

Tamworth Borough Council Corporate Peer Challenge

**Feedback from the peer challenge
team**

November 2013

The peer challenge team

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The purpose of peer challenge

Peer challenges are improvement-focused and tailored to meet individual council's needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. The peers 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 team provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors or inspectors.

The peer challenge process

- Peers reviewed a range of information to ensure we were familiar with the council, the challenges it is facing and its plans for the future
- We spent 3 days onsite in Tamworth during which we:
 - Spoke to more than 70 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external stakeholders
 - Gathered information and views from more than 20 meetings, along with additional research and reading
 - Collectively spent more than 200 hours to determine our findings – the equivalent of one person spending nearly 6 weeks in Tamworth
- Feedback session at end of onsite visit, followed by a short report and follow up activity (to be confirmed)

Scope and 'brief' for the peer challenge

You asked us to provide an external 'health-check' of the organisation by considering the core components looked at by all corporate peer challenges, namely:

- Understanding of local context and priority setting
- Financial planning and viability
- Political and managerial leadership
- Governance and decision-making
- Organisational capacity

Within this framework you asked us to comment on your approach to Community Development and Commissioning.

Overall messages and impressions

- There is a clear vision of place for Tamworth underpinned by a mutually beneficial relationship with Lichfield which has prospects for collaboration into the future
 - You have a sound understanding of the economic drivers impacting on the borough and have a reputation for 'getting things done'. However, we encourage you to develop a strategy to facilitate Tamworth identifying and fully utilising all available joint working opportunities
 - Partnerships are seen as core business.
 - Staff here have a clear passion and pride and a commitment to doing their best for the people of Tamworth. They recognise the nature of the financial challenges you face. However, in addressing these we encourage you to ensure you have appropriate synergy and clarity between your Sustainability Strategy and the Corporate Change Programme. There is a need to more clearly prioritise the objectives for each.
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Overall messages and impressions

- Your MTFS is based on prudent assumptions and your strategy is buying time for your delivery of efficiencies. We encourage you to assure yourselves that the measures you have in place will help you to ‘avoid’ rather than ‘delay’ the risk of falling over the ‘financial cliff’ you have clearly identified. We believe there is more to do in addressing your challenges in a fundamentally transformational fashion.
 - There are good working relationships between the senior political and managerial leadership at Tamworth. Both have a clear purpose in delivering the vision for the borough and stand by tough decisions that have to be taken. It is important that together you provide clear, consistent, stable and mutually inter-dependent leadership of the council.
 - There is a need to articulate clearly which services are appropriate for the various delivery vehicles you are considering. The clarity at the top of the Council about the Authority being a ‘hybrid’ is not yet matched across all of the organisation or with all of your partners.
 - You have good relations with the media.
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Overall messages and impressions

- There is an imperative to shift your approach to member training to be more proactive and where necessary to require attendance (e.g. Planning). This is important if Scrutiny is (i) to add value and become more strategic and (ii) councillors sitting on regulatory committees are equipped to make sound decisions. We feel that currently neither of these are happening.
 - A focus on getting the greatest cost, quality and productivity benefits from ICT is required to mitigate risk to attaining full potential of agile working. Also a greater consistency of approach is required.
 - There is potential to increase the impact and outcomes of your community development work by aligning it more closely to a more focussed programme of locality working.
 - Good work has been done with the first phase of commissioning; the Commissioning Intent document is a good example. In the next phase the priority needs to be clarity about what exactly is to be commissioned and the right level and scale at which commissioning takes place.
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Local Context/Priority setting

- Clear vision of place for Tamworth focussed on the town centre. Reality of edge of town retail (Ventura) recognised and complemented by innovative zoning approach to create 21st century Tamworth town centre.
 - Mutually beneficial relationship with Lichfield provides a strong foundation for future collaboration.
 - Sound understanding of economic drivers impacting on Tamworth and Lichfield (Birmingham LEP). Evaluate the payback versus resources required of joining both the Greater Birmingham and Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent LEPs
 - Reputation in county for getting things done. Deep rooted culture of partnership working. 'Tamworth is the most organised and dynamic of the 3 LSPs'. Also 'partnerships are seen as core business'.
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Local Context/Priority setting

- Review and refine the synergy between the Sustainability Strategy and your Corporate Change Programme.
 - The number of workstreams and groups is impacting on the clarity of the Strategy and the Programme as well as the capacity of staff involved to effectively deliver on either.
 - Need to prioritise the workstreams and projects under each and communicate to the wider organisation.
 - Maintain focus and resourcing on sign off for the Local Plan and close working with Lichfield and others on Duty to Cooperate.
 - Strengthen bottom up inputs to make TSP even more effective and reduce risk of being too strategic/remote (e.g. re-focussed locality working).
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Financial Planning and Viability

- Both members and staff are aware of the 'financial cliff' and timescale, with broad understanding of the financial approach.
 - MTFS based on prudent assumptions. Strategy is buying time for the delivery of efficiencies. However, a radical service reconfiguration is required if you are to avoid the 'financial cliff'.
 - Evaluate the risk of significant reliance on back loading and on financial wins downstream.
 - Business Rates and Council Tax income levels holding up.
 - Protecting Council Tax base with annual increases.
 - HRA under new regime is self-sustaining and creates potential funding opportunities.
 - Good progress on shared services and collaborative working will continue to make a contribution to closing the deficit. However, there is a need to progress from being 'opportunistic' to taking a strategic approach.
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Financial Planning and Viability

- Consider deploying a percentage of NHB to supporting growth and infrastructure to deliver strategic objectives.
 - There are some challenges to current income (e.g. car parking income declining, low council tax base). Some entrepreneurial initiatives and income generation ideas already underway (e.g. marketing, web and communication skills).
 - Need for more creative thinking is recognised in order to generate more income (e.g. review of fees and charges, pre-application advice charging).
 - Consider broadening the terms of reference for service reviews to embrace opportunities for fundamental transformation of service delivery.
 - Consider using Participatory Budgeting as a tool to re-focus locality working.
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Political and managerial leadership

- There is visible, respected and approachable political and managerial leadership of Tamworth. This encourages corporate loyalty to Cabinet and CMT from staff at all levels and engenders confidence and influence internally and externally. The Executive Management Team are regarded as working as one, notably in respect of 'difficult issues'.
 - Cabinet are a cohesive and purposeful team who are prepared to make and stand by tough decisions and set direction.
 - Are there really no sacred cows?
 - Good working relationships between Chief Executive and Leader/CMT and Cabinet.
 - Ensure clarity of respective roles between members and officers throughout the organisation is defined, understood and maintained.
 - Open and honest culture. Tamworth has embraced change to good ends: three criteria – customer experience, improved working environment and efficiency.
 - Cabinet and senior management have communicated the financial challenges clearly.
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Political and managerial leadership

- Given challenges facing local councils, clear, consistent, stable and mutually inter-dependent political and managerial leadership is essential.
 - Given the hybrid model, clarity is required as to which services would be appropriate for the different delivery vehicles. This needs to be articulated and communicated internally and externally.
 - Risk of perceived organisational over confidence in the context of responding to adverse feedback.
 - Visible confidence to take risks after assessing potential rewards.
 - Challenge the consistency of County Council interaction with districts
 - We were impressed by the positive direction in which you are moving with respect to developing in-house expertise and improving your website. It is clear that you are grasping the potential of using web and social media effectively. However, communications (both internal and external) would benefit from strengthening (e.g. to celebrate successes and availability of services; to communicate rationale for what, why and when something has been/will be done)
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Governance and decision-making

- Directors/councillors meet regularly (e.g. meetings, briefings and away days).
 - Councillors are effective on the ground – comparatively few complaints from the public.
 - Good relations with the media.
 - Shift member training from passive to proactive with clear rules on compliance and sanctions (e.g. no training no attendance)
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Governance and decision-making

- Scrutiny is not strategic or adding value. Review chairing and training arrangements.
 - Show Scrutiny members best practice from elsewhere.
 - Re-focus scrutiny on policy development and performance management. Re-balance scrutiny.
 - Consider providing dedicated scrutiny support.
 - Moving away from annual elections would create stronger direction and decision-making as well as savings.
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Organisational Capacity

- Positive approach to service reviews is perceived to be transparent and equitable across all service delivery areas.
 - There is a risk of siloed service reviews with consequent impact on capacity, identifying and utilising necessary skills leading to missed transformational opportunities.
 - Relationship/MoU with Lichfield provides a good foundation for the future.
 - Open access for staff to communicate with senior managers enables ideas to be brought forward. Officers afforded increased discretion and flexibility (e.g. special offers).
 - Training for staff to continue to develop commercial acumen and project management to assess viability of entrepreneurial ideas and manage risks. 'Concept, costed, to market'.
 - Early management structure review required focussing on spans of control, layers of management, transferrable skills and joint management posts.
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Organisational Capacity

- Embed project management across the organisation to maximise existing investment and manage capacity and risk.
 - ICT
 - Inconsistent approach across the organisation
 - Functionality especially off site/mobile working
 - Impact of Code of Connection
 - Slow roll out of technology
 - Procurement issues
 - Limited knowledge of what effective ICT can deliver.
 - Different ICT platforms are a potential barrier to shared services.
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Community Development

- Recognised community development provides a route for service providers to communities. Draws in other partners to be able to access people.
 - How can you increase take up by partners to enhance impacts and outcomes? Align more closely to locality issues e.g. community safety, health, education, employment and environment.
 - Valued by partners but not yet receiving funding from them. Community Development Officers (CDOs) act as advocates for communities, 'honest brokers'.
 - Ward members are actively involved with CDOs.
 - Managers of other services not engaging due to a lack of understanding, a disconnect between the off-site CDOs and office based colleagues – out of sight, out of mind.
 - Customer hubs need to be more customer friendly.
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Commissioning

- Good work has been done already with first phase of commissioning. The IEWM funded project looking at commissioning around Healthy Tamworth.
 - Commissioning Intentions document perceived by partners as a clear and transparent approach. Partners need to reciprocate.
 - Delayed discharge project - partnership money put in pot for joint working that saved costs for each partner, improved the service and enhanced the customer experience.
 - Commissioning approach has potential to provide longevity to address threats and risks as council and partners retrench to core business.
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Commissioning

- Need to improve clarity on:
 - What is the right level/scale at which to commission (county/locality?)
 - What is to be commissioned?
 - Need for training for staff to support commissioning, e.g. to write bids/specifications to maximise funding opportunities.
 - Dialogue with CCG and County Council to establish appetite and scope for joint commissioning.
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Additional Suggestions and ideas to consider (1)

- Introduce a convention that the chairman and vice-chairman of Scrutiny Committees are each appointed from opposing political groups.
 - The Council should move to “All-out” elections as soon as is practicable, in order to facilitate stronger direction, decision-making and cost savings.
 - Develop an internal “Who’s Who” in conjunction with the intranet, to help inform users as to who is responsible for what.
 - Re-visit and refresh the policies dealing with managing conflict/aggression and lone working.
 - Capture, share and implement the corporate learning from communication of complaints and compliments.
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Additional Suggestions and ideas to consider (2)

- Communicate and explain the Sustainability Strategy for the council with staff more widely. It was not clear to the team that all staff are as aware of this work as you would wish.
 - Consider how best to embed locality working within the Council and TSP. For example, an annual plan of priorities (i.e. improved Streetscene, health literacy and positive diversionary activities for young people in locality X) for each of the 4 locality areas would provide direction for the Community Development resource, align mainstream resources to locality working and lever in funding and resources from partners and the HRA account.
 - Review the Council's existing policy on managing aggressive customers to ensure it is fully fit for purpose.
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Additional Suggestions and ideas to consider (3)

- Consider how you can further develop the relationship between Tamworth Borough Council and Staffordshire County Council. This includes political managerial relationships and operational relationships; with a focus on locality working and commissioning.
 - Consider developing a higher profile for the Council's political leadership in strategic business planning and decisions. The input from political leaders in raising awareness of future financial challenges for the Council has been effective and you may wish to replicate this more widely in relation to other areas, for example, locality working. Review your current approach to learning from (and communication of) complaints, comments and compliments.
 - Seek to improve the ways in which the positive work you are doing with partner organisations is communicated. There appear to be benefits of more closely interlinked communications across different organisations which are not yet being utilised (e.g. links on each other's websites)
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Additional Suggestions and ideas to consider (4)

- Consider a structured development programme for the Council's Scrutiny Committees utilising experience from other Authorities. This might include visits to other Councils and targeted support such as
 - (i) mentoring for the committees as a whole (including observation of meetings with feedback)
 - (ii) targeted one to one mentoring for the Tamworth Chairs from counterparts in other Authorities' and
 - (iii) assigning Policy 'tasks/projects' for Overview and Scrutiny to consider (e.g. tasking Overview and Scrutiny to come up with recommendations on how you embed locality working).
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Next Steps

- Questions and discussion now
 - Offer of follow up activity and continued support – that can be shaped and informed by the peer challenge
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