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Chief Executive
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13 August 2013

Dear Debbie

Dorset County Council - Corporate Peer Challenge: 16-19 July 2013

On behalf of the Peer Team, I would like to say what a pleasure it was to be invited into Dorset County Council to deliver the recent Peer Challenge. The Team felt privileged to be allowed to conduct its work with the support of you and your colleagues.

You asked the peer challenge team to look **internally** at how, and how well, you are driving cultural change and improving agility, risk taking and customer focus; and **externally** at how well you are exploring opportunities in working with your partners around local growth and health integration.

In delivering this focus the peer team also considered the core components that all corporate peer challenges cover:

- Understanding of local context and priority setting: Does the Council understand its local context and has it established a clear set of priorities?
- Financial planning and viability: Does the Council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
- Political and managerial leadership: Does the Council have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?
- Governance and decision-making: Are effective governance and decision-making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change, transformation and disinvestment?
- Organisational capacity: Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas in order to deliver the agreed priorities?

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer Challenges are improvement-focused and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. The peers

used their experience and knowledge to reflect on the information presented to them by the people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

This letter provides a summary of the feedback that was presented at the end of our July 2013 onsite visit. In presenting this feedback, the Peer Challenge Team have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. We hope this will help provide recognition of the achievements of Dorset County Council (DCC) while also stimulating debate and thinking about future challenges.

1. Headline messages

These are demanding times for all councils in their role as community leaders to ensure that public services can help to meet people's future needs and aspirations. DCC's focus for its corporate peer challenge reflected well the future challenges that many councils face: dealing with a model of public services that is unsustainable with demands and costs increasing and funding decreasing, people perceiving public services as remote, over bureaucratic and bogged down in process, and a stagnant economy.

The Council's leadership is well aware of the need for organisational change to master these challenges. The new Leader has stated clearly his intention to lead a Radical and Reforming Authority and has started the process of articulating ideas on how to address these in its new vision: Forward Together. The purpose of the peer challenge was to help DCC in developing a practical way ahead.

Our headline messages are:

- Cabinet and the Chief Executive are aligned in their common and focused recognition of the need for DCC to be more responsive to partners and customers and to be more flexible in leadership, and in their ambition to improve outcomes. There is total congruence in their desire and intent to change the Council to a more flexible and responsive organisation that can weather the financial storms ahead. In fact, we witnessed the desire and ambition for change as a shared ambition by all the political parties. It is acknowledged that this is a strength and an important condition for successful transformation to happen at DCC.
- There are many committed employees who want to be released from what they perceive to be overbearing bureaucracy and be empowered to deliver better 'joined up' services for local people. We heard many comments about the need to increase the pace of change and work from '*being process led to being outcome led*' from front line employees and managers in both customer facing and support services. Many employees have already bought into the need for change and are keen to be part of it. Their energy and commitment needs to be harnessed, and this needs to happen quickly.
- Partners are in support of and welcome the Council's plan for change. They have noticed a more consultative leadership style and recognise the need to work in

partnership, be it in integrating health and social care, economic development or helping local communities to develop capacity to deliver services the Council may in future no longer be able to provide. However, they want to see evidence of what is happening and when and, more importantly, want to see changes in behaviours and attitudes across the organisation.

- DCC needs to be brave in changing culture to embrace an integrated customer focused approach. We received strong feedback from the residents and partners we met that '*the Council acts as if it knows best*' and that often, consultation plays lip-service, providing little or no feedback to consultees. Much of this is well intended but it emerges from a paternalistic ethos and is no longer appropriate for modern local government where people want services that are built around them and their needs and that visibly make their areas better to live in. This requires changes in 'hearts and minds' and processes for genuine engagement and dialogue as well as the realisation that the Council may not have all the solutions or lead on every project it is involved in. This is particularly important as consultation is needed to develop and design services differently as the money available to the Council reduces.
- It was acknowledged that additional dedicated capacity and support will be required to help change happen **now** and with **pace**. For example, securing external input by procuring professional advice on communications or back filling officer time on key projects, such as rewriting the scheme of delegation will be productive and symbolic. The challenge team welcomed the Cabinet's decision to make £2m available for the transformation fund and would encourage the Council to invest early and target it to make change happen quickly, using the funding to drive sustainable service change and shifts in central bureaucratic services.

2. Understanding the local context

Members and officers have a deep appreciation of the local distinctiveness of Dorset and its contrasts and complexities. Many officers and members we spoke with have a strong organisational memory and in depth knowledge of the area. The outstanding natural and built environment means that many officers chose to live and work in Dorset and this contributes to a stable workforce. The Council prepares a 'State of Dorset' report. The Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and NHS datasets are via the joint 'Dorset for you' website. The peer challenge team recognises the potential for making the various datasets more accessible and dynamic for the Council and partners to use and to be able to drill down to ward and super output areas. This information is a real asset but needs to be used to identify priorities for the County Council to address and establish a One Council focus.

Members and officers are aware of and understand the financial challenges and likely demographic change as a result of a rising proportion of older people with high impact care and above average percentage of unpaid carers. In response the Council and partners have submitted a pan-Dorset bid to the Government's Health and Social Care Integration Pioneer Programme, and is one of nine areas who will receive support under the Public Transformation Network programme. The partnership wide programme includes a suite of projects targeted at managing

demand, improving effectiveness, integrating commissioning and integrating service delivery. The Council and partners are also in receipt of systems leadership support through the LGA and the combination of plans and external support together with the enthusiasm of partners are an encouraging prospect for advancing health integration. In the words of one partner '*all planets are aligned to push for the integration of health and social care*'. There is real commitment to this and resources need to be available to support delivery.

There are many excellent examples of services and projects delivered by DCC with partners. These include the Dorset Waste Partnership between County and all six Districts which allows for integrated waste collection, disposal and street cleansing under one brand, generating efficiencies and delivering high recycling and composting rates. The peer challenge team consider this a significant success and an initiative which has been almost impossible to achieve elsewhere. Other examples are the Dorset Development Company, a joint venture company with the private sector to bankroll up-front investments into vacant sites to generate added value, sharing risks and rewards. The shared arrangements for a joint Director of Public Health for DCC, Bournemouth and Poole are regarded as notable practice nationally and have resulted in contract efficiencies for mandated services such as sexual health. Other examples are delivery of superfast Broadband into the County and the transformational work in Children's Services, including securing the engagement of young people in inspections of hospital emergency departments and minor injury units. These are innovative projects the Council should be proud of and see as models for future development.

As a contrast, services are generally profession based and the Council does not systematically engage with customers and partners to understand what outcomes are required, the nature of interventions to achieve these outcomes and who could deliver these. Our discussions with the Voluntary and Community Sector and the Association of Parish and Town Councils highlighted that partners are keen to work with DCC to co-produce services. The Lengthsman Scheme was cited as a successful initiative that was stopped without proper consultation with Parish and Town Councils, despite it being a locally tailored scheme that focuses on what is important to Parish and Town Councils. The Districts particularly desired a more positive and constructive engagement in discussions about enhancements to town centres. Representatives felt this could offer a very positive and productive place shaping opportunity. Working with partners to co-create services will often result in partners contributing resources and taking ownership which is key to achieving longer-term and financially sustainable solutions.

The Council's ambition for economic growth is not clear and is not understood by partners. Activity focuses on projects at the expense of a clear vision and strategy for growth. 'Support our local economy' is included in one of the five Council aims but is set in the context of the need to 'safeguard and enhance Dorset's unique environment'. Meeting these two aims needs to be better defined and driven. The aim of the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) goes further in aiming to 'deliver growth through enterprise and the environment' through higher paid and higher skilled jobs. The successful focus on superfast broadband and skills development are important priorities to fulfil this vision. However, the challenge team felt that there was an insufficient focus on pan-Dorset strategic infrastructure

planning, for example making connections to Hampshire, Somerset and Wiltshire, as well as working with Districts to determine and plan for the housing required to deliver this growth.

The Council's current approach to consultation is poor and fragmented and as a consequence the Council is not getting maximum benefits from the resources it has at its disposal. For example, it maintains a 5,000 strong Citizens Panel jointly with the NHS which has the potential to offer significant engagement. However, discussions with representatives of the panel highlighted that questionnaires are too long and complex with irrelevant questions, and that panel members do not receive feedback. The lack of 'strategic grip' on the panel means that questionnaires simply pool questions from individual services rather than adopting a planned and targeted approach. Many people we spoke to articulated the significant need for a change in mindset and confidence in moving from 'doing to' to 'working with' and using consultation early on and with a purpose to have an open dialogue as opposed to ticking a box. Our discussions with Panel members also highlighted that they were not well informed about the work of the Council and its achievements which is a missed opportunity to communicate with a group of people who are 'willing volunteers' to engage with the Council. Communication and strategic purpose needs to be significantly improved to maintain motivation of this group.

Key support functions such as policy, research, communications and business transformation are not utilised strategically and effectively. They are distributed between the Directorates and tend to lead professional groups but not for the Council in a strategic manner. These significant resources need to be better valued and used to support a One Council approach and provide data and evidence for decision makers. Failure to use these resources well and apply good operational management practice to achieving practical outcomes is leading to poor customer experience and adverse press. Bringing these support functions together should enable better and integrated planning, using engagement up front in the re-design of services and considering how, when and with whom to communicate alongside service changes and making sure that messages to customers and residents are pro-actively and skilfully managed. Bringing the communications people from across the Council into one team will provide a critical mass of communication expertise, focus the professional skills on one place and will free up capacity. It will also bring together existing pockets of good practice and provide a quicker and sharper interface with the Chief Executive, Leader and lead members.

3. Political and managerial leadership

Many elected members we spoke with recognise the need for change and are keen to be part of it. When asking members how they perceive the current culture of DCC they answered that it was '*rigid*', '*traditional and process led*', '*out of touch*' and '*slow*'. When asking what type of council members aspired to they told us that they wanted it to be '*member led*', '*progressive*', '*dynamic*', '*lean and flexible*'. The jointly owned vision and aspiration, which is common to all political parties, provides a strong platform for change.

Members and officers welcome the vision for transformation expressed by the Leader and Chief Executive and welcome the determination to become a Radical and Reforming Council and are looking to ‘Forward Together’ to articulate what this means. The organisational principles of greater independence, smarter provision and empowered people coupled with expectations that officers and members must innovate, inspire and include are welcomed by those we spoke to. Indeed, we were party to a lively and engaged discussion at the 150 Group of senior managers which generated ideas and personal commitments to making the organisation more agile, less risk averse, more customer focused and better partners. If harnessed effectively, this energy and commitment will provide robust foundations for the recently elected Leader and new Chief Executive to lead and manage organisational transformation.

The Leader enjoys strong support amongst his lead members in transforming the organisation. He took up his post in May 2013 and has committed to be Radical and Reforming. He has made changes to portfolios to enable a greater focus, for example by adding the ‘Communications’ portfolio to that of Education. The peer challenge team was encouraged by the commitment of longer established members to the organisational transformation. We feel that members have a real opportunity to input and guide genuine transformational change in Dorset that will set the Council on a footing required for modern local government and a rejuvenation of local democracy. The joint working between CMT and Cabinet, the development of a revised officer/member protocol are just two areas where this work is being improved.

Most managers are ‘up for the change’ but recognised and reflected back to the team that they may need support to deliver this change. This may vary from temporary resource to complete bespoke projects, such as the review of the scheme of delegation, to investments in professional skills and leadership and management development. Cabinet’s allocation of £2m into a change fund will enable the necessary investments to realise key projects with pace. This is significant and is recognised as a good commitment, but will need good prioritisation to achieve sustainable cultural change.

The current political and financial climate means that business transformation will be the norm and needs to support the Council’s business plan. The challenge team would recommend that the Council develops a single plan to incorporate the Council’s outcomes (Corporate Plan), its values and purpose (Forward Together) and how it deals with reduced budgets (its financial savings plan) and recommend this is done. The latter two plans must drive the corporate plan which requires a strong and recognisable brand whilst being simple, clear and public facing. It needs to be practical, engaging and delivered. Underneath the single plan, and internally facing, would be a single delivery plan setting out timescales that are ambitious, yet deliverable, and will be performance managed. Given the current prevalence (and comfort) of process and upward delegation, we would urge DCC to design focused and purposeful performance measures and present the information succinctly, for example in form of a dashboard and to ensure that accountabilities for change projects are clear. Performance monitoring should happen at different levels but proportionately to responsibilities and accountabilities of officers or lead members. In

all cases, delivery needs to be managed rigorously. It has to be better at defining the outcome rather than the process.

Many officers and some members we spoke to felt that they were not empowered to take decisions. The challenge team considers that this is primarily the result of unclear accountabilities. We welcome the current review of the Council's Scheme of Delegation and consider this to be a priority as it is essential to create clear accountabilities. Officers and members need to understand which decisions they can take themselves and, for officers, which decisions they need to refer to their managers. With greater clarity of accountabilities must come an expectation of (and initially support to) managers to turn from 'gate keepers' to 'enabling leaders' particularly at third and fourth tier. Enabling leaders who understand their span of control, are empowered and accountable, and who are closer to customers and the front line business are the innovators organisations need to generate ideas of how to deliver front line services with less resource.

DCC needs to radically improve how it communicates its vision and programme for change. At present, officers and partners are not clear about the different plans and strategies for change. We acknowledge that some of the plans have not yet been tested with partners but given the transformation and pioneer bids and the realisation that partners need to work together to achieve better outcomes for local people, this needs to now happen with pace. We heard about some good internal communication initiatives such as team brief, the Chief Executive's blog and posters which can be built upon but these need to be applied consistently.

Internal business processes need to be redesigned from a service user perspective. We heard examples from various services where unnecessary process slows down service delivery and demotivates employees. Examples are Committee reports being heavily edited for 'house style' as opposed to content, recruitment decisions being delayed by six months and partnership arrangements being so legalistic that it jeopardises partners' goodwill to cooperate. While processes are necessary to organise and manage public organisations in a fair, ethical and legal manner they must not stifle the core purpose of an organisation and must be sufficiently flexible to absorb the variety inherent in a complex organisation such as a council.

Within a strong focus on process lies a culture of non-compliance in order to get things done and this undermines a 'One Council approach' to drive core priorities. For example we heard about inconsistent approaches to financial management or performance review, with employees not complying with core business principles. There is a danger that this leads to service areas or Directorates inventing their own processes leading to lack of oversight at corporate level and customers receiving different service quality depending on the service they engage with. We suggest that as part of a review of corporate processes the Council adopts clear principles about which are corporate expectations and must be adhered to ('tight') and which Services or Departments can customise to ensure that they meet their specific requirements ('loose'). There needs to be support to achieve and consequences of non-compliance.

4. Financial planning and viability

The Council has a comprehensive savings programme to meet its financial challenges. The Meeting Future Challenges programme includes 140 projects approved by the County Council to deliver the 2013-14 savings targets of £16.5m against a savings target of £43.2m over the next three years. The programme is managed by the Efficiency and Change team with oversight from a Strategic Change Board and progress is reported regularly to Cabinet. Members and officers are confident that the method and approach will deliver the savings required for this financial year. However, this must not lead to overconfidence as much remains to be done.

The Council is well resourced with good levels of reserves and working balances. It has received an unqualified audit opinion from its external auditors in September 2012 with three recommendations, of which two focus on compliance issues with SAP procedures and access rights. This provides DCC with scope to continue to deliver services to communities and the potential to use reserves as an ‘invest to save’ mechanism or to deliver important outcomes for its community, enabling transformation to become a Radical and Reforming Council.

Members, officers and partners have a good understanding of the challenging financial climate. They are aware of the financial projects and understand the need to make savings through greater efficiencies as opposed to cutting front-line services. This organisational awareness provides a helpful focus on the need to do things differently. However, managers must always remember that jobs involve people’s livelihood and some may need support in dealing with uncertainty.

The outturn for 2011/12 showed an overspend in service budgets that was offset by an underspend in central budgets, and the peer challenge team understand that this is a common theme. The regularity of this suggests that budgets are not set realistically which undermines good budget discipline. We understand that DCC is considering a zero based budget review and would recommend this as a robust means to re-consider budgets across the **whole Council**, including centrally held budgets and reserves. In undertaking this task, the Council is likely to need some external support but it also needs to utilise its existing knowledge and expertise. Completing this task will provide DCC with a robust understanding of the costs of services in the context of the Council as a whole. This will be a demanding but critical base to building future sustainability.

We saw little evidence of benchmarking being routinely used to understand the cost of services and overheads compared to performance and to compare this with councils with similar characteristics. There are several benchmarking clubs facilitated through professional organisations as well as national data sources, such as the LGA’s ‘LG Inform’ which provide performance information which the Council can tap into as well as comparing performance locally where this is appropriate, for example facilitating discharge from hospitals.

Members and partners are not always engaged sufficiently early in prospective projects to achieve savings. We heard examples on reducing bus subsidies and street lighting where engagement with ward members and partners was not sufficiently comprehensive resulting in objections and the need to re-submit reports to Cabinet, causing a poor press and also delays to the realisation of savings. Effective and pro-active engagement with members, partners and the public early on whilst forming the savings plan can often help in identifying different ways of delivering services that make these sustainable, often with engagement of communities themselves, and deliver service changes and savings on time.

5. Governance and decision making

Cabinet is strongly aligned and ambitious with a more inclusive approach. Members demonstrate ownership of, and enthusiasm and energy for the Council's direction. Elected members are united in their desire to develop the organisation to become more modern, customer focused and entrepreneurial and recognise the implications this will have for themselves in demonstrably leading the organisation, fronting up difficult decisions in public with officers providing professional and technical advice and managing the day-to-day business. There is a strong will to work in a more inclusive way across all the elected members and strengthen cross party working.

Dorset has developed effective partnership governance models which are delivering better and more efficient services. The Dorset Waste Partnership, comprising the County Council, all six Districts brings together waste, recycling and street cleansing services. All seven authorities have approved joint waste strategy and have formed a Joint Committee that manages the waste contract on behalf of all authorities. Given the public face of waste and street cleansing this is a remarkable achievement. Another example is the joint arrangements for public health with Bournemouth and Poole where the three councils have appointed a joint Director of Public Health with a joint, but dispersed team and joint contracts for some of the mandated services such as sexual health. These are good examples of the Council pursuing with the negotiation of complex governance arrangements to deliver better and more cost effective services for its residents. As these become more common models of operation thought needs to be given to efficient governance structures to keep bureaucracy proportionate.

Members' determination for the Council to become more member led will require a change in practices in particular around the preparation of Cabinet reports. At present, the preparation and presentation of Cabinet reports is officer led, and processes for Cabinet report approval involves sign-off by the Chief Executive, Finance and the Monitoring officer but not the lead Cabinet member. We heard that there is inconsistency to the informal involvement of lead members in the preparation of Cabinet reports which leads to lack of ownership. The better use of informal Cabinet meetings for Directors or Heads of Service to give professional advice on policies or service changes could provide a good mechanism for lead members to have informal conversations and dialogue with professional officers about their political aspirations and how they can be implemented. Lead Cabinet members must be involved in the development of Cabinet reports from the beginning and ought to present reports at Cabinet, with officers being present (but not visibly part of the

Cabinet) to support their lead member where they require detailed information or professional judgement. Adopting this practice will firmly put the responsible Cabinet member in the lead. We understand the Leader planned to introduce these changes from October 2013.

At chief officer level, some consideration of key decisions by the corporate management team, rather than by Directors in isolation would assist corporate decision making and show the importance of team working to the organisation with a One Council approach. The One Council leadership at chief officer level needs to be visible and stronger.

Officer engagement with local members on policy or service changes which affect their local wards must be more systematic and better focused. We heard examples where it had not been made clear to members about changes to services in their wards, for example street lighting. There is information but more consideration needs to be given to enable effective communication. While members have a key role as representing the interests of their ward, they also have a 'corporate role' in that they are responsible for the viability of the Council as a whole. These can clash and where this might be the case officers need to support members in balancing both roles. For example, they must advise members of how new policies or service changes affect their wards to help them represent their wards, but also support them in dealing with local discontent where a decision may have disbenefits for a local ward but is of benefit for the Council as a whole. Consideration should be given to supporting those elected members who also hold Councillor positions in district/borough councils. Members need training and development to undertake the demanding role they have been elected to do.

The format of Council, Cabinet and Overview Committees could be refreshed to improve the effectiveness of decision making. For example, a lot of time at Council meetings is wasted by it receiving reports each from the many Committees as part of the agenda when their decisions have been taken and are a matter of public record. The poor quality audio system and the lack of provision for supplementary questions limit engagement from the public. We talked about the opportunities for Cabinet members to visibly lead on their portfolios at Cabinet by introducing Cabinet reports and sitting as a group with officers more visibly supporting members as opposed to leading the discussions. We heard that the support for Overview Committee is provided by the Directorate that is subject to overview or scrutiny which does not reflect good practice. For overview and scrutiny to add value to governance and policy formulation it requires professional support that is independent and can act without bias. The scrutiny process needs to be reviewed and reflect good practice in the future.

While the Council recognises the opportunities of partnership working with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) as a provider and key partner in devolving services and enabling communities, the challenge team felt that this was not sufficiently prevalent within Cabinet. As mentioned earlier, our discussions with the VCS highlighted that engagement was not systematic and often late in the process or when things have gone wrong. The challenge team felt that Dorset has huge potential in developing the VCS as a mature partner and this may merit a special Cabinet portfolio.

Arrangements for decision making are too complex and could be streamlined. They fuel the members' and staff's perception that the Council is not agile and is too risk averse. The peer challenge team welcome the current review of the Scheme of Delegation as a key step to clarifying accountabilities. The Council may wish to adopt an approach such as Decision Making Accountability (DMA) to systematically review management layers within the organisation, matching authority and accountability.

6. Organisational transformation

The new Chief Executive provides strong leadership for the Council's agenda for organisational transformation. This is recognised by members, officers and partners. The Chief Executive is highly credible and employees value her as being open, energetic, determined and committed to making the organisation more dynamic and customer focused. Many managers are keen to follow her in her vision and to instil her vision into those they manage.

The '150 Managers Group', is a real asset in the transformation journey. The group meets regularly and has been an important mechanism to identify organisational strengths and weaknesses and articulate the opportunities and threats for DCC. The January 2013 stock take session has provided rich data which helped shape the new principles and expectations in Forward Together. The peer challenge team co-facilitated a discussion on how DCC can become more agile, customer focused and improve its work in partnership and was heartened by the level of commitment and engagement. During the process, managers committed to many actions they can implement instantly and will make a change to the organisational culture in addition to a more planned change management approach. This should be followed through.

Internal communication works well in parts. We heard of a number of good initiatives such as team brief, the Chief Executive's blog and the introduction of social media such as Yammer, resulting in staff being more aware of key developments within the organisation and successes and pressures of colleagues and managers. However, these mechanisms are not accessible to all employees and messages are not filtering into all parts of the organisation. Purposeful and systematic communication is essential at times of organisational change and requires a mix of methods and channels that are applied with consistency. Testing it on a cross section of employees and learning from external practice, the peer challenge team would recommend DCC develops a communications strategy and plan as part of a general overhaul of communications. External support may be a wise investment to develop this rapidly as it is key to achieving cultural change.

We found a high degree of self-awareness among Heads of Service about the change that is required. Examples are Research, Finance, Legal Services, who are determined for review of the Scheme of Delegation, and HR and Learning and Development who have a clear vision of what improvements are needed in the next 12 months and many ideas of how to make this happen. We experienced much energy and potential that needs to be unleashed and channelled through more focused strategic leadership. Work needs to be done to ensure this is done with the

operational services who need the essential support these teams provide, but feel held ‘in check’.

In moving forward and building on the ideas and energy within the organisation there needs to be encouragement and freedom to learn from external good practice and bringing in professional expertise to support an open learning culture. We suggest that the next step for DCC would be to put together a transformation programme that builds on the principles in Forward Together. This change programme needs to be succinct and clear and led by the Chief Executive and her team. The Corporate Management Team needs to give visible and consistent leadership contributing significantly to the One Council approach. It needs to have a senior programme manager with expertise, clout and charisma, rigorous and outcome focused programme management and be focused on realising cultural and financial benefits. The peer challenge team suggests that it needs to address the following:

- Removing the doubt among some staff whether the move towards organisational transformation is real
- Moving away from being process centric to becoming more business like
- Reconsidering and restating the purpose of support services to becoming enablers to front line services delivering for the customer, and changing practices accordingly
- Tackling the culture of non-compliance, for example poor completion of performance reviews, staff management or financial management
- Introducing a culture and practices of systematic internal challenge and formalised learning
- Improving the accountability across the organisation through documenting areas of corporate compliance versus areas of local discretion, streamlining decision making and decision making accountability.

7. Partnership working

Partnership working is strong in many areas already and partners acknowledge and welcome the Council’s desire for organisational change and want to be a partner in this. Districts acknowledge that since the appointment of the new Chief Executive there has been a ‘new atmosphere’ with better engagement and more facilitative relationships. Much of this is attributed to the style and approach of the new Chief Executive. They are genuinely committed to working in partnership to master the financial and demographic challenges ahead. We found a keenness among them to align services to improve health and wellbeing and engage in the ‘troubled families’ initiative. The District and Borough Chief Executives also volunteered personal support to the Chief Executive to help deliver change.

Relationships with Health are strong and we found enthusiasm and commitment to integrating health and social care among partners we spoke to. Helped by a single

CCG for Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole and good relationships, the prospects for providing better demand management and integrated commissioning and service delivery for older people with significant long-term health and care support needs are promising. There is support through the DCLG Transformation Network Programme, the LGA system leadership initiatives; and the Council and partners have submitted a pioneer bid. These are promising prospects for realising the vision and generating better services and efficiencies. Discussions with key providers, however, highlighted their concerns about the lack of progress and pace to date and the challenge will be to effectively utilise external support and deliver change.

The business community is keen to engage with the Council and felt that the LEP provides a good vehicle for cooperation between the Council and other partners. However, partners are not clear on whether economic growth is a priority for the county, and if so, how this could be better mainstreamed across all Council services. They cited examples such as road works being scheduled without consideration of their impact on major visitor events, difficulties in gaining permission to erect brown signs and a general sense that protecting the environment and discouraging road travel were more important than boosting the economy. There needs to be visible evidence of supporting business to be successful.

As outlined elsewhere in the report, the voluntary and community sector, whilst keen to be an active partner of the Council, has not felt fully engaged in the past.

There are many good examples of partnership working such as the Dorset Waste Partnership (referred to earlier), and the single Dorset Community Safety Partnership which reported activities that have contributed to crime reducing by 15 per cent over the last 12 months. Our conversations with representatives from the higher and further education sector report very strong relationships with Children's Services to forge links with schools in developing career pathways. These are good examples of an ability to develop relationships that create better and more cost effective services for Dorset residents.

While conditions for partnership working are strong overall we had a number of recurring messages on how the Council can improve this further. These are:

- Reflect on your leadership role and style across the county. While partners welcome the role of the County Council to provide leadership of place, they want you to engage earlier and more openly to co-design and co-create as opposed to coming with fully developed plans.
- Understanding partners' perspectives, challenges and constraints is a necessary skill for successful partnership working, as strong partnerships are built on trust and accommodation rather than compromise. These are core skills for managers within the County Council. We heard examples of partners finding it difficult to engage with managers in highways, legal and property on projects that are very important for Districts or other partners but did not appear to be a priority or concern for the County Council.
- There is untapped potential and need to work across the wider region with regards to economic growth. Here the role of the County Council is significant

to involve in strategic infrastructure planning to facilitate the basis that will enable your economy to become higher value and higher skill based.

- Opportunities to adopt a whole system approach with health are unrivalled but will need to include the providers.

8. Key recommendations

Based on the peer challenge teams' findings we recommend that the Council considers the following actions to achieve its ambition to become Radical and Reforming. They are structured into *outward* and *inward* looking and are actions we believe will help improve and develop the Council's effectiveness and capacity to deliver future ambitions and plans. As such, they will help the Council become a more customer focused and agile organisation ready to meet the financial and demographic challenges ahead, and to improve local leadership and democratic representation with pace and rigour.

Outward facing

1. Develop a clear vision and delivery plan that sets out your vision, priorities, outcomes and how these will be delivered to customers, partners and communities of interest. We suggest that the plan should have a timescale of 5-10 years. It will require deep commitment and 'quality of association' from partners and stakeholders.
2. Build inclusive and trusted relationships with partners within Dorset and the sub-region to enable the delivery of key priorities for Dorset and the wider sub-region.
3. Engage and consult meaningfully and respectfully and provide proof that the Council has listened, developed ideas and responded to reflect the consultation and engagement. Empower customers and partners to articulate their needs and feel included in decision making.
4. Place customers at the heart of all you do. Review the whole external customer access doorway including web, telephone and face to face contact and introduce a clear and consistent approach across the Council with no exceptions.
5. Guided by professional external advice, radically improve communication to become more planned, systematic, pro-active and varied. It will be important to build stronger media relations.
6. Help shape Dorset as a Place by taking the opportunity to change relationships and the status of partnership working to focus on delivery for local people in Dorset.
7. Clearly define the responsibility for engaging with partners across the Council at member level by adding this function to a Cabinet portfolio.

Inward facing

8. Place customers at the heart of all you do and recognise the role of support services to support not regulate their internal customers. Review the whole internal customer access doorway including web, telephone and face to face contact and introduce a clear and consistent approach across the Council with no exceptions.
9. Strip out all unnecessary processes and procedures to release organisational capacity for change and protect front-line services.
10. Utilise capacity to deliver change quickly, for example by identifying a Cabinet member champion for transformation and by seconding able and willing officers into a change team.
11. Relentlessly manage the transformation programme, using established programme management principles.
12. Instil leadership to empower people by setting clear expectations, goals and responsibilities for individuals and equip these with the skills and competencies to enable and power. Define and streamline layers of management and remove posts from over managed areas.
13. Clarify members' and officers' roles in the Council. Ensure that the revised scheme of delegation is given priority; and introduce a system whereby Cabinet reports are written in the name of and presented by the lead Cabinet member, while officers are at Cabinet meetings to provide support.
14. Use benchmarking as the standard way to gauge services against comparator councils to understand the ratio between cost and performance and improve value for money.
15. Behave and act as one council – embrace a 'One Council approach' that brings together senior managers' support functions such as Efficiency and Change, Communications,, Consultation, Research and Information, and Organisational Development.

9. Next steps

The Council's political leadership and senior management will undoubtedly wish to reflect on these findings and suggestions before determining how the Council wishes to take things forward. As part of the Peer Challenge process, there is an offer of continued activity to support this. We made some suggestions about how this might be utilised, for example a follow-up visit after nine months. I look forward to finalising the detail of that activity as soon as possible.

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council through the Peer Challenge to date. Andy Bates, Principal Adviser (South West) is the main contact between the Council and the Local Government

Association. Andy can be contacted at andy.bates@local.gov.uk and can provide access to our resources and any further support.

In the meantime, all of us connected with the Peer Challenge would like to wish the Council every success going forward. Once again, many thanks for inviting the Peer Challenge and to everyone involved for their participation.

Yours sincerely

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On behalf of the Peer Challenge Team:

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Paul Crick, Director of Planning and Environment, Kent County Council
Pat Harding, Director of Customer Service and Transformation, Cambridgeshire County Council
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