



**Thurrock Council
Corporate Peer Challenge**

Final Report

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05 – 08 December 2011**

1. Introduction, context and purpose

Introduction

This report captures the outcomes and presents the key findings from the Local Government Associations (LGA's) Corporate Peer Challenge at Thurrock Council in December 2011.

The report also provides detailed information on the two focus areas of

- improving the education and skills of local people
- encouraging and promoting job creation and economic prosperity

Corporate peer challenge is part of the new approach to sector led improvement. It is a key component of the LGA's 'Taking the Lead' offer (www.local.gov.uk/taking-the-lead) which provides a range of tools and support to help councils further strengthen local accountability and explore how effectively they are delivering services.

The Peer Challenge took place from the 05 – 08 December 2011 and consisted of a range of on-site activity including interviews, observations, focus groups and workshops.

The peer team met with a broad cross-section of elected members, officers, stakeholders and partners.

During the time in Thurrock the peer team were well looked after and everyone the team met were engaged with the process.

The peer team also undertook background reading provided to the team in advance, including Thurrock Council's self assessment and key supporting documentation.

The evidence and feedback gathered was assimilated into broad themes and a discussion of the findings was delivered to the Council's Directors Board and Political Leaders.

Context and purpose

Thurrock Council is at a key point in its improvement journey with a new senior management structure in place, the integration of the Development Corporation and a huge regeneration programme underway.

The purpose of the peer challenge was to reflect how Thurrock Council is performing across the following areas of:

- Leadership and Governance
- Local Context and Priorities
- Financial and Organisational Capacity

The team also focused on Thurrock Council's top two priorities of:

- improving the education and skills of local people
- encouraging and promoting job creation and economic prosperity

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2. The Peer Challenge Team

Peer challenges are managed and delivered by the sector for the sector. Peers are at the heart of the peer challenge process. They help councils with their improvement and learning by providing a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

The peer challenge team for Thurrock Council was:

- Ged Curran – Chief Executive, London Borough of Merton
- Cllr Stephen Houghton – Leader, Barnsley MBC
- Cllr David Simmonds – Deputy Leader, London Borough of Hillingdon
- Neil Darwin – Director of Opportunity Peterborough
- Bob Stott - Director of Universal & Early Support Services, Lancashire County Council
- Gary Hughes – Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association.

3. Overall Summary - Key Messages

Thurrock Council is making strong strides to improve which is having a real effect in Thurrock.

Significant progress has been made on Thurrock's improvement journey and the Council has worked hard and come a long way. There was clear evidence of improvement with performance improving in key areas such as secondary education and planning.

This improvement was recognised by staff, partners and stakeholders across Thurrock, however, the Council needs to ensure it does not 'declare victory' too early and lose the existing drive and determination it has worked hard to achieve.

Strong and respected political and managerial leadership

Throughout the peer challenge the team received positive feedback on the work of the top political and managerial leadership in Thurrock.

Staff, councillors from all parties and stakeholders from a wide range of organisations and sectors commented on the strong and effective leadership provided by the Leader of the Council, the Leader of the Opposition and the chief executive. This is recognised and appreciated.

The leadership is respected both on a local and regional level and many people commented on the significant shift in transforming the Council to a much more stable and confident organisation.

Improved officer and Member relationships within the Council

The improved relationships between officers and Members within the Council are contributing to the Council's positive trajectory and the recent work around Member development and corporate governance has provided Thurrock with a strong platform for continued improvement.

The commitment from Thurrock Council to ensure high standards and clear governance protocols are followed at all times is key component for the Council's future success and the peer team reinforce the message of this continued focus.

Staff are motivated and engaged and Members are committed to the programme of change

A subsequent outcome of the positive, visible and stable leadership is that staff from across the Council are aware of the challenges ahead and are motivated and engaged in the programme of change.

Members also expressed a dedication to continue the positive progress and were committed to delivering the ambitions for Thurrock's community.

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Thurrock Council does, however, face a number of emerging challenges and there is a danger that the Council is 'declaring victory' too early. Thurrock Council needs to recognise its achievements and the progress it has made but it should not become complacent or divert from its current focus of improvement.

The peer team identified four key areas of improvement and presents them under the headings of:

1. Capacity
2. Budget
3. Stability
4. People

Capacity – Focus the financial and organisational capacity on the Council's key priorities

Thurrock Council is a small unitary council that like all other councils is facing significant financial reductions over the coming years. The political make up of the Council is finely balanced but has unanimously approved the vision for Thurrock and its five stated priorities for the area.

The peer team believe, however, that the stated priorities are too broad and rather than being clearly determined priorities they are wide ranging ambitions. It is recommended that these ambitions are reviewed and reduced in order to identify the key priorities for the Council. It should ensure it focuses its financial and organisational capacity on these key priorities to ensure it maximises the available resources and organisational capacity.

The Council has acknowledged the need to strengthen its regeneration capacities. Reliance has been placed upon the transfer of staff from the Development Corporation. More work needs to be done to ensure that the transition is managed carefully so that the new staff feel fully engaged with and part of Thurrock's future ambitions. In addition the learning and development needs of current regeneration staff would benefit from a review.

The Leadership also need to ensure that the new Regeneration team is well connected to the rest of the organisation and drives the agenda forward positively

Budget – Review the MTFS in light of continuing financial reductions

Thurrock Council understands that its financial management is not where it wants it to be and has significant work to undertake before it can be confident that it is on the right track.

Thurrock has a Transformation Programme in place which, if successfully delivered, will achieve the required savings for 2012/2013. However, to enable the Council to successfully manage the future financial reductions and to deliver its key priorities there is an urgent need to review the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Stability – Maintain a focus on providing a stable democratic platform

The work undertaken in the last 18 months to ensure Thurrock Council is a more stable and confident organisation has been widely acknowledged. The political leadership work well together which is recognised and respected. There is, however, a significant risk that this positive progress becomes derailed and the current political stability may become undermined by ‘political point scoring’ through the local media. The peer team urge both parties to refrain from this practice and continue to work together for the benefit of Thurrock’s communities.

The current election cycle also provides challenges for the political stability of Thurrock Council and there is an opportunity amongst the political leadership to lead by example and formally request a move towards four yearly elections.

People – Ensure communities shape the Council’s strategies and that staff are appropriately involved in the planned transformation

Thurrock has one of the largest regeneration programmes in the U.K. and 2012 marks a significant milestone for Thurrock Council with their commitment to enter a ‘decade of delivery’.

The Council has worked tirelessly to develop its vision and the subsequent strategies to deliver its ambitions and significant progress has been made but even greater challenges lie ahead.

In order to ensure it communities are on board and working towards the same agenda the Council needs to better engage and communicate with local people to enable them to shape Thurrock’s plans.

The Community Engagement Strategy has recently been developed but it needs to shift from informing communities to listening to communities to avoid them feeling ‘done to’ rather than ‘worked with’.

Staff in the Council should also be more appropriately involved in the regeneration of Thurrock. As a large number live in Thurrock they can help communicate and champion the positive developments.

Staff also need to be appropriately engaged and better involved in the Council’s planned Transformation Programme. There is a need to align the Organisational Development and Transformation Programmes, to ensure staff are ready and able to change to the new working practices in order to ensure the required efficiencies are achieved.

4. Leadership and Governance

Strengths

- The Council's political and managerial leaders are seen as a real asset to the organisation amongst staff and stakeholders.
- There are good relationships between the Leaders, Cabinet and Senior Management Team that is bringing a period of stability to Thurrock Council.
- Thurrock has a clear set of ambitions with cross party support and although they were originally agreed under a Conservative administration they were refreshed and agreed unanimously demonstrating the shared vision for Thurrock
- Political and ethical governance has improved with significant progress made. The Council needs to continue to reinforce this and focus on the newly developed protocols to continue the positive relationships between officers and Members.

Emerging Challenges

- Thurrock Council has been through a significant period of instability and disruption. During this period poor behaviour amongst some managers was prevalent. Many staff remember this. Senior officers, therefore, need to model the positive behaviours that are required of staff at all times.
- Member development and support should continue as part of the improvement process:
 - Scrutiny needs to be reviewed to improve its effectiveness and to develop its role in both challenging and supporting improvement
 - The Council should examine the role of non Cabinet Members to ensure all Councillors are engaged and have a forum to constructively challenge decisions
 - Improve the effective challenge of the audit committee by bringing in independent financial expertise onto the committee
- Develop a clearer partnership framework that identifies the Member role in order to aid understanding of partnership arrangements. With the Local Strategic Partnership no longer in place many officers and Members were unclear of the current partnership arrangements. A simple diagram may help clarify these arrangements.

5. Local Context and Priorities

Strengths

- Thurrock Council has established a clear Vision and a set of five ambitions that are shared and endorsed across all political parties
- Considerable work has been undertaken to communicate and embed a shared understanding, which is delivering results with officers and Members understanding the direction for the Council
- Work is underway to map strategies and to align them to the Vision and this is helping to identify required resources across the Council
- Very clear narrative that is shared by officers and Members on the economic future of Thurrock
- The Council has a well developed and technically sound Transformation Programme.

Emerging Challenges

- Thurrock Council has 'too many priorities'. With five ambitions and a set of 22 sub priorities covering a wide area of work the peer team recommend the Council focus on the key deliverables, particularly in light of the financial reductions.
- Although officers and Members understand the Council's vision, particularly around it's regeneration agenda, there is a need to better engage residents through developing a future story of place and a narrative around the regeneration opportunities
- The Transformation Programme is well developed but needs to engage all staff and customers to ensure the required efficiency savings and new opportunities are achieved
- Thurrock needs a foreign policy. The Council is valued by a wide range of stakeholders and partners. It needs to continue to develop effective partnerships to the west with London and to north and south with Essex and Kent. However, many partners do not understand Thurrock's agenda and the Council would benefit from developing a clear partnership policy and share this with all relevant parties.
- Professional and political stability is important. Throughout the peer challenge many people referenced the uncertainty of the annual election cycle and the peer team ask Thurrock Council to consider whether a four year election cycle would help.

6. Financial and Organisational Capacity

Strengths

- Enthusiastic and willing Members and officers who are committed to improving the Council and 'up for' change.
- Thurrock Council is open to learning and development as evidenced by it's willingness to learn from the outcomes of the LGA's corporate peer challenge.
- The Council has restructured its senior management team and has strengthened the senior management cadre. It is currently developing the organisational structure to deliver its ambitions.
- The Council fully acknowledges and recognises the key issues and scale of the task ahead. The Council should celebrate it's achievements but it should be careful not to declare victory too early

Emerging Challenges

- There is a significant need to improve the finance function by
 - Recasting the Medium Term Financial Strategy to fully take into account the future financial reductions
 - Reviewing the Transformation Programme risks to ensure that the objective efficiency savings are realistic and achievable
- Throughout the peer challenge the issue of capacity was discussed. Thurrock Council need to invest in and further develop officer capacity and engage Members in the key areas of
 - Performance and risk management
 - Project management
 - Procurement
 - Contract/Clienting
- Involve staff in development of the emerging Organisational Development strategy and Transformation programme
- Although the challenge of poor ICT is widespread the issues faced by Thurrock Council are considerable and should not be under estimated. There is therefore a need to address the weak ICT infrastructure to improve efficiency
- There is significant support for Thurrock Council amongst its partners and stakeholders. Representatives from the community and voluntary sector also demonstrated a strong commitment to engage and work with Thurrock Council. Thurrock Council should there look to better involve and work with partners and the voluntary sector to add to the Councils capacity.

Key Focus Areas - Detailed Feedback

7. Educational Attainment

Strengths

- Excellent achievement around secondary education that provides a strong platform for future improvement
- Positive strategic level planning around school improvement and a clear programme around improving primary education
- Strong leadership and management from senior officers
- Effective restructuring of primary provision and leadership
- Clear examples of cross phase school support

Emerging challenges

- Maximise the opportunities provided by the establishment of a Peoples Directorate
- Manage capacity of the school improvement team to ensure effectiveness
- Consider the future funding model for school improvement
- Continue to positively support schools and contribute to the recruitment and retention of high quality education officers

There is good evidence of strategic level planning around school improvement and educational attainment. There is a clear programme around improving Primary Education within Thurrock and around maintaining the significant improvement in Secondary attainment.

The Council's senior officers are a significant strength and show a clear understanding as to the actions required around further improving educational attainment.

Traded service models of school improvement are less well developed within the Council and should be progressed.

Thurrock Council has made a contribution to the significant improvement in secondary educational attainment over the past 3 years. This improvement at secondary level has also impacted on Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups

The Council has effectively restructured some Primary provision and has strengthened Primary leadership across the Borough. This has established an effective basis for Primary phase attainment to improve.

Clear examples of cross phase school to school support are taking place. These examples show the transfer of good practice between both phases.

Detailed improvement plans are in place for all schools causing concern. These show a thorough understanding of the issues facing those schools and

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appropriate strategies for improvement. Schools causing concern have been involved in the production of these plans.

Schools requiring improvement are appropriately tiered and the support being offered is proportional to their requirements. Members have been consulted around the tiered arrangements and fully support the approach being adopted.

Information around schools causing concern has been appropriately communicated to Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

The strategic leadership of school improvement is highly effective. This has been validated by the full range of stakeholder groups.

The school improvement team is small but other support is brokered from schools. This brokerage is very effective, however, the size of the core team could be an issue if key officers were not retained.

The capacity around the team delivering improvement across the entire Primary phase has been raised by some schools. There is a need to consider this along with the above point.

The capacity of the school improvement team is dependent on Council funding and "invest to save" proposals. Schools are not being asked for a contribution for improvement work. Supporting school improvement is a key political priority, however, charging schools and moving towards a full cost recovery model should be urgently considered. Schools Forum is being approached regarding a contribution to support this and this is a welcome development.

The creation of a Peoples Directorate is a recent development and views on how the work around delivering educational improvement will sit within this structure vary. Some views see this change as a potential increase in the capacity to deliver and the opportunity to move towards more integrated working. Other views question whether the focus on educational improvement will be maintained in the new structures. This will need to be carefully monitored as the Peoples Directorate "beds in" and the opportunities of cross working will need to be maximised.

8. Regeneration and Economic Development

Strengths

- Clear sense of regeneration opportunities shared by all staff and Members
- Some good work has contributed to key sites – London Gateway and Lakeside
- Key strategies are now in place to support wider regeneration activity with interlinked mapping
- Significant opportunity to take the regeneration agenda forward

Emerging challenges

- Infrastructure needs to be tackled to realise benefits and have them accepted by the wider community
- More work needed to ensure local people are tied into future employment
- Ensure that all council services and officers understand their individual and collective role in delivery
- Support Members to enable them to monitor the progress and impact of regeneration activity
- Prioritise – tackle the deliverable not the wish list

Thurrock Council has a clear sense of the major regeneration opportunities. For example, some very good work has contributed to the current delivery of key sites, most notably London Gateway and Lakeside. In common with many localities in the Greater South East, regeneration may be inhibited if key infrastructure matters are not tackled in the short to medium term. In Thurrock's case the road infrastructure around Junction 30/31 of the M25 needs attention not least with the forthcoming opening of London Gateway.

The Council should continue to build this longer term vision for regeneration further. The scale of the regeneration schemes is vast and will require continued expertise to ensure the benefits are realised for local communities. The peer team recognise that key strategies are now in place to support wider regeneration activity and recommend that further work needs to be undertaken to:

- Ensure that all Council services understand key regeneration drivers and more crucially their individual and collective role in delivery.
- Enable Members to effectively monitor the impact of regeneration activity and provide a mechanism for on-going review of economic interventions. The newly implemented Governance structure will help assist with this
- Establish clear approaches across services that ensure that employment opportunities are communicated across local communities. This should include community bases alongside the local education infrastructure.

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Thurrock needs to build its external image and reputation further, the Thurrock Foreign policy.

The Council has clearly worked its way through a difficult period. However there is now collective need to build strong external relationships with key partners and stakeholders, not least around the regeneration agenda. Increasing Thurrock's external profile will assist the Council in making the case for the 'big regeneration drivers' most notably the much needed transport improvements associated with Junction 30/31 of the M25.

The Council needs to re-establish personal relationships with key regeneration partners. It is encouraging that Thurrock has been asked to lead on transport issues for the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). Fundamentally this is a good opportunity to show that the Council can lead and create change in a broad based partnership. This outward looking activity will help nurture revised opinions of the authority.

The Council needs to be positive in setting out how it sees its role within the local geography. It needs to set out how it sees its relationship with London and the two neighbouring counties of Essex and Kent. There is a clear opportunity for Thurrock to leverage all three relationships, although this will require consistent messaging to all parties setting out the key long term Thurrock messages.

There is a significant opportunity to positively take the regeneration agenda forward. The winding-up of the Development Corporation gives the Council the ability to reassert leadership over the wider agenda. In many senses this provides the Council with a new start and offers the ability to forge new relationships and to generate greater understanding of the Council's aspirations with stakeholders and neighbours.

The Council has set out a powerful message around the integration of 'Regeneration' with 'Skills'. The Chief Executive's statement around ensuring that young people have access to jobs sets out a key leadership challenge. The message is very clear both to Members and officers but also to stakeholders and the wider community. While the operational integration of both issues are at an early stage there is real potential. The peer team highlighted work in other parts of the country where the private sector are being engaged to help identify the future demand for skills. The private sector demand the range of skills needed, rather than local providers, or indeed government, via its funding mechanisms.

Thurrock Council will need to maintain its approach if it is to realise its ambition of supporting young people into local jobs. At present there is strong understanding within the authority around the opportunities the key developments offer. However there is merit in building conversations within the community to ensure that they have an understanding about the scale of opportunity these investments bring, as well as the need to up skill to take advantage of new jobs.

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Equally the Council needs to consider how it can develop its engagement techniques with the local community. From evidence there is further work needed to ensure that local people understand the nature and impact of forthcoming investment and regeneration.

The new Community Engagement Strategy sets out a solid strategic approach. The implementation of a new Community Council provides a route to bring communities together. However the Council will also need to consider how the impact of key regeneration activity resonates with communities.

'Capacity' is a consistent theme across Local Government and is likely to remain a central theme for some time to come. The success of the 'decade of delivery' will largely be dependent upon the Council having sufficient capacity, with appropriate skills to lead the regeneration agenda.

The Council has acknowledged the need to strengthen its regeneration capacities and the integration of Thames Gateway Development Corporation staff will provide additional capacity, bringing key regeneration skills in house. Reliance has been placed upon the transfer of staff from the Development Corporation; however, more work needs to be done to ensure that the transition is managed carefully so that the new staff feel fully engaged with and part of Thurrock's future ambitions. In addition the learning and development needs of current regeneration officers would benefit from a review.

The Leadership also need to ensure that the new Regeneration team is well connected to the rest of the organisation and drives the agenda forward positively and that the entire range of council services need to provide support to regeneration activity. Service areas need to understand their role in regeneration and provide support to the newly formed Delivery Unit at appropriate times to ensure that key activities take place.

Looking ahead it will be important to understand the support the LEP may be able to bring to the Council. Overtime this partnership may offer further economies of scale, or indeed shared services. Recognising the scale of the South East LEP it may be prudent for the Council to work more closely within a sub regional sphere rather than across the broad geography.

Thurrock Council has a clear set of ambitions. However looking ahead the economic conditions we face as a nation will dictate the progress of many schemes. It is therefore recommended that the Council tackle the deliverable, and not the broad wish list.

Thurrock has a good range of regeneration projects. Ultimately the private sector will drive the pace of delivery, however the Council needs to ensure that it provides effective 'enabling' support, and returns timely and appropriate decisions to private partners. Focusing resource on areas where a difference

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can be made will be imperative within local government moving forward. The Council also needs to build understanding of regeneration priorities between management and middle managers. This will aid the pace of delivery and ensure positive decision making.

We have seen committed officers during our visit to the Council. It is clear that with Thurrock moving into a new phase following a difficult period there is enthusiasm and commitment to drive the Council and regeneration forward.

The peer team believe that by harnessing this enthusiasm and commitment Thurrock Council can continue on its improvement journey.

9. Notable Practice

From the peer challenge the team identified the following notable practice:

- Thurrock Councils work supporting schools to improve Secondary Education
- The work on preparing for family court proceedings was cited as best practice
- Internationally recognised good practice on Thurrock's work with children with Special Education Needs and autism
- The work to develop Thurrock's Health & Wellbeing Board

10. Signposting Note

This note signposts you to publications, information, discussion forums and examples of practice and policy that may be helpful to inform your further thinking about some of the feedback messages provided by the peer team.

The LGA has an important role to play in supporting councils to achieve better for less. We have focussed on critical high spend areas such as children's, adults and families, procurement and capital assets. The LGA's Productivity Programme will support councils as they explore radical new ways of working, and respond to the opportunities created by the Localism Bill and Open Public Services White Paper. The programme aims to provide practical support to councils as they grapple with the challenges local government faces to deliver better for less. <http://www.local.gov.uk/local-productivity>

Productivity Programme: Practical Support to Councils

Productivity Masterclass: A FREE 2-3 hour workshop with public and/or private sector experts providing good practise and challenge on productivity experts. This would be heavily tailored to meet the individual requirements of councils.

A brochure is available at the following link:

http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=d6a96e66-8c04-4591-b7ca-3be6ab1ae1c5&groupId=10161

Productivity Experts: We will fund (**upto £5k**) towards an expert mentor to provide ongoing challenge on a specific productivity issue. These are wide ranging and relate to a number of areas e.g. adult social care, waste or a council wide transformation programme and for Thurrock Council the procurement expert maybe useful.

A brochure is available at the following link:

http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=6ae2c733-8705-4795-9bfa-d9b0bc038665&groupId=10161

Procurement: In addition to the Productivity Experts, We will be providing seed funding (**£100K programme in total**) to support councils and their partners to further develop a category management approach to help drive greater efficiency savings.

Productivity Opportunities: A selection of short case studies available on the productivity section of the LGA website that demonstrate good productivity practise against each of the 'Big Win' areas.

Productivity and Efficiency Exchange - Community of Practise:

<http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/c/7177320/home.do>

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Children's: Partner organisation (Springboard Consortium) will begin delivering the Children's commissioning and productivity work early in the New Year. The early priorities will be

- to develop regional networks to support commissioning and productivity,
- to provide training on commissioning and productivity for officers and members working in youth services and
- to develop new tools and materials to improve commissioning and productivity in priority service areas, including youth, SEN, placements and prevention/early intervention.

In the medium term (February / March) we will be identifying a cohort of sector specialists (peers) and external experts (associates or consultants) who can support sector led improvement in this area on an on-going basis. - amanda-whitaker.brown@local.gov.uk

Capital Assets: We are directly supporting 15 Wave 2 Capital and Asset Pathfinder Councils to make better use of public land and property. Savings of over 20% in property running costs and 50% savings in carbon footprint have been identified since the launch of the Pathfinders in 2010. There will be a programme of dissemination activity led by the pathfinders in 2012.

The Collaborative and Commissioning Model

The following documents have been produced by the Local Productivity Programme and can be found at the following link <http://www.local.gov.uk/big-win-future-ways-of-working>.

- A short guide to new and emerging models of public service delivery.
- Learning from councils who have opted for shared chief executives and management teams.
- Shared Services and Management: A guide for Councils
- A comprehensive shared services database and map to highlight leading practice and the efficiency savings being delivered through shared service arrangements across the country. We would encourage councils and partners to check out the map before embarking on their own new shared services to see if there are any existing arrangements in their area that they can join in with or learn from.

Members

'Do Something Big' - This report from the LGA Big Society Task Force shows how democratically-elected local Councillors are working together with local people, public service partners and voluntary and community organisations to deliver different and better services for communities in difficult times:

http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=5bfefa23-ac6d-4d01-82c8-a8d6f9be251b&groupId=10161