



# Observatory PASCAL

*Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions*

---

*PURE Regional Visit Report (RVR1)*

*THAMES GATEWAY, UNITED KINGDOM*

*4<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2009*

*David Campbell, Anne Kaplan, Chris Shepherd and John Tibbitt*

## 1 Introduction

This report presents the initial findings from the first visit of the Consultative Development Group (CDG) to the Thames Gateway (TG) region in March 2009.

The purposes of the initial visit were as follows:

- to familiarise key stakeholders in the region about the PURE project and process;
- to enable the CDG to properly understand the nature of the Thames Gateway region, the main developmental priorities and aspirations in the region, and the context in which these developments are being pursued;
- to form preliminary views on issues relating to the engagement of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Region on priority developmental themes; and
- to agree a programme of work, including benchmarking, to take forward to the Vancouver PURE workshop and for the second CDG visit in early 2010.

### *Programme for the visit*

The Review took place over 3 days from 4 – 6 March. In addition two further meetings were held with planning agencies on 9 and 10<sup>th</sup> March.

Briefly, the review included an initial plenary meeting between the review team and the range of stakeholders to explain the PURE process and allow some initial exploration of key issues within the region. There then followed a series of meetings and site visits with representatives of HEIs and FE colleges within the region, and with partnerships and planning authorities with responsibilities within the Gateway area. These meetings allowed the review team members to probe issues and gain perspectives on key themes. Extensive notes were taken. A final wrap-up session allowed team members to draw together initial views and provide some initial feedback to the Region.

## 2 Key Regional Characteristics

This section highlights key features of the Thames Gateway region which are important in understanding the context in which the discussion of priorities, processes and practice in the TG region should be placed.

The Thames Gateway as a coherent policy area is a relatively recent construct, created in 1995 by central Government. The Gateway covers some 100,000 hectares, and stretches eastwards along both banks of the Thames estuary from the east end of London. It is about 40 miles long and 20 miles wide, and has a population of 1.46m people, living in some 600,000 households. The TG boundary was extended some 5 years ago to bring in further areas of the Thames estuary where it meets the sea.

# Observatory PASCAL

*Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions*

---

The area is recognised as an important strategic policy area. It is situated in the south-east of England. It offers the largest area of under-developed land in the south-east, is close to London, and straddles 2 major transport infrastructure developments (the Channel Tunnel Rail Link and motorway developments). The area has seen a substantial change in its economic base through the decline in the previously strong military-based economy and in traditional manufacturing and dockland industries. The land for regeneration in the Gateway is predominantly 'brownfield' former industrial land, which in many cases is difficult to develop, but land values allow this to be progressed as an economic option.

The area had been subject to wide ranging attempts at 'place-making' (Dagenham and Becontree Estate, Basildon New Town, East Tilbury Model village, Thamesmead and Docklands), but all were unconnected, were not conspicuously successful, and were not perceived or managed in a strategic way. The Thames Gateway spatial framework was established on a number of principles based around the consolidation of the existing settlement pattern of town and country, maximising the potential offered by the area's large supply of brownfield land, and exploiting the opportunity offered by new transport links and the river. The area has a rich environmental heritage – over 60% is green space, and designated areas protect the coastal wildlife.

During the 1980s and 90s TG experienced high levels of population growth but the rate of growth has slowed in recent years. It has a younger and more ethnically mixed population than the surrounding regions. Housing affordability is poor compared to national levels, the London TG sub-region having the poorest affordability and a high proportion of households in social housing. The TG has higher levels of deprivation and unemployment than the surrounding regions, which has been persistent over time. Whilst there has been an increase in the proportion of degree-qualified residents in TG, qualification levels persistently lag behind the wider regions, especially in the Kent and Essex sub-regions of TG. The presence of Canary Wharf in the London TG sub-region may be bringing in-migration of degree-qualified people to that area: the population of students has shown a marked increase in recent years. Life expectancy levels are only marginally lower than in the surrounding regions. The diverse population of the area provides a potentially rich social capital base.

In terms of employment, employment rates lag behind the national average especially in the London TG sub-region, as do workplace earnings. The TG industrial profile shows a comparative lack of knowledge-based or high-tech industries, and a dependence on manufacturing and construction. The 6 year period from 1998 – 2004 saw an additional 90,000 people working within TG. This rapid growth rate needs to be sustained to reach government employment targets and may be difficult in the current economic conditions.

The Gateway region includes the 2012 Olympics site which offers a major opportunity for economic and social development, and for the external marketing of the region.

The TG area spans some 17 local authority areas and three Government Regional Offices. No single authority is wholly contained within the Thames Gateway boundary.

### 3 Regional priorities, ambitions and aspirations

The strategy and delivery plans for the TG region are set out in a number of official publications. In essence, the main aim of the Gateway programme is to encourage and support growth in the area in jobs, housing and the economy in such a way that will bring sustainable benefits to the national economy, to the local environment, and to local communities. There is a substantial programme of investment in infrastructure, in housing and economic developments such as the major retail parks at Bluewater and Lakeside. The TG programme is overseen by the Thames



# Observatory PASCAL

*Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions*

---

Gateway Strategy Team within the central government Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

Thames Gateway has a high profile within government, a factor seen as important in driving the diverse programme forward and in securing and maintaining funding over a significant period of time.

The TG is managed through a complex structure of partnerships involving central government, local authorities, regional development agencies, and specialist agencies such as HEFCE and the Learning and Skills Council. Governance is further complicated by the division of the region into 3 sub-regions focussed respectively on London, north Kent and south-east Essex. We were warned in the initial meeting not to spend time in the visit trying to understand the complex workings of these arrangements. Suffice it to say that despite this complexity, the array of partnerships collectively were delivering significant resources and development within the region. The need for the role of DCLG in reiterating and communicating a clear strategic vision is vital in keeping the overall process on track.

There were concerns expressed over how the current economic downturn would impact on the progress of TG. Employment in the financial sector at Canary Wharf had already seen significant job losses, and there were expectations that job targets would be more difficult to achieve and housing and other capital infrastructure projects could be slowed. There was nevertheless a clear commitment to the TG programme (see below), and a recognition that in many respects the slowdown represented an opportunity and gave urgency to attempts to improve the skills base in the region in order for it to take advantage of the economic upturn in due course.

The PURE study is focussed on the emphasis placed within the TG programme on the delivery of education led regeneration, which places the raising of attainment and skills at the centre of the development strategy. In this connection particularly relevant priorities include:

- The need to increase educational achievement at all levels and especially post-16;
- Raise aspirations of young people and families;
- Improve the skills-base of the population to attract new businesses and retain talent;
- Reduce inequalities and tackle worklessness;
- Promote community cohesion to ensure benefits accrue not just to new populations but also to existing communities;
- Service new centres of population, especially education and health provision;
- Future-proof skills development to match skills to the future needs of the economy.

In meeting these priorities, TG is seeking to ensure that Further and Higher Education Institutions play a strong role in the development process. The expectation of these institutions is that they will have a strong visible local presence, will be responsive to local needs both of local people and employers, and will act to widen participation and progression to raise attainment, skills and aspirations, and strengthen the economic base of the region.

There are 12 HEIs within TG which between them represent most phases of development of the HE sector in England. The HEIs vary widely in their mission, some focussed very clearly on teaching and addressing the needs of local communities and surrounding regions, through to more research intensive institutions focussed more on national and international communities and still others developing interesting ways of combining the two. There is also a strong FE presence within the region, with some of these colleges having significant HE offerings. The need for close links between the FE and HE sectors was clearly recognised and was reflected within the partnership arrangements through which FE and HEIs are linked to the TG process, through the TG FE/HE partnership, whose lead officer is seconded to DCLG.

## 4 The key issues and findings

### Focus and commitment

#### *Community orientation*

Although Thames Gateway was created as an area for economic regeneration, much was made in the initial meeting of a shift in approach from one essentially concerned with infrastructure to a focus on communities and opportunity structures, and 'place-making'. Current thinking was based on the need to foster aspirations and opportunities in local communities as a means of providing sustainable economic development. This was seen in contrast to previous high profile developments such as the Canary Wharf financial district which, although it had provided some additional employment opportunities locally, had also served to import high skilled and high paid work which was taken up by people who by and large lived outside the Gateway area.

It was impressive how this focus on the needs of local communities was widely shared in the HEIs and FE colleges we visited and amongst the policy-makers within the Gateway region. Furthermore this commitment had brought a response from funding bodies in supporting the development of HE and FE consistent with this vision.

#### *Locally-oriented FE and HE*

This focus had led to some re-thinking about the kind of HE which is required. The required approach very clearly emphasised FE and HE which was:

- Develop appropriate infrastructure in non-traditional buildings that are modern, visible and iconic.
- Locally placed at the centre of communities to encourage local participation and support local business.
- Based on partnership (the multi-versity) between HEIs, (and between HEIs and Further Education colleges) allowing each to develop their particular strengths but in close collaboration with others and respond to local need for both vocational and academic skills.
- Clear progression routes from school, through FE, and on to HE to facilitate the continuing learning of communities, often starting from a relatively low base and with typically low participation rates in HE.
- Responding to the needs of the economy and promoting improved skills outcomes.

There had been some significant developments of new facilities which exemplified this approach, notably the Medway Campus, Grays Learning Campus in Thurrock and the combined campus in the centre of Southend, (see section below), which were addressing issues of local supply of FE and HE provision.

#### *Utilising the presence of HE for community and economic regeneration*

In addition to such steps to increase participation there was recognition too of the importance of HE students studying locally and engaging in local communities, both to help create aspirations within the local population and to increase the skills available to businesses and community groups.

There was a concern too to increase graduate retention in local areas as a way of encouraging and sustaining the development of local businesses, and in recognition of the changing skills levels required as traditional industries such as the ports and transport logistics adopt new technologies to maintain competitiveness. We heard of emerging placement schemes for

# Observatory PASCAL

*Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions*

---

students within local businesses as one way of benefiting both student learning and skill utilisation in (often small) businesses.

Whilst the commitment to such aims above was clear across the Thames Gateway, the team was less clear that actions were in place to take these issues forward in a sustained way. It was nevertheless impressive that students at the local campuses provided testimony to the importance of local provision for increasing participation (see below). This provides a base from which to work, and TG should look to harness this enthusiasm.

## Models of local HE and FE provision

The team saw 4 examples of education campus developments in the centre of local communities. In Medway, a shared campus was being developed by 3 HEIs (Greenwich, Kent and Canterbury Christ Church). Each had separate teaching buildings, but there were some interesting shared facilities such as the Library. Each University managed its own offering on the Medway campus, and had signed a non-competition agreement with the other HEIs on the site. Whilst it was clear that there was growing co-operation in developing the site, for example the excellent shared library facility, and the single student facilities, there was clearly scope for further steps towards collaboration in site management, common information and in academic course planning. It is possible and perhaps even desirable that the institutions might take the lead from their students who have already formed a single students union and reform as a single institution.

It was nevertheless apparent that the proximity of the campus to local communities was an important factor in promoting participation in HE: we visited 2 classes where almost all students said they would not have joined the class but for its local availability, and provided testimony to the importance of word of mouth in extending access among communities with little previous experience of HE.

We also visited the newly established campus in Grays where 3 HEIs (UEL, Essex and Anglia Ruskin) were in partnership with Southend College of F & HE. This was a new venture – the provision had only been open a few weeks and was housed in temporary buildings although construction of larger permanent buildings is planned to start soon. We heard of interesting initiatives to attract demand and participation from the local community. This included a 'Learning Shop' (UEL) opened in a former Post Office which was proving successful in allowing local people to express interest in courses, and as a way of generating demand within the community. The college had been encouraged by the strength of early enrolments from the area. All 4 institutions in the partnership made it clear that they were committed to local provision, but it was also clear that further steps were needed to develop joint planning in response to the demand which was being generated.

The third example was the provision in the town centre of Southend by Southend College and the University of Essex. The construction of striking new buildings on a previously run-down site in the centre of Southend had made an important contribution to the regeneration of the central area of the town, as well as presenting a strong local focus for FE and HE provision in the area. Local demand had risen substantially.

The theme of making HE activity visible in the centre of communities was also evident in the east end of London where a new build biotech innovation centre (Queen Mary University of London) had been established in Whitechapel. Like some of the buildings in the projects described above, the building boasted large street-level windows and striking features to attract attention. The Centre was encouraging schools to visit and increase awareness about science, and urging students to think of careers in science and health-related employment. Moving beyond this direct contribution to the skills agenda, the Director saw an important role for research in regeneration



# Observatory PASCAL

*Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions*

---

through the development of technologies for the future. It sought to provide economic stimulus locally through bio-enterprises and knowledge exchange initiatives.

## Progression Routes

The team were particularly impressed with the Thames Gateway guaranteed progression arrangements to facilitate learning careers through FE and into HE. Not only had this addressed a frequently found obstacle for students in moving from FE to HE, but it was being used enthusiastically and effectively to promote a positive aspirational atmosphere in colleges with a very positive 'yes you can' approach to promoting student participation and progress to HE. The importance of progression routes from FE to HE was emphasised in all these locations. The local provision was seen as giving permission to aspire to local people, and providing visible role models to fuel aspirations, which was entirely consistent with the overall TG strategic aims listed earlier and propounded in policy documents.

Foundation degree provision was seen as a key element within this framework and was an aspect of provision attracting rapid development in several but not all regional HEIs. FE was an important part of the supply chain for foundation degree provision.

## Engagement of Business Community and public services sector

We saw several different forms of engagement with local business. One such was the provision of specialist equipment and services. At the Medway campus, specialist equipment was made available to the local NHS which had resulted in more efficient use of NHS own plant. On the Southend campus, to encourage local entrepreneurship, there was a local business incubation centre, and an impressive 'i-lab' facility for business meetings, creative thinking and training.

Another was the placement of students with particular skills in local businesses to undertake specified projects for the business, for example preparing new logistics arrangements, demonstrating new technologies, or undertaking other business analysis. Such schemes served not only to benefit the student, but also show firms the benefits of engagement with different technologies and skill sets available in HE, and it was hoped in the longer term, to drive up demand for graduates in local industries.

Thirdly, one HEi was prepared to offer skills audits to local employers and develop training programmes to address skills gaps.

### *Public sector*

There were examples where colleges and HEIs had developed provision in the light of perceived needs within the local community. In one locality a decision had been made to focus provision on courses which would boost professional skills available to the public sector in developing communities, especially in health and education, whilst at the same time extending employment opportunities within the local population. In a similar way, another institution had recognised that the re-location of a major national opera resource to the area presented an opportunity to develop provision to boost the wider creative industries sector in the area with provision aimed at the technical and support aspects of the industry rather than performing arts per se.

## Aligning supply and demand for skills

Despite these initiatives, it was clear there was more to be done to better future proof skills demands in the emerging local and regional economy, through better engagement with business and the public sector. Even where interesting steps were being taken to allow a 'bottom-up'

expression of demand for learning, as well as more traditional attempts at 'top down' economic planning, it was not clear how a systematic response to expressed demand would be achieved. Much was still left to individual initiatives by HEIs, although there was evidence of some attempts at inter-HEI collaboration, eg Knowledge East, the knowledge exchange for East London.

One HEI had made efforts to understand the particular needs of its local population, many of whom were described as being in the 'still here' category, rather than the 'arrived here to do better' category. This was an interesting attempt to further segment the demand for FE and HE, and was leading to further thinking of how best to address the needs of these different populations.

Further steps were required to better align supply and demand for skills. There were significant developments throughout the region in transport infrastructure, retail, major exhibition and entertainment venues, and in the creative industries, all of which present significant employment and business opportunities with concomitant skills demands.

It was suggested by Thames Gateway partners that FE was more nimble in responding to expressed demand, but that in general the availability of skills was largely supply-led rather than demand-led, particularly amongst HEIs. There seemed, for example, to have been relatively little contact with the largest multi-nationals in Canary Wharf and the City of London beyond the level 2 offer at the Financial Skills Academy in Docklands.

There was a need for better engagement mechanisms with business and employers so that the employers' voice can be better articulated and connected with the wider planning processes both in development agencies and in educational institutions. Three regional development agencies work within the TG region, but it was unclear how well they co-ordinate their activities across their own boundaries. There were analytical resources available to the Gateway (see below) but there was little evidence of effective market research to drive an understanding of future skills requirements or on understanding of 'demand pull' aspects with industry and public sector employers.

### Engagement with Mega-events (the 2012 Olympics)

The Thames Gateway area includes the site for the 2012 London Olympics. The delivery of the Olympics is intended by the organisers to contribute to major regeneration of the surrounding areas, and to deliver a long-term legacy to the area. HEIs in Thames Gateway recognised that this mega-event presented an opportunity for them, not only to contribute to the securing of such a legacy for the community, but also as presenting opportunities for their own institutional development.

However the importance of keeping the importance of the Olympics in perspective was stressed. it was pointed out that the Olympics was only one of a number of important developments in the area, other notable ones being the Excel Exhibition Centre and the O2 centre (formerly the Dome), both of which provide long-term focus for development and economic impact. Other developments such as new rail links and retail centres were also significant.

The Director of Strategy at one HEI explained how his institution was developing a strategy that positioned the institution outside direct involvement with the Olympic event, but involved investment in areas which connected very much to the Olympics event and its legacy. Thus the University had strong engagement with public health through high quality professional training, and increasingly, research. The institution recognised it had a poor reputation for student sport, and is promoting access to local facilities, and also sports science courses, and is

validating courses in sports and events management. Recognising also its proximity to major exhibition centres, the University is developing Foundation Degree courses in visitor management in relation to retail, exhibitions, tourism and hospitality. Again, it is developing multi-level training in support of the construction industry, through strong links with further education, which is recognised as a key part of the student supply chain. All leavers from the institution will have a qualification (which may not be a degree), and all academic programmes include a skills element.

The HEI was also connecting with the widening participation agenda with the Olympics. The university was promoting a convergence legacy in which East London would come to look much more like London as a whole, and had created a long-term observatory function for local data collection and monitoring of progress on the convergence agenda. It was recognised that this agenda rested on partnership with other London HEIs, which collectively contained a huge variety of skills and specialisms. There was concern about the proposal for a 'world class' university to be established on the Olympic Park recently put forward by London's Mayor in favour of recognition of the very considerable strengths of existing HEI provision close to the Olympics site.

## Analytical Services

The TG London Partnership had a dedicated analytical resource, the Thames Gateway Knowledge Platform. Professionally staffed by researchers on secondment from a local HEI, the unit provided a baseline economic development evidence base down to the geography of local London Boroughs within the TG area. The unit was able to monitor the impacts of change at local level using a range of statistical and research resources. It had, for example been monitoring patterns of participation in HE and had shown widening participation, and that local HEIs were facing increased competition for students from other London HEIs. It was pointed out that recent policies of capping student numbers could present TG HEIs with some difficulties in maintaining these trends. The analysis also drew attention to a demographic downturn, more in some boroughs than others, which could impact on numbers wishing to participate in HE.

Funding for the Unit came from a variety of sources including the DCLG, Regional Development Agency, and the Borough Councils. The audience for its outputs is membership of London Boroughs, the National Health Service and local HEIs. It has a politically led Board, and members can ask for studies to be undertaken. It has acted as a kind of regional lobbying group. This political context may potentially inhibit the more effective use of some of the unit's output.

Although this was clearly an important resource for the Gateway, it was for consideration if there were more strategic ways in which its analyses could be commissioned and utilised in relation to the achievement of TG regional objectives and strategies. It was suggested that there were issues which could be profitably addressed, for example in relation to housing (was the right type of housing being made available to sustain economic development and population retention through the life cycle?), and into issues of promoting aspiration in the local population and businesses. Such work might assist in focussing more on place issues and away from silos around functional areas of provision.

## 5 Overall

The foregoing has highlighted a number of important issues for consideration in future development in the TG region. In many ways the review team were impressed by real steps forward in placing education at the centre of the regeneration of communities within the Gateway



region, and in the development of links across the whole of the education sectors to contribute to this end and to facilitate student progression.

There remain issues about how this thrust of activity is integrated into the wider TG process. In particular, how far has the place focus replaced the functional focus in the provision of houses, jobs and transport to meet TG objectives and wider regional planning targets. Linked to this are questions about local and regional identity, and the balance between addressing issues of developing local human capital, and the wider processes of knowledge transfer for the support of business and economic development.

We have commented at a number of points on the complexity of governance arrangements operating within the Thames Gateway, and this was raised by several institutions and organisations visited. Generally it worked where there was goodwill although there had been occasions when this had proved illusive. However we are left with the impression that this complexity could be addressed locally and by government with a view to some streamlining and promoting a stronger outcome, as opposed to an essentially process and output, focus. The role, commitment and expectations of Central Government are likely to be crucial in this respect.

The Government response to the above is:

“The governance structures of the Thames Gateway are inevitably complex for an area of this scale which spans three regions including London, but the scale of governance is the same as you would find elsewhere in the country and the additional governance established to lead and coordinate integrated activity across Gateway boundaries and to bolster delivery capacity where it is needed to secure the Government’s ambitions for the Thames Gateway“.

## 6 Special interests

A number of special interests were confirmed in discussion with the LP which could be the subject of cluster groups within PURE in which TG might participate. These were:

- Engagement with creative industries;
- Education-led regeneration as a means to reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion;
- Support for SMEs, including promoting innovation;
- Maximising opportunities from mega-events;
- Best practice in credit-transfer; and
- Implementing aspirations to become a eco/environmental region.

## 7 Examples of good practice

The review team were of the view that the region had several initiatives which were examples of good practice which should be written up during the course of the PURE study. These were:

*Town centre FE and HE provision:*

Both the newly developed Medway campus and the developments in the centre of Southend were excellent examples shared campuses in prominent locations designed to boost participation in further and higher education in the local population.



# Observatory PASCAL

*Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions*

---

## *Progression arrangements:*

The Thames Gateway progression guarantee was an important example of an arrangement to encourage continuing participation and progression of students in local communities through to Higher Education.

## *Analytical resources:*

The TG had available to it important analytical resources, provided by people seconded from Universities within the TG area.

## *Consistent Government support:*

The TG programme is recognised as requiring a longer timescale for delivery, and it was remarked that achievements to date have required consistent commitment on the part of government despite normal processes of policy change.

## 8 Action Plan

It was provisionally suggested that the action plan should evolve around benchmarking. When the instruments for HEIs and for the Region were confirmed decisions about application would be made.

## NOTE

The CDG would like to put on record our grateful thanks to Alison Bowerbank and her colleagues for the faultless arrangements made which enabled us to meet with a wide range of stakeholders in the region in a very smooth series of meetings and site visits across the Region, and to those we met who had obviously taken considerable trouble to prepare for our visit and who joined in frank discussion of the issues raised.