

# corporate **peer review**

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council  
23 – 26 October 2007

**Corporate Peer Review**

**Visit to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council**

**23-26 October 2007**

**Summary**

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) has made significant strides since the CPA inspection in 2004. The reform programme put in place as a response to that inspection, has enabled TWBC to undertake an impressive 'improvement journey'.

The council has a transformation agenda that has delivered a restructure of services, and an improvement and cultural change programme that is now achieving performance improvement across the whole council. There is strong political support for what the council wants to achieve with the top political and managerial leadership being clear about their roles and responsibilities. This approach is respected by stakeholders and partners.

Following extensive consultation with the community and partners, members set the four corporate priorities of;

1. promoting and maintaining a thriving and diverse local economy
2. caring for the environment
3. having housing suitable for local people
4. developing safer and stronger communities.

These priorities are well understood and have provided a focus for improvement in the organisation.

The council's strategic plan operates in conjunction with its improvement plan and with a medium term financial strategy (MTFS) in place, that is used to inform budgetary and service planning decisions, TWBC has a robust programme of improvement. The council has also embraced partnership working and there are examples where this has improved the delivery of some services.

There is a commitment to put the needs of customers first, external communication has improved and the council is working towards improved financial management and producing a balanced budget that does not rely on interest from reserves. This has resulted in services being well regarded and reasonably cost effective.

There are strong officer and member working relationships, staff are well motivated and 'up for change' and see the leader and chief executive as integral to continued improvement.

There is a robust performance management system to measure performance against targets which is regularly reviewed through the 'First Group' led by the chief executive.

TWBC has a developing culture of learning and it can be proud of a range of achievements against priorities which include:

## ***Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Peer Review***

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- good examples of targeting and investing in priority areas that are delivering improved outcomes for residents
- high satisfaction levels amongst residents
- improved performance with 50% of Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) now in the top quartile

However, there are challenges that need to be addressed. The council needs to focus more, gather and document examples of the achievements and outcomes for the community and so demonstrate the impact that the impressive improvement in BVPIs is having on local people and the services they receive.

TWBC should build on the achievements of recent years and the benefits of having strong leadership and enter a period of stability and consolidation. This will help partners, members and officers to be supported and brought on board for the next phase of improvement.

The peer review team also received evidence that the council is doing a great deal and it needs to be careful that it doesn't lose focus on its core priorities. TWBC therefore needs to maintain its focus on what is important to ensure it can continue delivering improvements whilst remaining within its resource limits.

TWBC should continue its approach to making further difficult decisions to ensure greater clarity on what its non-priorities are. It could improve performance further by realigning resources from identified non-priority areas. This will enable it to sustain improvements in priority areas and provide contingency to enable it to respond effectively to new opportunities.

There are opportunities to maximise the energy and motivation of staff by strengthening two way communications, through the timely delivery of the internal and external communications strategy which will effectively communicate its vision and lead staff, service users, partners and the wider community.

Members are developing their community leadership roles. There has also been a significant improvement in the overview and scrutiny function but there is still scope to engage all members further and improve awareness of the value and importance of overview and scrutiny.

Over the past 18 months, the Council has made substantial improvements in a number of equalities-related indicators and has made progress against the Equality Standard for Local Government. TWBC needs to provide examples of where engagement is making a difference – for example, in service provision, policy making and employment practices.

In terms of community engagement, TWBC needs to continue to build on recent improvements in this area through initiatives such as the innovative 'Ward Walks' and Councillor Call for Action pilots. The need to progress the delivery of the Engagement Strategy and to ensure this strategy is aligned with the emerging Communication and Customer Access Strategies, will be integral in ensuring the overall coherence of the Council's approach to engagement and consultation.

## ***Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Peer Review***

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TWBC could further rise to the challenges it faces by drawing on available capacity resources from partners and to start planning for the forthcoming Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA).

The review team supports the focus on performance indicators but asks TWBC to consider whether there is a risk that exceeding performance indicator targets could be seen by some as the end product and could be at the expense of a focus on the achievement of improved outcomes for local people.

Looking at the progress to date the review team is confident that the council can rise to the challenges ahead.

### **Overall key strengths.**

During the course of the peer review it became evident that the council demonstrates a range of key strengths:

- ✓ The political leadership, chief executive and her management team are recognised as having been instrumental in driving forward the transformation agenda together
- ✓ There is evidence that staff at all levels are seen as customer focused, approachable, able, and enthusiastic to 'do their bit'
- ✓ The drive and determination throughout the council is evidenced by the significant improvement in terms of performance across all services
- ✓ The approach to partnership working is strong with particular reference to work with the Maidstone Borough Council on shared posts, Gravesham Borough Council with regards to equalities and diversity, Kent County Council on the Gateway
- ✓ TWBC is open and receptive to new ideas and challenge
- ✓ The financial capacity of TWBC will be strong once the projected balanced budget is achieved

### **Overall key areas for consideration.**

The council does, however, have areas that it needs to consider for improvement:

- The peer review team believe that the council could benefit from a period of stability and consolidation to ensure that partners, members and officers are supported and brought along
- The council could raise its profile, value and effectiveness by strengthening its communications through:
  - improving two way internal communication
  - ensuring that all internal and external communications articulate a clear vision and future direction for TWBC
  - acknowledging, recognising and celebrating the success of staff through meaningful communication
  - improving the visibility and accessibility of the Chief Executive and her Senior Managers
- TWBC could provide more evidence of its approach to diversity, social inclusion and community cohesion by:
  - providing more evidence of the work to deliver outcomes for hard to reach groups
  - progressing the delivery of the Engagement Strategy and ensuring this strategy is aligned with the emerging Communication and Customer Access Strategies
- Finally, TWBC could consider how it can build on the pace of change and sustain this change which is evident over the past three years by:
  - developing a strategy for partnership working and continuing to support partnership working
  - getting away from the tick box mentality
  - considering the future after CPA and beginning to plan for CAA

## ***Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Peer Review***

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The relationship between leader and chief executive is crucial to the effective running of any council. The political leadership in TWBC has changed recently but already there is evidence of a strong, cohesive working relationship between the new leader and chief executive and this is recognised by staff and partners as having been instrumental in driving forward the transformation agenda.

This strong leadership has delivered significant improvement in performance across a range of indicators including;

- performance for recycling and composting
- residents satisfied with leisure, sports, arts and museums
- percentage of private sector homes vacant for six months or more.

The organisation is rightly proud of these improvements.

There was evidence that staff at all levels are customer-focused, approachable, supportive and enthusiastic in helping improve the organisation. This spirit needs to be supported and nurtured through delivery of a period of stability and consolidation and through improving meaningful two-way communication.

Much of the council's external communication is very good, particularly iLocal - the resident magazine. The development of a Communications Strategy and the further work being developed to establish a clearer branding for TWBC will build upon the good work to date to further communicate and engage with its local community.

Internal communication is, however, less effective and needs attention and, in particular, there need to be channels to ensure that staff can access and feed in their concerns to senior management.

This approach would support TWBC's overall ethos of being open and receptive to new ideas, challenge and learning and the council could benefit from harnessing the innovation and enthusiasm of staff throughout the whole organisation.

It is acknowledged that the council recognises its place and influence in the context of the regional, county and sub-regional plans and is now playing its part and this is evidenced through the council's work developing the new local area agreement (LAA2). This is welcomed by partners and stakeholders and the council's approach to partnership working has delivered improved outcomes – for example the partnership with Kent County Council to deliver the Gateway project - and has a strong likelihood to deliver much more.

The peer review team received evidence of many effective partnerships but the council should now consider what it is that it wants from these partnerships and whether they are all still fit for purpose. The partnership protocol was seen as a useful tool and could be further supported by the development of a strategy for partnership working. This would help assure the long-term sustainability of improvements and avoid the possibility of stretching resources unnecessarily.

The council has significant financial reserves and recent moves to reduce reliance on investment interest will increase flexibility for it to invest in priority areas. The Council now needs to build on the recent SIMALTO exercise (**S**imultaneous **M**ulti **A**tttribute **L**evel **T**rade

Off) to ensure that it is clear about priorities and non-priorities so that it has the capacity and resources to deliver its priorities effectively. TWBC has gone some way towards identifying some non priorities, but yet there is still a risk of initiative overload with evidence that capacity is being stretched.

If TWBC is to demonstrate that it is reaching all of its communities it needs to demonstrate more examples of its approach to diversity, social inclusion and community cohesion. The council needs these examples to be able to demonstrate how it is delivering improved outcomes for its hard to reach groups, - in particular the new emerging Eastern European communities and those people from rural communities who may find it more difficult to access services.

In the near future CPA will give way to CAA and although the agenda is not fully understood, it is suggested that a longer-term focus on CAA would benefit the council. By starting to prepare for CAA now, TWBC will be better placed to deliver its ambitions for CPA and will continue to improve services and outcomes for its community.

The review team believes that this is an authority with enormous potential that has delivered and can continue to deliver high quality services for the people of Tunbridge Wells.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations seek to build upon the council's existing strengths, and aim to equip TWBC with the necessary capacity to deliver the required change agenda effectively, and respond to future challenges. The recommendations are set out under the five main headings of the Audit Commission's Key Lines of Enquiry.

#### **Ambition for the community**

1. TWBC needs to provide more evidence to clarify how challenging and stretching its ambitions are up to 2011, and if these ambitions are widely shared amongst staff and partners
2. Whilst there are clear aims and priorities, TWBC need to demonstrate how these are to be measured against targets and over time
3. The council need to demonstrate how consultation in TWBC recognises the range and complex needs of the communities in the borough and how it will improve engagement and communication with hard-to-reach groups
4. Whilst partnership working in some areas is effective the council needs to demonstrate how improved outcomes are being delivered in other areas as a result of close partnership working
5. The council should consider how to effectively communicate its vision and lead staff, service users and the wider community

#### **Prioritisation**

1. TWBC need to provide more evidence of partner and customer/community engagement and how this is leading to the adoption/modification of priorities/policies
2. Whilst it is right to have focus on BVPIs the peer review team asks TWBC to consider whether there is a risk that the target could become the outcome
3. Despite known health inequalities, TWBC need to provide more evidence to demonstrate how it is addressing this priority.
4. The peer review team received evidence that the council is trying to do too much and it could lose focus and be diverted from its core priorities. TWBC should, therefore, consider how it will retain its focus and avoid overload.
5. The peer review team recognises that TWBC has made positive steps to develop robust strategies in line with its ambitions and reallocate resources accordingly, but some strategies are still developing and need to be progressed

#### **Capacity**

1. Priority is being given to meeting Equality and Diversity standards but more still needs to be done to identify and understand the "hard to reach" sections of the community
2. TWBC needs to progress the delivery and appropriately resource the 'People Strategy' to equip Members and staff with the required skills to deliver the future ambition for the council
3. The council should consider a more strategic approach to partnerships to ensure the long term sustainability of improvements

4. The council needs to improve and embed a number of corporate planning and support processes which should lead to improvements in the Use of Resources judgment
5. The council needs to consider how it can avoid the risk of initiative overload and ensure that capacity is not over stretched.

### **Performance management**

1. The peer review team recognises the significant improvement in Overview and Scrutiny, however there are further opportunities to strengthen and improve the effectiveness of this function
2. The council should extend the existing performance management culture within the organisation, including Overview and Scrutiny and the Audit Committee, and use it with partners as a strategic tool to improve outcomes
3. TWBC should seek out further opportunities to recognise achievement, celebrate success and capture and disseminate best practice throughout and across the organisation
4. TWBC should consider whether the focus on BVPI's is at the expense of a focus on outcomes and achievements for local people

### **Achievement and Improvement**

1. "Work in progress" was a statement mentioned by many and the review team felt that it was too early to tell whether the increased investment in priority areas is going to lead to improved outcomes for the community
2. The council needs to focus more upon achievements and outcomes for the community and be able to demonstrate the impact that the impressive improvement in BVPI's is having on local people and the services they receive
3. Finally, the peer review team did not receive information on how projects are planned and evaluated to predict and assess the impact upon people in the community. TWBC need to implement a corporate approach to project management that enables them to identify anticipated outcomes at an early stage of the project planning process.

### **Background**

1. The peer challenge for TWBC was carried out by reviewing the council's own self-assessment produced in October 2007 and challenging this against the Audit Commission's 'Key Lines Of Enquiry' (KLOE) for district councils.
2. The role of peer challenge needs to be stated in the context of the CPA framework. It is not an inspection and will not form an opinion as to whether the council has more strengths or weaknesses in any particular area. Peer challenge offers a supportive approach, undertaken by 'critical friends', with the clear intention of helping a council to identify its current strengths and recognise key areas that require development in order to drive future improvement.
3. The peer challenge for TWBC was facilitated by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and consisted of:
  - Steven Halls, Chief Executive, Three Rivers District Council
  - Councillor Marco Longhi, Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
  - Mike Nuttall, Corporate Director and Deputy Chief Executive, South Ribble Borough Council
  - Rhian Gladman, Consultant, IDeA
  - Gary Hughes, Review Manager, IDeA

The team was on site at the council between 23-26 October 2007.

4. The programme for the week was organised in advance and included a variety of activities designed to enable members of the peer review team to meet and talk to a spectrum of internal and external stakeholders. Examples of activities the team undertook were:
  - discussions with the political leadership and senior management of the council
  - discussions with a range of members, including cabinet members and a focus group with the chair and vice chair of overview and scrutiny committee
  - focus groups with cross sections of staff, including frontline staff and middle managers, external partners and residents
  - observations of the corporate management team and cabinet meeting
  - discussions with key partners, including the chief executive from the county council, trade union representatives and district audit
  - pre-reading of materials produced by the council, prior to the on-site working.
5. The team was appreciative of the welcome and hospitality provided by the council and would like to thank everybody that they met during the process for their time and contributions. The way in which the needs of the team were taken care of and the support received from Raymond Warren, Performance and Improvement Manager and Jo Williams, Performance and Improvement Officer deserve a special mention.
6. The feedback given to the council on the last day of the peer review reported on the key messages. This report gives a more detailed written account of the findings of the review and is structured around the five key lines of enquiry.

### **Context**

7. Tunbridge Wells is positioned within the Heart of Kent. It benefits from a rich historical legacy and is home to an array of well established villages and rural communities, as well as the thriving town centres of Royal Tunbridge Wells, Southborough, Cranbrook, Paddock Wood and Hawkhurst. 55% of the population live in Royal Tunbridge Wells and 45% in rural towns and villages. Covering 326 square kilometres, the borough is home to a population of 106,200 residents, living in 45,961 households representing 7.7% of the county of Kent's total population. It benefits from good transport links to London and the south coast.
8. Tunbridge Wells has over two thirds of the borough designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and has ten Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Residents enjoy a high quality of life with average life expectancy of 80.2 years, over 70% of residents live in owner-occupied households, and over 81% of residents own at least one car or van, which is above both the county and the national averages.
9. Tunbridge Wells also faces significant challenges such as an extremely high cost of housing, which is coupled with a significant gap between housing supply and need. This means that there is a significant challenge in balancing the housing market and with a high cost of living it is very difficult to attract new people to the borough.
10. Whilst in overall terms the borough appears to be affluent, there are areas of deprivation. For example, within the borough there are areas ranked amongst the most deprived twenty percent in Kent and Medway and, in these areas, life expectancy is much lower than the borough average.
11. There is also an over reliance on retail economy with Royal Tunbridge Wells town centre facing increased competition from elsewhere.
12. One of the main challenges for TWBC is the increasing age of the boroughs population. It is projected that by 2016, over 20% of the total population will be over the age of 65.
13. Although recent data show that the large majority of residents are classified as white (97.5%) there are many new and emerging communities, particularly Eastern European immigrants that will change the profile in the borough. Accessing, engaging and understanding the needs of these communities is a challenge that the Council is working towards.
14. As with many other authorities the issue of climate change and the impact on the environment is one of concern. There is a need to ensure that the Council and the residents both reduce their local contribution to climate change and promote adaptation to the consequences of climate change
15. The council is Conservative controlled with 41 councillors from the Conservative party and 7 from the Liberal Democrat party.
16. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council was rated as 'weak' in its CPA assessment in 2004.

### **Ambition for the community**

#### **Strengths**

- ✓ Members, the senior management team and staff are enthusiastic and committed to bringing about change and improvement and are clear about their respective roles
- ✓ The Council has a vision, clear aims and priorities for the borough's communities. These are articulated in the Council's Sustainable Community Plan 2004-2011
- ✓ TWBC is working well to improve partnership working and is taking a more proactive role within the County and through the LSP
- ✓ The Council has a good understanding of key strategic issues and prioritises accordingly. For example the corporate priorities are now steering the LDF. As a result, regeneration of the Town Centre and affordable housing have now become priorities
- ✓ Members are developing their community leadership roles and have demonstrated that they are willing to make difficult decisions around what are and are not priorities for the people they represent

#### **Areas for consideration**

- The peer review team did not receive enough evidence to clarify how challenging and stretching TWBC's ambitions are up to 2011, and if these are widely shared amongst staff and partners
- Whilst there are clear aims and priorities, TWBC needs to demonstrate how these are to be measured against targets and over time
- There was limited evidence of how consultation in TWBC recognises the range and complex needs of the communities in the borough and how the council will improve engagement and communication with hard-to-reach groups
- Whilst partnership working in some areas is effective the council needs to demonstrate how improved outcomes are being delivered in other areas as a result of close partnership working
- The council should consider how to effectively communicate its vision and lead staff, service users and the wider community

17. There is a clear shared commitment amongst members, managers and staff to bring about change within Tunbridge Wells. Accompanied by clear roles and strong working relationships between members and officers with a high level of trust permeating throughout the organisation. The council has a vision and clear aims and priorities that are articulated in the council's Community Plan 2004 – 2011 and Strategic Plan 2007-2011.

18. The peer review team, however, did not receive enough evidence to clarify how challenging and stretching the ambitions for TWBC are after 2008 and how they were to be measured against targets and over time. The council's improvement plan, for example, details deadlines for many key actions and projects but very few of these deadlines stretch beyond 2008. The Strategic Plan does provide targets for 2009/10 but the peer review asks TWBC to consider how SMART these targets are and whether they can be more challenging.

19. Evidence from focus groups suggests that staff are not fully confident about the council's ultimate aims and what it wishes to achieve and how they can own and contribute to achieving these aims. Change has been significant, and whilst there are examples of good communication and consultation regarding the change agenda, this is not consistent throughout the organisation. Staff, however, welcomed improved two way communication and although they valued existing channels of communication, such as the staff convention, they felt that the organisation could benefit from a more accessible and visible senior management team.
20. The council has a wide range of successful partnerships ranging from the shared posts with Maidstone Borough Council to the very successful Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP). Staff and partners report that these work well and have enabled effective working and are delivering improved outcomes. For example the CDRP is recognised as being successful in addressing crime and anti social behaviour issues across the Borough.
21. TWBC is now also taking a more active role within the region, particularly with regard to the Local Area Agreement and partnership working. The role that the chief executive has assumed on the 'Kent Commitment' (a statement of intent to improve joint working) also provides strong evidence of TWBC's dedication to playing its part on the regional stage. The Council also recently commissioned a review of its joint LSP arrangements and, as a result, has now revised its LSP composition and direction.
22. Partnership working is welcomed across the community, with partner organisations and councillors very supportive of the renewed approach to partnership working. The partnership protocol was seen as a useful tool and could be further supported by the development of a strategy and improved governance arrangements for partnership working that would determine the shape, form, nature and purpose of such partnerships. This would help ensure the long term sustainability of improvements and avoid the possibility of stretching resources, fragmenting service delivery and removing future flexibility and contingency.
23. This work would clearly establish the desired outcomes of partnership working and enable the council to decide what partnerships it wanted to enter into and, perhaps more importantly, what partnerships it should withdraw from or avoid.
24. The peer review team received evidence of successful partnership working that is delivering results. For example the CDRP has focused its activity on the town centre to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour. This has improved the quality of life for local people. In addition the team heard about the work on the TN2 Community Centre which is improving community cohesion in a deprived area.
25. The council could, however, benefit from further evidencing the achievements and outcomes of their approach to partnership working. For example, even though the health agenda is not explicitly set out as one of the Council's four corporate priorities, the Council is making progress despite significant changes in the PCT arrangements. However, the peer review did not receive enough evidence of this work and how they are working together to improve the health of their community.

## ***Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Peer Review***

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26. The council has a good understanding of key strategic issues and prioritises accordingly. The council identified that the Local Plan was not aligned with the new corporate priorities and consulted with members on how this could be achieved through the Local Development Framework (LDF). As a result, regeneration of the town centre and affordable housing have now become priorities.
27. Members are developing their community leadership roles and are willing to make difficult decisions around what are and are not priorities for the people they represent. Recent decisions around the closure of Cranbrook Offices, the building of a new hospital and an extension to a prison all attracted significant local attention but members were clear about their strategic roles in making their decisions.
28. It was unclear, however, what strategic consultation mechanism was in place and how future consultation would address the range and complex needs of the different communities in the borough and if separate provision is to be made to engage with hard-to-reach groups.
29. The council should, therefore, consider how best to effectively communicate its vision and the rationale for decision making to ensure it is able to effectively deliver its community leadership role.

### **Prioritisation**

#### **Strengths**

- ✓ Stemming from the ambitions for the community there are clear corporate priorities that are well articulated and understood by Members and officers, for example the town centre regeneration
- ✓ There is strong evidence of the 'Golden Thread' running throughout the organisation from the Community Plan through to individual appraisals
- ✓ The Medium Term Finance Strategy notionally directs resources to priorities and there is some evidence of resources following specific priorities, for example the Medway site
- ✓ TWBC recognises its place and influence in the context of the regional, county and sub-regional plans and is now playing its part
- ✓ The priority of service improvement has led to significant improvement in BVPI's

#### **Areas for consideration**

- The peer review team did not receive enough evidence of partner and customer/community engagement leading to adoption/modification of priorities/policies
- Whilst it is right to have focus on BVPI's the peer review team asks TWBC to consider whether there is a risk that the target can become the outcome
- There was limited evidence of work in the health area, despite known inequalities
- The peer review team received evidence that the council is trying to do too much and it could lose focus and be diverted from its core priorities
- The peer review team recognises that TWBC has made positive steps to develop robust strategies in line with its ambitions and reallocate resources accordingly, but some strategies are still developing and need to be progressed

30. TWBC has clear priorities and in 2006, the council prioritised its objectives from the previous Local Plan and captured these in the new LDF. The council focused its core strategy on;

- affordable housing
- regeneration and
- health.

31. The council is clearly prioritising Royal Tunbridge Wells town centre, within its regeneration objective, and this is recognised by members and officers. TWBC is in the process of developing a Master Plan for its key town centres and, in particular, to ensure that Royal Tunbridge Wells remains a key visitor, retail and business destination.

32. The council has also pursued improvements in service delivery which has led to significant improvement in performance for both local and best value performance indicators.

33. Another example of where the council is focusing on its priorities can be seen in its grants programme as they are to be transferred to 'one pot' and directed at priority areas with service level agreements in place for voluntary groups. There is a voluntary sector compact in place.

## ***Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Peer Review***

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34. With regards to non-priorities, the recent SIMALTO exercise identified both that residents would prefer to see an increase in charges for users of specific services rather than an overall increase in council tax for residents as a whole and that they were willing to see fees and charges for users increased in order to maintain and improve services in priority areas. This approach to consultation is to be supported and has gone some way to help identify non-priorities.
35. The peer review team received evidence of the 'Golden Thread' running throughout the organisation from the Community Plan through to individual appraisals. The councils approach to service planning is robust, with a service plan framework in place, and there was evidence of a staff focus on priorities delivered through the appraisal processes.
36. The MTFs notionally directs resources to priority areas and there is evidence of resources following specific priorities. For example, on the Medway site some of a capital receipt was forgone in order to secure more affordable housing. In addition, TWBC stopped supporting the building of a school in a rural area as it was no longer a priority and it has taken money from landscapes to fund health initiatives.
37. TWBC recognises its place in the county, sub-regional and regional agenda. A good example of how TWBC is playing its part is in a recent change to the way in which its LSP is structured following a strategic review of the arrangements that were previously in place. There is evidence of a more structured approach to the delivery of cross-cutting priorities and improved engagement with partners.
38. Although the approach to partnership working is recognised as improving, the peer review team did not receive enough evidence of partner, customer and community engagement leading to the adoption and modification of priorities. This is particularly relevant for hard to reach and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.
39. The peer review team recognises and commends the significant improvement in performance, particularly BVPIs, but asks TWBC to consider whether there is a risk that this focus is now at the expense of the delivery of other priorities. In addition, all BVPIs do not necessarily reflect strategic priorities and, therefore, the focus on these targets could become an outcome in itself without consideration of their impact on the community.
40. Despite known health inequalities and reference to a limited contribution to the healthier communities agenda being made in a recent inspection report, TWBC did not express how they are addressing this priority through partnership working with the PCT or through the contribution of culture, leisure and sport.
41. The peer review team recognises that TWBC has made positive steps to develop robust strategies in line with its ambitions and reallocate resources accordingly, but some strategies are still developing and need to be progressed as a matter of urgency. Particular reference is made to the council's asset management plan which needs development to ensure that property assets support corporate priorities.

### **Capacity**

#### **Strengths**

- ✓ Political and senior management arrangements have been revised and refocused on priority areas and there is a clear focus on roles and responsibilities of all councillors
- ✓ The Council holds significant financial reserves that should enable it to invest in priority areas
- ✓ The peer review team received evidence from Members and officers that there is a continued focus on providing value for money services
- ✓ Engagement and relationships with partner organisations have significantly improved with evidence that some partnerships are delivering improved outcomes, for example CDRP
- ✓ Evidence that staff are seen as customer-focused, approachable, supportive, and enthusiastic to 'do their bit' and this spirit needs to be supported across the whole council
- ✓ The Council shows evidence of a good working relationship between officers and councillors and the Trade Unions

#### **Areas for consideration**

- Priority is being given to meeting Equality and Diversity standards however more still needs to be done to identify and understand the "hard to reach" sections of the community
- TWBC needs to progress the delivery and appropriately resource the 'People Strategy' to equip Members and staff with the required skills to deliver the future ambition for the Council
- The Council should consider a more strategic approach to partnerships to ensure the long term sustainability of improvements
- The Council needs to improve and embed a number of corporate planning and support processes which should lead to improvements in the Use of Resources judgment
- There is a risk of initiative overload with evidence that capacity is stretched

42. TWBC recognised that it needed to refocus its political and senior management arrangements and the recently restructured senior management team is effectively working alongside a reorganised cabinet structure to deliver improved services for the community of Tunbridge Wells borough. The allocation of clear roles for all councillors is enabling decisions to be made quickly and efficiently and priority areas are being progressed. Examples of where this is making a difference is;

- the allocation of a lead member in the Gateway Project
- the improved relationships with parish councils
- delivery of savings from lower priority areas such as leisure.

43. The council holds significant financial reserves that should enable it to invest in priority areas. The peer review team received evidence of where this investment is already delivering improvements such as the investment in the planning service and plans for further investment in areas such as human resources and shared services should also deliver improvements.

## ***Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Peer Review***

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44. The peer review team received evidence from members and officers that there is a continued focus on providing value for money services and the council uses a number of methods to ensure it provides cost effective services, which include:
- Use of the 'Price Book' comparison tool to compare and benchmark with other local authorities.
  - The recent review of the council's grant allocation and the requirement to link the allocation of grants to priorities.
  - The focus on removing the reliance on interest from the financial reserves and achieving savings from within existing service provision
45. Relationships with partner organisations have also improved significantly and evidence from focus groups demonstrated that TWBC's approach to the promotion of partnership working is welcomed and valued amongst organisations.
46. Some examples of where TWBC is positively promoting partnership working is evidenced by the fact that it is;
- playing a key role in developing the second generation local area agreement (LAA2)
  - leading on the 'Kent Commitment' to improve joined up working in Kent
  - addressing internal capacity issues through a partnership approach to delivery of key outcomes such as overview and scrutiny, equality and diversity, licensing and training and development.
47. The peer review team was particularly impressed by the dedication and motivation of staff and they are seen as customer-focused, approachable, supportive and enthusiastic to help improve the council.
48. The council does, however, need to nurture and develop this spirit and would benefit from celebrating staff achievements in a meaningful way and improving engagement and communication with staff.
49. Although the peer review team received evidence of some good processes to access staff feedback, such as 'tell us your success' and the customer champions team, the top team need to be more accessible and should work to involve staff in decision-making. Sessions that would enable staff to meet the chief executive and directors and, therefore, enable them to provide that "personal touch" would further help staff recognition and maintain motivation.
50. The council has recognised the need to develop a new 'People Strategy' and this needs to be progressed and appropriately resourced. The strategy should consider;
- Effective and considerate ways of addressing staff sickness
  - The management of the integration of all customer facing staff
  - How the council will maintain the capacity to keep pace with the rate of change both with regards to the numbers and skills of staff
  - How to embed the newly developed Values amongst staff and also members
  - Recruitment, retention and succession planning for staff
51. There is evidence of a good working relationship between the trade unions and TWBC. The council has been through many changes recently without any evidence of staff or union unrest.

52. It was evident that priority is being given to meeting equality and diversity standards, however, more still needs to be done to identify and understand the “hard to reach” sections of the community – particularly new migrant communities - and to demonstrate how TWBC is delivering services for these communities.
53. Although there is currently insufficient information on economic migrants and emerging communities, the peer review team note that work is underway to address this including a project to collate information held by Kent County Council and TWBC. The results of this exercise are being fed into a scrutiny review and the findings will need to be taken into consideration in planning and delivering its services. The council could also consider alternatives methods of communicating and start to engage with people from the Eastern European community by utilising less formal channels such as churches, local shops and businesses.
54. As previously mentioned in this report, the council could benefit from adopting a strategic approach to partnership working to help sustain long term improvement. The peer review team received evidence that some existing partnerships are stretched and do not have a long term plan in place. There is a danger that without careful consideration and planning the excellent work delivered to date may not be maintained.
55. The Council needs to improve and embed a number of corporate planning and support processes which should lead to improvements in the Audit Commission’s Use of Resources judgment - for example some corporate processes are relatively new and need embedding and developing further, examples include , project asset and financial management processes.
56. The asset management plan needs developing to align it with the council’s corporate priorities. This will enable the council to plan for the strategic use of its assets and ensure that they are fit for the future.
57. The peer review team did not receive evidence of customer involvement in the procurement of services. The recent procurement of a leisure partner for example could have been further improved with involvement from existing and potential customers.
58. There were some good examples of learning for example applying the PRINCE 2 lessons learned methodology and holding ‘mop up sessions’ to review project delivery. However, this approach was not evident throughout the organisation and the pace of progress in TWBC is impacting upon the council’s ability to apply appropriate resources to learning and evaluation. This increases the chance of repeating mistakes and adding to already stretched resources.

### **Performance management**

#### **Strengths**

- ✓ Impressive improvement in terms of performance indicators (both BVPIs and Local Performance Indicators) across the council
- ✓ The council has a strong focus on performance management and systems (Covalent) and processes are in place throughout the council
- ✓ The council has sound building blocks to continue to improve performance
  - 'First Group' is recognised and valued by senior staff
  - Improved reporting of performance
- ✓ TWBC has recognised external accreditation across the council and is seeking further accreditation, for example IIP for the whole Council, Customer First, LGC Awards 2008 for the Councillor Kit Bag
- ✓ There is a culture of learning across the council with effective systems and processes in place, for example independent evaluation
- ✓ There is a strong and robust approach to service planning with plans aligned with corporate priorities

#### **Areas for consideration**

- The peer review team recognises the significant improvement in Overview and Scrutiny, however there are further opportunities to strengthen and improve the effectiveness of this function
- The council should extend the existing performance management culture within the organisation, including Overview and Scrutiny and the Audit Committee, and use it with partners as a strategic tool to improve outcomes
- TWBC should seek out further opportunities to recognise achievement, celebrate success and capture and disseminate best practice throughout and across the organisation
- TWBC should consider whether the focus on BVPIs is at the expense of a focus on outcomes and achievements for local people

59. The council has a sound performance management system, Covalent; with the key building blocks in place such as the Covalent Workshop to ensure the system is used widely and effectively. Members and officers understand and are fully committed to the benefits of monitoring performance.

60. The council also has a robust approach to service planning, with all plans scrutinised and challenged and aligned with the corporate priorities. TWBC has a service plan guidance that provides headings and content requirement. The guidance is flexible so as to allow for it to be tailored to help support ownership amongst staff.

61. TWBC has embedded a focus on performance and governance issues through the 'First Group', which is a forum for the close monitoring of performance and is chaired by the chief executive. Officers attend this forum to report on performance and any actions needed to improve performance are discussed and prioritised. This forum demonstrates commitment to the performance improvement agenda and enables officers to identify and address issues at an early stage.

62. Councillors and independent members from a number of committees including the east and west area planning committees, the Audit Committee, Standards Committee, overview and scrutiny and cabinet also have a strong focus on monitoring, managing and challenging performance and now receive performance information on a regular basis. There is evidence that both Cabinet and the Select Committees are challenging and managing performance and the peer review team encourages TWBC to develop this area to further support the drive for improvement. All relevant councillors have access to the Covalent system as do independent Members of the Audit Committee.
63. Overall there is strong focus on performance management which has delivered impressive results over the last three years and performance indicators are showing improvement across a range of services, including:
- Culture and Leisure
  - Environment
  - Planning
  - Community Safety
  - Revenues and Benefits
64. The peer review team also received examples of where targeting resources towards priority areas has delivered results. These are most prevalent with regards to the planning service and the investment of resources and skills are now delivering improved results in dealing with both major and minor planning applications, although there is still some work to do to move into the best quartile the performance of minor planning applications determined in 8 weeks and the satisfaction of applicants.
65. The council is open, embraces learning and has a history of using external reviews as a tool for improvement and engages external support where capacity and skills are lacking. This is evidenced by the following examples:
- Volunteering to pilot the 'Councillor Call For Action' to assist and support councillors in their community leadership role
  - IDeA, Warwick Business School and SOLACE review of the LSP
  - The Trevor Roberts review of planning services
  - Peer support on equality and diversity from the Institute of Community Cohesion and Gravesham Borough Council
66. The council has invested in the building blocks for performance improvement and the focus on performance provided by the 'First Group' was welcomed by staff and the increased reporting frequency to members was also seen as a positive move forward.
67. The recent annual performance review identifies that in 2006/07 customer satisfaction is in the top quartile at 62% and more performance indicators are residing in the top quartile than the average excellent-rated authority. This is impressive performance and has been a key area of improvement for the council.
68. To further support this improvement and with recognition of the significant improvement in the function of overview and scrutiny, the peer review team believe that there are opportunities to further strengthen and improve the effectiveness of this role by increasing awareness of the value and importance of scrutiny and how it can

influence and improve the council's operations through managing performance and setting policy direction.

69. The peer review team suggest that further development of the roles of overview and scrutiny and the recently established audit committee; can play an integral part in extending the strong performance management culture already established within the council, to its key partners and stakeholders.
70. An increasing emphasis on partnership working underpins the success of the council's delivery and forms a key aspect of the new CAA framework. With the launch of LAA2 it will be necessary for TWBC and its key partners to be able to demonstrate that its projects and programmes are robustly performance managed. The council will need to ensure that performance management with its partners remains focussed on the key priorities and outcomes.
71. TWBC has recognised external accreditation including Investors in People (IIP) across the whole council. The council also recognises the value of seeking further accreditation and is endeavouring to achieve Customer First accreditation. This work is already delivering positive results with TWBC awarded winner of the recent customer service quiz, held during the national customer services week 2007. The [customer first website](#) celebrates the success of TWBC and recognises the effort and commitment demonstrated by individual staff in the council.
72. In addition, the council is also seeking recognition in areas such as Legal Services (Lexcel), parks and open spaces (Green Flag) and a range of other awards including recognition for the innovative 'kit bag for councillors'. The kit bag was developed following a request from councillors and provides easy access to a wide range of information to support councillors in engaging with their community whilst collecting views from residents during their 'ward walk' sessions.
73. 'Ward walks' pull together a team of interviewers including TWBC councillors and officers, Kent county councillors and representatives from parish and town councils and provide residents with an opportunity to raise concerns and issues right on their doorstep. It also provides the council with the opportunity to gather information about the needs of all sections of the community. The aims of the 'ward walks' are to:
- improve engagement with local residents
  - inform and act upon resident's immediate concerns and to inform long-term council priorities
  - provide councillors with further opportunities for face to face contact and enhance their awareness of local people's views
74. TWBC has a system in place to respond to all queries and issues raised and the 'ward walks' pilot is recognised as a positive development. The peer review team, therefore, encourages TWBC to roll this out further.
75. Although these are all positive steps forward and are to be celebrated, through the staff focus group, the peer review team identified that staff morale was low in some areas and we suggest that the council gives consideration to seeking out further opportunities to:

## ***Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – Peer Review***

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- recognise and meaningfully reward the achievement of its staff
- celebrate success perhaps through the provision of staff awards, staff lunches and other celebrations
- continue to showcase good practice through the existing staff magazine, intranet and other routes
- investigate methods to share and capture learning in the council
- identify appropriate staff feedback opportunities and improve the visibility of the chief executive and her directors by holding staff forums and back to floor visits.

### **Achievement and Improvement**

#### **Strengths**

- ✓ There are some good examples of targeting and investing in priority areas that are delivering improved outcomes for residents:
  - 'Grot Spots' being addressed to improve the environment
  - Introduction of plastics recycling and composting services
  - Community Safety Power Project, reducing crime
  - Making it project, targeting vulnerable adults
  - TN2 Community Centre in Sherwood
  - Housing, affordable housing ahead of target
  - Planning Services, improved performance
- ✓ High satisfaction levels amongst residents
- ✓ Low cost services for the community

#### **Areas for consideration**

- "Work in progress" – It was too early to tell whether the increased investment in priority areas is going to lead to improved outcomes for the community
- The Council needs to focus more upon achievements and outcomes for the community and be able to demonstrate the impact that the impressive improvement in BVPI's is having on local people and the services they receive
- The peer review team did not receive information on how projects are planned and evaluated to predict and assess the impact upon people in the community

76. The council can demonstrate a record of many achievements, not least a proven track record of delivering good services and facilities to very satisfied customers. Some of the examples reported to the review team include new recycling services and some excellent work with vulnerable and disadvantaged adults through its leisure services.

77. The investment in the planning service is particularly recognised as delivering improvements. The planning service as a whole, officers and members, have worked hard to develop good officer, member and parish councillor relationships. Innovative work has helped the service to address its recruitment and retention issues, for example through the training and promotion of entry level planning staff to planning officer and planning team leader level. This work has been recognised as good practice by human resources as a model for the rest of the authority as to how to "grow your own". Enforcement has also been used effectively to protect the environment, for example two recent breaches of planning laws were successfully prosecuted.

78. Another excellent example of delivering improved outcomes for residents is the 'Grot Spot' project. An example of a recent 'Grot Spot' being addressed by the council was the restoration of the fountain at the junction of Albion and Quarry Roads. This resulted in an award of a conservation commendation in this year's Royal Tunbridge Wells civic society annual conservation and shopfront awards.

79. However, the term 'work in progress' was used widely by members, officers and partners and the council needs to demonstrate and communicate that the investment in priority areas is delivering improved outcomes for the people of Tunbridge Wells borough. For example the recent investment in a 'Graffiti Hit Squad' has received

positive anecdotal support but the peer review team did not receive any hard evidence that this investment is recognised as improving the environment.

80. Another very positive area of achievement is the impressive performance in terms of BVPIs and in particular satisfaction amongst residents.
81. This impressive performance is accompanied by a commitment to provide cost-effective and value for money services. As mentioned previously in this report, the council compares and benchmarks costs and are committed to providing high quality services but maintaining a low council tax for its residents. The council is clear that discretionary services should be paid for at a reasonable rate and has demonstrated this commitment by making difficult decisions in spite of public pressure.
82. People also speak highly of the work that TWBC is delivering with its partners. There are excellent partnerships in place with examples such as the TN2 community centre in Sherwood which is recognised as addressing community cohesion issues within a deprived area. A further example is the community safety power project which is aimed at young offenders and provides diversionary activities to discourage them from re-offending. The results of the Power Project have been that 96% of those involved in the project have not gone on to re-offend.
83. These are excellent examples of partnership work really making a difference but the peer review team would encourage TWBC to focus more upon achievements and outcomes across its range of services and equip itself to demonstrate how the impressive improvement in BVPIs is impacting upon local people.
84. To achieve this, the peer review team encourage the council to invest in improving its approach to managing and planning projects. An appropriate project management methodology could enable officers to build in impact assessment evaluation before commencing any delivery. This would also support assessment of a projects ability to achieve the desired outcomes and help with prioritisation and the allocation of resources. It would also shift the existing focus of achieving BVPI targets towards outcomes.
85. Whilst recognising that TWBC has achieved significant progress since CPA in 2004, there is a growing understanding that in the world of local government the 'bar' keeps rising and the agenda is changing. Accordingly, consideration should be given to ensuring that the recent pace of change of improvement is built upon and the council positions itself to positively respond to and meet the requirements of the new Comprehensive Areas Assessment.
86. In summary the peer review team congratulate TWBC on the impressive improvement since 2004 and believe that by further harnessing the motivation, drive and determination that exists in the council it will be able to continue to succeed.

**Written with and on behalf of the peer review team by:**

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