

Corporate Peer Challenge: Follow-up Visit
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

28th and 29th January 2019

Feedback Report

1. Introduction and purpose

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council undertook an LGA corporate peer challenge in October 2016. The feedback presented to the council included the following:

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council has strong political and managerial leadership. This is reflected both in what has been achieved in recent years and in the level of ambition that exists for the borough and the council going forward. Economic growth is the key to the future prosperity of Tunbridge Wells as a place, the fulfilment of the council's ambitions for the borough and the financial sustainability of the authority. There is a lot of goodwill and support for the council amongst partners and they are keen for the borough and the authority to succeed. They wish to see the authority 'seize control' of the borough's destiny.

The authority is keen to ensure the views of the 'hard to reach' and 'seldom heard' within the borough are listened to. Whilst there is already extensive engagement on the part of the council across the borough, the authority has an anxiety that if the voices of some are not being heard then those of the more vocal may have a disproportionate impact. In our view the council should be willing to be clearer that the most vocal voices in the borough are not necessarily fully representative. The council has a democratic mandate to pursue the interests of the whole borough and, in so doing, make difficult, and often controversial decisions, for the greater good.

The council has sound governance. Central to this are the very good relationships within the organisation.

Whilst there is a commitment in the authority to open and honest communication both internally and externally, the desired impact is not necessarily being achieved. We see benefit to be had from the council adopting a more strategic approach to communication.

The purpose of the follow up visit on 28th and 29th January 2019 was to help the council take stock of progress made against the following areas, which were identified by the council as being of the greatest significance:

- The transition from a broad to a more focused set of priorities and the move towards actually delivering them
- The council's approach to communicating its plans and projects
- The extent to which decisions on the priorities and projects are soundly based

This report provides a written summary of the key observations made by the peer team during their visit to Tunbridge Wells.

Peer challenge

Peer challenges are improvement-focussed and tailored to meet an individual council's 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 process is not designed to provide a technical assessment or due diligence on specific proposals. Neither is it intended to provide prescriptive recommendations. The peer challenge process provides feedback, observations and insights from experienced practitioners that will help validate, reality check and further develop the council's current plans, proposals and evolving thinking about the future.

Peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The peers who undertook the follow-up visit to Tunbridge Wells were involved in the original peer challenge and were:

- Dr Donald Graham, Chief Executive, Hertsmere Borough Council
- Councillor Neil Clarke, Rushcliffe Borough Council and Nottinghamshire County Council
- Kate Waterhouse, Head of Performance, Research and Intelligence, Manchester City Council
- Maria Collinge, Project Support Officer, LGA (shadowing)
- Chris Bowron, Peer Challenge Manager, LGA

The team spent two days on site at Tunbridge Wells, during which they spoke to more than 40 stakeholders, including elected members, officers and partners. Peers prepared for their visit by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council, the challenges it is facing and the recent progress and developments made.

2. Key findings and observations

Priorities and projects

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council has adopted the strapline 'Shaping the borough, making a difference' to help convey what it stands for. This message is well understood amongst the people we met and is a direct response to one of the findings from the original peer challenge – that of the need to ensure a balance of emphasis and attention between the various projects that the council is undertaking to secure economic growth and financial sustainability and the services it delivers on a day-to-day basis.

The council's 'Five Year Plan' (2017-22) details what the council and the borough are all about and encapsulates this in the following vision:

- ‘To encourage investment and sustainable growth and to enhance quality of life for all’

Tangible progress is being made in translating this vision and the council’s related ambitions into a reality, including the delivery that is underway of a number of projects central to the future of the borough. Key to this has been a very clear shift by the authority from a set of broad ambitions to what is a deliberately limited set of focused projects, of which there are eight in total:

- Cultural and learning hub (The Amelia)
- New theatre
- New civic centre
- Additional off-street parking
- Local Plan
- New sports facilities
- Supporting the provision of community centres
- Enhancing public realm

This has been underpinned by the re-alignment of resources to reflect what the council is prioritising, with this including the expansion of its Property team and the creation of a Programme Management Office. Further prioritisation has been demonstrated since the eight projects were determined, with the decision having been taken to defer work on one of them, the creation of new sports facilities within the borough, in order to better enable the council to cope with the current capacity pressures.

Delivery

The tangible progress being made by the council in translating its vision and ambitions into a reality is clear to see.

Work is underway on the creation of The Amelia cultural centre, a joint £13.2m initiative being delivered by the council and Kent County Council. It will house a museum, art gallery, library, adults’ education centre and tourist information facility and is due to open in the summer of 2021. The securing of £4.3m from the Heritage Lottery Fund has not only played a major role in enabling this project to come in to being but has also served to reinforce a growing track record on the part of the council for successfully bidding for external funding.

Work on phase 2 of the public realm works in Royal Tunbridge Wells commenced on the day the peer challenge follow-up started. The final hurdle is being approached in looking to secure the go-ahead of the Calverley Square development. It is hoped that construction work can commence in the autumn of this year on this development which would provide a new theatre and civic centre, underground car parking and public square.

Work is underway on the Local Plan, with dialogue taking place internally through the Planning Policy Advisory Group, which is open to all councillors, and externally in the form of discussions with parish and town councils and public consultation events. The council is looking to enable the creation of ‘Community Hubs’ in three areas within the borough – Cranbrook, Paddock Wood and Southborough – which will bring together the likes of

council services, libraries, GP surgeries and community facilities in order to either safeguard their future or improve the quality of the facilities. Whilst the hubs have not yet come to fruition, the process is underway with dialogue taking place, including with the parish and town councils concerned.

The council's objective of becoming financially self-sufficient by 2018 has been achieved. The authority is in a sound financial position and has strong financial management, as demonstrated by the unqualified Audit Letters of the last nine years.

A new waste contract has been negotiated jointly by the council and Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council. This commences at the end of March this year and has secured annual savings for the council of £700,000. It will also deliver environmental improvements through an increased recycling rate and its impact on air quality. The council continues to demonstrate its commitment to maintaining the quality environment offered by its parks and open spaces, with Green Flags having been awarded to six of its parks, grounds and cemeteries. In 2018, Royal Tunbridge Wells was awarded Silver Gilt at the Britain in Bloom finals.

A major impact has been made by the council on rough sleeping in the borough, with a reduction in numbers from 20 to the low single figures. Such has been the impact that demand for the winter shelter provided by the council has reduced significantly. With the help of funding secured from a successful bid for government monies, appropriate accommodation and support has been made available and this has had a very positive impact on the number of people sleeping rough.

The authority is achieving a lot, whether that be in terms of physical projects, policy and planning work or the delivery of day-to-day services. This is quite rightly engendering pride and increased confidence in the organisation.

Place leadership

We highlighted in 2016 both that partners wished to see the council seize control of the borough's destiny and that the council recognised economic growth as the key to the future prosperity of the borough and the financial sustainability of the authority. The council has acted impressively during the intervening period and truly seized the place leadership mantle, with the drive for economic growth central to this. In so doing, it is creating a sense of optimism and excitement about the future for Tunbridge Wells. What it has done has required vision, persistence and carefully managed risk-taking.

Challenging projects are being taken forward by the council, demonstrating that it has the courage of its convictions. The vision and ideas are turning into tangible realities and have been underpinned by a thoroughness of planning and preparation that has seen the more controversial elements of the plans successfully pass the scrutiny they have faced. That scrutiny has been significant, involving Judicial Review, the Local Government Ombudsman, CIPFA analysis and detailed external audit. The fact all such scrutiny has been passed with flying colours says much about the council and the people leading it and working for it.

In summary, and in our view, what is being seen in Tunbridge Wells represents place leadership at its best.

Communicating plans and projects

The council has created a Cabinet Portfolio that specifically covers communications. It is a dual Portfolio, also leading on economic development. Linking these two aspects together makes perfect sense, given their importance to the borough and the council. There have been clear improvements over the last two years in the council's approach to communications. A much more proactive stance has been adopted, as seen with the work on the '100 Voices' campaign and a wide range of communication events, including over two hundred public events across a range of venues, such as schools and libraries, engaging local people in the thinking and planning around culture and the creative arts in the borough. There has also been a re-focusing of the council's quarterly 'Local' magazine to residents. The authority is currently in the process of drawing together a communications strategy to build on all of this.

Internally, the council delivers a range of events and activities to engage and reward people, including staff awards and the 'We Made a Difference' initiative to promote the impact of day-to-day service delivery. There is clear valuing of the council's staff by the leadership of the organisation, embodied in the personal approach demonstrated by the Chief Executive and reflected in the hosting of coffee mornings for staff by Directors and leading elected members. This valuing is a key part of a virtuous circle, with the positive atmosphere and culture that exists and the commitment, energy and enthusiasm of the staff that we met.

The councillors that we met are well informed about the authority's plans and activities and there is a good flow of information about them to the public, demonstrating openness and transparency. There is also good engagement with partners, sharing information and enabling involvement as seen with the presentation of the council's budget to members of the Town Forum the week prior to our visit and the work engaging parish and town councils in the work around the Local Plan.

Thus positive steps have been taken in the council's approach to communications. It feels, though, that there is still scope for strategic communications to facilitate and support further the council's fulfilment of its ambitions. The council therefore needs to ensure its communications approach and capacity is commensurate with the scale of those ambitions.

Areas for further attention

In 2016 we highlighted the need to ensure the council's key growth projects were balanced in terms of them contributing to the tackling of social challenges and benefiting the borough as a whole, as well as being about 'bricks and mortar'. The authority has responded well to this, delivering a range of activities linked to the theatre, The Amelia and the potential Calverley Square development. This has included an award-winning focus on health and well-being, including dementia and social inclusion, delivered by the museum and art gallery; a levy on theatre tickets to fund cultural activities across the borough; free youth theatre in priority neighbourhoods; the development of a creative

learning participation plan which is leveraging cultural facilities to provide social value, including aiding talent development; the 'pay what you can' initiative for certain theatre performances and 'meet the buyer' and other such enterprise activities aimed at developing local supply chains.

The council needs to build a comprehensive picture of such activities and what is being achieved through them and then use this as part of a drive to communicate with a wide range of audiences to help them understand the importance of economic growth to the future of the borough and the way in which the social benefits are being, or will be, felt across Tunbridge Wells.

The original corporate peer challenge outlined that whilst the council was delivering a lot, what was less clear was how it all linked with key agendas such as employment and skills, transport infrastructure provision and health challenges. We described this as the need to establish a clearer understanding of how the council's ambitions and priorities sat as part of a wider 'strategic whole' in terms of both geography and partnership working. The council needs to continue its efforts both to clarify this strategic whole and, through influence and partnership, progress the interests of the borough. The need for improved infrastructure is increasing, including not just transport infrastructure but also utilities such as broadband provision, sewerage and electrical supply capacity.

In 2016, we described the work focused on transforming the way the council operates as being undertaken by a 'coalition of the willing' and outlined the need to develop a more strategic approach to transformation. The council has responded to this, establishing a transformation programme which is managed through its newly-created Programme Management Office and overseen by a Transformation Board. However, we see a need to create further drive behind the ambitions, including making the necessary investment. The programme includes 'Modern Ways of Working' which is focused on ensuring a modern and flexible workforce and devising new working practices across the council. A set of principles underpinning 'Modern Ways of Working', including management by outcomes, work taking place at the most effective locations and times and 'digital by default' is in the process of being agreed. Given how important this strand of the transformation programme is for people in the organisation, because of the opportunities, benefits and challenges it will provide, it really needs to come to the fore over the coming months.

Strain continues to be felt in the capacity of the organisation. Given the scale of what the council is delivering, with the current period being particularly demanding given several major projects are coming to fruition at the same time, this is unsurprising. It is important for the council to continue to be mindful of the pressures that exist and do what it can to alleviate them. The authority is alive to this and we highlighted earlier the way in which it has re-prioritised within its eight focused projects in order to alleviate some of the pressure.

The council is seen to have good governance, at the heart of which are traditionally good officer/member relationships and good support for councillors. However, this has been an intense time for the organisation, especially in relation to the Calverley Square development. Tensions have been running high and some relationships have become strained. As the council moves forward, there is a shared responsibility to ensure that it

remains a constructive environment that both officers and elected members feel that they want to be part of and where they can make a positive contribution.

3. Next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership of the council will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions and then determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support the council. The Local Government Association (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. Will Brooks, Principal Adviser, is the main contact between your authority and the LGA. He can be contacted via e-mail – william.brooks@local.gov.uk or by phone – 07949 054421.