community, and to persuade children, young people and their families – and, in some cases, their teachers and schools – that they can progress further, achieve more, and make more of the increasing opportunities in their fast-changing world. Thurrock is already a busy place where most people are in work – but it is about to become a lot more exciting, with a huge increase in the number and range of opportunities, from one of Europe's largest port and logistics developments to a whole range of arts, media and technology based activities. They all will demand higher-level skills and knowledge, so it is essential that children and young people are encouraged by everyone around them to make the most of their talents and abilities.

Recommendations

The report makes six key recommendations to support the acceleration of progress and performance in Thurrock and each of these is outlined in more detail in Chapter 5. The key recommendations are:

- build and communicate a compelling case for change and a powerful vision for education across the community in Thurrock that increases pride in what is being achieved and ambition for achieving even more
- redefine the role of the local authority, agree with partners what change means in practice and make sure services are provided efficiently
- grow the role of schools themselves as the leaders in supporting other schools to improve
- recruit and retain the best teachers and leaders by establishing greater pride in Thurrock
- use governors as key agents of support for improvement both within their own schools and across the school system in Thurrock
- recognise and celebrate education in Thurrock.

Recommendation 1: Build a compelling case for change and a powerful vision for education across the community in Thurrock that increases pride in what is being achieved and ambition for achieving even more

The Commission recommends that the council uses this report to trigger a borough-wide conversation about education in Thurrock, which builds pride in what is being achieved and raises aspirations and expectations for the future. There needs to be more widespread understanding of the improvements that have taken place in recent years but also of the journey that still needs to be undertaken. This ‘big conversation’ should involve everyone with an interest in education, including parents. It should include all those usually associated with schools but also key players that bring innovation and resources. Most particularly, that would mean engaging the cultural and creative players, represented so distinctively in Thurrock by High House Production Park enterprise, as well as the business sector, and higher education.

Organising the ‘big conversation’ is a complex task and the Commission recommends that the Leader of the Council sets up and chairs a formal alliance of key players to oversee the process. Thurrock Education Alliance would seek to accelerate and sustain transformation in education in Thurrock by:

- defining and refining the need for change
- producing and advocating a compelling and actionable vision for the future of education in Thurrock
- facilitating widespread engagement and interaction between those involved or interested in education in Thurrock.

Recommendation 2: Redefine the role of the local authority, agree with partners what change means in practice and make sure services are provided efficiently

Although the role of the local authority is changing, many of those to whom we spoke in Thurrock stressed its importance as the champion for the needs of local children. This entails being decisively on the side of parents too. The local authority still retains a number of important statutory responsibilities and with the agreement of schools can take on various supportive functions, though the Commission believes that these should be kept to a minimum in Thurrock. The Commission recommends that there is a detailed discussion with schools in Thurrock over the next few months about what they do themselves and how much they see the local authority doing. To undertake this task, the Commission recommends that a small time-limited task group be established, comprising senior management from the local authority, headteachers and governors to establish clarity about:

- the core functions of the local authority;

- the supporting functions of the local authority that are wanted by schools;
- how both are to be subject to monitoring and evaluation by schools.

An annual report on the services provided by the council should be presented to Thurrock Education Alliance.

The task group should also review the processes in place for communication between the council and schools.

As champions for the needs of children in Thurrock, however, the local authority should continue to capture local knowledge and intelligence by undertaking some scrutiny of education provision to ensure it is meeting the needs and interests of children and young people in the area. Based on this, accessible and easily readable data should be provided to governors and customised for each individual school.

The Commission also recommends that the council should produce an annual report on the quality of local education provision, which should be shared with schools and the community. It should also be sent to the Secretary of State so he receives early warnings of any emerging issues and addresses them through his relationship with academy trusts.

To reduce tensions and longstanding sores about the council's ability to plan well, it might want to consider setting up an independently chaired Board to plan and commission school places and provision at 16+. The Board should include representatives from schools or colleges.

Recommendation 3: Grow the role of schools themselves as the leaders in supporting other schools to improve

It is important to establish a framework for improvement in Thurrock that has widespread commitment from headteachers and governors. There is considerable appetite for working across schools to build individual and collective capacity and many schools spoke to us about this with real enthusiasm. The Commission recommends that, within three years, the council should phase out its provision of school improvement services and devolve them to a school led partnership, Thurrock Excellence Network.

It is exceptional for a local authority the size of Thurrock to have four teaching schools and the Commission recommends that this important resource is built securely into the new school improvement framework and used across the entire borough.

Charged with improving school performance and capacity in all schools across the borough, Thurrock Excellence Network should be established by March 2014. It should offer all schools access to a learning partnership rooted in peer learning and development. This Network would be subsidised by the local authority for the first three years of its life and thereafter would be self-financing.

As an immediate collaborative activity, the Commission recommends that the local authority and schools devise a funded programme to address recognised areas for development in schools in Thurrock. This programme should be up and running by March 2014. It should engage schools themselves in peer support and development.

The Commission proposes that the primary programme should target improvement in:

- assessment for learning and effective pupil feedback
- English
- Mathematics.

The secondary programme should focus on the quality of information, advice and guidance given to students by agreeing a protocol that should lead to better practice.

The Commission also recommends that the local authority and schools work together to improve the quality of performance management across all sectors, most particularly the ways in which it might be linked more securely to the impact of teaching on pupils' progress.

Finally, based on the model of the highly effective Good to Great initiative in London schools, a project should be developed in Thurrock involving good primary schools that are ambitious to become outstanding.³

Recommendation 4: Recruit and retain the best teachers and leaders by establishing greater pride in Thurrock

There is a need to establish greater pride in Thurrock itself and, more particularly, in education. The population is growing and the area has exciting regeneration prospects. The presence of the Royal Opera House in Thurrock has already had impact and receives enthusiastic acclamation from schools, as does the entire High House Production Park enterprise. They bring a rich resource to Thurrock. The Commission recommends that a communication strategy and plan are devised to capture the image of Thurrock as an

³ *Good to Great* is an initiative established by the London Leadership Strategy to support good secondary schools in their endeavour to become great. The programme helps schools continually to improve and develop practices that enable them to achieve 'outstanding' in their Ofsted inspections. It is targeted at secondary schools but Thurrock could develop its own model for primary schools.

interesting and vibrant place in which to live and work. This should attract teachers and leaders.

The Commission recommends the greater use of Teach First trainees in schools that meet the Teach First criteria. It is also recommending that the feasibility of a customised arts-based teacher-training programme for Thurrock, based on the Teach First model, be explored further.

The Commission saw the beginnings of good use of School Direct and recommends that it is used more extensively and strategically across the local authority to create a Thurrock School Direct offer and a clearing house that is accessible to all schools in Thurrock.

The Thurrock Excellence Network should be asked as a priority to develop a coherent approach to talent management and succession planning across Thurrock. The expertise of the teaching schools should be of value here. At the same time, the Network should look at the investment of some schools in teaching assistants and Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs) and support the creation of a development path for them to become teachers.

Recommendation 5: Use governors as key agents of support for improvement both within their own schools and across the school system in Thurrock

In an increasingly autonomous system, schools governors have a particularly important role to play in ensuring that each school is well managed and that senior leaders are held to account for improving both outcomes for pupils and school capacity. Governing bodies in Thurrock should be recognised as the key mechanism for ensuring school improvement is taking place and as the pivotal link between the school and the wider community.

The Commission recommends that the development of governors be prioritised and supported financially for the next three years. In collaboration with governors, an action plan for development and training should be devised. This may need to complement the service for governors, bought in by some schools, which now has high satisfaction ratings. Chairs and vice chairs of governing bodies should be offered an intensive induction programme and personal support, particularly in their first year.

The Commission also recommends that the local authority continues to supply information to each governing body, such as short updates of key educational issues, or signposts where these might be accessed, as well as clear data that enables the governing body to benchmark its school locally against London and the national context. The latter should be supported by the offer of training on interpreting schools' performance data.

Finally, the Commission recommends that governors, as part of their support and challenge role, make school review more open and inclusive, particularly of the local community.

The best schools in Thurrock know themselves well. They have effective systems and processes for monitoring and evaluation. These engage all key stakeholders and the findings feed directly into their school improvement plans. This sort of challenge is particularly important in a system with a high proportion of academies.

To encourage openness and engagement with parents and the community, schools should consider publishing a short annual report and providing a forum for discussing it in public. To support public confidence and in the interest of openness and transparency, the Commission recommends that each academy trust in Thurrock produces an annual report. These in turn should feed into the local authority's annual report of educational provision in Thurrock.

Recommendation 6: Recognise and celebrate education and achievements in Thurrock

The Commission believes there is much to commend in Thurrock but it is not recognised sufficiently locally, regionally or nationally. There should, therefore, be an explicit programme to recognise and celebrate what is happening in Thurrock.

Activities could include:

- creating a website with teachers of good practice in and across schools in Thurrock;
- using social media to celebrate key achievements;
- publishing case studies of interesting initiatives and projects;
- organising activities and competitions across schools for targeted groups of children and young people;
- establishing a Thurrock 'alumni' club of adults who had attended Thurrock schools; and
- organising an annual awards ceremony to showcase Thurrock excellence.

Structure of this report

Following this overview, the report is set as follows:

- Chapter 2 summarises the socio-economic and political context of Thurrock
- Chapter 3 provides a commentary on the current performance of Thurrock schools
- Chapter 4 analyses the challenges facing schools and education services in Thurrock
- Chapter 5 details recommendations on the way forward.

Chapter 2: The Thurrock context

Thurrock is growing fast. Its population is projected to increase by almost one third by 2033. It is also becoming more ethnically diverse, with more than 30 per cent of primary school pupils from a Black or minority ethnic group. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is slightly below the national average, and so is the proportion of children aged 0-15 in income-deprived households – but the majority of these are under 11 years old, and more than half are under five. The concentration of children living in poverty varies greatly across the borough, with just six of the 20 Thurrock wards accounting for more than half of the total. These areas also generally have the lowest educational attainment.

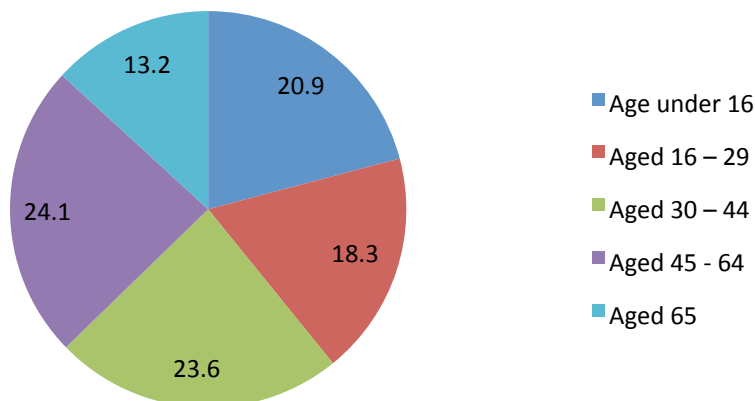
The proportion of the population that is economically active is slightly higher than the national average, though slightly lower than the figure for the Eastern Region. However, the working population tends to be employed in occupations requiring fewer skills and qualifications rather than in higher-level professional jobs. Thurrock's unemployment rate is similar to the national position, though the figure for youth unemployment is particularly challenging. At the same time, Thurrock has a number of exciting projects and regeneration initiatives that have the potential to change the life of young people and families living in the area. These will bring demands for higher skill levels.

Population profile

In 2011 Thurrock's population was estimated to be around 157,000 residents but it is a fast-growing borough⁴. It is projected that by 2033 the population will have grown to 207,000 – an increase of nearly a third. As Figure 2.1 shows, a fifth of the population is aged under 16. The highest percentage of under 16s in Thurrock is heavily clustered around the south of the Borough in the areas of Tilbury and St Chads, Chafford and North Stifford, South Chafford and Thurrock West and South Stifford.

⁴ See Thurrock Profile – Key facts (July 2012)

Figure 2.1: Population of Thurrock Council by age profile

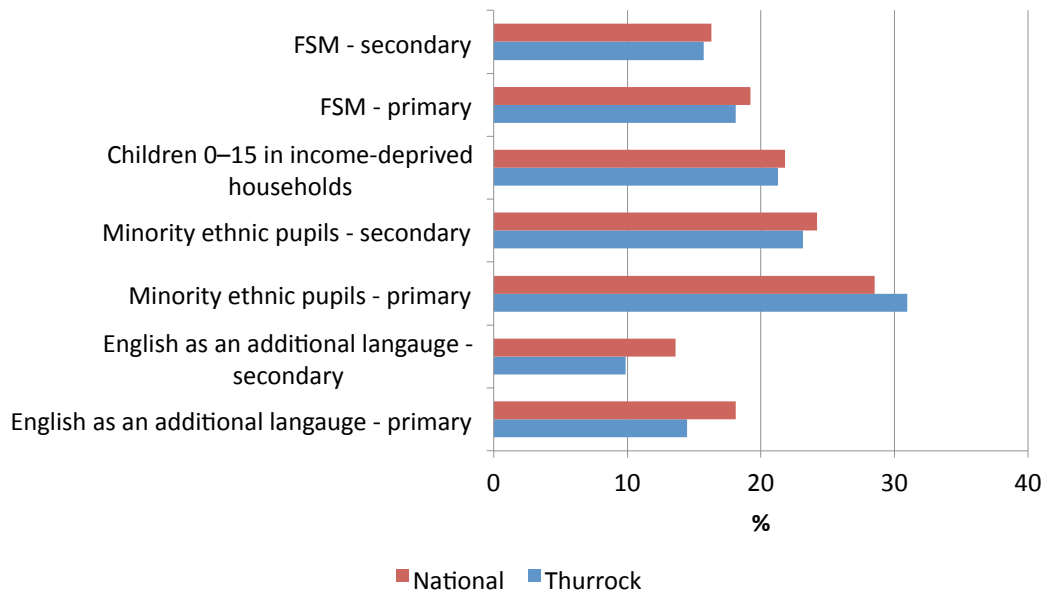


Source: Thurrock Profile – Key facts (July, 2012) http://www.thurrock.gov.uk/i-know/profile/pdf/our_thurrock_201207.pdf

Thurrock is also becoming a more ethnically diverse place in which to live and work. In 2001 the Black and minority ethnic population was estimated to be just 4.7 per cent. By 2009 this had risen to 12.5 per cent – still three percentage points below the figure for the whole of the United Kingdom. The largest Black and minority ethnic group in 2009 was Asian/Asian British, comprising 4.6 per cent of the population. More recent information from schools' census data shows rising ethnic diversity. Over 30 per cent of pupils in Thurrock primary schools are from a Black and minority ethnic group (higher than the national average), with the largest group being Black African pupils, who comprise 12.4 per cent of the primary school-age population⁵ - see Figure 2.2. The Commission was repeatedly told by headteachers that Nigerian parents have the highest expectations and ambitions.

⁵ See Office of National Statistics and Department for Education Statistical First Release SFR21/2013

Figure 2.2: Profile of Thurrock pupil population



Source: Office of National Statistics and Department for Education Statistical First Release SFR21/2013

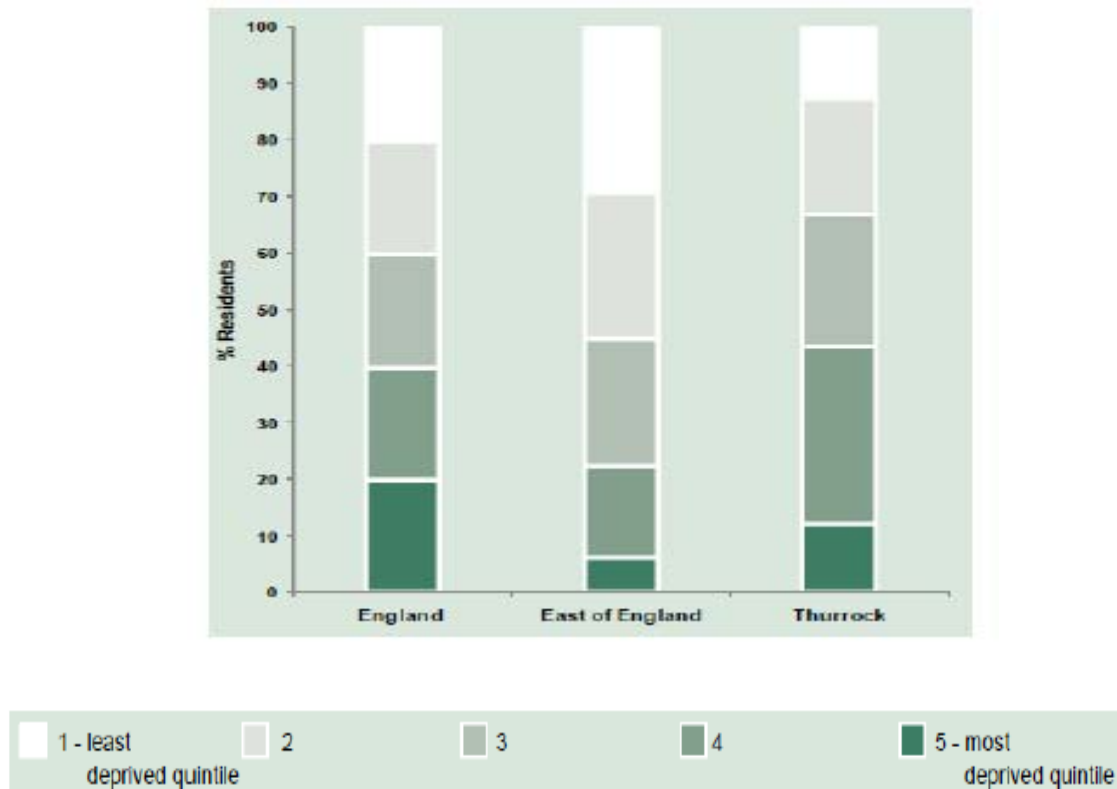
Socio-economic profile

The government in England uses the Index of Multiple Deprivation to assess relative levels of deprivation in local authorities – dividing up each local authority into a series of small areas known as Local Super Output Areas (LSOAs). Thurrock has five LSOAs that are among the 20 per cent most deprived in the country – they are located in the south and west of the borough. However, as Figure 2.3 illustrates, although proportionally fewer of Thurrock’s residents live in the most deprived areas compared with the national average, the borough has proportionally more residents living in the second most deprived quintile of LSOAs compared with the national average. Overall, as Figure 2.2 above shows, the proportion of children aged 0 to 15 in Thurrock who are living in an income-deprived household is, at just over 21 per cent, just below the national average. Similarly, levels of entitlement to free school meals (FSM) are also just below the national average.

The impact of household deprivation is significant (see Figure 2.4) because, in most cases, the areas of the borough that have the highest rates of child poverty also have: the lowest educational attainment; more people in poor health or with disabilities which prevent them from working; higher proportions of workless families; and higher numbers of adults who have poor basic skills or who lack qualifications. The main drivers of child poverty in

Thurrock are worklessness, low pay, low skills, low attainment, and the impact of the economic downturn⁶.

Figure 2.3: Percentage of Thurrock population by quintile of Local Super Output Areas, compared with national and regional percentages



Source: Thurrock Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) – Strategic refresh 2012

Figure 2.4: Child poverty in Thurrock

A fifth of children in Thurrock are growing up in poverty, according to the official definition of child poverty. The vast majority is under the age of 11 and more than half are under the age of 5. Child poverty in Thurrock is slightly below the national rate but greater than the average for the East of England...

...Child poverty exists everywhere in Thurrock but is most concentrated in the deprived parts of the borough. Just six of the 20 Thurrock wards account for more than half of all children living in poverty. Differences between the highest and lowest areas of deprivation are extreme with Tilbury Riverside and Thurrock Park having 55 per cent of

⁶ See *Thurrock Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) – Strategic refresh 2012*

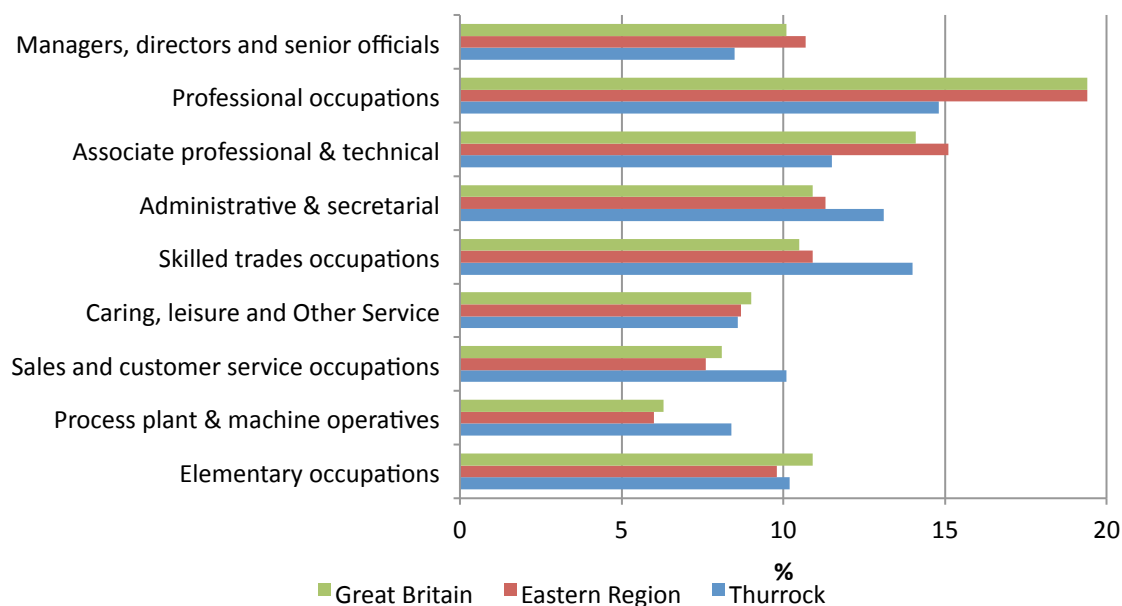
children living in poverty, 25 times the proportion of the lowest child poverty rate, which is in Corringham and Fobbing.

Source: Thurrock Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) – Strategic refresh 2012

Employment and skills profile

At 78.8 per cent, the proportion of the population that is economically active in Thurrock is slightly higher than the national average though slightly lower than the comparable figure for the Eastern Region. However, as Figure 2.5 shows, the working population tends to be employed in occupations that require fewer skills and qualifications. The proportion of those working in professional jobs in Thurrock is a quarter below the national average, whilst the proportion in occupations covering skilled trades, administrative and secretarial, process plant and machine operative and sales and customer service jobs, is above the national average.

Figure 2.5: Employment by occupation of all Thurrock residents aged 16 or over in employment, April 2012 to March 2013



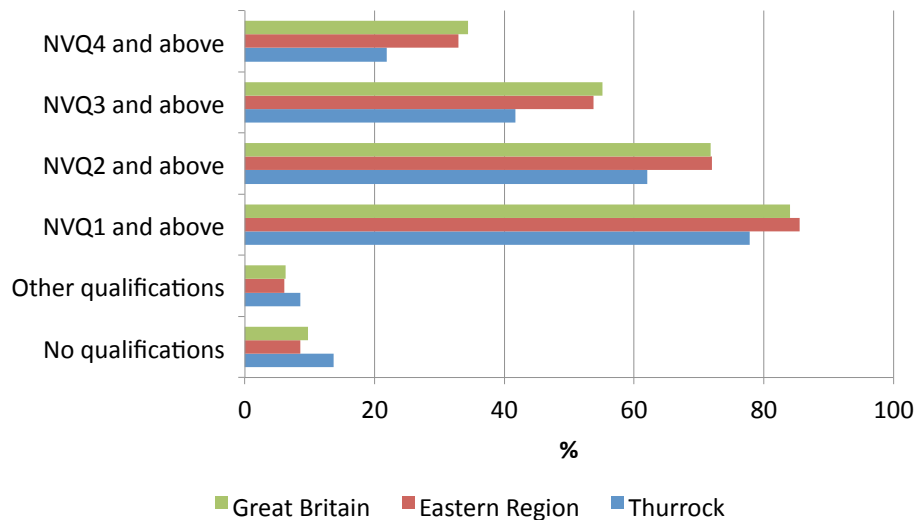
Source: Office for National Statistics

<http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157204/report.aspx?town=Thurrock>

The pattern of distribution shows that, by a significant margin, the Thurrock population is not as qualified as the rest of the country. As Figure 2.6 highlights, the proportion of residents qualified to Level 4 or above is only two-thirds of the national figure, whilst the proportion with no qualifications is two-fifths higher than the national figure and three-

fifths higher than the Eastern Region. This underlines the seriousness of the challenge facing the education system in Thurrock.

Figure 2.6: Qualification levels of the population aged 16-64 in Thurrock , January to December 2012

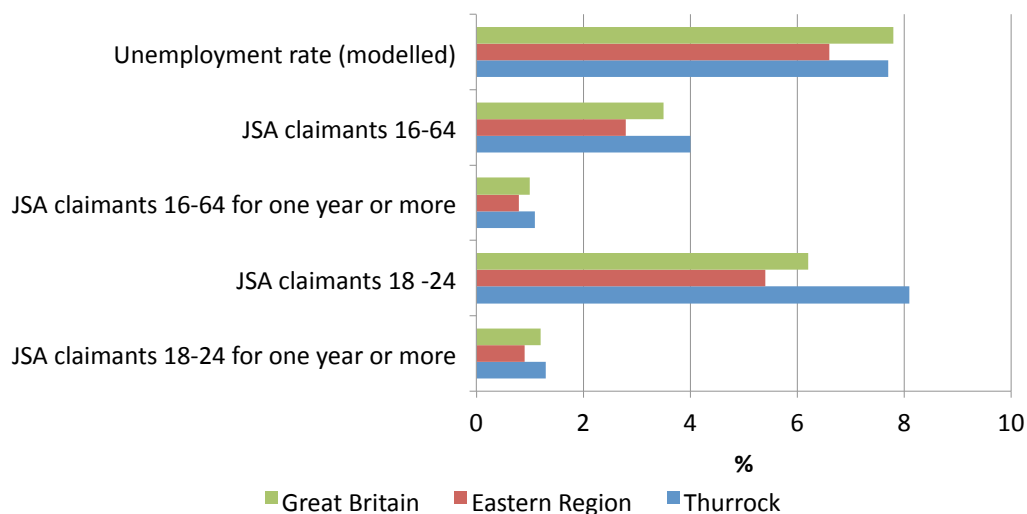


Source: Office for National Statistics

<http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157204/report.aspx?town=Thurrock>

The unemployment rate in Thurrock is similar to the rate in the rest of the country, though higher than in the Eastern Region (see Figure 2.7). However, the proportion of the population claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) is higher than the national rate and the position on youth unemployment is particularly challenging. Over a thousand 18-24 year olds are claiming JSA, which represents over eight per cent of the total cohort and nearly two percentage points, or a third, higher than the comparable national figure.

Figure 2.7: Unemployment and claimant rates in Thurrock, as at June 2013



Source: Office for National Statistics

<http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157204/report.aspx?town=Thurrock>, as accessed on 22nd July 2013.

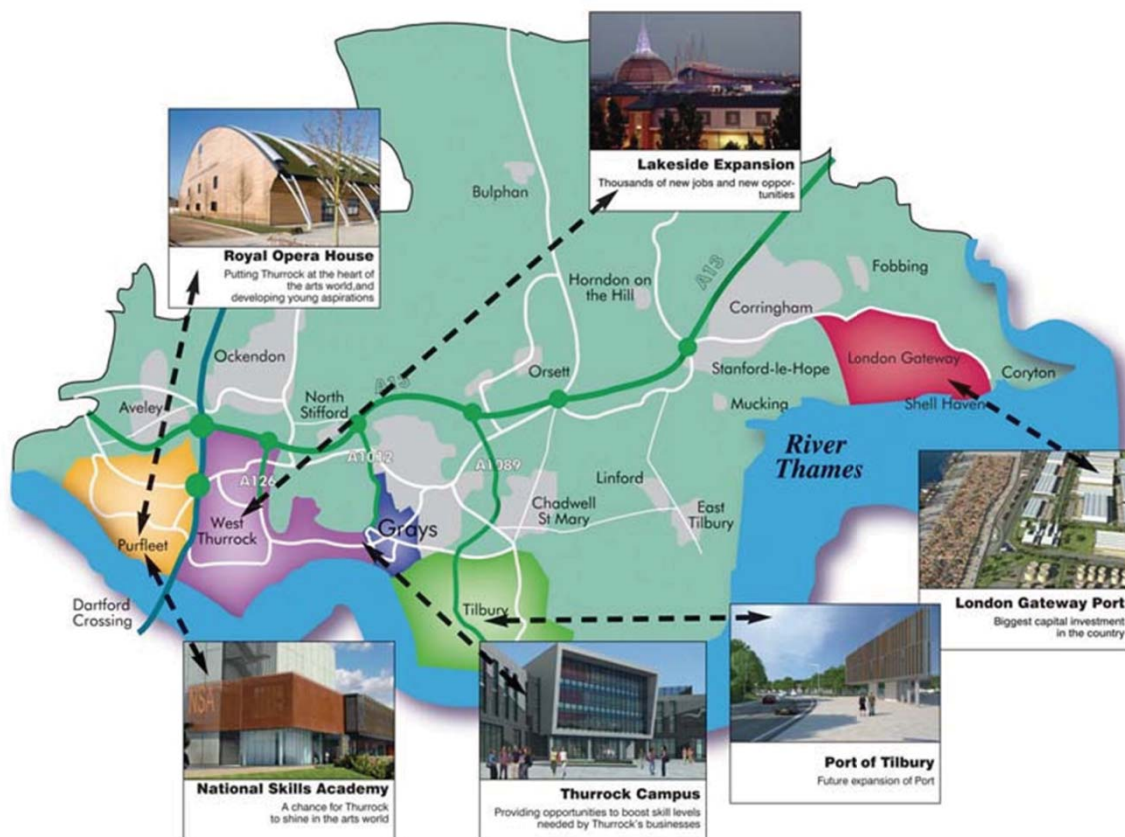
Economic development and regeneration

As Figure 2.8 illustrates, there are a number of exciting and high profile projects being developed in Thurrock that have the potential to change the life chances of young people and their families living in the area – but they will bring new demands for higher skill levels:

- the development of London Gateway is heralding the construction of a large new deep-water port for the biggest container ships. The new port will be supported by the expansion of London Gateway’s logistics park to become the largest in Europe. This will result in 2,000 new jobs in the port and 10,000 in the logistics park. These jobs will require skills and degrees in engineering, ICT, logistics and supply chain management – not the manual work traditionally associated with port employment. Along with the expansion of the Port of Tilbury, this will make Thurrock’s ports and infrastructure the hub for a large proportion of the country’s imports and exports;
- High House Production Park is home to the Royal Opera House's (ROH) production workshop, where world-class artists produce the sets and scenery required for the ROH’s Covent Garden stage. High House also hosts the National Skills Academy (the Backstage Centre), a new world-class production training venue for theatre, music and live events. This is a state-of-the-art, purpose-built technical centre providing full offstage and backstage technical and rehearsal facilities for large-scale live theatre and music events, including arena tours, operas and commercial musicals;

- the expansion of Lakeside Shopping Centre is expected to result in the creation of a further 2,600 jobs; and
- the construction of a new campus for South Essex College in the middle of Grays will incorporate specialist workshop and studio spaces linked to courses for technology, media and creative arts, and facilities for art, design, logistics, engineering and IT courses. The new campus, due to open in September 2014, will also be the base for some higher education courses.

Figure 2.8: Regeneration hubs in Thurrock



Chapter 3: The school context in Thurrock

Thurrock has a large number of academies, well in excess of most other authorities. The school landscape in Thurrock is diverse and fragmented.

There has been a considerable improvement in the educational achievement of pupils in Thurrock over the past six years. It has been faster than the national rate of improvement. From lagging well behind national average attainment levels, Thurrock is now generally around or ahead of the national average at each of the key stages. This is an impressive achievement. However, whilst Thurrock was approaching the national figure for the proportion of pupils achieving level 4 at KS2 in 2012, the proportion achieving level 5 was further behind; and, at KS4, the proportion of Thurrock pupils entered for, and the proportion achieving, the English baccalaureate (EBacc) threshold in 2012 was well below that for England. Significantly, the proportion being entered for the full range of EBacc subjects is eight percentage points lower than the proportion achieving level 5 at KS2, which could suggest a lack of aspiration in the curriculum for the more academically able students. However, it could also indicate that headteachers do not think it is an appropriate curriculum.

There is significant variation in performance between schools, and this is also reflected in Ofsted inspection judgements. Just over half (21) of the primary schools are judged 'good' (up from only nine in 2009), but only one is judged 'outstanding'. By comparison, 15 are judged 'satisfactory'/'requires improvement' and two are deemed 'inadequate'; four primary schools are below the DfE floor standard for level 4 in reading, writing and mathematics at KS2. In the secondary sector, half the schools (six) are judged 'outstanding', whilst three are judged 'good' and two 'satisfactory'/'requires improvement'; only one is below the KS4 floor standard. Both the special schools are judged 'outstanding'.

Key issues of concern in primary schools categorised as 'satisfactory' or 'requiring improvement' are assessment for learning, subject knowledge in English and Mathematics, and consistency in teaching. There is also a more general concern about performance management which is rarely linked to the impact of teaching on pupils' progress. Schools making the strongest progress have good governance. Those which have progressed to 'good' have high expectations. They also have an astute understanding of strengths and weaknesses based on perceptive classroom observations and regular analyses of performance.

Organisation of schools

There are 52 schools in Thurrock covering the different phases as follows:

- 40 primary schools, including two infant and two junior schools (though one infant and its junior counterpart are part of an academy trust overseen by an executive head and the other infant and junior are planning to join together in a federation in September 2014);

- 10 secondary schools; and
- two special schools.

As of July 2013, only 14 of the 52 schools were community schools maintained by the local authority; one of these was consulting on becoming an academy and another is scheduled to become an academy sponsored by a secondary school within Thurrock later in 2013. All of the local authority maintained schools are primary schools – apart from one (Treetops) which is a special school.

Nine of the 52 schools have a faith connection (six Catholic and three Church of England). Seven of these schools are voluntary aided, one is voluntary controlled and one is a Church of England foundation school.

The rest of the schools have become either sponsored or converter academies. Figure 3.1 below describes how many of these academies are part of multi or umbrella academy trusts. The academy chains are a mix of those led by educational sponsors embracing groups of academies that extend beyond Thurrock, and those that at this point just comprise schools in Thurrock.

The proportion of schools that have become academies is high relative to the rest of the country where around 60 per cent of secondary schools and 10 percent of primary schools have become academies. In part, this is because the local authority has supported and facilitated schools to convert to academy status. It has also been open in welcoming academy sponsors to play a significant role in school improvement and has been supportive of strong schools in the borough sponsoring other schools that need improvement support. However, freedom from the local authority was also often cited as the motivation for moving to academy status.

Figure 3.1: List of Thurrock schools by form of governance

Local authority maintained community schools	Faith schools	Academy Chains	Free-standing academy converters
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arthur Bugler Inf* • Arthur Bugler Jun • Aveley • Bonnygate • Chadwell St Mary • Corringham^ • Deneholm • Giffards+ • Little Thurrock 	<p>Catholic diocese voluntary aided</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holy Cross • St Joseph's • St Mary's • St Thomas • Grays Convent <p>Church of England</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bulphan (voluntary controlled) 	<p>Harris Federation multi-academy trust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chafford Hundred Secondary • Harris Primary Academy Chafford Hundred <p>Ormiston</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beacon Hill • Belmont Castle • Gable Hall • Kenningtons • Ockendon • Shaw • West Thurrock* • William Edwards • Woodside <p>* Conversion takes effect in August</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manor# • Somers Heath • Stifford Clays • Treetops • Tudor Court • Warren <p>*Looking to amalgamate with Arthur Bugler Junior in September 2014 ^Gable Hall sponsoring the school as an academy October 2013 +Seeking to convert and join the umbrella trust # The Gateway sponsoring the school as an academy April 2014</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horndon on the Hill (foundation) • Orsett (voluntary aided) 	<p>Academies Trust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Gateway Academy (sponsored) • Gateway Learning Community Free School • Lansdowne Primary Academy (sponsored) • Herringham Primary Academy (converter) • Ormiston Park (sponsored) <p>REAch2 multi-academy trust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purfleet Primary (sponsored) <p>The Academy Transformation Trust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Hathaway Academy (sponsored) <p>St Clare's Co-operative Academy Trust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • St Clare's School (Converter) • East Tilbury Inf (Converter) • East Tilbury Junior (sponsored) to amalgamate • Thameside Primary (sponsored) • Stanford-le-Hope 	<p>2013</p>
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		(sponsored) Catalyst Academy Trust (The Dilkes multi-academy trust) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dilkes Academy (converter) • Quarry Hill (sponsored) • Benyon (sponsored) Umbrella Trust <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graham James (converter) • Hassenbrook (converter) • Abbots Hall (converter) 	
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Source: Thurrock Council (amended)

In 2013, 83 per cent of parents were successful in obtaining their top primary school preference for their child. That is an increase on the corresponding figure for 2011 and 2012 (respectively 75 and 80 per cent), higher than for London (81 per cent) but lower than for Essex (94 per cent).

In terms of secondary school preferences, 84 per cent of parents got their first preference in 2013 – the same level as in 2012. That is higher than for London (81 per cent) but lower than for England as a whole (86.7 per cent)⁷.

Organisation of post-16 education and training

The organisation of post-16 education and training is also quite diverse and complex – as Figure 3.2 describes. Fifty per cent of those continuing in learning in September 2012 went to a sixth form college – 44 per cent to Palmers College. Thirty-seven per cent progressed to further education – 23 per cent to South Essex College. Thirteen per cent stayed in school sixth forms and this proportion is rising as the majority of local secondary schools use academy freedoms to offer post-16 learning⁸.

In addition to the provision within the borough, some 442 students in 2012/13 went outside Thurrock for their post-16 education and training. Nearly two thirds of these students went

⁷ The position on school preferences also need to take account of 67 parents choosing to send their child to a grammar school outside Thurrock.

⁸ Thurrock post-16 strategy

to either the South Essex College campuses at Basildon or Southend (which offer courses in construction and motor vehicle mechanics) or to South East Essex Sixth Form College – which has campuses in Benfleet and Basildon.

Figure 3.2: Post-16 education and training provision in Thurrock, by estimated places for 2013/14

Provider	Estimated total nos in 2013/14	Form of provision
Beacon Hill School	16	Mainly commissioned provision for special needs students
Chafford Hundred Campus Business and Enterprise College	186	Second year of full level 3 academic offer and some vocational courses – also offers level 2.
Gable Hall School	92	Catering for post-16 also from St Clere’s and Hassenbrook. Range of level 3 academic courses and some vocational courses. In addition, level 1 vocational courses delivered by South Essex College in workshops on site
The Gateway Academy	55	Level 3 academic and vocational courses
The Ockenden Academy	30	Studio School in first year offering post-16 provision and a range of A levels
Ormiston Park Academy	100	Only vocational courses at present but intending to offer A level
Palmer’s College	2,071	Mainly level 3 academic courses but also offering level 2 and 3 vocational, and GCSE English and mathematics
South Essex College – Thurrock Campus	1,200	Vocational provision at all levels at Woodview campus. Academic courses on other campuses – for example, at Southend
Thurrock Borough Council	44	Mainly specialist provision for NEETs
Treetops School	47	Specialist provision for students with special needs
Total	3,841	

Sources: UCAS Progress estimated numbers for 2013/14 as supplied by Thurrock Council along with additional material supplied by Thurrock Council

At the end of 2011, 83 per cent of 16 and 17 year olds were in education and work-based learning compared with 88 per cent nationally⁹. However, Thurrock Council’s

⁹ ONS/DfE Statistical First Release: 22/2013 revised

'Intended Destination Report' places Thurrock in a strong position as the Raising Participation Age requirements and targets come into force. As of July 2013, all but one year 11 student had a positive intended destination recorded for September 2013¹⁰. However, there remains a challenge for the Council to ensure that young people do not drop out and by age 17 are not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET).

The proportion of 16 to 18 year olds who are NEET in Thurrock has been falling faster than the national average. The level of 16-18 year old NEETs in February 2013 was 5.9 per cent, slightly lower than the benchmark both for statistical neighbours and England as a whole¹¹.

School performance

At the time that this report was being written, complete and validated data for 2013 standard attainments tests (SATs) were not available. Accordingly, the charts and commentary that follow examine, for the most part, performance up to 2012. The local authority has, however, provided access to headline unvalidated data for 2013 test and exam results, so headline details and observations have been added at the end of each section based on this data.

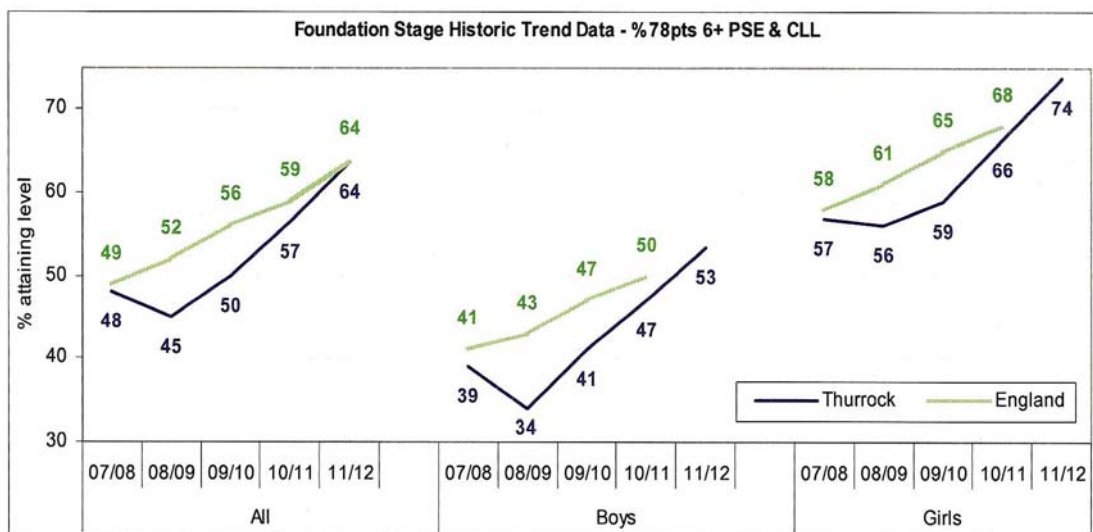
School performance – Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

The performance of five year olds is currently scored by reference to the proportion who achieve at least 78 points across the EYFS with at least six points in each of the scales in 'Personal, social and emotional development' and 'Communication, language and literacy'. On this score, Thurrock five year olds are achieving in line with the national average, as Figure 3.3 shows. Given that many primary schools reported significant levels of problems with general communication skills and cultural deprivation in respect of children coming into school this is an encouraging picture. The performance of girls outstrips that of boys – which is also in line with national trends.

¹⁰ Thurrock post-16 strategy

¹¹ Thurrock post-16 strategy

Figure 3.3: Levels of achievement in the Early Years Foundation Stage in Thurrock compared with the national average



Source: Thurrock Council based on ONS/DfE SFR23/2012

In 2013, the basis for measuring EYFS outcomes changed. Unvalidated data indicate that 53 per cent of children attained a 'good level of development' compared with a projected 52 per cent nationally.

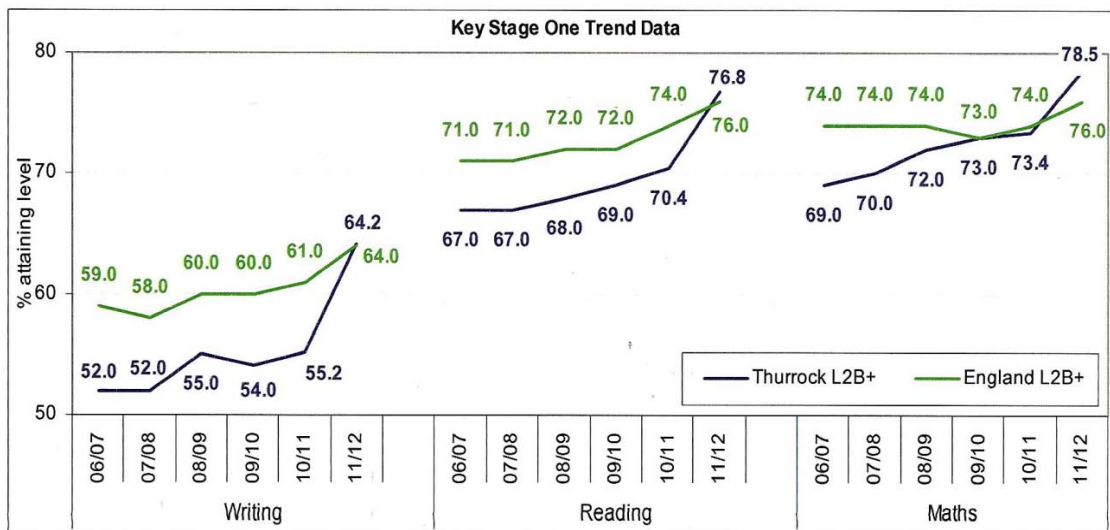
School performance – Key Stage 1

The performance of Thurrock pupils at KS1, as measured by the proportion of pupils achieving level 2B, is in line with the national average for writing and above the national average for reading and mathematics – as shown in Figure 3.4 below. One explanation for the relative drop off in performance at KS2 as suggested by primary headteachers, is that assessments at KS1, which are made by teachers, have not been as rigorous as they need to be. Within the time available, we have not been able to evaluate whether this is an issue or not.

The percentage of pupils (58 per cent) reaching the required standard of phonic decoding is also in line with the national average – although the performance of white pupils lags four percentage points behind the borough average and nineteen points behind that of Black pupils¹².

¹² See SFR21/2012

Figure 3.4: Levels of achievement at Key Stage 1 in Thurrock, compared with the national average



Source: Thurrock Council based on ONS/DfE SFR21/2012

In 2013, overall performance at level 2b remained broadly in line with the national average, though the proportion of pupils achieving level 3 is four percentage points below the national average for writing and mathematics and five percentage points for reading. The percentage of pupils ‘passing’ the phonics decoding test increased significantly to 72 per cent.

School performance – Key Stage 2

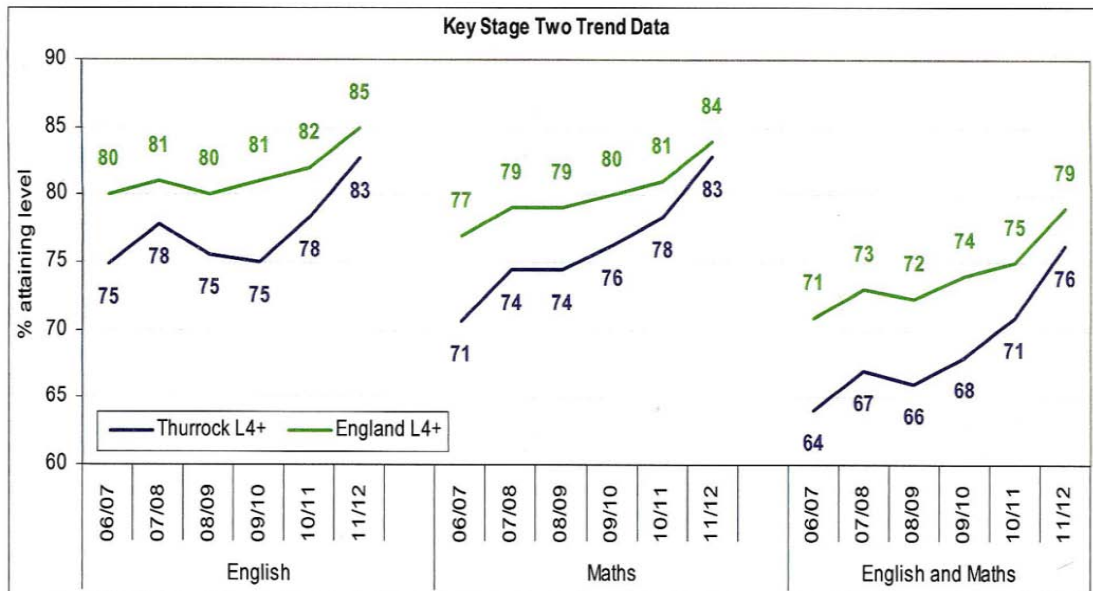
In recent years, schools in Thurrock have significantly reduced the historical performance gap at KS2 between their pupils and the national average. In 2012, Thurrock lagged behind the national average by three percentage points in terms of the proportion of pupils achieving level 4 in both English and mathematics (see Figure 3.5) This compared with a gap of seven points in 2007. As at KS1, girls are performing more strongly than boys. There is a 16 percentage point difference between pupils on Free School Meals (FSM) and other pupils, which is the same as the national average, as is the proportion of pupils making two levels of progress in English. The corresponding figure for progress in mathematics was two percentage points below the England average.

An area where there is still a larger gap is level 5 performance – this measure is important because pupils achieving level 5 are much more likely to go on to achieve an A/A* grade at GCSE in mathematics and English. The proportion of pupils in Thurrock achieving level 5 in both English and mathematics (22.6 per cent) was over four percentage points below the national average and six points adrift in English.

The results from four Thurrock primary schools in 2012 put them below the government’s minimum or ‘floor’ target for pupil achievement at KS2. Five schools were more than 10 percentage points below their School and Local Authority Target (SaLT) for achieving level 4

in English and mathematics. Ten schools were more than 10 percentage points below their Fischer Family Trust (FFT)-D target¹³. However, six schools exceeded their SaLT and FFT-D targets by more than 10 percentage points (five schools achieving this on both measures).

Figure 3.5: Levels of achievement at Key Stage 2 in Thurrock, compared with the national average



Source: Thurrock Council based on ONS/DfE SFR33/2012

The proportion of pupils achieving level 4 in reading, writing and mathematics has continued to improve in 2013 but looks set to be around one percentage point below the projected national average, rising to two percentage points in terms of the percentage students achieving level 4 in all three aspects. The significant gap between Thurrock and the rest of the country, in terms of the proportion achieving level 5, is still present – particularly in respect of reading (projected seven percentage point gap) and writing (projected five percentage point gap). The results from 2013 place four primary schools below the government’s targets, the same number as last year though one of the primary schools has moved out of this category and another has taken its place.

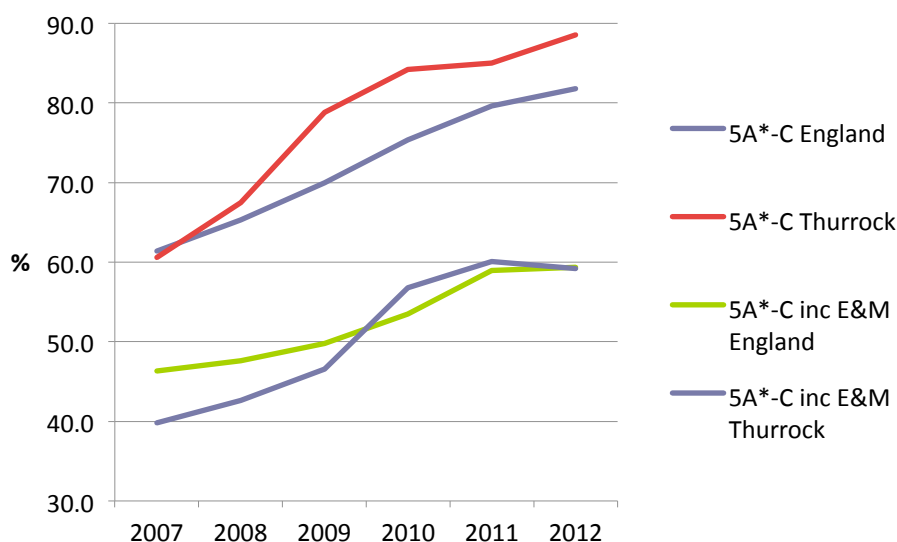
School performance – Key Stage 4

In 2012, the percentage of pupils achieving 5 GCSE grade A*-Cs including English and mathematics and GCSE equivalents was in line with the national average (see Figure 3.6). Thurrock secondaries were slightly under the national average in terms of the proportion of pupils making three levels of progress in English but above the national average by six percentage points in mathematics. There was a 14 percentage point gap between the performance of FSM and other pupils but this was smaller than the gap nationally – by a margin of nearly three percentage points.

¹³ Fischer FamilyTrust D data projects the results that can be expected at the end of a Key Stage if pupils make the same progress as similar pupils in the top quartile of similar schools.

In two Thurrock secondary schools, the proportion of pupils achieving five A*-C grades including English and mathematics fell below the floor target (40 per cent) set by the government. Three schools exceeded their SaLT targets, but seven missed them by between three and seven percentage points which may indicate there is a problem with accurately tracking and assessing pupil progress. However, the issue of projecting pupils' GCSE performance in both 2012 and 2013 has been complicated by issues relating to changes in grade boundaries – particularly in English.

Figure 3.6: Proportion of students achieving 5 A*-C grades, including English and mathematics and GCSE equivalents in Thurrock, compared with the national average



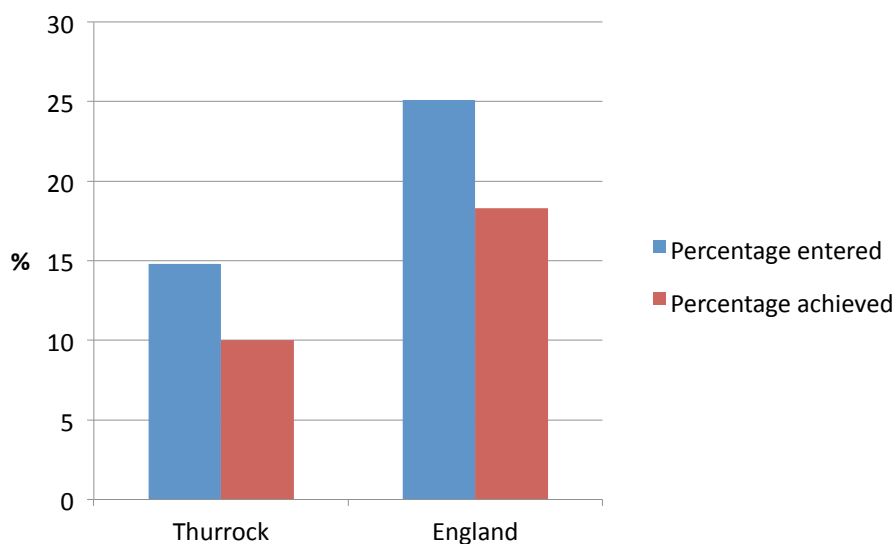
Source: ONS/DfE SFR02/2013 Additional tables

The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) is a contentious performance measure. It reports achievement in GCSE (or regulated iGCSE) English, mathematics, sciences, a language (including Latin, classical Greek or ancient Hebrew) and a humanities subject (history or geography). Many schools argue that the EBacc does not reflect a curriculum that is appropriate for their student cohort. However, with the reduction in the extent to which GCSE equivalents will count in school performance tables from 2014 and as the emphasis shifts on to a more academically orientated qualifications system, the EBacc provides a crude pointer of how schools could be judged in the future. The EBacc also demonstrates the proportion of students that are following a more academic pathway, which is significant in terms of entry into higher education.

Figure 3.7 shows that a significantly lower proportion of students in Thurrock is being entered for the full range of EBacc subjects than the average nationally. Significantly, the proportion being entered is eight percentage points below the percentage of pupils achieving level 5 at KS2. This could suggest that there is a lack of aspiration in the curriculum

for the more able students. However, more positively, the unvalidated data for 2013 show a nine per cent improvement in Thurrock's EBacc results.

Figure 3.7: Proportion of students entering and achieving the English baccalaureate threshold in 2012 in Thurrock, compared with the national average



Source: ONS/DfE SFR02/2013 Additional tables

The provisional data for 2013 also indicate a 0.3 percentage point increase on last year's achievement for the proportion of students achieving 5 A* - C grades, including English and mathematics. Six of the 10 ten schools registered an improvement on this measure and only one secondary school is now below the government's floor targets.

Ofsted inspection judgements

Another way of looking at the performance of schools is to review the judgements made by Ofsted in their inspections. In the primary sector only one school is judged 'outstanding'. However, just over half the primary schools are assessed as 'good', which represents a significant improvement on the position in 2009 when only nine primary schools were in that category. In the last two years alone, the percentage of primary schools judged 'good' or better has moved from 33 to 56 per cent. However, 15 schools are considered by Ofsted to be 'requiring improvement' or 'satisfactory' and two to be 'inadequate'. This leaves the borough still a long way from its stated aim for all schools in the borough to be 'good' or better.

In the secondary sector, half the schools are judged 'outstanding' with three considered 'good' and two 'requiring improvement' or 'satisfactory'. The two special schools are both classified as 'outstanding'.

Figure 3.8: Categorisation of schools in Thurrock, by Ofsted judgements as at July 2013

	Outstanding	Good	Requiring Improvement/ Satisfactory	Inadequate
Primary*	1	21	15	2
Secondary	6**	3	2	
Special	2		1***	

Notes: *Gateway primary school not yet inspected; **Includes Palmers College; ***Pupil Referral Unit

Source: Thurrock Council

An analysis (Humphrys, 2013) of Ofsted inspection reports from Thurrock schools judged 'satisfactory' or 'requires improvement' (a description which replaced 'satisfactory' in 2012) has identified the main areas where improvements were needed. A brief analysis of the inspection history of these schools revealed that very few of them had been good schools, a number had been in categories of concern and a small number had experienced significant staff changes. A number of common threads about current practice emerged from the reports and, in many cases, these difficulties were long standing:

- The first, and perhaps most important, relates to the extent to which teachers are able to assess pupils' learning, monitor their progress and design demanding tasks to maximise learning.
- The second main area relating to teaching is that of subject knowledge in English and mathematics.
- There are other significant concerns in methodology, for example teacher exposition and questioning, where intervention in teaching is needed, but these tend to relate to a minority of schools rather than the majority.
- Leadership, management and governance in these schools have two main weaknesses. The strategies used to secure improvement have not yet achieved consistency in teaching. This is often because senior leaders do not have the skills to analyse the impact of teaching on learning and do not always measure performance in relation to the progress children make. Without consistently high quality teaching, children's progress will remain erratic and high standards will not be achieved and sustained. A second area of concern, not unconnected, is that of performance management. Linking performance management securely to the impact of teaching on pupils' progress is rarely done.

Those 'satisfactory' or 'requiring improvement' schools showing the strongest signs of recovery have good leadership. Those that have become Academies are benefitting from expertise in good governance, as are those schools where the local authority has strengthened the governing body through, for example, the establishment of a Progress Board (as explained in Chapter 4).

A further analysis (Humphrys, 2013) was commissioned by the local authority to examine Ofsted inspection reports on seven Thurrock primary schools judged to be good, all of which

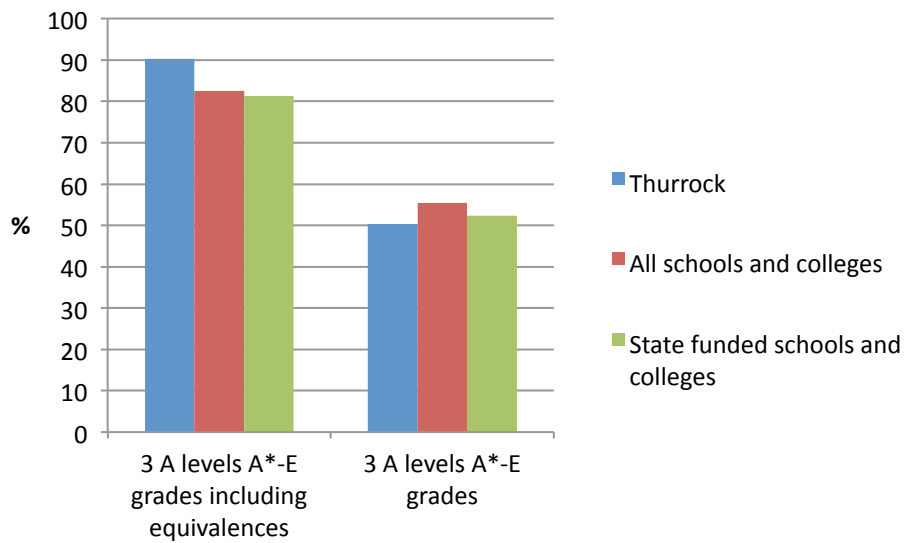
had been judged only satisfactory at their previous inspection. This concluded that, whilst the circumstances and contexts of the seven schools differ considerably, there are many similarities in the good practice that secured improved outcomes for the children in these schools:

- Detailed assessments of children’s work, regular and rigorous monitoring of progress and designing tasks to build on previous learning led to good progress and higher standards for most children. These aspects of teaching emerged more strongly where teaching had been monitored effectively and teachers held to account for the standards children attained. Teachers had high aspirations for the children and were single minded in their aim to enable every child to do well. In most schools teachers and teaching assistants were well supported and given appropriate training to enable them to teach effectively.
- Leadership, management and governance in these good schools were relentless in their efforts to bring about improvement, ambitious about what they expected of themselves, the staff and children, and clear about how they would achieve their aims. Linking performance to pupils’ progress and making sure that training and pay were also part of this equation helped to achieve a level of consistency in the quality of teaching.
- In most cases, the senior leaders had acquired an astute understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their schools, based on perceptive classroom observations and regular analyses of performance. The insightful knowledge that they had gained enabled them to set a clear agenda for improvement.
- The ‘light-touch’ support from the local authority was judged to be timely and helpful in all cases.

Post 16 performance

The proportion of students in Thurrock institutions achieving three A*-E grades at A level – including A level equivalences – is higher than for other schools in England, as Figure 3.9 shows. However, when the measure is just A levels (i.e. excluding equivalences), Thurrock starts to lag behind the national average.

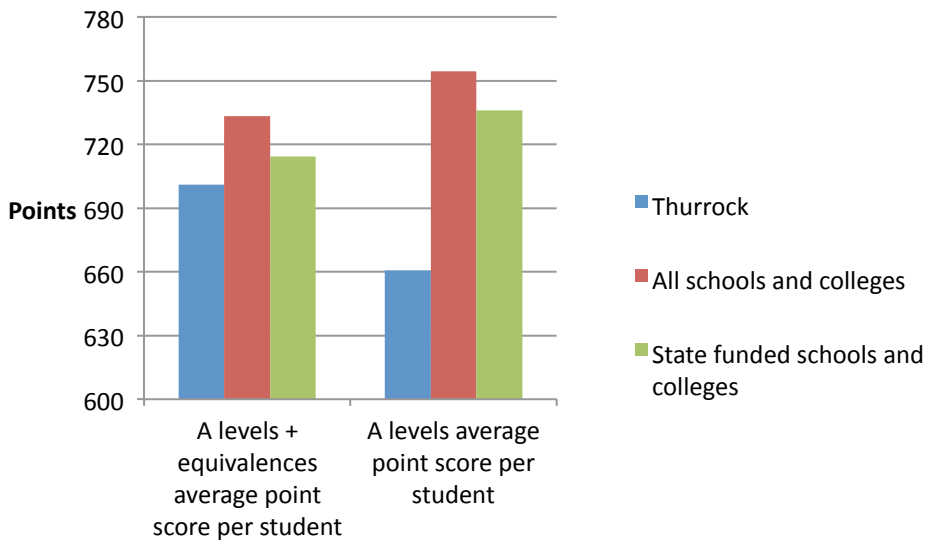
Figure 3.9: Percentage of KS5 students achieving three passes at A level at grades A*-E, with and without A level equivalences



Source: DfE KS5 Performance Tables 2012

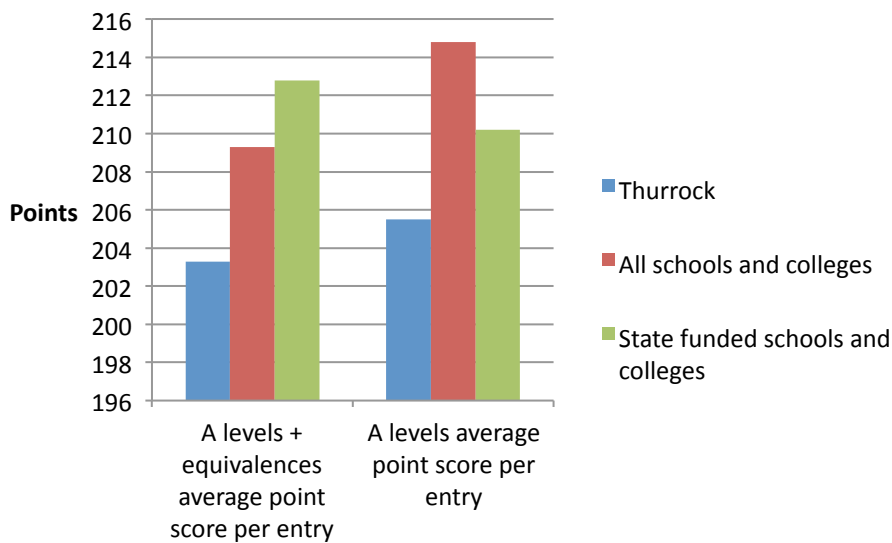
The position becomes starker when comparisons are made using average point scores per student and average points per entry – see Figures 3.10 and 3.11. On these measures Thurrock KS5 students are underperforming quite significantly relative to the national average, even though at KS4 Thurrock students have on average matched their peers nationally. Students in Thurrock are overall gaining a comparable level of A level passes to other students in England, but they are relying more on vocational qualifications (equivalences) to do so and are passing at a lower grade.

Figure 3.10: Average A level point score per student, with and without A level equivalences



Source: DfE KS5 Performance Tables 2012

Figure 3.11: Average point score per A level entry, with and without A level equivalences



Source: DfE KS5 Performance Tables 2012

Given this position, it is not surprising to find that Thurrock is a long way behind in terms of the proportion of its students achieving three A levels at AAB grades in facilitating subjects¹⁴. Just 1.6 per cent of A level students in Thurrock achieved this measure in 2012 compared with 7.4 per cent in state maintained schools nationally (and 9.5 per cent for all schools)¹⁵. So while in 2011 49.4 per cent of sixth form students in Thurrock progressed to higher education, Thurrock was in the bottom ten per cent of local authorities in terms of

¹⁴ Facilitating subjects are those that are generally deemed necessary to gain entry to a degree course at a Russell Group university.

¹⁵ DfE KS5 Performance Tables 2012

state school pupils being accepted into higher education at the most selective (Russell Group) universities and Oxbridge¹⁶.

Preliminary analyses of the 2013 A Level results indicate improving average points scores in some institutions, but the projected overall average points score per student and the proportion of students gaining three A*-E grades look like being significantly down on 2012 levels. However, there were five Oxbridge entrants from Thurrock this summer, four from Palmer's College and one from the Harris Academy Chafford Hundred. A third of Chafford Hundred's sixth-form students are progressing to a Russell Group university.

¹⁶ Thurrock post-16 strategy

Chapter 4: Challenges

Chapter 3 highlighted the progress that children and schools in Thurrock are making, as well as identifying areas where performance was lagging behind where it needed to be. Headteachers value the passionate commitment of the Leader of the Council to education and very much appreciate his visits to schools but Thurrock's history of political volatility makes them anxious. At the same time, headteachers recognise the willingness of the new Director of Children's Services to embrace change and work differently but remain sceptical that the department has the capacity or resources to back up this good intent. This section explores some of the challenges which the Commission considers are holding back further and faster progress. From our interviews, visits and meetings we have identified six challenges. These are:

- *the absence of an overarching educational vision and strategy owned by all*
- *a lack of trust between headteachers and the local authority*
- *tensions between some headteachers*
- *school improvement*
- *recruitment and retention of teaching staff*
- *a lack of aspiration and progression.*

1. The absence of an overarching educational vision and strategy owned by all

It is clear to us that the councillors responsible for leading the council – both those forming the administration and those in opposition – are ambitious for the future of the young people of their borough. They are passionate about education and they know that aspirations and expectations have to be raised. They will not be satisfied until every child in Thurrock is learning well in a school that is good or outstanding.

It is also evident that senior officers share that commitment to the future. They are proud of the progress that has been made but are under no illusions about the further improvements that are needed.

And many headteachers, several of whom have worked in Thurrock for a long time, care not just about their own school but about the future prospects and life chances of all young people in Thurrock.

All these key players share a common objective: to improve radically the quality of education and the standards of achievement in Thurrock. However, there is no overarching educational vision and strategy that is binding them together or providing a route map for how they are going to deliver the shared goal. Although there have been recognisable, recent improvements, there is too much of a disconnection between those responsible for leading and managing the council and those on the ground responsible for leading education. Typical of the comments we received from headteachers were the following:

“Schools are not entirely sure what the strategic plan is for the local authority and therefore feel there is no real path to follow.”

Secondary headteacher

“There is no clear direction coming from the local authority and there is continuing confusion about who to talk to and when [to influence decisions].”

Secondary school head

“There is no real strategic direction.”

Primary headteacher

One councillor whom we spoke to recognised that *“there was not a vision for Thurrock children”* and another accepted that *“the end point has not been clearly enough defined”*.

Two headteachers sit on the Children’s Partnership Board which approves and reviews the Children and Young People’s Plan. This sets out educational priorities and actions. However, headteachers as a whole appear to be either unaware of the plan or do not feel any affinity with or ownership of it. The same is true of the council’s Community Strategy.

The lack of strategic cohesion does not just apply to agreeing overall aims and objectives; it also applies to specific policy areas. Heads rightly or wrongly feel that key strategies are not developed, agreed and carried through. For example, the absence of a strategy for special educational needs (SEN) pupils is particularly keenly felt. Heads are frustrated by the fact that a lot of effort went into developing a SEN document, under a previous Director of Children’s Services, but it was then *“never distributed and implemented in schools”*. The lack of strategy shows itself in differing approaches being taken towards commissioning or providing for SEN students post-14 through to age 25.

Similarly, we heard criticism from several schools about the local authority’s strategic capability in planning school places. Much of the criticism relates to experiences in the past but this has had the effect of making schools cynical of current planning. One group of heads told us that *“The pupil place plan data is seen as not being credible”*. This is a view that was confirmed by a councillor who told us:

“The West of the Borough has more houses being built but not enough schools are in place to match the demand.”

The primary headteacher of a school that had a difficult history but had been turned round gave us a very specific example of poor place planning. Just a few days before the end of the summer term in 2012, the school had been told that it was to have another reception class the following September. This meant the head had to find another teacher with very little notice. The head was able to do this but felt that the authority had failed to appreciate the importance to the school of ensuring that every teacher appointed was of high quality and not just being taken on because the post had to be filled. Other headteachers offered similar examples of poor place planning. The Council believes it now has a strong plan in place but the Director recognises that it will only gain credibility over time.

Even when a strategy on an issue is being drawn up – as it was in the spring and summer of 2013 in relation to school improvement – it is not clear to us that headteachers always have the opportunity to play a major part in shaping the strategy. The new Director is determined that this will be the case in the future.

The authority is perceived as being reactive rather than proactive:

“There is no long-term policy, only short term actions.”

Primary headteacher

“The LA tries to do too many things and so none get done well. They don’t prioritise.”

Secondary headteacher

Underlying this whole challenge is the sense that at a time when local authorities’ role in education and supporting schools is changing rapidly, Thurrock has not thought through and agreed with its headteachers what roles the authority should undertake and what resources and skills it needs to undertake them. We return to this theme in Chapter 5.

2. There is a lack of trust between headteachers and the local authority

The lack of strategic coherence and cohesion is compounded by a lack of trust between headteachers and the local authority. While headteachers respect particular officers within the authority, appreciate some of the support they have received and recognise the commitment of the new Director to working differently, the relationship between the authority and heads does not currently provide as strong a platform as it should for working together to improve schools. As one councillor we interviewed acknowledged:

“There has previously been a poor relationship between schools and the local authority.”

Councillor

A significant part of the problem is historical caused by changing political administrations and by a rapid succession of people filling the senior posts within the local authority, both at director and chief executive levels. At one point, there were five different Directors of Children’s Services in three years.

“There have been a ridiculous number of changes – we don’t know who is in charge.”

Primary headteacher

Heads have also noticed infighting between council staff as they have vied for position in a diminishing organisation, which has not sent out good messages.

The history also includes examples of schools that have lost trust because of the way that they feel they have been treated over specific capital projects. One secondary head described how the school had had a poor experience with the local authority over a sixth form centre. The school considered that the authority had reneged on its commitment and so the school had to look elsewhere for funding – *“It left a very bad feeling.”* Another school

described how the abandonment of a rebuilding and refurbishment project was not handled well – *“There was no ‘closure’ meeting to discuss what should happen now.”* Both schools and the department must try to put these incidents behind them and work together to build trust and confidence.

Some heads considered that more recently relationships had improved. *“It has been infinitely better over the past few years,”* one secondary head said. There was also some sympathy for the local authority’s predicament. Heads are aware of the impact of funding reductions. As one head put it:

“It is difficult to expect much of the local authority given the huge cuts they had to take.”

Secondary headteacher

However, schools are also all too aware of the impact of the cuts on their own position:

“The local authority is too small to be effective and some services are not available. Staff cuts in the authority have meant that the appropriate advice and support is not available to schools.”

Secondary and primary headteachers

“The local authority has cut down massively on school improvement personnel.”

Secondary headteacher

The result is that the services provided by the local authority to schools are seen as a mixed bag. Some services, such as data analysis, are highly valued:

“The LA has a strong data team with high calibre information, making it easy to see how other schools are performing.”

Secondary headteacher

“The school purchases the data service from the local authority which has been beneficial.”

Secondary headteacher

Views on school improvement support are more mixed, as the commentary on the next challenge will describe. But some schools do welcome the support provided by the authority’s assessment team which, according to one primary head, is always there “to provide information and guidance”. However, in other areas schools are more critical of the authority’s performance:

“They rarely follow through on things even when they have been discussed and decisions taken. It is still a struggle for the local authority to undertake prosecutions for poor attendance even though they gave a commitment they would do so.”

Secondary headteacher

Similarly, for schools that are still community schools or buy into the authority's service, there is frustration at having to use educational psychologists specified by the authority rather than being able to commission expertise themselves.

The potential of what it is possible to achieve with schools if the authority is responsive to what they need and want is shown by recent developments in governor services. A significant number of schools have bought back into the governor training programmes and satisfaction is high. The combination of a capable new officer and a reduction in the cost of the services has led to the number of schools purchasing governor services from the authority rise in 2012/13 from eight to 26.

The particular issue that symbolises the poor structural relationship between heads and the authority is the heads' briefing which is run twice a term and is convened by the authority. The following are typical of the comments we received:

"I don't get much out of going to headteachers' meetings. I attend now and again to show solidarity with other headteachers".

Secondary headteacher

"Headteacher briefings are a waste of time and so too are the email briefings that come through. They are tired, dull and boring."

Primary headteacher

The main problem is that heads perceive the information provided at the meetings as late and behind the curve. Rather than helping them to think about issues that are currently in their in-tray or are high on the government's policy agenda, the meetings deal with matters heads have already addressed.

"We are always told what has happened rather than what is coming down the road or about the thinking going on at national level."

Primary headteacher

"They are either top down briefings of little timely relevance or 'intelligence-gathering' which never translates into anything of value."

Primary headteacher

Heads find the separate meetings which they convene among themselves¹⁷ to be more useful.

Another symptom of the authority's poor relationship with schools is its failure to do more to recognise and support the progress and achievement that is taking place. Others made the same point:

"The local authority doesn't know how to celebrate success. They seem to take no pride in the achievements of their schools."

¹⁷ There are separate groups for primary and secondary heads.

Secondary headteacher

Actually, councillors and senior officers are extremely proud of the progress that is being made in Thurrock schools, but the fact that this is not appreciated, understood or visibly demonstrated illustrates the gulf between headteachers and the authority.

It is important to build on the new Director's willingness to work differently but crucial too for the department to listen hard to the views of schools and make sure it does what it has promised to do efficiently.

3. Tensions between headteachers

The third challenge relates to how schools work with and trust each other. In many ways the problems on this front flow from the first two challenges.

As Figure 3.1, shows, the school system in Thurrock is now diverse and fragmented. Most schools are now part of a chain, federation or other form of academy cluster. Formal and structured partnerships of this sort have the potential to deliver really strong and sustained school improvement but such an approach also has its limitations. Progress between different school families may be uneven. Learning can get trapped within a school grouping, rather than being shared across all schools in the borough. Furthermore, unless there is an explicit Thurrock-wide perspective, schools will not all be working to shared objectives and common core strategies.

At the same time as the number of formal groupings has grown, support for less formal cluster working across the borough, which the authority had funded and encouraged, has diminished. However, we were given examples of continuing joint working between schools in the Lakeside and Northeast clusters¹⁸. This work is now largely organised and sustained by the schools themselves. There is, however, still some local authority funding going to projects highlighted by locality groups as needing support. For example the Lakeside cluster identified a need for development of writing and put in a bid which the authority supported by allocating £10,000 from its 'Early English Development' budget. The Lakeside cluster schools also contribute £1,000 per school to their collective work and have organised themselves into a series of hubs which take the lead on different issues such as modern foreign languages, science and literacy. Activity includes joint inset training sessions, commissioning a gap analysis and organising children's authors to come into schools.

In the Northeast cluster, heads meet together on a six weekly basis, share professional development sessions and have implemented a programme of mentoring and coaching for all their schools. This has involved joint observations and feedback sessions and appointing and training coaches who are quality assured by the cluster to provide support in schools across the cluster. There has also been a cluster policy on attendance and joint work with the secondary schools on the transition of pupils from primary to secondary school. At least one of the secondary schools has made its science labs available for primary students.

¹⁸ There are four school locality groups in Thurrock: Central, Tilbury and Chadwell, Lakeside and North East.

However, some headteachers pointed out that “*collegiality was broken*” for many schools that were not clustered into formal federations or academy chains. Schools in some areas are on their own and, given how important school-to-school working is for professional development and school improvement, this is not a healthy position to be in.

Schools that are not in one of the ‘families’ or academy chains are considering (somewhat nervously in some cases) where their future lies. They mostly recognise that it makes sense for both educational and financial reasons to work together with other schools, but they also want to retain their identity and avoid, as they perceive it, being ‘swallowed up’ by an academy chain. Indeed, there are, as one primary head put it, “issues” around the larger chains.

The Commission was also told that increasing competition for pupils was having an impact on schools’ willingness to work with each other. It became clear to us that, generally, where there were plenty of pupils for school places in a particular locality, relationships between schools were positive. However, where there were too many school places, relationships were often poor. We heard several anecdotes about poor behaviour from schools desperate to increase numbers.

Another problem mentioned by more than one school was the way some heads were opting out of collaborative forums or only collaborating with other schools on their terms. So as well as a need for greater trust between heads and the local authority “*Trust needs to thrive between schools*”, as one head put it. It is important that schools do not act in a selfish manner, without regard for the potentially damaging consequences for neighbouring schools and their pupils.

Potentially the answer to some of the fragmentation could lie in the work of teaching school alliances¹⁹. Thurrock is a small education authority but already has four teaching schools. This is very impressive and could prove extremely valuable. Treetops Special School, Harris Chafford Hundred Academy, Dilkes Academy and Beacon Hill Academy have been designated and a fifth (Ockendon) could, subject to a review, be designated in autumn 2013. The remit of a teaching school alliance is not necessarily confined to the schools in its own local authority. Given the breadth of the teaching schools’ remit and the relative compactness of the authority, it makes sense in the Thurrock context to co-ordinate the contribution of each of the lead teaching schools and their respective alliances if resources and efforts are to be used to best effect. However, the designation of the teaching schools has come in phases so, although there is a Thurrock Teaching School Alliance, this is not yet a body that is coordinating the different streams of activity of the various teaching schools across the authority. We also came across schools that did not see the teaching school programme as having any relevance to them at this stage.

¹⁹ Teaching schools have to be judged by Ofsted as outstanding overall and ‘outstanding’ for the quality of their teaching and learning. Following an application and assessment process they are formally designated by the National College for Teaching and Leadership. They form and lead partnerships of local schools and universities known as teaching school alliances with a remit to organise school-led delivery of six key priorities: initial teacher training; continuous professional development; leadership development; talent management and succession planning; school-to-school support; and research and development

Alongside the challenges, the areas where there is good joint working should also be recognised. The Schools Forum is, we were told, working well and here headteachers demonstrate both moral and professional accountability as they make decisions that serve the interests of children and young people. There is an agreed protocol on hard-to-place pupils and an inclusion panel, chaired by a local authority officer, meets every three weeks. There are sometimes some difficult conversations, but the panel does provide a forum for resolving issues.

There is also growing collaboration on post-16 provision. For example, Gable Hall Hassenbrook and St Clere academies work together as part of a sixth form consortium and have a joint timetable. The local authority played a part in helping to facilitate the arrangement and is also supporting a new network for heads of sixth-forms.

4. School improvement

The local authority's approach to supporting school improvement is summarised in Figure 4.1

Figure 4.1: Model for supporting school improvement in Thurrock

The authority has a strong data analysis function and uses this to identify performance concerns and issues in individual schools. School improvement officers (SIOs) and Thurrock improvement consultants (TICs) and early education improvement officers (EEIOs) draw on this data pack when they visit schools to examine progress against targeted outcomes that are identified through data and discussion. Schools are then categorised according to the Ofsted grading system:

- Tier 1: Special measures or serious weaknesses (Ofsted grade 4)
- Tier 2: Requires improvement or (previously) satisfactory (Ofsted grade 3)
- Tier 3: Good (Ofsted grade 2)
- Tier 4: Outstanding (Ofsted grade 1)

The SIOs, TICs and EEIOs, plus representatives from children's services with responsibility for education welfare, form a Standards and Progress Board which meets every half-term to discuss schools causing concern. The Board allocates support and resources and also considers broader issues – for example, trends on school attendance. A master grid tracks the assessment of schools and the support interventions being delivered.

The schools in Tier 1 receive the greatest level of support, with the authority drawing on a broad menu of options that includes:

- using consultants and school improvement officers to inject expertise into schools that are struggling:

“It was like having an extra member on the senior leadership team who was out of class. And they found us a national strategies person to help with schemes of work, teaching and learning strategies and the school development plan.”

Primary head

- deploying National and Local Leaders of Education (NLEs and LLEs) – including, on occasion, NLEs and LLEs from Essex and Southend – to provide leadership support to struggling and vulnerable schools;
- establishing interim executive boards (IEBs) and progress boards to strengthen school governance in underperforming schools. As at July 2013, there were two IEBs, though one was about to end as the school was becoming a sponsored academy. Progress boards are an innovation developed by Thurrock. The progress board consists of two additional governors, two school governors (the chair and one other governor), the headteacher and a senior school improvement adviser. The purpose of the progress board is to challenge the headteacher and support the whole governing body in its role of holding the school to account and supporting improvement;
- responding to school requests for support by providing limited dedicated funding to buy in bespoke expertise;
- merging or federating schools and/or facilitating the sponsorship by an established academy sponsor or another school within the borough;
- supporting schools to secure and retain effective leadership:

“Good stable leadership and the ability to retain head teachers are to be accredited for the rapid transformation of Secondary schools in Thurrock. This has been shown through peer reviews.”

Director of Children’s Services

- using schools as hubs for particular areas of expertise, such as St Clere’s work on English as an additional language;
- providing a range of continuous professional development courses – particularly for early years foundation stage practitioners;
- working with the Thurrock Teaching School Alliance, for example, through supporting the recruitment and deployment of Specialist Leaders of Education (SLEs) and Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs).

There is much to commend what the authority has been doing and, as Chapter 3 made clear, schools in Thurrock are improving. Another marker of the progress that has been made is the reduction in the reliance on interim headteachers. A few years ago around half

the headteachers of primary schools were in post on an acting basis. By July 2013 this had reduced to three out of 40. Again, these are significant improvements of which Thurrock should feel proud.

However, there are also some weaknesses in the current system:

- There needs to be a sharper focus on identifying, understanding and addressing specific authority-wide performance issues. For example, it is not entirely clear to us what is happening between key stages 1 and 2 to lead to a relative dip in performance in Thurrock schools when they are compared with the national average. Similarly, there has been no exchange of effective practice on pupil premium initiatives²⁰. College leaders believe that there is a real gap in mathematics, English and languages for students who take GCSE in these subjects in year 10 rather than year 11 and then wish to study these subjects at A level. Their concern is that students tend to forget key knowledge and skills and do not maintain subject-level expertise when they are in year 11 (as their focus is on other subjects), so when they start their sixth-form course, they fall behind. This results in poor performance in these courses. The colleges now screen pupils to see if their levels meet the required standards and, if not, there are catch-up sessions to improve students' skills;
- There is an insufficient critical mass of outstanding practice in the primary sector. As indicated earlier, although the proportion of primary schools that is judged 'good' has risen, there is still only one 'outstanding' primary school in the borough. A major objective, therefore, should be to move more schools into the outstanding category and create networks of high quality practice across Thurrock;
- The support provided is not always appropriate and may, with the exception of schools in Tier 1, be relying too much on confident heads asking for help

"The local authority has tried its best to provide support for the school when we have asked for it, however there has not been much proactivity from the authority."

Secondary headteacher

"The local authority is responsive but you have to be confident asking for help and formalise your needs."

Primary headteacher

- Thinking about how best to support school improvement has been changing fast in recent years, with an acknowledgement that it needs to be built round the capacity of schools to support their own improvement. Thurrock's model draws on elements of this approach but is not yet rooted in schools leading schools. It is noteworthy, for example, that the half-termly meeting to consider the progress of schools does not include heads' representatives. Improvement support needs to be based less on parachuting in experts

²⁰ An analysis of the use of pupil premium funding was sent to the Commissioners in August 2013. It showed that a number of schools fail to provide the required information on their websites; there is often little correlation between the quantity and quality of information and its impact on outcomes; and few schools make any reference to the use of pupil premium for looked after children.

and more on facilitating schools to develop networks of support, peer learning and challenge. Similarly, rather than promoting continuing professional development (CPD) courses the emphasis needs to move to a classroom-based approach to improving teaching and learning, as exemplified by the Improving and Outstanding Teacher Programmes²¹. We heard of some examples of this model being adopted and, indeed, in the case of Dilkes, adapted to impressive effect²², but there is a need to accelerate the moves to this way of working.

“The local authority tries to fix problems instead of empowering schools to tackle them.”

Secondary headteacher

Crucially the co-ordination of school-to-school support will also need strengthening as more schools become academies, join academy chains and the number of teaching schools increases.

- The quality of school governance remains a challenge and governors themselves told the Commission that, as volunteers, they found it difficult to do all that is expected of them. In part, this is a recruitment challenge, persuading enough potential governors of sufficient calibre and with the right skills to take on the role; in part, it is a training and development issue with some governors describing the positive impact of customised training from the local authority for their individual governing body. Recent progress (described above) in increasing the take-up of governor support services shows what it is possible to achieve in a relatively short time. As more schools become academies, there is also potential for the different type of academy trusts within the borough to share their practice and experience of how to use academy status to develop effective governance models. Governors themselves identified the potential value of working with governors from other schools in helping them provide more constructive challenge within their own schools.
- More needs to be done to develop middle and senior leadership. The most effective school improvement systems not only have able headteachers who share a sense of mission to improve education and life chances for young people in their area, but are also supported by a cadre of senior and middle leaders. Such leaders do not spontaneously appear. They are spotted, fostered and grown by having access to training and development, mentoring by an experienced and expert headteacher and opportunities to practise their leadership skills in different school contexts. There are leadership development opportunities within Thurrock but the advent of teaching

²¹ The Improving Teacher Programme (ITP) is aimed at teachers who want to improve teaching and learning and deliver consistently good lessons. It is designed and delivered by experienced and successful school leaders. The sessions are interactive and provide opportunities for peer support and lesson observation and the programme works best if schools are able to send three teachers on the same course, as coaching takes place in triads. The Outstanding Teacher Programme (OTP) works in a similar way and provides teachers rated as ‘good’ with a set of skills and strategies that enable them to become consistently and sustainably outstanding.

²² The High Impact Teaching Programme (HIT) developed by Dilkes Academy is a good example of this approach. Over a six-week period the programme focuses on supporting teachers to link research evidence on high impact techniques, with direct observation of the methods being used in real classes,

schools provides the possibility of school-led talent management and a leadership succession strategy.

“Secure leadership and succession planning are the key drivers for school improvement. There are worries about deputy headteachers and middle leadership positions in the future.”

Councillor

5. Recruitment and retention of teaching staff

The quality of teaching and learning is the factor within the control of schools that has the greatest impact on the progress a pupil makes. It is vital therefore that Thurrock attracts, recruits and develops high quality teaching staff. Headteachers told us that their recruitment challenge is all the more difficult because Thurrock is located just outside London and does not therefore attract London weighting. This means that the average salary of a Thurrock teacher is lower than their counterpart in Barking and Dagenham or Havering.

Another obstacle that schools face is that many potential applicants do not know where Thurrock is, that it has access to good housing opportunities and that it is both close to London and also near to open countryside (more than half the borough is green belt).

“NQTs are unaware of the location and assume we are in Essex and therefore they don’t look for jobs.”

Primary headteacher

A general theme was that the authority was missing a trick by not using the development of Thurrock Lakeside, the Dubai Ports development and the High House Production Park enterprise to brand and market Thurrock.

Many schools in Thurrock have used the employment-based routes into teaching such as the Graduate Teacher Programme. A number have also encouraged and financially supported teaching assistants and higher level teaching assistants to progress into teaching through these routes. But it has, of course, been up to each school to ‘do their own thing’. The introduction of teaching schools and School Direct²³ offers a Thurrock-wide approach to developing staff already working within schools, recruiting graduates, and training them in the borough. Academy chains may have sufficient economy of scale to manage this process but individual schools, free-standing academy converters and small academy chains would gain considerably by acting together.

There are already good and encouraging moves in this direction. For example, Dilkes Primary School in partnership with Thurrock Teaching School Alliance and 14 other Thurrock

²³ There are two separate School Direct training options:

- School Direct Training Programme is for high-quality graduates who want to be part of a school team from day one. They may be eligible for a bursary of up to £20,000 to support them while they train.
- School Direct Training Programme (salaried) is an employment-based route for high-quality experienced graduates with at least three years’ work experience. These will earn a salary while they train.

Primary schools are offering 30 initial teacher training places through Schools Direct from September 2013. In Chapter 5, we suggest how this approach might be expanded in scope to embrace all schools in Thurrock with all the teaching schools working together to co-ordinate delivery across the borough.

Teaching schools working with the local authority would also be in a strong position to make much better strategic use of Teach First²⁴. Currently only four schools are using Teach First teachers, although up to 29 could potentially be eligible to be part of the programme. This is significant because Teach First has a very strong reputational brand amongst the best graduates. Thurrock could gain from this association as Teach First undertakes the graduate recruitment (i.e. schools do not have to recruit them) and then, by agreement, allocates them to schools. School satisfaction with Teach First teachers is generally very high.

6. A lack of aspiration and progression

Many of the people we met – politicians, officers, governors as well as headteachers – spoke about a lack of aspiration amongst many families and pupils. One headteacher referred to what he called a ‘lack of culture’ in Thurrock. He was clear that this did not relate to class and contrasted this with his own experience of growing up poor in Wales but surrounded by a strong culture of music and chapel.

Another head described how this lack of culture was spilling over into school. The head keeps children in school if they are appearing in a school play in the evening because otherwise the parents will not bring them back. The head also provided the example of one of her pupils who was running in a borough sports event and was likely to be selected for the region, but the parents said he could not go because he had no plimsolls. The headteacher resolved the problem by buying a pair for £2 at Primark.

Some attributed this lack of culture and low aspiration to the nature of employment in Thurrock. Unemployment is relatively low – there are jobs available but many positions are low paid and of low skill.

“Due to Lakeside being on Thurrock's doorstep and only providing low skill positions, people do not look for jobs in London or Southend which are in close proximity to Thurrock.”

Councillor

Others thought that there were also other underlying issues that were contributing to the problem – such as a lack of cohesion and community, poor public health, high teenage pregnancy rates, drugs (including glue sniffing which has led to deaths of children) and domestic violence.

²⁴ Teach First is an education charity that offers a two-year Leadership Development Programme for graduates with a 2:1 degree, or better, interested in an employment-based route into teaching. Trainees join Teach First and their university partners for six weeks of intensive training before teaching in a school in a low-income community for two years, where they achieve a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE), a full-time salary and real responsibility in the classroom from day one. Trainees are also supported with professional development, coaching and opportunities to network with supporters from all industry sectors.

As Chapter 3 revealed, this lack of aspiration seems to feed into a lack of progression for even the most able students in terms of their relative achievement at key stages 2 and 4. It is then reinforced in terms of the subjects and attainment levels being studied and achieved at A Level and the relative lack of progression into higher education and the best universities in particular. The latter point is not helped by the lack of a university campus within the authority. Experience in other parts of the country suggests that a university campus can have a powerful effect on helping to raise aspirations.

Another contributory factor is the variability of information advice and guidance that is available for students and their parents. Under the current arrangements schools choose the provider of this service. As some schools are seeking to build up their own sixth form numbers there is concern that the advice may not always be as full and as independent as it should be. This problem is compounded by the lack of a fully-developed post-16 strategy in the borough.

However, as in other areas, we also recognise that steps are already being taken to address this challenge. For example, the Opportunity Thurrock event helps young people in colleges to meet employers in Thurrock and FE and HE providers beyond. This proved very successful in 2012. For the first time in recent years, A level and BTEC results were publicised and celebrated by the local authority for all Thurrock providers. The Next Top Boss event helps post-16 students aspire to high positions such as those offered in the forthcoming opening of London Gateway.

There are already good and improving relationships between the local authority and the two colleges. There is a stronger and broader relationship emerging as a result of the new South Essex College campus that is being built in Grays, and to which the authority contributed land. The college is planning new higher education provision, leading to degrees, through costume design courses at the Royal Opera House (ROH).

Chapter 5 Moving forward

“If Thurrock’s young people do not have access to the professional and managerial jobs and other opportunities from the regeneration programme, then we will have failed.”

Graham Farrant, Chief Executive, Thurrock Council

As we have seen, education in Thurrock has seen impressive improvement over recent years and there is much good practice to applaud in schools. Nevertheless, it still faces a number of major challenges. If more children and young people in Thurrock are to enjoy the excellent education they deserve, these challenges must be addressed with focus and determination and by using the available opportunities that we have seen in the borough. We believe there is political, cross-party will to do this and there is certainly enthusiasm and commitment from headteachers, officers and key partners.

The Commission’s Report should be used as trigger to build greater pride in Thurrock’s education service while at the same time developing capacity and skills to accelerate both improvement and achievement. In drawing up these proposals for change, we have taken the leader of the council seriously when he told the Commission:

“The Council understands that nothing is out of bounds.”

The recommendations that follow are designed to support radical change so that all children and young people experience the benefits of a first class education and Thurrock realises its goal of becoming a great place for learning and opportunity. The six recommendations are to:

- build and communicate a compelling case for change and a powerful vision for education across the community in Thurrock that increases pride in what is being achieved and ambition for achieving even more
- redefine the role of the local authority, agree with partners what change means in practice and make sure services are provided efficiently
- grow the role of schools themselves as the leaders in supporting other schools to improve
- recruit and retain the best teachers and leaders by establishing greater pride in Thurrock
- use governors as key agents of support for improvement both within their own schools and across the school system in Thurrock
- recognise and celebrate education in Thurrock.

Recommendation 1

Build and communicate a compelling case for change and a powerful vision for education across the community in Thurrock that increases pride in what is being achieved and ambition for achieving even more

The Commission recommends that the council uses this report to trigger a borough-wide conversation about education in Thurrock, which builds pride in what is being achieved and

raises aspirations and expectations for the future. There needs to be more widespread understanding of the improvements in recent years but also of the journey that still needs to be undertaken. This 'big conversation' should involve everyone with an interest in education, including parents. It should include all those usually associated with schools but also key players who bring innovation and resources. Most particularly in Thurrock's case, that would mean engaging the cultural and creative players, represented so distinctively by High House Production Park enterprise, as well as the business sector and higher education. This conversation should be rooted in evidence, not only data driven but also through the experiences of personal stories. The conversation should also look forward and create an inspirational vision of what learning in Thurrock could be like.

This 'big conversation' would sit well alongside '*Thurrock: Big skies, Big Thinking*' the broader initiative being set up by the council to establish a new approach to development and change and a vision for Thurrock in fifty years.

The conversation would develop an overarching strategy for education, articulate a local and aspirational vision that captures the power of regeneration to support ambition and change and establish relationships that would lead to implementation. The process should encourage all schools to sign up to the vision and a collective strategy for improvement, rooted in moral and professional accountability. The latter would be supported by specific targets such as the proportion of the local population going on to a Russell Group university.

The council therefore needs to engage all governing bodies and key players across the community in a discussion of the issues raised in this report. If it is well organised, this initiative has the potential for breathing life into the strategy and for engendering ownership of the action plan that will be based on a fresh vision of what learning and achievement in Thurrock should look like. It would need to use a wide variety of approaches to engage people in conversation.

This is a complex task and the Commission recommends that the Leader of the Council sets up and chairs a formal alliance of key players to oversee the process.

Thurrock Education Alliance would seek to accelerate and sustain transformation in education in Thurrock by:

- defining and refining the need for change;
- producing and advocating a compelling and actionable vision for the future of education in Thurrock; and
- facilitating widespread engagement and interaction between those involved or interested in education in Thurrock, not just those working in schools but parents and partners in the arts and creative partnerships, in business and higher education.

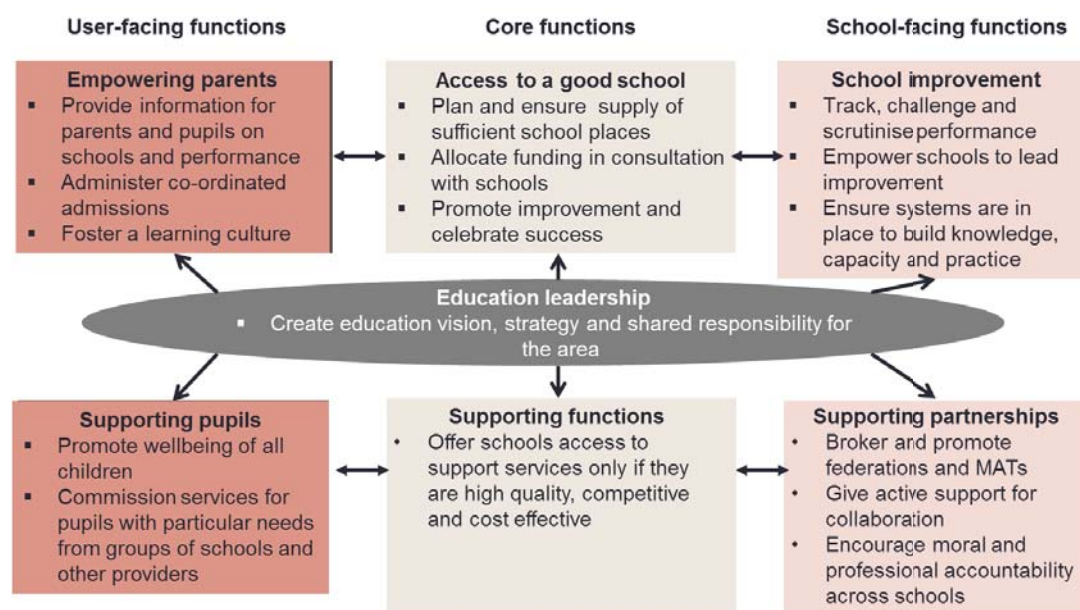
Thurrock Education Alliance would meet, at least three times a year, as the main forum to reflect on progress, to share challenges and breakthroughs and to generate new ideas and plans. Initially, it might be facilitated by an external adviser.

Recommendation 2

Redefine the role of the local authority, agree with partners what change means in practice and make sure services are provided efficiently.

Chapter 4 described how policy and practice in supporting school improvement is changing and becoming more school-led. This does not mean that there is no role for local authorities in education but it is becoming more of a strategic and championing role. Figure 5.1 describes and summarises the discussions we had in Thurrock about the various roles and functions of a local authority within this changing landscape.

Figure 5.1: The facilitating role of the local authority within a community of autonomous schools



As indicated by the council taking the lead in establishing Thurrock Education Alliance, local authorities can build on the authority that their electoral mandate gives them and align this with their local knowledge to help shape and build an education vision and strategy for their area. Authorities should be decisively on the side of parents in providing them with the information to help them make informed choices about their children’s education while also supporting the role of parents as partners in their children’s learning. Authorities also still have important statutory functions to promote the wellbeing and health of all children, especially vulnerable children and those with special needs.

In terms of its key functions, given the diversity and fragmentation in the school system, ensuring that there are enough school places has already become very demanding for Thurrock, although the provision of new schools and extra forms of entry also provide new opportunities to improve schooling. To reduce tensions and longstanding sores about the council’s ability to plan well, it might want to consider setting up an independently chaired Board, on the model of Wandsworth Council (Appendix F) to plan and commission school places and provision at 16+. The Board should include representatives from schools or colleges.

Local authorities may still provide support services to schools but it will only make sense to do so where this is cost effective and schools feel that what is on offer is a quality product. Thurrock has already reduced its provision of support services to a very small core. Schools told the Commission they would find it helpful to have a clear statement of what exactly was to be provided by the department and for this to be supported by a process of regular monitoring to check that services are provided to time and are of good quality. This could be done through the use of a simple termly questionnaire which asked for evaluation of all services provided. The council should also provide clear, regularly updated lists of officers, their responsibilities and their contact details. These are simple things to do which would make a big difference to the relationship between the department and schools.

To enable a clearer focus on its role as guardian and champion of the needs and interests of children and young people in their area, the council should phase out its provision of school improvement services and devolve them to a school led partnership. This should be done over a period of no longer than three years. How this might be done is outlined in Recommendation 3 below.

As champions for the needs of children in Thurrock, however, the local authority should continue to capture local knowledge and intelligence by undertaking some scrutiny of education provision to ensure it is meeting the needs and interests of children and young people in the area. This information should be shared with governing bodies. At the same time, the government, Ofsted, parents and the wider community expect authorities to be aware of how their schools are performing – particularly where they are struggling. The Commission is recommending that from April 2014, the council should provide all governing bodies with a simple performance score card with their school's position, benchmarked locally, nationally and against London. This would help governors be better informed and better equipped to ask questions and take action. Although simple, this score card should offer more detail than the score card currently provided by Ofsted.

The Commission also recommends that the council should produce an annual report on the quality of local educational provision. This should be shared with the local community, in particular copies should be accessible for parents and discussed with both the Thurrock Education Alliance and the Thurrock Excellence Network (as described in Recommendation 3 below). Given the large numbers of academies in Thurrock, the Commission also recommends that the council should send this report to the Secretary of State so he receives early warning of any emerging issues and addresses these through his relationship with academy trusts.

The Commission recommends that there is a detailed discussion with schools in Thurrock over the next few months about how much of this they want to do themselves and how much they see the local authority undertaking. To carry out this task, the Commission recommends that a steering group be established comprising senior management from the department, headteachers and governors to establish clarity about:

- the core functions of the local authority;

- the supporting functions of the local authority that are wanted by schools;
- how both are to be subject to monitoring and evaluation by schools.

An annual review of the services provided by the council should be presented to Thurrock Education Alliance.

This steering group should also review the processes in place for communication between the council and schools. In particular, it should consider the value of the briefing meetings for headteachers, the information bulletin for schools and the feasibility of the production of an annual timeline for key decisions. It should also propose ways in which heads could engage more personally with councillors, in particular the Leader of the council.

Recommendation 3

Grow the role of schools themselves as the leaders in supporting other schools to improve.

Thurrock has a system of schooling that is almost entirely based on academies and, even in those schools that have not chosen to become academies, notions of autonomy and independence are strong. However, it is important that autonomy should not mean isolation as lack of engagement in external professional learning partnerships carries many risks. As we have already suggested, schools in Thurrock need to learn from each other if improvement is to be accelerated. There is considerable appetite for working across schools to build both individual and collective capacity.

It is exceptional to see four teaching schools in a local authority the size of Thurrock and it is important to use this resource. We heard a real willingness from teaching schools to work as part of the broader Thurrock education system. Similarly, a number of federations and academy chains operate in Thurrock and we heard strong, though not universal, support for working beyond their particular families of schools to improve education for all children in Thurrock. It is important to establish a framework for improvement in Thurrock that has widespread commitment from headteachers and governors.

Increasingly, local authorities are empowering schools to work together, to learn together and to hold each other to account –in essence, to lead their own improvement. Many continue to promote and broker collaborative working between schools as well as partnerships, federation and academy chains. This role requires a softer, more facilitative set of leadership skills. A recent report by NfER²⁵ suggests that the most effective local authorities in developing this school improvement role tend to undertake the following activities:

- practical work (maintaining a knowledge of the education system, and using data to support work on the ground);

²⁵ Smith, R., Aston, H., Sims, D. and Easton, C., October 2012, *Enabling school-driven system leadership: rapid review*, NfER

- engaging with schools' improvement work and enabling them to maximize the capacity of that work to benefit the system as a whole;
- brokering school-to-school collaboration, facilitating initial discussions and working with schools to help them as they respond to challenges or develop new approaches;
- nurturing a sense of collaboration and shared responsibility for the system as a whole through effective system leadership;
- helping to embed and sustain the work in individual schools and across networks disseminating effective practice; and
- being open to innovation and new ways of working.

As an immediate collaborative activity, the Commission recommends that the local authority and schools devise a funded programme to address recognised key areas for development in education in Thurrock. This programme should be up and running by March 2014. It should engage schools themselves in peer support and development.

The Commission proposes that the primary programme should target improvement in schools judged either 'satisfactory' or 'requires improvement' in three key areas:

- assessment for learning and effective pupil feedback
- English
- mathematics

The secondary programme should focus on the quality of information, advice and guidance given to students by agreeing a protocol which should lead to better practice.

The Commission also recommends that the local authority and schools work together to improve the quality of performance management across all sectors, most particularly ways in which it might be linked more securely to the impact of teaching on pupils progress.

Finally, based on the model of the highly effective Good to Great initiative²⁶ in London schools, a project should be established involving good primary schools ambitious to become outstanding.

These are key issues for many schools in Thurrock and would need collaboration and resourcing. Working together on a detailed action plan and on individual projects should build constructive relationships, commitment and stronger accountability for system improvement.

²⁶ *Good to Great* is an initiative established by the London Leadership Strategy to support good secondary schools in their endeavour to become great. The programme helps schools continually to improve and develop practices that enable them to achieve 'outstanding' in their Ofsted inspections. It is targeted at secondary schools but Thurrock could develop its own model for primary schools.

As a more long-term measure, the Commission recommends that Thurrock should establish a local network, led by headteachers, charged with improving school performance and capacity across Thurrock. Working closely with all schools, the local authority should establish the Thurrock Excellence Network by March 2014 and this should involve all schools in Thurrock. The steering group should be made up predominantly of headteachers and should include all four teaching schools. It should also involve higher education. In the first instance, it might be helpful to have senior attendance from the local authority, either at director or assistant director level.

Keeping a tight focus on teaching and learning, the Thurrock Excellence Network would:

- offer all schools access to a professional learning partnership rooted in peer learning and development and providing opportunities for working between schools;
- build knowledge, capacity and practice across Thurrock, using all available resources;
- agree a common basis for peer reviewing the performance and progress of all schools in the borough;
- be proactive about spotting both development and performance issues and taking action appropriately;
- develop and implement a strong leadership development programme;
- ensure training is provided in the processes needed for school-to-school work;
- provide training and broker partnerships for peer review;
- ensure underperforming schools receive targeted support;
- celebrate good practice and performance in Thurrock schools; and
- ensure schools in Thurrock improve.

The Thurrock Excellence Network would be resourced by the local authority for the first three years of its life and thereafter would be self-financing.

Recommendation 4

Recruit and retain the best teachers and leaders by establishing greater pride in Thurrock

There is a need to establish greater pride in Thurrock itself and more particularly in education. If implemented, Recommendation 1 should do much to address this. A stronger sense of identity and pride in the area and its achievements will help build confidence and success. The council is already showing leadership in doing this through a range of activities which are engaging people from within Thurrock and beyond in thinking about the opportunities presented by current developments in Thurrock and the regeneration still to come. The Commission recommends that a communication strategy and plan are devised,

involving schools, to develop the image of Thurrock as an interesting and vibrant place in which to live and work.

The presence of the Royal Opera House in Thurrock has already had an impact and we heard enthusiastic acclamation from schools. There was evident pride from many we spoke to about the presence of the Royal Opera House in Thurrock and the High House Production Park enterprise more generally. We heard about changed attitudes to the arts and creative work following engagement with the Royal Opera House and better practice in schools and classrooms. It has brought a rich resource to Thurrock and offers a focus for community aspiration. This should be built on, most particularly through the activities linked to Recommendation 1 but also through specific initiatives designed to recruit and retain the very best teachers and leaders.

The Commission is recommending greater use of Teach First across all schools in Thurrock that meet the Teach First criteria. Nationally, this programme has developed high calibre teachers so expansion of the scheme in Thurrock would bring much to local schools. We welcome the dialogue that the authority has started with Teach First and recommend that the teaching schools in the borough become fully involved in this conversation. In addition, the Commission is also recommending that the local authority should explore the feasibility of devising an arts-based Teach First programme. For example, the promise of arts-based work placements, in organisations such as the Royal Opera House, in tandem with teaching, might well attract more teachers to the area. The scheme would also enhance Thurrock's reputation as a place of innovation and creativity.

The Commission saw the beginnings of good use of School Direct and recommends that it is used more extensively and strategically across the local authority to create a Thurrock School Direct offer and a clearing house accessible to all schools in Thurrock.

The Thurrock Excellence Network should be asked as a priority to develop a coherent approach to talent management and succession planning across Thurrock. The expertise of the teaching schools should be of value here. At the same time, the Network should look at the investment of some schools in teaching assistants and Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs) and support the creation of a development path for them to become teachers.

Recommendation 5

Use governors as key agents of support and challenge for improvement both within their own schools and across the system

In an increasingly autonomous system, schools governors have a particularly important role to play in ensuring that each school is well managed and that senior leaders are held to account for improving both outcomes for pupils and school capacity. Governing bodies are the key mechanism for ensuring school improvement is taking place and the pivotal link between the school and the wider community.

Governors told the Commission that they found the role of support far easier than challenge. They are willing to give greater challenge and recognise its importance but want help to do this. They wanted to know how governors in other schools go about this and

wanted more opportunities to work with other governors over the coming years. An officer new to Thurrock commented:

“The thing that strikes me about Thurrock...is the willingness of people to roll up their sleeves and help each other despite much moaning about other schools. So I think there is a terrific resource for governors in Thurrock - other governors. The more we can break down the barriers between different types of school, the better for pupils, and governors working together to support each other could be at the heart of this.”

In particular, governors asked for:

- documentation in plain English and any jargon clearly explained;
- possible questions they might ask about aspects of school life;
- more short, clear updates of key changes in education as they are announced;
- opportunities in small groups to network, share ideas and develop skills and expertise;
- opportunities for peer collaboration to ensure better and more rigorous challenge;
- governor training at school level;
- support from mentors and specialist governors to develop their expertise and skill in the challenge role;
- training for headteachers about how they work with governors; and
- support for parents at key points in their child’s career, for example at KS2 and at secondary transfer.

The Commission recommends that the development of governors be prioritised and supported financially for the next three years. In collaboration with governors, an action plan for development and training should be devised. This may need to complement the service for governors, increasingly bought in by schools, which now has high satisfaction ratings. Chairs and vice chairs of governing bodies should be offered an intensive induction programme and personal support, particularly in their first year.

The Commission also recommends that the local authority continues to supply information to each governing body, particularly short updates of key educational issues, or signposts where these might be accessed, as well as clear data that enables the governing body to benchmark its school locally, against London and the national context. The latter should be supported by the offer of training on interpreting schools’ performance data.

Finally, the Commission recommends that governors, as part of their support and challenge role, make school review more open and inclusive, particularly of the local community.

The best schools in Thurrock know themselves well. They have effective systems and processes for monitoring and evaluation, which engage all key stakeholders, and the findings feed directly into their school improvement plans. This sort of challenge is particularly important in a system with a high number of academies. It is important that the views of pupils, parents and the community are taken into account as well as those of professionals. These views should inform thinking and influence planning and action for improvement.

To encourage engagement with parents and the community, schools should consider publishing a short annual report and providing a forum for discussing it in public. To support public confidence and in the interest of openness and transparency, the commission recommends that each academy trust in Thurrock should publish an annual report. This in turn will feed into the local authority's annual report of educational provision in Thurrock.

Recommendation 6

Recognise and celebrate education in Thurrock

If the recommendations above are accepted and implemented, they should give far greater recognition of what is being achieved in Thurrock and celebrate a range of educational achievements through identification of particular individuals, organisations and initiatives. However, to emphasise the importance of doing this, the Commission has also identified the recognition and celebration of achievements as a separate recommendation.

Activities could include:

- creating a website with teachers of good practice in and across schools in Thurrock;
- using social media to celebrate key achievements;
- publishing case studies of interesting initiatives and projects;
- organising activities and competitions across schools in Thurrock for targeted groups of children and young people
- establishing a Thurrock 'alumni' club of adults who attended Thurrock schools; and
- organising an annual awards ceremony to showcase Thurrock excellence.

Appendices

Appendix A: Letter and consultation questions sent to headteachers of schools in Thurrock



Children's Services Directorate
Civic Offices, New Road, GRAYS RM17 6SL

My Ref: CG/CL/CG
10 May 2013

To all Headteachers/Principals

Dear Colleague

Thurrock Education Commission

Following the Education Summit, I am now seeking your views about how to improve the quality of education in Thurrock. We hope to engage a wide range of people in the work of the Commission but the views of school leaders are absolutely central to our thinking and planning.

As you know, the Commission's brief is to review educational provision to see how progress and performance might be accelerated for children and young people in Thurrock. It will have a particular focus on schools, looking in some detail at the current context, identifying both strengths and areas for development. We hope to produce our report by the end of September.

We do not wish to prescribe the format of your response to the Commission but have set out twelve open questions which you can access via the attached link:

[EducationCommission](#)

Please feel free to ignore it and send in your views by letter or email to educationcommission@thurrock.gov.uk if you prefer. Please let me know if you wish your views to be anonymised in presenting the evidence in the final report.

Over the next few months, we hope to meet as many of you as possible either individually or in groups. If you would like one of us to visit your school, please contact Chris Graves at cgraves@thurrock.gov.uk or on 01375 652077 who has the dates when we will be in Thurrock. I am also happy to be contacted on christine.gilbert@cgilbertassociates.com. Both Robert Hill and I will be attending the headteachers' meeting on Tuesday, 18 June 2013 and will be able to test out initial perceptions with you.

We would be grateful to have your response by Friday, 7 June but if you need a little more time, just tell us so we know it is on its way.

I look forward to meeting you over the next few months.

Best wishes

Christine

Christine Gilbert, Chair of the Commission

Appendix B: Parent and carer questionnaire



Thurrock Education Commission

Parent/Carer Questionnaire

1. What do you think is good about education in Thurrock?

2. What are the biggest challenges?

3. What would you most like to see improve?

4. What could be done to improve education in Thurrock:
 - in one year

 - in 3 years

5. What could you do to help it improve?

Appendix C: Summary (produced by Thurrock Council) of key themes emerging from Thurrock Education Commission's questionnaire for parents and carers, based on 37 responses

Parents' involvement in the education of their children

A key theme evident in a majority of the responses is communication between parents/guardians/carers and the school their child/children attend. Parents wish to be involved more in their children's education and the learning process and highlight a number of areas in which communication needs to be improved. Parents desire to be more aware and familiar with the methods of teaching, the topics their children are learning about (the syllabus) and what is expected of parents; some of the tasks parents are asked to work through with their children are not always fully explained. These points should take into consideration the working lives of parents and time restraints upon them.

The schools should also provide advice and help for all parents, and parents should be kept well informed on what changes are taking place within schools, involving them in deciding/voting upon some of the policies and changes made to their children's school (where applicable). By schools involving parents as much as possible, this will show their shared level of commitment to the children and their education and will send out positive messages about education to children.

It is recognised that parents should be supporting teachers by reinforcing learning at home and that this results in parents being better equipped to support children outside school. A majority of parents want the best education for their children and are willing to support the school and staff to improve teaching standards and push their children to the best of their ability so that Thurrock can have more outstanding schools. An audit whereby parents can offer their services to the school would be likely to be fruitful, with the unanimous message being that parents have a voice and would like to be heard.

Pushing children to achieve all that they are able to

A strong emphasis has been placed upon children not being pushed hard enough to truly achieve what they are capable of. Much time and emphasis is placed upon children who are below standard and on pupils who have behavioural issues and this has resulted in very little time being delegated to those who are able to exceed expectations and improve. By making

it clear what each child's targets are and how they are going to achieve them, and providing more challenging activities to those who are able to tackle them, children will be able to excel. Every child should have the opportunity to achieve what they are able to, with support being spread equally to both ends of the scale.

There appears to be a consensus that children should be pushed to achieve more and rewarded for reaching these tougher goals. Suggestions of a Gifted and Talented programme have also been raised, to be set up within schools for those with exceptional potential. This could potentially be a borough-wide opportunity.

School standards/teaching standards to be improved

Much feedback has focused upon there not being enough 'Good' and 'Outstanding' schools within Thurrock. All schools should be rated as a minimum of 'Good' and improvement should be driven to achieve these higher ratings. More openness between schools will allow good practice to be shared from succeeding schools to help improve performance in schools rated as 'Satisfactory'. Identification of schools that can be 'Good' or better within three years would be beneficial to help guide this improvement.

Numerous suggestions have been made that performance related pay for teachers be introduced for those teachers who excel in their standards of teaching. There needs to be a greater emphasis too on the expected standards of schools, teachers and parents.

Better facilities for children with SEN

Children with SEN are thought not to be receiving the education that they deserve. Schools are seen not to be fully equipped with the staff and facilities to support and help develop these particular pupils. Treetops has been noted as having excellent facilities but is heavily oversubscribed and the waiting list is incredibly long. One parent has suggested that a school be opened specialising in education for autistic children, claiming that the need in the area is profound. This same parent has stated that 'irreparable damage' is being done to children with autism in mainstream schools and teaching autistic children with the proper facilities will help them to achieve their greatest potential and raise their chances of becoming fully employed, useful members of the community.

Schools working together and not competing (mixed views)

Competition between schools has been encouraged by parents in some circumstances, however discouraged in other areas of education. Some parents have expressed the view that more competition between schools in relation to school competitions (spelling competitions, local businesses setting schools art/design competitions) would be beneficial, promoting educational excellence in a fun and challenging environment. Competition between schools however is seen less positively when some schools attain 'Outstanding' judgements and others only achieve 'Satisfactory'. It is suggested that better schools should share their practice with other schools who did not achieve such high ratings from Ofsted. Some respondents said that teachers should be paired up with mentoring buddies from different schools. Achievements of highly rated schools should also be celebrated so as to generate positive messages about education in Thurrock.

Consistency of teaching staff

The consistency of teaching staff has been raised as an issue within education in Thurrock. Teachers are often not teaching children, being taken away for training sessions and taking leave, which results in too many teaching assistants and cover teachers taking their place. Parents have reported that their children have been taught by numerous teachers within a single subject, which makes it difficult for the teacher to identify with children, their strengths and weaknesses and how they can progress.

Expanding borough

With more people moving into the borough, and more children being placed in local schools, this has resulted in classes growing bigger. In an increasing number of cases children cannot be placed within local schools. Parents have suggested that more secondary schools are built to accommodate this increase. A positive message however in an expanding borough is that it is becoming more culturally diverse and this helps to teach children about the cultural differences in society. This has raised some issues of language barriers between students and extra resources being allocated to resolve them.

Greater opportunities for children

There should be more opportunities for students to visit universities and colleges from KS2 and KS3 to encourage harder work at an earlier stage. This introduction of successful role models will help to expand the visions and horizons of children from a younger age and help them to strive to achieve greater things within education.

Improving the range of after school provision and clubs

There are reports of there being little after-school educational provision for children who need to use school facilities for homework. Some schools only remain open for thirty minutes after the school day ends and parents feel this is not sufficient to meet their children's need for these facilities.

After school activities such as free football clubs on Saturdays and other extracurricular clubs run by schools are highly praised and there is a desire for more of these to be run. More education-based clubs such as a homework clubs have been put forward as a suggestion to be introduced by schools.

Improving the basic skills of children

Improving children's basic skills is also an area of importance raised from the feedback. One parent outlined a child in reception unable to put their shoes on the right feet when dressing after a P.E class, and it is suggested that dressing, washing (particularly hand washing), responsibility and care of personal belongings could be much more of a priority within KS1.

Appendix C: List of schools and academies visited by the Thurrock Education Commissioners

Primary schools

Belmont Castle Academy

Bonnygate Primary School

Dilkes Academy

Giffards Primary School

Kenningtons Primary Academy

Purfleet Academy

Warren Primary School

West Thurrock Academy

Woodside Academy

Secondary Schools

St Clare's School

Gable Hall School

Gateway Academy

Harris Academy Chafford Hundred

The Ockendon Academy

Special Schools

Beacon Hill Academy

Treetops Special School

Appendix D: List of people interviewed (outside schools) by Thurrock Education Commissioners

Petra Back, Headteacher, Graham James Academy

Anne-Marie Brister, Headteacher, Grays Convent High School

Ruth Brock, School Improvement Manager

Steve Cox, Assistant Chief Executive

Vivien Cutler, Interim Strategic Leader for School Improvement, Learning & Skills

Melanie Dean, Acting Headteacher, Tudor Court Primary School

Gabrielle Foster-Still, Royal Opera House, High House Production Park

Councillor Angie Gaywood, Chair of Governors of two Thurrock schools

Councillor Oliver Gerrish, Former Portfolio Holder for Children Services

Richard Glasby, Principal, Hassenbrook Academy

CLr James Halden , Shadow Portfolio Holder for Children Services

Councillor Diana Hale, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Children's Services

Councillor John Kent, Leader of Thurrock Council

Matt Lane, Royal Opera House, High House Production Park

Jo Lang, Governor Development Officer

Damon Last, Performance, Quality & Business Support

Carmel Littleton, Director of Children's Services

Steve Munday, Headteacher William Edwards School

Angela O'Donoghue, South Essex College

Neil Speight, Chair of Governors, Horndon-on-the-Hill CoE Primary School

Andrea Stark, Chief Executive, High House Production Park

Mark Vinall, Palmer's College

Group of parents from Warren Primary School

Appendix E: Examples of emerging local school improvement systems in other unitary local authorities

Milton Keynes Strategic Schools Effectiveness Partnership Board

<p>Membership:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of Children Services • Assistant Director • Head + director from each of teaching school alliance • 1 representative from primary sector • 1 representative from secondary sector • <p>Meets twice a term</p> <p>Introducing web portal to speed up provision of support</p>	<p>Remit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local authority brings intelligence on support that schools need • Teaching school alliances offer packages of support • Assistant Director brokers support to schools • Local authority has dedicated budget which is used to fund agreed support • Board reviews impact of support and interventions
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Source: Commissioners

Slough Learning Partnership

<p>A private limited charitable company led by a Steering Group comprising:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seven headteachers covering primary, secondary and special schools; and • the local authority head of school improvement <p>Funded via subscription membership – plus charges according to use</p> <p>Employs a co-ordinator and PA</p>	<p>Remit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-ordinates CPD programme and action research opportunities across the borough • Co-ordinates deployment of ASTs and SLEs • Provides directory of school-based resources/expertise • Commissions external support • Acts as umbrella for teaching school alliance – expected to include initial teacher training • Buys Fischer Family Trust data • Operates disclosure and barring services • Co-ordinates governor support
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Source: Commissioners

Brighton Learning Partnership

The City has set up a Learning Partnership to bring together school leaders. This is not currently planned to be a legal entity. Chaired by the principal of the Sixth Form College, its remit is to: set the City's education vision and strategy; oversee its design and implementation; bring together key stakeholders; and respond to the desire for the local community to work together.

Alongside this, working with the Learning Partnership, the local authority seeks to provide:

- a challenge and support service to heads and governors;
- a strategic overview for school improvement, which meets statutory duties;
- engages all schools and coordinates services; and
- a performance categorisation for all primary schools.

It has invested heavily in school-led partnerships focused on teaching and learning, including eight, mainly cross-phase, clusters; a partnership of nine secondary schools; and the teaching school alliance. Schools tend to belong to more than one partnership.

Source: Aston et al, 2013, *What works in enabling school improvement? The role of the middle tier*, NFER

Southend Education Trust

Southend has 54 schools, including one National Teaching Secondary School, and standards overall compare well with national ones. It combines considerable affluence with high levels of deprivation. Three main local partners work with schools on the improvement agenda: the LA; the Teaching School Alliance; and the Southend Education Trust (SET), which evolved from an Education Action Zone and an Excellence Cluster.

The local authority has focussed on: setting a strategic direction; data collection on school performance; and the traditional group of schools causing concern. Meanwhile, SET has pioneered local school led partnerships: encouraging strong school partnerships; promoting Southend as a learning community; encouraging innovation; and providing heads with a strong voice in shaping services for schools that fall outside the LA focus.

All Southend schools are SET members: an elected group make up 75 per cent of the board's trustees. In 2011/12 SET had a £4.5m turnover, funded by government grants. Schools now fund most of its work since central funding decreased.

Source: Aston et al, 2013, *What works in enabling school improvement? The role of the middle tier*, NFER

The York Education Partnership

York City has 65 maintained schools, with whom it has good relationships. It has responded to schools' increased autonomy by creating the York Education Partnership (YEP) which is led by an independent chair chosen by headteachers. Its role is to:

- fulfil the functions of the Schools Forum (from which it grew originally);
- bring together the stakeholders and prevent fragmentation;
- develop the education strategy for the city;
- commission services through the School Improvement Steering Group which brings together the Executive Board of the Teaching School and the key school leaders from YEP. The local authority improvement team is responsible to the Steering Group.

The local authority has no votes on the YEP and, demonstrating 'adaptive leadership', describes its role as 'servant leaders'. Its key role is to hold schools accountable. As yet, it has not moved to extensive use of school-to-school support, because its current services are strong.

Source: Aston et al, 2013, *What works in enabling school improvement? The role of the middle tier*, NFER

Appendix F: Wandsworth Academies and Free Schools Commission

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference for the Commission are based on the proposals agreed by the Council's Executive in Committee Paper 11-657. The overall role of the Commission, as approved in that paper is to *"to engage with and determine support for specific academy sponsors"*. The detail of Paper 11-657 suggests that the following could be considered within the Commission's role:

- 1 To promote the Council's policy of diversity and choice of schools for parents by identifying high quality academy operators who might be encouraged to put themselves forward as potential sponsors when local schools are considering academy status.
- 2 Where any school is proposing to become an academy with a sponsor, to gather as much intelligence as possible about the potential sponsor's performance, track record and approach and to be confident that the academy operator will deliver the outstanding schools that the Council expects.
- 3 Where small primary schools in particular are considering academy status, to review the risk analysis that will be undertaken by the Council and to consider the need for and suitability of any proposed sponsor/ federation arrangements.
- 4 To support parent groups and other potential free school promoters to identify and work with potential sponsors where the promoters need the capacity of an experienced school operator.
- 5 To monitor the performance of academy sponsors operating within the Borough and use this information to inform subsequent support for specific operators.
- 6 If the bid for a whole Borough pilot to develop the expectations of academies to provide school-on-school support is successful, to inform and contribute to the pilot as appropriate.

Free schools are, in legislation, academies and it is therefore proposed that consideration of free school sponsors will be included within the remit.

