

Corporate Peer Challenge

Thurrock Council

22-25 February 2016

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

This is the second corporate peer challenge for Thurrock Council, their first being in December 2011. Three of the team were on the initial peer challenge and were struck by the difference in the council.

The peer team couldn't fail to see the enhancements made to the physical environment of both the council and the place, the difference in the culture of the council was also evident and the team were encouraged by the continued 'strong strides' evidenced by significant improvement across a range of service areas.

The Leader and Chief Executive are widely valued by partners and staff and are recognised for the critical roles they have and are playing in making Thurrock a better place to live and work.

There is clear support and unity for the growth agenda, expressed by councillors, staff and partners, with a very positive story of regeneration over the last 4 years.

Whilst onsite the peer challenge team met with some great people who are up for the challenges ahead and demonstrated a strong sense of pride for the place

But inevitably there is still a way to go.

2. Key recommendations

The peer team's view is that the council needs to more clearly articulate and deliver on three inter-related themes:

First to develop a clear and confident narrative for Thurrock the place. The peer team referred to it as the 'Story of Place'. It is more than an economic or growth strategy but a narrative which captures the inter-relationship between people and place in an aligned and integrated approach to place-making.

Second to define the role of the council in empowering and delivering the narrative, cognisant of the need for effective partnership working and shared advocacy.

And third to bring all of Thurrock's communities with you. A great plan is not enough, so much more needs to be done to engage with and to win over the hearts and minds of communities and businesses behind the same aspirational narrative.

To deliver this ambitious and culturally new agenda, the Council needs to develop and deliver on a modernisation agenda to ensure the authority is fit for purpose. Ensuring the correct capacity, behaviours and skills are in place to deliver this transformational approach.

Improved data and intelligence and the development of an evidence based approach to member decision making would help sustain your improvement journey and ensure key services are adequately resourced. And finally improved financial planning and viability must be seen as a critical area for sustainable improvement.

3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Thurrock Council were:

- John van de Laarschot - Former Chief Executive, Stoke City Council
- Cllr Tony Newman - Leader, London Borough of Croydon
- Cllr David Simmonds - Deputy Leader, London Borough of Hillingdon
- Ruth Redfern - Director for Communities, Transformation and Change, Kirklees Council
- Neil Darwin – Chief Executive, Greater Cambridgeshire Greater Peterborough LEP
- Gary Hughes - Local Government Association

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges cover. These are the areas we believe are critical to councils' performance and improvement:

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. Leadership of Place: Does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. Organisational leadership and governance: Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?
4. Financial planning and viability: Does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
5. Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

In addition you asked the team to focus on the two supplementary themes of:

Growth

- Has the Council got a clear strategy for growth that is embedded across the organisation and is influencing Council and partner strategies?
- What outcomes are being achieved as a result of the strategy?
- What more can be done to ensure Thurrock's residents and communities experience the benefits of growth?
- Is Thurrock maximising its potential to secure external funding and raise finance to support the delivery of growth programmes?

Interconnectivity of strategies:

- How do the Health & Well-Being Strategy and other key strategies work together to drive the "Place"?

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement-focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 4 days onsite at Thurrock Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 100 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 10 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 200 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 5 weeks in Thurrock Council.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (22 – 25 February 2016). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

The Leader and Chief Executive have a good understanding of the challenges ahead. There is a growing understanding of the fabric of the place and the interdependency of physical regeneration with the social, economic, health and wellbeing of communities.

The peer team identified that there is strong support and unity for the growth agenda and a clear understanding of the need, but not the methodology or approach, to bringing communities, residents and businesses with you on the journey.

The peer team feel you should build on these strengths and develop a clearly defined place making narrative which is owned and advocated by everyone.

Making better use of intelligence and data to develop this narrative would ensure it is seen as realistic and believable.

Once complete there is a critical need for a compelling communication and engagement strategy to better tell the story.

You also need to ensure your narrative addresses some of the systemic issues with other public sector organisations which currently, and if not addressed will continue to, hinder your progress; such as the significantly poor performance of GPs in some areas of Thurrock and Essex Police, where HMIC judges that they require improvement at keeping people safe and reducing crime. The team encourage Thurrock to visibly champion resolution of these issues on behalf of your residents and local businesses.

4.2 Leadership of Place

There is growing recognition of the importance of effective partnership working and the period after the forthcoming election with a new senior management team in place provide a unique period of stability to make tangible progress on the transformation agenda.

As mentioned previously there is strong member consensus for growth and both the leadership and management of the authority are valued by partners, staff and unions.

There is also more evidence of Thurrock Council's capability to effectively deliver its core services. The peer team are not saying everything is perfect, far from it, but there is certainly a move in the right direction.

There is much to build on, however the importance of effective collaboration and partnership working must not be underestimated.

There is a clear need to ensure that your narrative and strategies reflect the functional and practical relationships essential to their delivery.

By this we mean developing a multi-layered approach where there is a clear narrative for Thurrock which works for Thurrock, which works in the context of the Thames Gateway,

which works in the context of Greater Essex, which works in the context of an ever expanding capital and equally which works just as well for the larger sub-regional LEP arrangements.

This will be challenging and for it to be achieved it is crucial that the narrative is owned corporately and shared across all political parties and that concrete steps are made to continue to build the trust and confidence with partners across the geography.

The steps for improving managerial leadership are well planned and should be welcomed as these new senior management positions will provide the bedrock for delivering on your narrative. You should also capitalise on the arrival of a new Chief Executive at Essex County Council to help recast a more effective and productive approach to collaboration.

4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

Members have a positive and improved view of staff and are becoming ambassadors for their shared agendas. There appear to be greater levels of Member challenge and improved mutual respect for the different but complimentary roles of Members and officers. Overall Member and officer relationships have improved.

There is good evidence of progress on areas of political consensus, e.g. growth, public health and educational attainment.

Joint working and stability amongst senior politicians has led to improved constructive cross party working albeit from a low base.

Going forward Members should consider developing co-production of the ambitious policy agenda for Thurrock with their communities and partners and continue to drive the cultural change for communities from dependence to independence.

A strong message came from partners and stakeholders regarding Thurrock council being more confident and ambitious for the place. You have a great story to tell and should celebrate your success.

Developing a strong evidence based approach to the implementation of Member decisions and priorities would help sustain your improvement journey. You cannot afford a disconnect between the story and the reality and the recent issues with street cleaning are a prime example. Although the team give credit to Thurrock Members for their reactive response once the impact of previous decisions were apparent.

Given the political dynamics of Thurrock, council officers need to go above and beyond in supporting all Members and political groups to undertake their role, as an inconsistent response can quickly undermine confidence. Remember to get it 'Right first time, Every time'.

4.4 Financial planning and viability

There is evidence of improving fiscal management but it is from a very low base. The council has recouped its minimum reserve provision and received an unqualified annual audit of accounts but this should be seen as the basic minimum and not regarded as a strength.

As such financial planning and viability must be seen as a critical area for sustainable improvement.

Your narrative, vision, strategy and outcomes must drive your financials and not vice versa. Plan over a three to four year time horizon as a minimum and do not address budget issues on an annual basis as present.

The key messages from the peer team are:

- prioritise your expenditure to better reflect your desired outcomes
- no more salami slicing or x% top slicing of all budget headings
- prioritise and take your saving from those areas and activities seen as lower priorities by elected Members.

The peer team understand that there are further opportunities for significant efficiency gains and savings. The authority could develop and deliver on a modernisation agenda to ensure the authority is fit for purpose. This agenda could include but not be restricted to:

- digital by design
- channel shift
- proactive demand management
- single face of the customer
- customer service excellence
- paper-light
- agile working and asset rationalisation.

The peer team had the opportunity to review the emerging strategies in these areas but feel much more can be accomplished.

Finally there is a pressing need for a better understanding of the unintended consequences of growth on your communities. Growth will inevitably add further pressure to your already challenged services in Adult Social Care, Children and Young People's Services and transport infrastructure, not to mention schools, GPs and primary care. To prepare you need to fully understand the demographic, social and financial challenges.

4.5 Capacity to deliver

The council has a strong base to build on with Investors in People (IiP) Gold accreditation, a new Chief Executive with a clear plan and strengthened managerial leadership to take the organisation forward.

New policies and procedures are reducing sickness absence levels and helping to strengthen the quality of delivery and performance.

The new approach to engaging staff through the corporate workforce group, staff forums and Trade Union forums are valued and recognised as notable practice.

The peer team are of a united view that you do not have all of the requisite skills or capacity essential if you are to take the transformation agenda forward, and at the required pace. So you will need to be prepared to adapt and change as the journey unfolds.

Consider aligning the appropriate behaviours and skills to deliver your agenda through a refreshed Organisational Development Strategy and addressing all single points of failure both from an organisational perspective and system perspective.

Thurrock has an over-reliance on a small group of key officers and appear to have limited or no back-up plans for succession planning.

The peer team were also made aware that Thurrock council currently relies on a single data centre and desperately need to secure back up arrangements through another centre of your own, shared, outsourced or via the cloud, but resolution of this issue is mission critical. You have already experienced a failure in this area which fortunately was of a short duration and despite the fact your team in the contact centre used the experience to test their Disaster Recovery plans a longer outage could have a significant and detrimental impact on your business.

And finally and very important Thurrock needs to strengthen and resource your strategic approach to communications and media. This is of significant importance to you to meet your desire of bringing all your communities with you on the transformation of the area.

4.6 _Growth

Thurrock has a very positive growth story, which has been developed and delivered over the past four years, with a strong appetite to do more with major schemes under discussion.

There has been strong delivery of key growth hubs, such as High House Production Park and London Gateway.

High House Production Park has seen the Council act as a strong catalyst to enable the scheme to get traction and ultimately deliver an impressive facility and London Gateway where the Council provided a clear facilitation to enable the Local Development Order to help make the scheme a reality all of which demonstrate the different roles the Council can play in delivering growth.

Business engagement is a growing strength with private sector partners confirming that the council are positive to work with.

The council have played a strong role in shaping a difficult LEP environment and has been very successful in achieving a significant amount of funding. Thurrock has a nationally significant strength in traditional industries such as the ports and logistics. It also has a fantastic opportunity around creative industries and retail. Which is a major future driver of the UK economy; Thurrock can be at the core of this and this diverse portfolio of traditional and the new economies provides a significant platform to build upon and provides a forceful opportunity to develop a new narrative for the Borough. The peer team urge you to continue to build the relationships with the sector to exploit these industries/sectors.

London's growth is getting closer, the message from the peer challenge team is to make sure you position yourself effectively to get the growth you want, rather than the growth that is 'given'.

There was good all-round recognition for growth facing services provided by the council, but there is a need to ensure support services build on their current commercial approach. There was evidence that some back office/corporate services were not providing the same level of great service to front line services which ultimately detracted from their professional offer.

The overall message from the peer team is to keep the momentum up. There is a clear market presence in Thurrock, make sure it is harnessed to bring maximum value to the area through growth.

Infrastructure will be key to the next phase of growth. Ensure that you have a clear strategy to maximise the benefits schemes may bring, also be clear on how you wish to mitigate the impact on residents. You can perhaps learn from the experience of the work on the A14 by Greater Cambridge and Greater Peterborough LEP (GCGP LEP).

Develop and consider strong use of 'brand' Thurrock – this will help build outward presence and help position future partnerships on a stronger footing.

Strengthen the narrative between your communities and growth. Ensure that residents understand the broader impact of growth and how it is changing Thurrock for the better. Also develop a strong communications narrative about each step of the growth story. This will help build this narrative.

Consider the role of your town centres more overtly and try and define complementary roles for the towns so they supported rather than competed with each other. We encourage you to be confident in approaching the market. The retail sector regularly has targets detailed on their website, build the conversation so that Lakeside is not seen as the only option. The LGA sense a growing interest from Government regarding this issue and it would be great if councils such as Thurrock were able to shape rather than respond to the Government's agenda. The peer team encourage Thurrock to engage with the LGA. Please get in touch with Kamal Panchal, kamal.panchal@local.gov.uk, to share your experience.

Skills availability at all levels is undoubtedly a major issue for business. While not a quick fix, consider how the council builds a clear skills strategy into the wider growth

strategy. Although a national issue, the absence of coordinated work experience in Thurrock is a problem which was raised. Attention should therefore be paid to the relationships with schools, not least to build the aspirations of young people. Consider how work experience can benefit young people and the role Thurrock council can play in facilitating this.

4.7 Interconnectivity of Strategies

There is good engagement with Clinical Commissioning Groups, third sector and across council in the development of joint health & wellbeing strategy (JHWS).

The JHWS is anticipated to corporately drive the people agenda and this is understood and welcomed.

Intelligence and the investment in a data repository and an observatory is recognised as necessary to further align strategies and plans. The team received feedback "We all need to use the same basic information".

There is evidence of the key linkages between JHWS and Growth Strategy is recognised in practice and delivering improved outcomes. For example the new health centre in Tilbury and planning/housing activity influenced by the wellbeing agenda.

Development of Hubs and local area coordination as a result of the community engagement strategy evidences commitment to community needs.

The engagement with, and influence of, the two key strategies; the JHWS and the Growth Strategy has been good. The next step is reader alignment through the development of clear joint delivery plans.

Community engagement has been well developed by the emerging Hubs and Local Area Coordination. There is, however, limited community cohesion thinking and consideration of the rising Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) population, potentially up to 25% by 2020. Drift from London of aspiring families, an increasing Eastern European intake and deprivation of the white working class could all lead to tensions if left unmanaged.

Given the wish to reflect the diversity of the resident population in staff numbers, the growing BAME population and the prevalence of hate crime nationally there is a need to develop an Equality & Diversity strategy.

There is little referencing between two key strategies and the community engagement strategy, improved linkages could easily be created, particularly to reflect the good practice on community resilience, asset based community development, community builders, coproduction with communities, volunteering and the stronger together programme - all of which are models that Thurrock should be proud of.

Council officers and Members talk of clarity around priorities, particularly developing clear and shared goals. It may be helpful instead to focus on outcomes, making the golden thread from 'intelligence to performance' an easier journey. Integrated strategic

outcomes may be a way of focusing on functions rather than services. This may, in turn, assist in the integration and interconnectivity of strategies, reduce silo working and create pathways to a financial strategy that can follow the right outcomes rather than lead a damage limitation exercise.

The council may wish to look at the following strategies:

- Kirklees Equality and Diversity strategy
- Connecting jobs & growth strategy from Leeds City region
- Edinburgh's Equality & Right outcomes
- Haringey's child poverty strategy

The Human Resources team has had significant upheaval in the last few years, not least the return of services from Serco, turnover and recruitment of senior management, reducing high levels of sickness absence and the challenge of improving member/officer relationships. The team are on top of solid HR practice and emerging policy changes from government.

The OD strategy has changed little since 2010 and almost certainly does not now reflect the desired culture of the council as it changes and transforms. The OD strategy is an all-encompassing wish list of interventions a good organisation would want to see but there is little that reflects the personality of Thurrock council and their employees.

The emphasis on viewing staff as residents (70% of staff are residents) and assisting one duly assists the other is a strength and an interesting approach but staff nevertheless should be seen as a particular cohort and the single most important asset of the council. The refreshed OD strategy could be led by a clear alignment with the corporate narrative and in particular the key strategies and could include:

- A 6 monthly pulse survey of no more than 12 questions;
- Development of an in-house resourced coaching culture;
- Redesign of the 360;
- A refocus of the behaviors framework to reflect the strategies;
- An exploration of accommodation of staff through a productivity lens;
- Inclusive leadership development of all staff regardless of position "leadership is an attitude not a position";
- Maintaining and developing the staff forums;
- Ensuring systems (e.g. oracle) meet 'great' manager's needs.

The OD strategy does not merely interconnect with other strategies it exemplifies and underpins - it makes it possible to deliver the desired outcomes for the people of Thurrock.

5. Our Views

In response to the specific questions posed to the peer team around growth, the team feel there is evidence of an emerging growth strategy but the team also highlight the need for this strategy to be wholly integrated into a narrative of place or integrated place making strategy.

The team also felt the authority has been successful in securing external funding however the authority will need to adopt a more mature approach to collaborative partnership working in the future if it is to continue to attract a disproportionate amount of large scale funding.

Ensuring the authority has a pipeline of shelf ready projects and raising its profile on a regional and national basis will be critical going forward.

With regards to the interconnectivity of strategies the team felt there was limited evidence to-date however there was an undeniable understanding of getting this right going forward

6. Going Forward

In summary the peer team concluded the authority's work should be focused around 3 inter-related themes:

1. Crystallising a clear and confident narrative for Thurrock the place – developing and telling the integrated story of effective place making.
2. Defining the role of the council – delivering a modernisation agenda that makes Thurrock Council fit for the future.
3. Bringing all of your communities with you – engaging, communicating and selling the story of success.

The team concluded that Thurrock Council has the appetite and ambition to deliver on this agenda and wished them well in their efforts.

7. Next Steps

We appreciate you will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions with your senior managerial and political leadership in order to determine how the council wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Gary Hughes, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). His contact details are:
gary.hughes@local.gov.uk

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with you and colleagues through the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide additional information and signposting about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform your ongoing consideration.

Follow up visit

The LGA peer challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the council assess the impact of the peer challenge and the progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team. It is a lighter-touch version of the original visit and does not necessarily involve all members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the council. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next 12-24 months.

Sign posting

Developing a Place Based Narrative

Many councils are looking to develop this approach and the LGA are currently in the process of developing a resource around place branding. Please contact Matt Nicholls, Head of Local Government Communications Support, matt.nicholls@local.gov.uk

The peer team would also suggest you speak to the following councils:

- London Borough of Hackney
- London Borough of Waltham Forest
- Stoke City Council
- Opportunity Peterborough
- Oldham Council
- Crawley Council
- Aylesbury Council

Infrastructure – Highways

The peer team encourage Thurrock to learn from the experience of the work on the A14 by Greater Cambridge and Greater Peterborough LEP (GCGP LEP).

Town Centres

The LGA sense a growing interest from Government regarding this issue and it would be great if councils such as Thurrock were able to shape rather than respond to the Government's agenda. The peer team encourage Thurrock to engage with the LGA. Please get in touch with Kamal Panchal, kamal.panchal@local.gov.uk, to share your experience.

Interconnectivity of Strategies

Thurrock council may wish to look at the following strategies:

- Kirklees Equality and Diversity strategy
- Connecting jobs & growth strategy from Leeds City region
- Edinburgh's Equality & Right outcomes
- Haringey's child poverty strategy