

Corporate Peer Review

Visit to Oxfordshire County Council

18 – 22 June 2007

Summary

Oxfordshire County Council is successfully working through its programme of change and improvement and can demonstrate a strong record of achievement, having made significant progress in performance over the past 2 years. The chief executive and leader are seen to be wholly integral to that improvement path.

The Council benefits from a recognisable, ambitious and strong leadership core, with the chief executive, assistant chief executive, leader and deputy leader being seen as a cohesive leadership unit, by partners, Members and staff alike, and valued. In particular, the chief executive is recognised as a leader amongst her chief executive peers by key partners within the sub-region, and the leader is recognised to be setting out a clear sense of direction - 'you know where you stand with him'.

More-over, the cabinet is seen to be standing up to the plate and showing the leadership expected by setting out its message to the wider community as it delivers the Council's ambition. In delivering their responsibilities, the cabinet has clear involvement in planning and performance within their own portfolio responsibilities. For example, the use of cabinet question time is welcomed. Staff are seen to be approachable, supportive, and enthusiastic to do their bit in support of the Council's success, although from the customer perspective, it is sometimes hard to know who to speak to in order to get things done.

Showing clear strategic spatial awareness for the area it serves, the Council recognises the need to increasingly demonstrate the link to outcomes for people locally. For example, the new shared services centre and the introduction of SAP, albeit with some way to go, all adds up to a solid foundation for the organisation to improve in a sustainable way.

Service improvements have been secured across priority areas and the Council is leading partners on its own service-led initiatives. Recent steps taken to improve partnership working include, for example the appointment of a joint director of public health with the National Health Service. Whilst recognising the challenges of two-tier working and the impact of the recent local government review debate, there is some evidence that partners do recognise the tact and diplomacy shown by the leadership of the Council in trying to achieve wider partnership outcomes.

However, perhaps the key to ensuring sustainable improvement will be to sharpen the approach to business process re-engineering, and through a consistent use of systems, such as ensuring that the compliance agenda is both more widely promoted and enforced at all levels, and especially by all middle managers. This should include seeing through and further embedding the performance management culture, ensuring a strong focus on the clarity of outcomes, and underpinning this with a clear

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organisation development strategy to ensure ongoing and improved development. In recognition of the progress which has been secured, consideration should be given, not only to maintaining the pace of change, but also to increasing the pace of change.

With the Council's significant investment in the change agenda and clear actions which are starting to have impact, the peer review team consider this to be a solid foundation, which if properly managed, will take the Council forwards to its next stage of development and prepare it well for the future.

Recommendations

As a result of the corporate peer review, it is recommended that the Council give consideration to securing further improvements by considering the following recommendations to:

Ambition for the Community

1. Raise the profile of the Council by strengthening its communications through:
 - Ensuring that all internal and external communications are consistently aligned to the Council's priorities statements
 - Establishing a clearer brand which will support external communications
 - Developing, resourcing and implementing a communications strategy with accompanying messaging bible and product placement

2. Be clearer about the Council's work at local community level and progressing the place-shaping agenda by:
 - Profiling the Council's resource allocation and revenue and capital spend on a geographical basis and expressing outcomes at a natural community level
 - Considering the establishment of co-terminus boundaries for the delivery of more joined-up services to local communities by the Council and its key partners
 - Considering the appointment of a Member champion to lead on local devolution, and with responsibility for service differentiation
 - Establishing a clear framework for what could, and what will not be delegated for decision taking at this local level

3. Address the view of the peer review team, that the Council is seen to be a relatively 'quiet' organisation, by inspiring its partners and communities by identifying the 'wow' factor and describing the difference it has made, and will make to the lives of ordinary people

Prioritisation

4. Develop, articulate and communicate a narrative which clearly illustrates the meaning of 'value for money, more choice and low Council tax', and use this to gather more evidence of how the objectives are shaping priorities for action, investment, the redistribution of resources, and areas for disinvestments

Capacity

5. Build on the benefits of having a clear leadership team at the helm of the Council, by ensuring that the cabinet and all senior managers drive forward the change and improvement agenda by completing, resourcing and prioritising the organisation development strategy. This strategy should include consideration of skills audit, engaging managers in their development, and individually

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customised training and development programmes to build further capacity within the Council.

6. Consider how the Council can build on the impressive pace of change which is evident over the past two years by:
 - Achieving greater consistency and compliance to the Council's key projects which are being used to drive improvement
 - Simplifying the change agenda message and encouraging a wider acceptance that the pace of change should not only continue, but that it should be even faster over the next few years
7. Further build the leadership capacity of middle managers to work with partners and ensure that they are sensitive to and aware of the impact which their actions can have on the perceptions of partners

Performance Management

8. Develop the next stage SAP implementation plan, with a clearly identified lead from within the corporate leadership team and ensure that this is integrated with the Council's compliance and management systems across all services
9. Develop, articulate, communicate and implement the next steps of the evolution of shared services across the Council
10. Provide more evidence of the Council's approach to diversity, social inclusion and community cohesion by:
 - Raising awareness amongst Members, staff and partners of the need for service differentiation to address the different needs of each of the many communities in Oxfordshire
 - Being clearer about achievements and outcomes
 - Bringing together the various policies, strategies and service delivery arrangements behind a clearly expressed framework to secure the Council's expressed intention to achieve level 3 of the equality standard for local government

Achievement

11. Consideration should be given to seeking out further opportunities to recognise achievement, celebrate success and capture and disseminate best practice throughout and across the organisation

Background

1. The visit to Oxfordshire County Council was part of the programme of corporate peer reviews of local authorities arranged by the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA). A peer review is designed to help an authority assess its current achievements and its capacity to change. The Audit Commission's key lines of enquiry were used to provide the basis for this assessment.
2. The peer review is not an inspection. Rather it offers a supportive approach, undertaken by friends, albeit 'critical friends,' and its intention is to help a council identify its current strengths as much as what it needs to improve.
3. Peer review is part of an ongoing change process, whereby the recommendations from it can, along with CPA recommendations, inform improvement planning.
4. The members of the peer review team were:
 - Mark Henderson, Chief Executive, Northumberland County Council
 - Councillor Ken Taylor, Leader, Coventry City Council
 - Councillor Kathy Pollard, Liberal and Independent Group Leader, Suffolk County Council
 - Jan Burns, Director of People and Partnerships, Cheshire County Council
 - Fatima Koumbarji, Board Director, Veredus Executive Resourcing
 - Gary Hughes, Principal Consultant, IDeA
 - Richard Masters, Programme Manager and Review Manager, IDeA
5. The programme for the week was organised in advance and included a variety of activities designed to enable members of the peer review team to meet and talk to a spectrum of internal and external stakeholders as well as residents. Examples of activities the team undertook were:
 - Discussions with the political leadership and senior management of the Council
 - Discussions with group leaders and a workshop for the cabinet
 - Discussions with and workshops for a cross section of staff, including top managers, senior managers and front-line staff
 - Discussions with a range of key partners, including the local strategic partnership, voluntary sector, neighbouring local authorities, Police, University of Oxford, a trades union, Government Office for the South East and the Audit Commission
 - A workshop for residents
 - Observation of a meeting of the Council

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- Pre-reading of materials produced by the Council, prior to the on-site working
6. The team was appreciative of the welcome and hospitality provided by the Council and would like to thank everybody that they met during the process for their time and contributions. The way in which the needs of the team were taken care of by colleagues from the corporate performance team deserves a special mention.
 7. The feedback given to the Council on the last day of the peer review reported on the key messages. This report gives a more detailed written account of the findings of the review and is structured around the five key lines of enquiry of the Audit Commission.

Context

8. Oxfordshire County Council serves a population of in excess of 626,000 and covers an area of 1006 square miles. With three tiers of local governance, the Council works with five district councils which are responsible for specific services. All areas of the county, apart from the majority of Oxford city, are served by the 317 town or parish councils with responsibility for various local amenities.
9. The county is the most rural in the south east, and includes three areas of outstanding natural beauty: the Cotswolds, the Chilterns and Berkshire Downs. The world renowned university city of Oxford is at the centre of the county, surrounded by a green belt. Beyond the green belt are smaller, but very rapidly growing, towns which with Oxford form a single economic and travel to work sub-region. There are unusually high concentrations of hi tec, science and knowledge based industries across this sub-region. Other key employers include BMW which makes the mini in Oxford, motor sports, the health service, the royal air force which includes Brize Norton and tourism, with key attractions including Blenheim palace and the Henley regatta.
10. With changing patterns of migration, the population of the county continues to grow, with new populations arriving mainly from Poland, South Africa, the Slovak Republic, India and Australia. This is indicated by the increasing trend in national insurance registrations by non United Kingdom nationals, which nearly doubled from 2,610 in 2004 – 2005 to 5,100 in 2005 – 2006 and the 2,095 people from accession countries applying for worker registrations to work in Oxfordshire between May 2004 and March 2007.
11. Five percent of the total population of the county is from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities and is close to 13 percent in Oxford city. With an ageing population, the focus is increasingly on the preventative agenda. Increasing housing prices, with the average cost of the least expensive properties now nearly ten times the lowest incomes are a feature of Oxfordshire and the availability of affordable housing is a major issue.
12. The County has good transport links, including the M40 and A34 and two main rail lines to London, and is within easy reach of Heathrow. Although transport links towards Cambridge are less good, there are strong economic links, with a vision to link the two through East West Rail.
13. Central Oxfordshire is designated as a sub-region within the draft south east plan and is also a 'diamond for growth' in the regional economic strategy for the south east. Within the sub-region, there is a particular focus on development within Oxford itself and the west end quarter in particular, the area between Didcot and Grove in the south which includes Harwell and the diamond synchrotron, and in the Bicester area.
14. Climate change is recognised as one of the key issues for the future of the county. The Council has detailed plans to reduce its own carbon footprint by 18 percent by 2012, and is preparing plans to adapt its services to the impacts of

climate change. The new community strategy incorporates this as one of its main themes for all partners. The county faces some major regional infrastructure issues which in part stem from climate change. For example, Thames Water are developing proposals for a regional reservoir near Abingdon, with a debate about a possible nuclear power station at Didcot to replace the current coal fired one.

15. Politically, the local authority is governed by a Council which comprises 74 Members. It operates the leader and cabinet model of governance, with councillor Keith Mitchell CBE, as leader, who is supported by 9 portfolio holders. The political composition is 43 Conservative, 16 Liberal Democrat, 9 Labour, 5 Green, and 1 Independent.
16. Underpinning the direction of the work of the Council, is the commitment of the administration for 'low tax, real choice, value for money'. These were introduced following the elections in 2005 when the Conservative led administration took control, after some twenty years of politically hung governance arrangements. Underpinning the Council's work is its recognition of the need for improvement, the importance of demonstrating responsiveness to change, and the management of the pace of change.
17. The Council has its main administrative offices in Oxford, with an expenditure of £829.7m. It employs 13,336 full time equivalent staff under the managerial leadership of Joanna Simons, chief executive, who is supported by the county council management team which comprises 4 service directors, 2 assistant chief executives, the head of finance and procurement, and the director of public health.

Ambition for the community

Strengths

- Leader and chief executive well known and respected
- Evidence of demonstrating Council aspirations for communities
- Consultation contributing to driving service delivery
- Reviewing and refreshing the consultation strategy
- Helping individuals to live independently
- Evidence of successful partnership working delivering the Council's ambition
- Ambitious programme for cultural change and service improvement

Areas for consideration

- Ensuring wider understanding by Members, staff and partners of the Council's three headline objectives
 - Ensuring that equalities and diversity issues are embedded throughout the organisation
 - Being clearer about the Council's work at local community level and progressing the place-shaping agenda
 - Raising the profile of the Council by strengthening communications
 - Populating the consultation database
18. Throughout the peer review, it was clear that the leader and chief executive are well known and respected across the organisation and amongst many partner organisations.
19. The Council can demonstrate evidence of its aspirations for the communities which it serves. These are communicated through the three headline objectives of 'low tax, real choice, value for money'. The peer review team found that the administration is very clear about its political direction, with the expectation that staff will deliver on these policies. For example, the Council has delivered on the promise to keep council tax rises to four percent, two years ahead of schedule.
20. There is evidence that information gathered from consultation is contributing to shaping and driving service delivery, for example via the children's sounding board and the citizen's panel. Work is also underway to reviewing and refreshing the Council's consultation strategy which, it is anticipated will inform the development of a coherent Council-wide consultation strategy. This should address the current disparate approach to consultation activities which are undertaken by individual directorates.
21. There is evidence that the Council has developed a clear ambition for adult social care and this includes a focus on assisting individuals to live independently. This is substantiated through the decision to move from residential to independent living, the investment in preventative services, the recognition of the projected growth in an ageing population and links to the Council's medium term plan.

22. There is evidence of successful partnership working which is contributing to delivering the Council's ambition. For example, the Council can demonstrate leadership for the community through improved working with the primary care trust, including with the joint appointment of a director of public health. This has in turn, enhanced communication and the sharing of priorities. Another example seen by the peer review team was the work of the Council with the private sector, such as Oxfordshire Highways which has streamlined the design and construction of highways schemes.
23. Underpinning the Council's development is an ambitious programme for cultural change and service improvement, such as evidenced by the establishment of the shared service centre. This is described in the well-illustrated annual report 2006, of the change management board.
24. However, while the Council has adopted its three headline objectives of 'low tax, real choice, value for money', the peer review team found that 'real choice' was not clearly understood by all Members, staff and partners who they met. The peer review team wished to highlight the importance of taking steps to ensure a wide understanding of these headline objectives and their implications.
25. While the achievement of level 2 of the equality standard for local government, and the commitment to achieve level 3 is welcomed, the peer review team was not provided with sufficient evidence to demonstrate that equality and diversity issues are embedded at corporate or directorate level. Given the Council's ambition to achieve level 3 and the prominence of equalities and diversity within the comprehensive performance assessment framework, the peer review team wished to highlight the importance that the Council is able to provide more evidence of embedding the issue, throughout and across the organisation.
26. A theme consistently arising during the peer review was the need for the Council to be clearer about its work at the local community level and how it is progressing the place-shaping agenda. In order to contribute to thinking, the peer review team recommends that consideration be given to:
 - Profiling the Council's resource allocation and profile of revenue and capital spend on a geographical basis and expressing outcomes at a natural community level
 - The establishment of co-terminus boundaries for the delivery of more joined-up services to local communities by the Council and its key partners
 - The appointment of a Member champion to lead on local devolution, and with responsibility for service differentiation
 - Establishing a clear framework for what could, and what will not be delegated for decision taking at this local level
27. During the course of the peer review, the importance of communications and the need to strengthen communications emerged as an underlying theme. For example, the Council appears to have a low profile on some occasions and in

order to secure further improvements, the peer review team recommends that consideration be given to raising the profile of the Council by strengthening its communications through:

- Ensuring that all internal and external communications are consistently aligned to the Council's priorities statements
 - Clarifying the 'brand that is Oxfordshire County Council' to support external communications
 - Developing, resourcing and implementing a communications strategy with accompanying messaging bible and product placement
28. Now that the consultation tracker has been introduced to assist with managing the Council's consultation, consideration should be given to populating the consultation database with evidence of post consultation changes, and using this to provide evidence of a comprehensive and consistent approach to managing the Council's consultation. The peer review team wished to suggest that it will also be helpful for the Council to be able to document more evidence to demonstrate that policies and services have been changed as a result of consultation.

Prioritisation

Strengths

- Medium term financial strategy in place
- Spatial planning awareness across the county
- Recognition of the changing demographics of the area
- Establishment of the shared service centre anticipated to deliver efficiency savings in line with Council priorities
- Developing the evidence base for priority setting
- Developing some strong partnerships to deliver Council priorities

Areas for consideration

- Providing further clarity on Council corporate priorities and how these impact on directorate service plans, teams and individuals
 - Providing more evidence of the framework for funding shifts
 - Further developing the geographic differentiation of services
 - Strengthening the input and involvement of partners in the Council's change agenda
 - Providing more evidence of the prioritisation of the needs of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities
29. The Council has its medium term financial strategy in place and this benefits from clear financial leadership by Members. There is evidence that the implementation of the medium term financial strategy is cascaded into the organisation, as service directorates are supported and held accountable for their financial performance and activities through a star chamber approach to prioritisation and allocation of spend.
30. The Council can demonstrate good spatial planning awareness, with evidence of robust transport and highways strategies and the significant number of associated initiatives which are being delivered. For example, the Council was the first in the country to introduce a park and ride scheme and has unusually high levels of bus patronage. It has a clear policy to sustain its green belt and the peer review noted that this is a priority area for the Council, on which supportive public feedback has been obtained.
31. There is evidence that the Council is recognising that with changing demographics, there is a requirement to set in place, the necessary policies, strategies and plans to manage the impact of an aging population on its services. This is particularly evident in adults services, for example where resources and strategies are being developed, such as through supported housing initiatives as part of the five year plan with districts, to enable more people to continue to live in their homes. However, the response from other directorates is less clear, and the peer review team wishes to advise on the need to provide more evidence of a Council wide strategy to planning for changing demographics.

32. The Council's commitment to developing the shared services centre has both underpinned its corporate priorities, as well as raised expectations at a service directorate level for the realignment of services. This initiative is widely anticipated by Members and staff met by the peer review team, to deliver efficiency savings.
33. The peer review was made aware that the Council is developing the evidence base for its priority setting. For example, a number of plans addressing the needs of local communities are being developed and these are seen as the stepping stones for developing locality-based services. In particular, the children and young peoples plan developed by the young peoples board, and the annual public health plan, identifies themes that partners have signed up to deliver. While this is welcomed, the peer review team suggests that the Council's approach to locality working, be further supported by stronger political engagement and increased partnership working.
34. The Council can demonstrate that it is developing some strong partnerships to deliver its priorities. In particular, this includes the productive relationship with the primary care trust and accompanied by the alignment of priorities and pooling of resources to meet the needs of communities. For example, the appointment of a joint director of public health, with pooled budgets and joint appointments for learning difficulties and mental health in children's services, further demonstrates the strength of this partnership and builds on the strong arrangements for adult social care for all client groups.
35. However, there is a need for the Council to provide further clarity on its corporate objectives and how these impact on the service plans of individual services and their directorates. In discussions with staff, it was clear to the peer review team, that while most are aware of the three corporate objectives, not all could identify and articulate what this means for their service areas, their team or for individual performance. In particular, the parameters and implications of 'real choice' were unclear.
36. It will be helpful to work with staff and Members in order to more clearly demonstrate the golden thread and linkage of the corporate objectives through the organisation to service delivery. The peer review team recommends that consideration be given to developing, articulating and communicating a narrative which clearly illustrates the meaning of 'low tax, real choice, value for money', and use this narrative to gather more evidence of how it is used to establish priorities, non-priorities, funding shifts from non-priorities to priorities, and areas for disinvestments.
37. While through the star chamber, the Council can demonstrate its approach to the provision of priority funding, it was not clear to the peer review team how funds are moved between services and their directorates in support of corporate priorities. It will be helpful for the Council to be able to provide more evidence of how it funds its priorities, how individual services support corporate priorities, and being clear about what are not Council priorities. In the light of this, the peer review team suggests that the Council provides more evidence of its framework for shifting funding from non, or lesser priorities, to its top priorities.

38. A theme emerging through the peer review was the need to further develop the differentiation of services on a local geographic basis. In particular, further consideration should be given on how best to develop and cascade corporate and strategic priorities into targeted areas, and how the analysis of local needs influences resource allocation.
39. Consideration should also be given to strengthening the input and involvement of partners in the Council's change agenda. For example, while there is evidence that the primary care trust plays a strong role in service planning, this is less so for other partners, with considerably less evidence seen by the peer review team of how the wider community is involved in the process. The Council's relationship with the districts was identified by some staff and community representatives met by the peer review team, as an area where a closer working relationship could and should, have a more positive impact on outcomes for the community. However the peer review team recognise that whilst the Council has ambitions to deliver improvements within the two tiers framework, this also needs strong buy in from district colleagues.
40. A consistent message emerging from the peer review was the need for the Council to provide more evidence of its prioritisation of the needs of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities. While the Council can demonstrate areas of good practice, such as through the children and young people's plan which was developed through an active partnership board, the process for implementing equality impact assessments, and the race and mental health partnership action group, the peer review team wished to highlight the need for strong corporate political and managerial leadership to drive forward the prioritisation of the needs of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities. This is necessary to help ensure that the Council can better demonstrate its commitment to meeting the needs of its wider community and all sections within it.

Capacity

Strengths

- Productive working relationships delivering
- IDeA Member and officer development audit
- Talent management programme
- Council seen as a good employer
- Ambitious change programme underway
- Motivation for change evident within the shared services centre
- Evidence of delivering value for money
- Corporate procurement processes delivering efficiency savings

Areas for consideration

- Embedding the change management programme
 - Further developing human resources and organisational development strategies
 - Strengthening internal and external communications
 - Opportunity to further strengthen scrutiny
 - Oxfordshire Observatory providing data
 - Demonstrating that the workforce reflects the community
41. The Council benefits from good Member and officer relationships and these are enhanced through the strong leadership exhibited by the cabinet and chief executive. Together they have demonstrated success in developing the Council, with evidence of marked improvement in some areas over the past two years. This view was consistently expressed to the peer review team by front-line staff, senior managers and partners throughout the peer review.
42. The Council has recently participated in an IDeA audit of Member and officer development of all the local authorities in the Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. This audit was part of projects funded by the sub-regional improvement partnership drawing on capacity building funds with the reports being shared across the local authorities to review skills and inform future development.
43. In 2005 and 2006 as part of a talent management programme, the IDeA delivered a challenge event to help assess strengths and development needs of rising stars. This year, the Council has taken the lead in coordinating this event with the IDeA delivering it for the sub-regional partnership with over 100 staff taking part and assessors and role players from the local authorities. This was seen as a success in developing individuals and teams as well as embedding partnership and two tier working.
44. In discussions with staff, the Council is seen as a good employer. For example, single status has been achieved, positive relations with the trades unions were reported and flexible electronic working practices were generally valued by staff met by the peer review team.

45. The Council has successfully embarked on its ambitious change programme, this being led by a portfolio holder for change management and the recently appointed assistant chief executive for change, and overseen by the change management board. The peer review team saw this programme and other new skills which are being brought into the organisation via the shared service centre, as being key to driving continuous change.
46. There is evidence that staff within the new shared services centre are enthusiastic, motivated and keen to deliver improvement. It benefits from a conducive working environment with new spacious open plan accommodation, good on-site facilities and regular shuttle transport provided to the centre of Oxford.
47. The Council can demonstrate delivering value for money and this is recognised by the Audit Commission through securing a 3 out of 4, for its use of resources score. In discussions with staff, it was apparent to the peer review team that there is an awareness of the importance of value for money, this being one of the Council's three overarching priorities.
48. The Council can demonstrate that its corporate approach to the procurement of services is delivering efficiency savings. £5m efficiency savings are scheduled for the current financial year, with £2.5m savings delivered at the point of the peer review. For stationary, improved procurement savings have been made. Savings have also benefited district councils through joint procurement approaches, such as for agency staff, stationary, recruitment and public advertising as well as print and design.
49. However, while welcoming the Council's ambitious change management programme, the peer review team wished to highlight the importance of embedding this throughout and across the organisation. Key to this will be to provide greater clarity of what the Council is seeking to achieve, how it plans to do this and the role of all staff in its delivery.
50. In order to build capacity, the peer review team recommends that consideration be given to completing, resourcing, communicating and implementing the organisation development strategy as a matter of some urgency.
51. This strategy should include consideration of skills audit, engaging managers in their development, and individually customised training and development programmes to build further capacity within the Council. Attention should also be given to building the leadership capacity of middle managers to work with partners and ensure that they are aware of the impact which their actions can have on the perceptions of the partners of the Council.
52. Consideration should also be given on how the Council can build on the impressive pace of change which is evident over the past two years. In particular, the peer review team believes that there is an opportunity to achieve greater consistency and compliance to the Council's key projects which are being used to drive improvement. It is suggested that the change agenda be simplified, and that encouragement be given to secure wider acceptance that

the pace of change should not only continue, but that it should be increased over the coming year.

53. While the components of the change management programme appear to be worthy, consideration should be given to demonstrating and communicating the links between the various initiatives, for example by highlighting why a particular change activity is being delivered and what the benefits to the Council and individuals will be.
54. The peer review team wished to highlight that an updated communications strategy for both internal and external communications, should be produced and adopted to replace the 2004 – 2007 communications and marketing strategy. The peer review team was made aware of the recent communications project which aims to shape the capacity and competence of internal and external communications and its planned completion date early in 2008. It is suggested that this new strategy be aligned to the Council's corporate priorities and values and include a corporate approach to team briefings and be used to showcase successes.
55. In the view of the peer review team, there is an opportunity to further strengthen scrutiny, by making it more outwardly focused. The recent action taken to bring the various strands of review work together and the strengthening of management in this area are positive signs and welcomed.
56. While the Council benefits from the increased capacity of the Oxfordshire Observatory and the provision of consistent and reliable data, there is an opportunity for the Council, and its partners, to jointly commission and analyse the information, and identify trends to develop appropriate services into the future. While this is currently being taken forward through the development of a round of evidence papers for the new sustainable community strategy, there is a need to be able to demonstrate that the facility is widely used.
57. The peer review team was unable to gather sufficient evidence that gender and ethnicity are seen as important elements of the Council's employment strategy. Although there was evidence of action in the fire and rescue service, there is a need for the Council to be in a position to more readily provide evidence of how the composition of the workforce reflects the communities it serves. This should also take into account the changing composition of local communities and the requirements of migrant communities.

Performance management

Strengths

- Significant progress made in improving performance across services
- Evidence of strengthening performance management systems and processes which are being rolled-out
- Sound and robust financial management arrangements
- Evidence of exceeding Gershon targets
- Implementing SAP
- Top level political and managerial leadership commitment to further enhancing improvement
- Introduction of a new complaints process and the existing staff suggestion scheme
- Seeking charter mark accreditation across the Council
- Shared services provides platform for deepening performance management across the organisation

Areas for consideration

- Developing and implementing a single and simple performance management system to assess Council performance as a whole
- Exploiting the full potential of SAP to incorporate compliance, customer relations management and human resources management
- Ensuring demonstrable community outcomes within performance management targets
- Providing more evidence and information of the Council's approach to diversity, social inclusion and community cohesion

58. The Council has made significant progress across a range services over the past two years, with evidence of the recognition of the need to address under performing areas, and in particular, to improve educational attainment. For example, children and young people's services have improved and perform well in most areas. The Council can also demonstrate good and improving school attendance and the achievement of its pupils is improving. Adult social services perform well and continue to improve in the majority of areas, and more people are helped to live independently at home and the use of direct payments continues to increase.

59. Performance in protecting the environment, transport and recycling is strong and improving. The failure of the contracted management service for the six permanent gipsy and traveller sites was recognised some two years ago and the service was brought back in-house. As a result, the conditions on the sites and terms of tenancy have improved beyond recognition and these improvements were recognised during the award of the charter mark for the Council's gipsy and traveller services in 2007.

60. The Council can demonstrate that it has established systems and processes to manage performance against financial and service priorities. For example, these include use of the balanced scorecard, the star chamber and business planning approaches and accompanying business plans, which are being rolled out across the organisation.
61. In addition, the Council can demonstrate sound and robust financial management arrangements which are underpinned by the 3 year medium term financial plan. The Council has also exceeded its Gershon targets for 2005 – 2006. This is expected to continue in 2007 - 2008, within the agreed and decreasing level of Council tax and anticipated savings from the shared services center, allowing the budget to service directorates to be decreased.
62. In order to enhance its approach to managing performance, the Council has implemented the established SAP electronic business system. The peer review team found evidence of top level political managerial commitment to further enhancing improvement. This includes a commitment to secure further buy in from all managers and staff, across the organisation.
63. A new complaints process has been introduced, which together with the existing staff suggestion scheme, will it is anticipated, provide the Council with information to further improve services. In order to systematically drive up its performance, the Council is seeking to secure charter mark accreditation across the organisation.
64. The evolution of the shared services centre provides a platform for deepening the Council's business processes and securing improved efficiencies across the organisation. The peer review team were informed that it is anticipated that the shared services will lead to improved outcomes for customers.
65. However, there is a need to develop, articulate, communicate and implement the next steps of the evolution of shared services across the Council.
66. Attention should be given to seeing through and further embedding the Council's performance management culture. In particular, the use of the balanced scorecard is in its relatively early stages of implementation and it will be important to ensure that its use is embedded throughout the organisation. The peer review team wished to highlight the importance of developing, communicating and consistently implementing a single corporate and simple performance management system to enable the organisation to measure progress and demonstrate improvement.
67. The peer review team would encourage the development of the next stage of the SAP implementation plan, with a clearly identified lead from within the corporate leadership team. In particular, consideration should be given to exploiting the full potential of SAP and rolling it out to cover human resources management and customer relations' management.
68. Whilst the peer review team acknowledges the macro financial management as being strategic, the peer review team did not see evidence of intra directorate

spending shifts to reflect corporate priorities. It will be helpful for the Council to provide more evidence of the framework which is used for funding shifts.

69. In preparing for the forthcoming corporate inspection, the peer review team suggested that it will be helpful to provide more evidence of the involvement of partners and users in reviewing the Council's performance. It is anticipated that this would provide information useful to the Council as it strives to deliver improved outcomes for the communities it serves. Consideration should also be given to ensuring that community outcomes are expressed within performance management targets. This will enable the Council to measure progress and delivery against community priorities.
70. Consistent with the theme of localities emerging during the peer review, consideration might usefully be given to developing service and budget information on a geographical basis, as this would enable the Council to better understand the needs of local communities and set service targets more precisely. The recent upgrading of the Council's website is welcomed, this enabling the public to see what is happening in their own area, and to set up personalised news feeds for their areas. This could be built on by the inclusion of information on spend.
71. In managing its performance, there is a need for the Council to provide more evidence of its approach to diversity, social inclusion and community cohesion. For example, consideration should be given to raising the awareness amongst Members, staff and partners of the need for service differentiation to address the different needs of each the many communities in Oxfordshire. Consideration should also be given to bringing together the various policies, strategies and service delivery units behind a clearly expressed framework to deliver the Council's expressed policy to achieve level 3 of the equality standard for local government.
72. Perhaps more importantly though, the peer review team advises that consideration should usefully be given for the Council to be more active in demonstrating its approach to diversity, social inclusion and community cohesion. This will enable it to be in a position to highlight a wider range of examples within the self-assessment and ensure that these are showcased during the forthcoming corporate inspection.
73. These might include in time, for example, providing evidence of how the needs of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups are addressed, how other groups at risk of disadvantage are catered for, how through partnership working the specific needs of targeted groups are addressed, such as through the provision of meals or translation.

Achievement

Strengths

- A 4 star Council with many examples of achievement
- Partner acknowledgement of having the gravitas and credibility to lead
- Clear political and managerial leadership with active and engaged cabinet
- New approach to business planning underway
- Charter mark received for working with the gypsy and traveller community

Areas for consideration

- Recognising achievement and celebrating success
 - Mapping Council and partners resources at local community level
 - Translating targets into descriptions of the real difference the Council will make to different communities
 - Further developing the emerging framework of service based community plans
 - Joining up services and consultation when engaging with the community
 - Focussing efforts to achieve Level 3 of the equality standard for local government
 - Providing dedicated customer contact and access for citizens to Council services on a 24/7 basis
74. The Council can demonstrate a record of many achievements, not least having secured a 4 star comprehensive performance assessment rating, with many 3 star services. Much has been achieved through a two-year journey by clear leadership, with examples of acknowledgement by some partners met by the peer review team, that the leadership is 'up for it' 'approachable' and that 'the Council has the gravitas and credibility to lead', with cabinet members being seen to be 'knowledgeable and engaged in their portfolio activities'. It was clear to the peer review team that the Council benefits from recognisable political and managerial leadership, and this is bringing a focus and sense of direction.
75. The achievements of the past two years have also been possible by building on the platform of earlier investment and success. For example, the integrated delivery strategy with the primary care trust and the introduction in Oxfordshire of the homeshare scheme originally pioneered in West Sussex are tangible examples of the Council's performance. However, the Council recognises that the improvement journey is not yet complete.
76. The Council has introduced a new approach to business planning and this is made possible by building on the platform provided by medium term financial plan and complementary range of systems which are in place.
77. However, while the peer review team detected the acknowledgement that the Council may perhaps not be seen as innovative as it might like it to be, there are some real 'diamonds' which need to be more clearly identified, recognised and promoted, both internally and externally. For example, the Council is the first in the country to be awarded the charter mark for its work with the gypsy

and traveller community and awareness of this and other achievements, should be raised, both internally and externally. In particular, the peer review team recommends that consideration be given to seeking out further opportunities to recognise achievement, celebrate success and capture and disseminate best practice throughout and across the organisation.

78. The issue of further developing the emerging framework for service based community plans was raised on a number of occasions during the course of the peer review. The peer review team wished to suggest that consideration should be given to building on the community strategy, with a view to mapping Council and partners' resources at the local community level and for these to be used as the basis for service based plans for local communities.
79. For example, within each of the boundaries, the Council and partners should consider the advantages of expressing a clear set of outcomes for that community. This would then enable the Council to demonstrate a clear differentiation of service offer and delivery for each community, according to its own priorities. The peer review team wished to suggest that such an approach might usefully assist the Council to translate its targets into descriptions of the real difference that it will make to its different communities.
80. In order to assist to secure improvement, consideration should be given to further joining up services and consultation when engaging with the community. The peer review team suggests that the Council should adopt a corporate approach to community engagement and move increasingly towards an outcomes-based and more joined-up approach. The introduction of the consultation tracker is a useful step in this direction and the current external review of consultation across the Council should help the shift to a more effective approach.
81. It was raised to the peer review team that more clarity is required to better manage the expectations arising from the results of consultation. For example, is the consultation simply telling people, asking for their opinion, or coming with a completely open agenda to decide on priorities and actions together? It is suggested that a partnership approach in support of shared community outcomes should increasingly percolate through the organisation.
82. A theme emerging consistently through the peer review was the need for the Council to provide further evidence of its approach to and success in promoting equality, diversity and social inclusion. Key to this, will be to focus efforts to achieve level 3 of the equality standard for local government as a priority. There is also the need to ensure that all Members have a wider appreciation of the diversity agenda and how the Council works to serve the individual needs of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.
83. While the While the new shared services centre is welcomed, the peer review team suggests that further clarity be provided on whether there are plans to provide a dedicated customer contact and access point for citizens to Council services on a 24/7 basis. This should also be accompanied by greater clarity on all proposed communications channels and the audience they seek to address.

84. It is understood that the next stage of customer service development is currently being scoped with external assistance through the 21st century customer project. This will build on the use of the Council's website, the 24/7 telephone point for transport users, the staffed contact point for social and community services and front offices at district and city offices, and the current review of joint front office facilities in Cowley.

Achievement - sustainable communities and transport

Strengths

- Satisfaction with bus services
- Improving the transport system
- Promoting the local economy

Areas for consideration

- Managing partnership arrangements
85. It was clear to the peer review team that public transport is a key feature of the Council's achievements and the service is recognised as being managed well. The Council's ability to further encourage use by the elderly and less able, is paramount to addressing the social inclusion agenda this will continue to remain a high priority.
86. There is evidence that social transport is used to meet the requirements of towns and villages for access to major services. The ever-increasing demands of the less able are being recognised and this is enabling communities to be sustainable.
87. The Council has introduced parking concessions in Oxford during the evenings and on Sundays to help business and to make the city to be more welcoming to visitors at times when congestion is not an issue. The local communities to more easily access facilities in response to the requests of residents. This has given further encouragement to the city centre business community and is seen to be contributing to reducing anti social behaviour.
88. The Council can demonstrate a programme of highways objectives which are rigorously targeted on the objectives of the local transport plan to tackle congestion, improve air quality, reduce casualties, improve access and improve the street scene. A notable success in reducing congestion has been the 'hamburger' roundabout where the A40 enters Oxford from the east.
89. The Council can demonstrate recognition by the federation of small businesses, by the presentation of an award for their work with small and medium sized enterprises within the county. It was reported to the peer review team that this is contributing to engendering a good relationship with small business which are an essential part of the local economy.
90. However, the peer review team wished to highlight the need for the Council to both provide further evidence of its working relationship with Oxford city in order to redress the perception that 'a sensitive relationship' is preventing both councils from providing more joined-up services. For example, while the Council can demonstrate an impressive number of partnership activities, such as the renaissance of the west end, a commitment to new joint civic offices post the unitary debate in relation to highway and environmental activity, the no cold

calling zones, the rental enforcement scheme, the rogue trader initiative and a one stop shop in Cowley, the perception of a number of people met by the peer review team highlight the need for the perception of this relationship to receive further attention.

91. More-over, it was reported to the peer review team that the recent debate over unitary authorities has been very visible in the press to partners and residents met by the team. It is clear that attention has, and continues to be given to ameliorating these tensions and this will need to be continued to avoid conflict, the duplication of effort and enhance the benefits of more joined up working for local communities.

Achievement – safer and stronger communities

Strengths

- Delivering a range of community safety initiatives
- Tackling racial harassment
- Providing for gypsy and traveller communities
- Tackling alcohol misuse
- Reduction in re-offending
- Reducing road accidents
- Emergency planning undertaken

Areas for consideration

- Planning and providing for new migrant communities
- Providing evidence of a strategic approach to tackling deprivation with district partners

92. There is considerable evidence that the Council actively participates in a range of community safety initiatives. These include for example, the introduction of no cold-calling zones, which have been very popular with residents, and the development of a community safety board game by ethnic minority advocates within trading standards which helps to disseminate the message of community safety message amongst communities which do not use English as their first language. Rogue traders have also been actively targeted with well publicised promotional events.
93. Through the multi-agency network tackling racial harassment, the Council continues to tackling the issue of low level racial harassment. A telephone line and email access to the local racial equality council has been set up. This initiative which builds up local intelligence, including for use by the Police, is intended to reassure Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities that they are being taken seriously.
94. The Council has achieved the first charter mark in the country for work with the gypsy and traveller community. This was founded upon the improvements made to the way in which the Council manages the relationship with and between the gypsy and traveller communities. For example, codes of conduct for temporary, unauthorised encampments have reduced the clean up costs of districts from £40,000 per annum to £2,000 and the conditions of the six permanent sites managed by the Council have improved significantly. Oxfordshire is now seen as a model of best practice in this area of community support.
95. The Council can demonstrate that it is tackling alcohol misuse, with an innovative arrest referral scheme which has received £80,000 funding from the drinks industry. This targets those whose behaviour changes for the worst on the occasion that they have too much to drink.

96. There is evidence that the Council is contributing to a reduction in re-offending rates by providing financial advice to inmates at Bullingdon prison. This helps to ensure that inmates are better informed prior to their release. The Council can demonstrate that levels of youth re-offending are below the national average as reported in the last joint inspection of the children and young people's service.
97. A number of effective schemes to reduce road accidents are in place within the county. For example, these include the '365 alive campaign' which has saved forty-nine lives in the past year and an estimated reduction of £10m to the damage of property. Light goods vehicle drivers are also targeted at motorway service areas, and overloaded heavy goods vehicles have been targeted by trading standards staff and the Police.
98. The Council conducts road safety demonstrations in schools, with a hard-hitting documentary produced for young drivers. Through an innovative programme, seventeen local driving schools are providing an extra lesson for each learner-driver. This takes place at a local fire station where the video is shown under supervision in partnership with local approved driving instructors.
99. The county emergency plan with business continuity planning is in place and people can sign up to receive a text message for early warning of floods or countywide traffic information.
100. However, there is a need for the Council to provide further evidence of its provision for migrant communities and how it plans to ensure community cohesion.
101. The peer review team was made aware that while the Council recognises its areas of deprivation, there is a need for it to provide evidence of a strategic approach to tackling deprivation and the associated issues, in conjunction with its district partners.

Achievement – healthier communities

Strengths

- Joint appointment of director of public health benefiting partnership working
- Joint working with primary care trust on adult social care and children and young people
- Evidence of pooled budgets and joint appointment of staff within children's and young people's services
- Newly restructured health and overview scrutiny committee seen to be providing improved challenge

Areas for consideration

- Improving engagement with the community on health improvement by the Council and primary care trust
- Identifying, sharing and celebrating good practice in terms of health and well-being improvement, with partners and across the organisation

102. There is evidence that the joint appointment of the director of public health is widely recognised as a beneficial move and is seen to be improving partnership working with the primary care trust. For example, the independent assessment of long term health needs in the director's first annual report provides a focus for future strategic planning, with evidence that this is directly influencing the plans of Oxford city, the primary care trust, the County strategic partnership and the Council. Districts have also signalled an enthusiasm for playing an active role in a countywide programme to improve wellbeing.
103. Joint working with the primary care trust on adult social care is reflected in the significant pooling of budgets and long established joint working arrangements, such as over 10 years in the case of adults with learning disabilities. There is evidence that agreement has been reached on the health needs across the County for children and adults.
104. In addition, pooled budgets and joint appointments within children and young people's services and in adults is further evidence of a strong partnership between the Council and the primary care trust. The peer review team were informed that a range of partners recognise the improved challenge provided by the newly restructured health and well-being scrutiny function.
105. The Council can demonstrate that it has developed partnerships to improve health across the county. This includes the race and mental health partnership action group, to help ensure effective collaboration and joint working between statutory health, social care and voluntary sector organisations and the provision of mental health services for the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities. The Council in partnership with Age Concern and the primary care trust has developed an extensive programme with more than 50 schemes of healthy walks across the county.

106. However, in the drive to build and maintain healthier communities, the peer review team wished to highlight the need for the Council and primary care trust to be better equipped to address health inequalities across the county, through improving their understanding of the diverse communities which they serve. It is suggested that improved community engagement and consultation, together with enhanced geographic differentiation would go some way to achieving this.

107. In line with a key theme arising from the peer review, it is suggested that it will be helpful to identify, share, communicate and celebrate good practice in terms of the health and well-being improvement work which the Council and its partners are delivering for the people of Oxfordshire.

Achievement – older people

Strengths

- Strengthened capacity and financial management
- Pooled budgets
- Addressing demographic change
- Strong commissioning strategies
- Developing more choice for independent living for older people and adults with learning disabilities

Areas for consideration

- Providing more evidence of mainstreaming services
- Making benefit of data to illustrate geographic differentiation more clearly
- Tackling the delayed transfers of care

108. The capacity of the service has been strengthened with evidence that strong financial management, underpinned by robust systems are in place and that budgets are well managed. Pooled budgets with the national health service to deliver shared objectives have also been developed.
109. The Council can demonstrate that it is developing strategies to address the demographic challenge in response to the growing ageing population. However, while this is focussed more on medium-term activities rather than long term, it will require significant realignment of budgets.
110. Strong commissioning and planning strategies are in place for the provision of services to older people. This includes the involvement of partners, such as health and the districts, and through the supporting people's board which is chaired by one of the districts. This board has developed a five year plan on the housing and care needs of older people.
111. The Council is also working to promote more choice for older people and adults with learning difficulties, through developing strategies for independent living.
112. However, there is a need for the Council to provide more evidence of how it is helping to build the capacity of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities to deliver for older people. In particular, it is the peer review team's view, that it will be an advantage for the Council to obtain data on a geographic basis, as this will provide information on the service delivery needs of all local communities.
113. The peer review team also wished to raise the well known area for tackling the delays in transfers of care with the primary care trust and the Oxford Radcliffe hospitals trust. While plans are being identified to secure improvements, it will be necessary to see these through and ensure they deliver the desired outcomes.

Achievement – children and young people

Strengths

- Political leadership
- Partnerships
- Consultation and participation
- Equalities
- Raising standards

Areas for consideration

- Developing service integration
- Making the difference at community level
- Increasing educational attainment levels

114. The Council has increased the investment in children and young people's services for the current financial year, with evidence that Members provide political leadership and are aware of upcoming budget pressure and issues
115. The Council can demonstrate a track record of partnership working benefiting its delivery for children and young people. This includes the children and young people's partnership and the children and young people's board, which constitute the local and children's trust arrangements and have established thirteen multi-disciplinary locality teams and fifteen children's centres. In addition, the Council has led strong cross agency collaboration which is proving to be an effective way of working with head teachers.
116. The peer review team was made aware of the positive engagement with the voluntary sector, with involvement in setting priorities and delivering services. For example, this includes the jointly funded residential provision for disabled children through Barnardos.
117. There is evidence that through children and young people's services, the Council can demonstrate solid models of engagement, such as through sounding boards which encourage user and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic community involvement. Many staff met by the peer review team were aware of equality issues and implications.
118. There is a drive to raise educational attainment standards and the service would appear to be improving, for example as evidenced by the reduction in the number of schools in special measures or difficulties. The Council is also in the process of introducing academies, and this is perceived as an opportunity to provide increased choice for local communities.
119. However, the children and young people's service acknowledges that it has not yet achieved, full integration and has made this a priority in the children and young people's plan. There is evidence that the Council recognises that structures will need to change as services move from realignment to fuller integration and this is welcomed by the peer review team.

120. The peer review team suggest that as the integration agenda develops and is implemented, attention continues to be given to managing the crucial point of handover of clients from children and young people's services to adult services. While there is evidence of good systems and processes within the directorate, the peer review team wished to highlight the need to accumulate, document and communicate the difference which is being made as the community level.
121. The peer review team detected concern about educational attainment. For example, whilst there is evidence of school improvement, sometimes linked to the recruitment of new head teachers, overall attainment levels remain in line with national averages. The Council recognises that the rate of progress in Oxfordshire is not currently as fast as expected and this has been identified as a key priority in the children and young people's plan.

The draft self assessment

122. In order to contribute to finalising the self-assessment for the forthcoming corporate inspection, the peer review team have submitted a colour-coded, marked-up version of the draft, under the following headings:

- Positive commentary but needs further evidencing
- Queries whether this information is relevant
- Questions about the validity of the information or facts stated

123. The peer review team wished to raise the following main comments on the draft self-assessment for consideration, as follows:

- The need to highlight more Council achievements
- Demonstrate the Council's relative performance with regard to other local authorities and against the Audit Commission family group
- Provide further discussion on the big issues faced by the Council, such as access and equalities, crime and disorder, social care, waste and education. On education, some discussion about why the Council acknowledges the service is improving, is suggested.
- More fully express the challenges of what has been achieved by the Council in outcome terms. For example, much is made of waste and the Council now has established sound governance arrangements, but this is not an outcome based achievement. Where is the achievement in terms of waste to landfill reduction? What about waste treatment? What is the Council doing about an incinerator, where would it be located?
- Highlight actual outcomes and provide more information on geographic differentiation of service provision
- For future plans, the balanced scorecard is in place and there is a need to maintain the momentum. Can improvements be shown as a result of the new performance management arrangement, and if so, it will be helpful to highlight these.
- Partnerships and partnership working has been historically weak and this should be more clearly recognised, together with how improvement will be sustained
- Change management has set a good lead and it will be helpful to show how it embeds within the organisation and how it will make a tangible

Written with and on behalf of the peer review team by:

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