

BIG SKIES BIG THINKING

A NEW WAY OF LOOKING AT THURROCK

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| Context | 4 |
| A new agenda | 6 |
| Progress | 6 |
| Big skies big thinking | 8 |
| Recommendations for future steps | 11 |
| Appendix 1 | |
| Expert seminars | 12 |
| Appendix 2 | |
| Measurable targets | 12 |
| Appendix 3 | |
| Delivering and funding strategies | 13 |



CONTEXT



The Big Skies project was tasked with developing a landscape led, integrated and holistic approach to development and change in Thurrock to reflect the aspirations of the borough. The purpose of the study is to set out an overarching vision to guide the processes of development and a way of working to achieve real change.

The aim is to ensure that Thurrock will no longer be regarded as a landfill site, a repository for the debris of London, but as a resilient borough taking pride in its relationship to the river, its growing European and international reputation for arts, music, biodiversity and wildlife. Creating more jobs for local people, investing in its educational and cultural capital, encouraging high value productive agriculture, horticulture, green industries, innovative transport infrastructure and affordable sustainable housing, this will be significant 21st century transformation.

A range of reports commissioned over the last decade have examined various aspects of the area, including Thurrock: A Visionary Brief in the Thames Gateway (The Public Agency, 2003-5), Thurrock Landscape Capacity Study March, Chris Blandford Associates, 2005), Recognising Sense of Place, Thurrock Urban Character Study, (Chris Blandford Associates, November 2007) Thames Strategy East (Chris Baines, 2008), yet none seem to have found any sustained traction.



This study aims to establish a way of working that will effect significant transformation by utilising Thurrock's unique qualities and proximity to London. What makes this achievable is a new political and professional leadership keen to develop a different approach in the face of increasing pressure from the spread of London eastwards, a more resilient attitude towards the land and the landscape, increasing recognition of the necessity for sustainable development and the value of good quality environments for attracting robust economic growth.

Due to the dominant industrial legacy of the borough, it appears to have largely avoided the excessive sprawl and suburbanisation created by the last 20 years or so of regeneration evident elsewhere on the fringes of London. This presents Thurrock with a great opportunity to capitalize on its distinctive qualities. Along this part of the Thames, there is an unusual confluence of countryside, industry, towns and villages where, "Despite the factories, land fill, oil storage facilities, ports, power generation and motorways", it has Canton suggests "an ability to hold the urban within the rural" (James Canton, Out of Essex 2013). In addition to its historical villages, the rural landscape with valuable fen and marshland and significant areas of agricultural land, is renowned for its wildlife, and has a number of wetland sites of international importance.

The devastation caused by the 1953 floods and subsequent building of the flood walls in the 1950's, quite literally hide the river from view and this explains its low utility as a recreational, cultural and educational resource. Yet the Thames, described by Schama as "liquid history", is a rich, evocative asset. The superb rail service places Thurrock 35 minutes from the centre of London. Imagine being told you could live next to the river and be just over half an hour away from the centre of the capital. How much would a similar location cost in the west of the City? Tilbury Port includes the main point of departure and return for cruise liners. But bafflingly there are to date, no plans to turn Tilbury into a first class destination in its own



right, welcoming visitors from around the world. This is another prime asset not being realized.

Thurrock has plenty of cheap land available in an extraordinary location. Recently, several significant major investors have moved to the borough including Dubai World Ports, the Royal Opera House production facilities and the National Skills Academy for Creative and Cultural operating out of the Backstage Centre. The recently completed South Essex College will develop new skills in building and vocational courses. Discussions have taken place with local universities to establish a faculty in the borough focusing on arts, crafts and culture, languages, logistics, port and maritime studies, ocean infrastructure, climate change and tourism. The arts and culture scene is growing, with annual independent international film festival, artists studios, and a proposal for the first international Thames festival along the entire riverside. Major logistics employers including Proctor and Gamble and Unilever are present in the borough.

This is the context within which it can achieve its growth agenda to deliver 23,000 new homes and 26,000 new jobs by 2021.



A NEW AGENDA



It's time to capitalise on the new dynamic created over the last three years for Thurrock, establishing it as a borough with ambition, aiming to become an economic cultural, artistic and scientific hub that will play a prominent role in shaping the UK's responses to major environmental challenges at a strategic and local level and lead the field in sustainable spatial development. With three ports, including the largest new deep-water port in Europe, three rivers, the juxtaposition of urban and rural, it will have a thriving local culture and a healthy green economy. This imaginative, productive identity will inevitably engender a greater self-confidence among residents and stakeholders, as well as encouraging national and international investment.

Looking at Thurrock in detail and as a whole, it is quite clear that until about three years ago, it has been living up to low expectations. To paraphrase Churchill, it has been a modest borough with a lot to be modest about. An industrial landscape unfettered and unloved, "dogged by utilitarian grandeur, structural rawness, by industry in its nudity, by mostly unwitting sublimity, by the forms of might" (Meades 2012, Museum without Walls). But is this a criticism by Meades or actually, a back-handed compliment?

Thurrock's proximity to London, its history and character give it a unique capacity for transformation in the face of enormous eastward development pressure. The borough has a number of landscapes, each with its own distinctive identity and capacity for change. The aim is to accentuate the best qualities to create a rich variation of opportunity.

PROGRESS

Several important steps have been taken to progress this work. The Big Skies Big Thinking project hosted a series of expert seminars (see appendix 1) with the directorate, senior officers, political leaders and major stakeholders. There has been significant buy in for a new approach including discussions at the Directors Board.

The Director's Board Event on 12th November 2013 established priorities complementing the Big Skies Project. Its key objectives, set out in the table below, are to be achieved in a way that is more business-like, collaborative, better connected and resilient.

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| 1. Riverfront | Rotterdam Cycleway 'Thurrock-on-Thames' |
| 2. Grays Shopping centre | Business location Night life Old people in pubs No extremism Choice of quality homes |
| 3. University | Creative crucible Silicon valley Schools you'd choose |
| 4. Villages | Tourism Weekend offer Keep the beauty |
| 5. Community | Local decision making |

Following discussions with experts within Thurrock Council, the Environment Agency, the DfT, HCA, SELEP, adjacent local authorities and universities, regional and national NGO's, developers and investors from the private sector, the project is already informing a number of significant strategies in the borough. These include better use of the Thames, community engagement, the possibility of locating a new University or Faculty in Thurrock and the debate concerning the third crossing. It has helped shape bidding to the SELEP for Local Growth Fund, investigations of other funding sources such as the Horizon 20:20 INTERREG programme, discussions with a research group from cities around North Sea, with the European Bioenergy Research Institute (EBRI) and embryonic talks with HCA and DCLG.



There is clear evidence of a greater determination to negotiate more substantial contributions to the borough from ongoing and new major infrastructure proposals such as the London Gateway Port and the possible Lower Thames Crossing. A shift towards a more holistic rather than site-by-site approach to future development is being demonstrated. There has been a highly supportive response to the “measurable targets” (see appendix III) which are guiding plans to develop key strategies for the villages, tourism, housing, transport, mobility and access, including projects such as “beat the street”, developed by Public Health.

Potential sites for system built and self build housing have been identified. The internationally acclaimed, award winning EcoMod designs from Professor John Quale have been translated into British Standards to comply with building regulations and the possibility of locating a system build factory within the borough has been discussed.

To seed this progressive agenda about £50m of inward investment has been forthcoming to spend on housing and over £100m has been made available for road, rail/ bus interchanges and cycling. There are plans to rebuild the stations and improve pedestrian and cycle crossings across the railway lines. The Big Skies Big Thinking project provides further opportunities for considerable inward investment, and drawing upon best practice and research in the UK and around the world, aims to develop funding bids to support aspects of the work.

BIG SKIES BIG THINKING:

A new water, land, development and transport strategy for Thurrock 2015–2040

September 21, 2014

Proposing a new kind of urban living, Big Skies Big Thinking is prompting debate about what the borough should look like in future, based on a holistic, integrated approach, connecting housing, transport, planning and landscape. It is firmly believed that the transformational agenda proposed will improve the quality of life, level of skills and economic prospects throughout the borough. It underpins a potential Thurrock Garden City proposal. It contains a number of important principles outlined below:

A New Way Of Looking At Development

Working with the landscape as the context within which development takes place is an effective way to increase environmental quality. Conserving and highlighting the richness of Thurrock's landscape, improving degraded and derelict land and avoiding suburban spread, it will provide a mix of affordable social housing, accommodation for large families and professionals, a graduated range of densities and visual, physical connections with the water to re-establish a symbiotic relationship between local communities, the river and the landscape.

Design Excellence

Design excellence is a prerequisite. A public realm strategy encourages people to walk more, cycle more and spend more time in the local environment. Cycle routes are constructed alongside (and separate from wherever possible) major roads. Pedestrians and cyclists are given priority over cars in the urban centres. The transition between inside a building and the outside is seen as a vital part of the public realm, and all built form is above national standards in terms of energy rating, space standards and quality of design. Priority is given to system built housing, produced locally (if possible) and erected by local people trained (if necessary), at the new College

Valuing The Land, Social And Cultural Capital

Tipping and the careless use or exploitation of land, river and air is prohibited and environmental pollution (diesel and noise) dramatically reduced. Carbon capture is improved by planting a Forest of Thurrock and a sustainable return to the land is driven by new market gardening, allotments and intensive horticultural production of organic food in association with local gardening societies, local college and schools.

Grays nighttime economy is supported, participation in arts festivals, public events with the RNO and other regional, national and European organisations are more widely encouraged and publicized, and initiatives to improve public health and well-being include catalyst projects such as encouraging the private sector to invest in a 50m swimming pool and heated lido, more numerous gardening competitions, the promotion and facilitation of cycling and walking, sailing and fishing on the river.

Replacement street lighting is responsive to context. To ensure that the skies remain dark in the centre of Thurrock, roads and paths are to be lit by glow in the dark lines. Elsewhere, smart lighting responsive to movement and demand is used to reduce lighting costs and maintain public safety.

On The Water

At carefully selected locations, high-density flats and duplexes are built on the water in proximity to water taxi stops/railway stations. Each block has a distinct character and form (industrial, riverine, fluvial, rural). Note: Silodam in Amsterdam, is 10x 20m x 10 stories. This provides a mix of 157 flats, the equivalent of 657 houses per hectare.

The River

It is vital to increase safe access to the Thames for local communities. River based tours, water taxi's linked to the railway stations and leisure boats, sailing back and forth from London, to and from Kent and Medway, establish the river as a connecting rather than dividing element, as does a frequent ferry from Gravesend to Grays and in the longer term, to Swanscombe and Paramount Park.

The Quiet Heart/Dark Sky Of Thurrock

The Fenlands, de-poldered for productive water catchment, storage and purification have the traditional rectilinear field patterns, streams and ditches restored providing the capacity for periodic flooding and water harvesting. Used more intensively for recreation, fish farming, increased bio diversity and wildlife sanctuaries, it is serviced by a network of foot and cycle paths. As the land rises, agriculture, ecological and horticultural production, forestry, and nature reserves are created, form part of a high quality, resilient green belt.



The Fenland Shoulders

In conjunction with the Fenlands (above) local accessibility is improved for recreation, cycling and walking. Careful design and management enhances the quality of the green belt. It is preferred that the lower Thames Crossing does not come through the borough. However, if it is decided that that third crossing runs through the Fenlands of Thurrock the road needs to be realigned to the higher ground to the East. Pylons are removed, gas pipes and other utilities, including a high-speed digital infrastructure are placed underground as part of the road construction.

The Inhabited Flood Plain

Riverside housing, institutional and commercial development, designed with local and long distance views of the river and local surroundings, defines an iconic sequence of connected parks (some of which could be floodable), with piers, terraces, viewing platforms, squares and promenades. Generous, substantive footpaths and cycleways help re-establish a productive relationship between local communities and the river, accommodating events such as the Marshland Half Marathon, an extended Shoreline Arts Exhibition, offering numerous venues from which to enjoy a renewed programme of recreational and cultural activities on the river in Thurrock.

A collision of urban, marshland and industrial characteristics, this strategic spatial structure embraces people and industry, recreation and work, integrates river and rail with other forms of public transport. Renewed flood defences, moved inland wherever possible incorporate the development, and the robust public realm re-establishes a long lost connection with the river. The developments are brightly lit to mark the river's edge and more muted away from the edge with smart lighting.

Terracing and manipulating the massing of the built form ensures that all development, including housing, incubators and digital and creative start up facilities industries, have views of the river, across the river as well and to adjacent areas to create a greater sense of location and identity. This might include areas of high density living accommodation at about 30-80 houses/flats per hectare.

The Ports

Ensuring the ports are leading the way in terms of sustainable development, it is suggested that as in Europe, they are used as engines of growth for the whole borough and its wider constituency, for example by working collaboratively to seek access to funding through the EU, utilizing the facilities to establish Thurrock as the entrance to the North Sea and contributing to a

flourishing North Sea dialogue with surrounding seaward facing communities including Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Scotland.

As a priority, the ports will aim to reduce night lighting of roads and facilities within the ports, introduce energy efficient mobility strategies for employees and goods, and a series of community engagement projects, including helping to address the lorry-parking problems. We will investigate whether the ports would contribute to the provision of residential accommodation and facilities to become a major tourist attraction (for example, as in Cape Town) in addition to creating a striking showcase for the arts, music and media when viewed from the river.

Tilbury Port capitalizes on the huge number of passengers embarking and disembarking on the cruise liners by the provision of hotels, restaurants and other entertainment facilities (through a joint HLF bid?).

Water Management

The EU-funded project "Making room for the River and the expert seminar with Dirk Sijmons, raises a number of issues relating to water management within the borough and highlights the vital responsibility and opportunity Thurrock has to play to alleviate flooding within the context of the Thames Gateway and London. With the support of the Environmental Agency, it is proposed that Thurrock increases the capacity of the river, without compromising safety, by realigning the floodwalls, changing the profiles of the flood defences and river edge to create new floodable areas.

Relocating the floodwalls releases room for the river, allows periodic flooding in existing low-lying areas, marshland restoration and, improves water catchment and storage. New dikes defining the urban areas and accommodate a longitudinal cycle and footpath connecting the communities. Development on top of the floodwalls provides local facilities and houses facing the river. Habitat creation will increase biodiversity.

Built further inland, the flood defences utilise the natural topography, embankments and ancient dykes. On the river's side, excavating pools, lakes and green river flood by-passes allows for the greater collection and retention of flood water. The reinstatement of small streams, the ancient grain of field patterns and footpaths creates a patchwork of salt marshes, water meadows, semi natural grassland, rough damp meadows, small scale pastures, an expanded floodplain and far more extensive river and ground water flood catchment areas.

Improved river flood defences protect existing housing, but in some locations it may be necessary to replace the poorest quality housing situated on the floodplain with new housing on higher ground.

Energy

Thurrock could be one of the first boroughs to move away from new energy production towards energy conservation, micro storage and recycling. Companies will be encouraged to establish research labs on existing or proposed powerplant sites in association with a new faculty/university and incoming research facilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STEPS

Engage with the Government, the Environment Agency, the Ports and other local stakeholders to seek buy in for the borough wide transformation proposed by Big Skies, Big Thinking.

Establish a series of events for strategy development, community and stakeholder engagement.

Establish integrated, cross-disciplinary working to achieve tangible, measurable outcomes (set out in appendix III).

Set up pilot projects between Directorates as pilot projects to examine the interconnections between:

- Housing / Planning /sheltered accommodation
- Transport infrastructure / growth / ports and jobs.
- The Garden City proposal

Collate a baseline of information to measure success (see Appendix 1)

Continue with the programme of expert seminars

- Thurrock: Entrance to the North Sea, (Maria Ignatieva and Tom Holbrook)
- Sir John Sorrell, Education (TBA)
- Food and Health (TBA)
- Innovative Finance, Padraic Kelly (or someone from the Purfleet project?)

Commission an imaginative marketing prospectus to present Thurrock as place to live and invest in, a point of arrival, not a means of escape.

Develop local, regional and international networks to help generate knowledge, best practice, economic connections and funding opportunities. Develop a proposal for Thurrock, Entrance to the North Sea (TENS) as a network for research, capital funding and/or to establish a new cultural and economic network (appendix 3).

Embark on wide-ranging Council and stakeholder discussion leading to a greenbelt, site and Core strategy review.

Investigate sources of funding for research, development and implementation (see Appendix III).

Find a fabricator for system built housing.

Follow up initial discussions with HEI's to establish a faculty in Thurrock.

APPENDIX 1

EXPERT SEMINARS

Sept 20th 2013

Professor Kathryn Moore, Big Skies Big Thinking: a landscape led approach to development and change
Professor John Quale, University of Virginia USA,
EcoMod: System Built Sustainable Housing

Dec 3rd 2013

Klaus Bondham, Director of Cycling in Denmark, former mayor of Copenhagen: Mobility and City Building

April 15th 2014

Barbara Brownlee, Princes Trust, and Richard Speight: Fairness in Thurrock, Women and Young People in Construction

May 2014

Cultural Study Tour along the Thames

June 21st 2014

Dirk Sijmons: Making Room for the River

A different way of looking at Thurrock

The same approach was adopted to establish a series of measurable targets to drive forward the work of the borough, cutting across the work of housing, transport, planning, health and education.

- Ensure 50% families can grow their own vegetables by 2018 and that all schools have regular access to allotments or gardens.
- All residents/families have access to all of the river frontage by public transport, cycle-ways or footpaths by 2018
- The number of cycling journeys is increased by 15% per annum to 50% population making 2 cycle journeys per day.
- Number of deaths of cyclists falls year by year.
- The number of adults and children walking at least 1 mile a day is increased by 15% per annum to 50% population by 2015.
- The number of visits to the river and riverside walks increased by 15% per annum until 50% population visit the river each day by 2015.
- All residents living within a 15 minute walk from a good quality park, accessible countryside, the riverside walkways or cycle routes by 2018
- No one under 25 smokes by 2015
- Year by year, 10% more adults work where they live until 70% adults live and work in Thurrock by 2018.
- 15% more activity in main shopping streets each year until 70% adults and families use local services.
- The number of families sitting down to eat together regularly each week increases by 15% each year
- All new housing maximises views of river or horizon. Existing housing to be retrofitted for energy efficiency and to ensure views wherever possible, at a rate of 20% pa.
- All railway crossings have good quality coffee shop, wifi access, fresh fruit and locally sourced vegetables with safe and well provisioned access and cycle storage by 2018.
- All school kids to sing opera once a year and participate in constructing homes (in some way) by 2015,
- Happiness score for men aged over 45 to be increased by 10% each year
- Biodiversity values and cultural activities increase by 15% each year
- The river Thames used in the curriculum (from maths and physics to literature and art) by every cohort by 2014
- The number of pleasure trips taken from Grays riverside increases by 15% per annum and number of visitors by boat from Kent increases by 15% per annum (to Tilbury Port? Greys Town Centre?)
- Tourists from the North Sea Communities increase by 15% per year
- Investment from the North Sea Communities increases by 15% per year in Thurrock
- 20% young adults undertake 6 hours voluntary service per term, increasing by 15% per annum to 100% by 2018

APPENDIX 2

MEASURABLE TARGETS

These were proposed on September 20th, amended at the December 3rd 2013 meeting at High House. The approach is based the strategy adopted to transform Copenhagen (Copenhagen Visions and Goals for 2015) which recognised that urban life is all about people, and that public life is everyday life. These two assumptions leads to key realistic and achievable objectives such as:

- More urban life for all
- More people to walk more
- More people to stay longer

From these key objectives a whole series of cross-disciplinary targets are set and measured.

- By 2018, 30% of school children can swim, and having sailed on the river, or rowed on the river, join a Thurrock rowing club (is there a swimming pool?)
- By 2015 a water taxi commuter service operates from London to Lakeside (and beyond)
- By 2015 a leisure water taxi brings tourists and Londoners to experience a shopping day in Lakeside, sailing up the river with breakfast, shop for the day and have afternoon tea on the way back.
- By 2015 Thurrock will have a thriving seafood market and community, renowned for excellent fish and have an Award Winning local fish restaurant in Lakeside.
- Number of children from the borough going to university increases by 20% pa and number returning to live in Thurrock increases year by year, attracted by the quality of its educational and cultural capital.

MG-8.4a-2015: Smart governance, network resilience and streamlined delivery of infrastructure innovation and MG-8.4b-2015

3. Other funding organisations

NESTA www.nesta.org.uk/about-us

HLF www.hlf.org.uk

ECO Money www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/

Take-action/Find-a-grant/Green-Deal-and-ECO

The Technology Strategy Board www.innovateuk.org

APPENDIX 3

DELIVERING AND FUNDING STRATEGIES

1. Fundraising

it is suggested that an investment prospectus is commissioned to attract inward investment from key local and international institutes and partners, including:

- **SELEP**
- **Dubai World Port**
- **The Royal National Opera**
- **The Princes Trust**
- **The New College/University**
- **Tilbury Port**
- **Cruise Liner Companies**
- **Proctor And Gambol**
- **Local Landowners, Celebrities And Entrepreneurs**

A specific fundraising event should be held to encourage support.

2. Seek funding in association with other cities through Horizon 2020:

MG-5.4-2015: Strengthening the knowledge and capacities of local authorities

MG-5.5a-2015: Demonstrating and testing innovative solutions for cleaner and better urban transport and mobility and MG-5.5b-2015

THURROCK

will no longer be regarded as a landfill site, a repository for the debris of London, but as a **RESILIENT BOROUGH** taking **PRIDE** in its relationship to the river, its **GROWING EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION** for arts, music, biodiversity and wildlife.

