

**Local Government Improvement Programme**

**Final Follow-up Visit to Taunton Deane Borough Council**  
**4 November 2002**

**Introduction**

1. The peer review of Taunton Deane Borough Council (TDBC) took place between 20 and 24 November 2000. The review report identified a number of key issues that TDBC needed to address to continue moving forward. An initial follow-up visit to the authority took place on 4 December 2001 when Ian Prosser, former Chief Executive of Stratford-on-Avon District Council, Councillor Hugh Pritchard, Fareham Borough Council and Jan Wickham, the IDeA Review Manager reviewed progress against the original peer review recommendations. They gave feedback to the authority's leadership on achievements and areas for continuing attention both verbally and in writing.
2. The final follow-up visit with which this report is concerned took place on 4 November 2002. The team conducting the follow-up visit comprised:
  - Ian Prosser, former Chief Executive, Stratford-on-Avon District Council
  - Cllr Hugh Pritchard, Fareham Borough Council
  - Cllr Frank Davies, Leader, Spelthorne Borough Council
  - Sheila Boden, Chief Finance Officer, Winchester District Council
  - Bob Rhodes, Chief Executive, TACT
  - Jan Wickham, Review Manager, Improvement & Development Agency
3. The final follow-up visit had two main objectives:
  - to assess the progress which the authority has made against the key recommendations of the original review report
  - to look at the current position of the authority against the key themes of the Audit Commission's Corporate Performance Assessment methodology

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### **Programme for the Visit**

4. The programme for the visit and its timing was discussed and agreed in advance with the authority. It comprised:
  - a large-scale workshop attended by frontline staff, middle managers, senior managers, members, partners, tenants and town and parish councillors. All participants were asked to identify on continuums the level of progress which they considered the council had made in relation to each of the original key recommendations. Groups of participants then discussed individual recommendations and fed back their perceptions of TDBC's performance in relation to each
  - facilitated discussions with each group of stakeholders to consider in greater detail TDBC's progress since the original peer review
  - interviews with the chief executive, the leader of the council and other political groups leaders
  - discussions facilitated by TDBC staff with groups of participants on the authority's current position in relation to the nine key themes of the Audit Commission's Corporate Performance Assessment methodology
5. The day's events were efficiently organised and well attended and this was much appreciated by the IDEa reviewers. Thanks should also be given to TDBC's facilitators.
6. This report draws together the information gained through the large-scale workshop, the facilitated discussions with stakeholder groups and the individual interviews in order to provide TDBC with feedback on its progress in relation to the key recommendations of the original peer review. The information obtained through the exercise relating to the themes of the Corporate Performance Assessment is for the authority's own use and is not covered in this report.
7. It should be noted also that whilst discussions took place during the visit with a significant number of individuals, an in-depth analysis of the authority is not possible during the course of a single day. There is an extent therefore to which the conclusions set out in this report could be impressionistic.

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### **Progress Made Against the Key Recommendations of the Peer Review Report**

#### Review its Corporate Priorities in order to Achieve a Sharper Focus, Better Ownership and Integration with the Emerging Community and Medium-Term Financial Strategies

8. There has been some good progress made in sharpening the council's corporate priorities and in creating the linkages with the medium-term financial strategy. This is reflected in the views expressed by the workshop participants where there was broad agreement on improvements in this area. The council's corporate priorities have also been aligned with those of the Borough's Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), and its community strategy which is due to be published by the end of 2002.
9. The six priority areas are also being used as the basis of some of the council's major Best Value reviews. This should result in improvements to the work being carried out under each heading.
10. Notwithstanding this, there was still some feeling amongst those present that the priorities are of equal weight and that there is no sense of what TDBC would consider to be a non-priority. It will be important that the authority is clear about what it is trying to achieve and not achieve in order that it achieves greater focus of its efforts in the future. In addition the council and its partners need to be confident that they can provide the resources needed for the priorities supported.

#### Bring the Future of the Town of Taunton, and Economic Development Issues generally, to the Forefront of Debate

11. There was a very positive reaction to the progress that has been made against this recommendation since the review with all parties agreeing strongly that good progress has been made. The Taunton Vision Commission was created involving district and county councillors and with an independent Chair. After a lengthy investigation, which considered extensive evidence from external bodies, a vision for Taunton has been produced.
12. The vision for Taunton extends to 2025 and is centred on its development as a "*regional centre of excellence*". Objectives have been set around each of a number of themes and projects have been linked to these. A decision on the designation of Taunton as a Principal Urban Area is awaited.

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13. Economic development is an issue that has clearly been moved up Taunton Deane's agenda with the appointment of a Director of Development responsible for this area of work, and a member of the Executive also dedicated to it. Many people identified as a result that economic development now has a much higher profile inside and outside the authority.
14. Private sector partners reported feeling much more involved with the council principally through the recently formed Economic Development Partnership. It will be important also for the council to ensure that the voluntary and community sectors are similarly engaged with the agenda given that economic development can contribute positively to social, economic and environmental well-being.
15. The good progress in relation to this recommendation needs to be maintained. In particular if the vision for Taunton is to be achieved resources will need to be put in place by the district council and others.
16. Responsibility for achieving the various objectives and leading projects also needs to be allocated. Currently the vision refers to the possible involvement of the Taunton Deane LSP and the Somerset Strategic Partnership in this work. Clarification is needed of how progress against the vision is to be maintained and monitored.

### **Reflect upon the Current Balance within the Council of the Focus on Urban and Rural Issues**

17. Many of those present at the workshop acknowledged that there had been a greater focus recently on rural issues by the council. There have been three rural development projects including the establishment of the community office in Wiveliscombe, which involved joint working with the town council.
18. The problems facing the rural community in Taunton Deane mirror those in many other such areas across Britain and include transport, access to services and affordable housing. These are complex issues that are not easy to solve. TDBC needs to ensure that close partnership working, particularly with the county council, takes place to address these, especially in the light of the Rural White Paper.

### **Sharpen the Strategic Focus of the Political and Managerial Leadership**

19. There was widespread agreement across the organisation that both the political and managerial leadership has succeeded in focusing more closely on strategic issues. There is better use of officer delegated powers and more communication of decisions particularly through the monthly councillor briefings and CMT feedback.

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20. Workshop participants still felt, however, that there were channels through which decisions could be appropriately influenced.

Give Greater Priority to the Establishment of Strategic Partnerships particularly in the light of the Community Planning Agenda

21. The LSP within Taunton Deane is still relatively new and time will be needed for it to establish itself fully. However, this is the case nationally and there is evidence to suggest that TDBC's LSP has made good progress to date. It will be important, however, that as time goes on the partnership is able to point to solid achievements on the ground.

22. In building on the work done, there will be a need to ensure that all parties within the LSP feel similarly engaged. It is sometimes difficult for the community and voluntary sectors to feel able to play a full part in LSPs given that their resources are much more limited than larger partners. It may be that support for capacity building needs to be put in place in order to ensure that these sectors are able to participate more fully.

23. There is also some feeling currently that consultation undertaken by the LSP is top-down. Care will need to be taken to ensure that those being consulted feel that they have a degree of influence over the outcomes of the exercises.

24. There was some confusion amongst partners as to how the various partnerships within the borough fit together and in particular how the LSP sits with the council. There may be some merit in undertaking an audit of current activity and mapping partnerships to show linkages.

Review All Aspects of the Political Management Arrangements to Arrive at a Solution which is Right for Taunton Deane

25. There were a number of participants who indicated that they were unsure how the political management arrangements had progressed including front line staff. Generally speaking, however, there was positive feedback in relation to this recommendation.

26. It was acknowledged that the creation of the executive has led to quicker, more streamlined decision-making, and felt that it was operating in a more strategic manner.

27. There have also been some instances of the Review Board undertaking its role in a more pro-active manner. It has begun to not only review the Executive's decisions but also flag up potential difficulties in service delivery or funding. It identified, for example, that there was no funding allocated to meet the costs of action required in response to energy targets and referred this matter to one of the four Review Panels. Such

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action needs to be built upon in order that the Review Board carves itself out a clearer role.

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28. The operation of the Review Panels also seems to be improving and most are now involved in policy development work. There will be a need to ensure that appropriate training and development continues to be made available, particularly to new members joining the council to support the scrutiny function

### **Strengthen its Best Value Processes in order to Address Current Shortcomings**

29. TDBC has continued to make changes to its Best Value programme in order to streamline the numbers of reviews and ensure that they are more cross-cutting. The staff were able to identify improvements that had been made as a result of the Best Value reviews such as the establishment of a Leisure Trust, and inspection reports have generally been positive.
30. Two issues still remain, however, which are common to many councils throughout the country. The first is that there is still scope for member involvement at all stages of the process to be improved. This includes at the scoping, challenge and improvement planning stages. The second concerns staff capacity to undertake the reviews. Neither problem has an easy solution but it may be that considering the ways in which other authorities undertake their reviews and in particular best practice from elsewhere may assist TDBC in this area.

### **Establish a Corporate Public Image and Standards for the Council**

31. The council now has corporate style guidance and is working on a communications strategy. It has also made improvements to its website.
32. Notwithstanding this, there is still work that the council could do to ensure that its image is more coherent. The fact that it has recently allocated an Executive member with responsibility for communications shows that it is serious about effecting further improvements, and this has provided the press with a much-needed contact at political level.

### **Develop a Corporate and Integrated Approach to Service Planning and Performance Management**

33. There was evidence of good progress in this area. The service plans are now in their second or third year and the practice of producing them and linking them to the corporate priorities is now embedded. For the first time this year Directorate service plans are being produced in order to provide an intermediate link between the service-level activity and the corporate.

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34. The Executive and CMT regularly receive key performance indicator information and actively monitor it. The Review Board receives an overview of performance and the Panels detailed service information. This level of activity represents an enhanced level of performance management over that being undertaken when the previous follow-up visit took place and it is one on which the authority should be congratulated.

### **Develop Robust Human Resources Policies and Processes which are Consistently Applied**

35. The large-scale workshop demonstrated that staff at the more senior levels of the authority are more positive of progress in relation to this recommendation than those working on the frontline. Whilst this is not unusual continued efforts will need to be made to ensure that there is a consistent approach to issues relating to human resources management from the top to the bottom of the organisation.
36. There was general agreement that internal communication had improved with regular team briefings allowing for upward feedback to be given, a weekly bulletin, use of the intranet and some directorate briefing sessions. Frontline staff as well as managers acknowledged this improvement although there were some concerns regarding an over-reliance on the Intranet when some people do not have access to it, and the fact that the Grapevine facility is often clogged up with personal items. It was suggested that an updated bulletin board might be of assistance in accessing the latest information quickly.
37. The consistency of the application of the PREDS appraisal system remains a matter of concern for some. Approximately half of those front-line staff interviewed had not had an appraisal in the last year, although where they had taken place staff confirmed that their targets were related to those within the service plans.



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### **Conclusion**

- 38 Overall TDBC has responded very positively to the recommendations raised by the peer review and has many areas of good progress to report. Particular areas the review team would like to highlight include:
- bringing the future of Taunton to the forefront of local debate and raising the profile of economic development issues within the Council
  - ensuring that the Executive and CMT are operating more strategically
  - making a sound start on the creation of the Local Strategic Partnership and the community planning process
  - embedding a service and performance management framework
- 39 There are some areas, however, in which it is considered that the authority needs to continue to make progress including the following:
- ensuring that it continues to sharpen its priorities and identifies the areas on which it is not going to focus as well as the ones that it is
  - focusing the attention of the LSP, the Vision Commission and other key partnerships on the achievement of outcomes and the provision of resources needed for the priorities supported
  - continuing to progress the work in relation to a communications strategy and the creation of a coherent public image
  - ensuring that any gaps in the implementation of human resources policies and practices are identified and addressed

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