

**TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL**  
**ECONOMIC REGENERATION ADVISORY BOARD**

**3 September 2014**

**Report of the Chief Executive**

**Part 1- Public**

**Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Non-Key Decision (Decision may be taken by the Cabinet Member)**

**1 CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE – ECONOMIC REGENERATION ISSUES**

**To set out the key recommendations on economic regeneration issues contained in the Borough Council’s Corporate Peer Challenge Report and to determine an appropriate response to each.**

**1.1 The Corporate Peer Challenge**

1.1.1 As Members will be aware, the Corporate Peer Challenge took place at the end of April 2014 and the report of the Peer Challenge Team was issued in late June. An initial report about the key conclusions was made to the Cabinet on 25<sup>th</sup> June.

1.1.2 The Peer Challenge’s ‘corporate’ issues that were investigated included local priority setting, resource management, leadership, governance and organisational capacity. In addition, the chosen specific theme for local review was economic regeneration and the Peer Challenge Team were asked specifically to:

*‘consider [the Borough Council’s] approach to economic regeneration and in particular whether the council has the right strategy and capacity to get to where it wants to’.*

1.1.3 The purpose of this report is to review the recommendations from the Peer Challenge in relation to economic regeneration and to decide what actions now need to be taken to address the issues that have been raised. The Cabinet will also be undertaking a similar process in relation to the corporate issues addressed by the Peer Challenge process.

**1.2 Peer Challenge Recommendations**

1.2.1 The Peer Challenge team explored a number of economic regeneration issues as part of the review process. In addition to interviewing Borough Council Members and relevant staff, the team also had meetings with economic development representatives from Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, Sevenoaks District Council, Kent County Council, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the West Kent Partnership, K

College and Sainsbury PLC. The conclusions reached by the team were therefore based on a wide range of views and opinions.

1.2.2 Before assessing the nature of the recommendations for change made by the Peer Challenge Team, it is worth noting the number of positive observations that were made by the Team in relation to the Council's current approach to addressing local economic regeneration issues. In summary, the team recognised:

- The raised profile of economic regeneration within the Council following the creation of a new Cabinet Portfolio which has already help create a more business-orientated approach alongside the role of the new Advisory Board;
- The current focus on supporting small and medium-sized businesses, enhancing local town and village centres and the redevelopment of Tonbridge Town Centre, all reflecting their importance to the local economy;
- The grant support being awarded to local businesses affected by flooding;
- The importance of the development of existing initiatives such as the Escalate Loan Fund for growth-orientated businesses;
- Our enhanced external focus, with West Kent partners, for example, in influencing the priorities of the Local Enterprise Partnership, which more recently has achieved an award of £4.56M for schemes within Tonbridge and Malling.

1.2.3 In terms of the specific recommendations for change contained in the report, these are described below along with a commentary on each.

**Peer Challenge Team Recommendation: Produce an integrated economic regeneration strategy which links and guides the council's investment across a range of services and projects, jointly owned by elected members and officers across the Council**

**Suggested Response:** The Advisory Board has already adopted an economic regeneration action plan at its meeting held in February of this year. The action plan currently seeks to embrace activities related to economic regeneration undertaken by other Council services. However, to raise the profile of economic regeneration both across the Council and to a wider, external audience, as recommended by the Peer Challenge team, it is agreed that a more formal economic regeneration strategy should now be prepared. It is understood that Sevenoaks District Council is currently preparing a similar strategy so that there is some scope for joint working.

We would envisage that our economic regeneration strategy should be short and concise and focused on the activities that best add value to the local economy. Whilst there is a need to embrace the activities of our economic partner

organisations, there is a need for a clear focus to be maintained on the economic role of the Borough Council and, as recommended, the extent to which all council services can contribute positively to this agenda. The strategy should be easily understood by the business community including those looking to work and invest in the borough, and provide a platform for closer engagement with those parties. It should set out a positive overall feel and sense of ambition backed up by what the Council can offer in terms of advice, support and practical help and clear signposting to other avenues of assistance.

With regard to timing, it is suggested that the strategy should be developed for 2015/16 with a three year life-span. A report on a draft document will therefore be made to the meeting of this Board in February 2015.

**Peer Challenge Team Recommendation: As part of the development of an economic regeneration strategy, ensure that the council is joined up in its approach to economic regeneration and all of the opportunities to contribute to it from across the organisation are maximised; develop greater understanding of the way in which the full range of portfolios and council services can have an impact.**

**Suggested Response:** Following a request from the Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration, a corporate officer group has been established to address economic issues and the role of individual services in contributing to this agenda. We suggest that this group should be charged with leading on the development of the new strategy and with ensuring that a corporate approach is adopted. Many council services have a relationship with the business community and these need to be captured. We should strive to ensure that our regulatory services are delivered in a way that positively assist local business and investment as far as practicable and consistent with the Council's statutory duties. For example, in areas such as licencing, business rates collection, food hygiene inspections and some aspects of development control our aim will be to ensure that any interventions are proportionate and that decisions take fully into account the needs of local business in the context of the overall economic regeneration priority. In particular, we should ensure that businesses are given the right information and advice for them to understand the processes that need to be followed.

The link between economic regeneration and the Council's emerging Local Plan will also be important to develop. An Employment Land Review study for the Plan is being prepared and a report on this will be made to the next meeting of this Board following its initial consideration by the Planning and Transportation Board. It will be for the local plan to reflect the importance of economic regeneration and growth in its approach to planning policy and land allocation, not just for employment uses but for other development such as an appropriate supply of housing to support local labour market needs.

**Peer Challenge Team Recommendation: The Council should continue to develop the way it influences across a wider geography in order to secure maximum benefit for Tonbridge and Malling.**

**Suggested Response:** Significant progress has already been made with the regard to our influencing role, supported by the West Kent Partnership as appropriate. However, as future sources of support funding are now more likely to be channelled via the Local Enterprise Partnership, we need to remain vigilant and ready to respond to calls for bids when these arise. Members of the Council may also have a positive role to play in helping to engage with key businesses within their respective wards and reporting back any issues of concern for the Council to address.

**Peer Challenge Team Recommendation: The Council's role in influencing national and regional initiatives via the West Kent Partnership and the Kent and Medway Economic Partnership needs to be built upon to maximise this role.**

**Suggested Response:** There are two ways that we can further develop our wider influence as suggested in the recommendation. The West Kent Partnership remains an influential body but its role could be further strengthened. There needs to be greater business representation on the Partnership to help guide its work and, in effect, become a 'West Kent Economic Partnership' which is more readily aligned to the county-wide Kent and Medway Economic Partnership.

In addition, we need to be more proactive in ensuring the economic needs of the Borough (and West Kent more generally) achieve greater recognition across a wider audience. As a starting point, the three West Kent districts have agreed to commission a short study on the economic impact of investment made in West Kent compared to that made in other areas. We anticipate that this will demonstrate that investment in the West Kent area would generate greater economic benefits and will thus encourage a sharper focus on the significance of the West Kent economy to the county as a whole. We will report on the findings of this study to a future meeting of this Board.

**Peer Challenge Team Recommendation: Delivering the economic agenda to achieve the full potential requires increased resources and for these to be supplemented with greater expertise from within other council services.**

**Suggested Response:** We intend to focus on joint working across services as has been suggested by the Peer Challenge team which aims to involve additional staff to help deliver the wider economic regeneration agenda. Secondments will also be investigated. We continue to work closely with our West Kent partners to share the workload in relation to joint projects such as further work on the West Kent Priorities for Growth document and the potential need to prepare joint bids to access future funding from the South East LEP.

### 1.3 Legal Implications

1.3.1 None

### 1.4 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.4.1 As considered above.

### 1.5 Risk Assessment

1.5.1 n/a

### 1.6 Equality Impact Assessment

1.6.1 See 'Screening for equality impacts' table at end of report

### 1.7 Recommendations

1.7.1 That the suggested responses to the economic regeneration issues raised as part of the Corporate Peer Challenge, as set out in the report, **BE ENDORSED**.

The Chief Executive confirms that the proposals contained in the recommendation(s), if approved, will fall within the Council's Budget and policy Framework.

Background papers:

contact: Mark Raymond

Nil

Julie Beilby  
Chief Executive

Screening for equality impacts:		
Question	Answer	Explanation of impacts
a. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper have potential to cause adverse impact or discriminate against different groups in the community?	No	
b. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper make a positive contribution to promoting equality?	n/a	
c. What steps are you taking to mitigate, reduce, avoid or minimise the impacts identified above?		

*In submitting this report, the Chief Officer doing so is confirming that they have given due regard to the equality impacts of the decision being considered, as noted in the table above.*