

**Local Government Improvement Programme**

**Final Follow-Up Visit to Derby City Council**

**7 March 2002**

**Introduction**

- 1 The peer review of Derby City Council (DCC) took place between 3 and 7 July 2000. The review report identified a number of key issues, which DCC needed to address to continue moving forward. An initial follow-up visit to the authority took place on 21 March 2001 in order to review progress and to offer further advice and assistance.
- 2 Following on from this the authority engaged the IDeA and Capita to undertake some joint consultancy work, principally to address issues arising from a recent Ofsted report. The IDeA provided support to the authority on issues relating to corporate capacity. This comprised assistance in formulating a strategic vision and priorities for the Council, determining future political management arrangements and putting in place a performance management framework.
- 3 Capita assisted the authority specifically in relation to education-related issues, although some of the corporate issues also needed to be reflected in this work. The Alliance worked with DDC between April and June 2001.
- 4 The final follow-up visit to the peer took place on 7 March 2002. The team conducting it were Councillor John Ryan (Labour), Councillor Eileen Bosomworth (Conservative), John Sellgren, Director of the County Councils Network and Jan Wickham, IDeA Review Manager.
- 5 The final follow-up visit had two main objectives:
  - to assess the progress which the authority has made against the key recommendations of the original review report and in building on the work of the IDeA/Capita consultancy
  - to look at the current position of the authority against the competencies set out in the Local Government Improvement Programme's (LGIP's) benchmark of an "ideal" authority

### **Programme for the Visit**

- 6 The programme for the visit and its timing was discussed and agreed in advance with the authority. It comprised:
  - a large-scale workshop attended by frontline staff, middle managers, senior managers, members, partners and residents. All participants were asked to identify on continuums the level of progress, which they considered the Council had made in relation to each of the original key recommendations. Groups of participants then discussed individual recommendations and fed back their perceptions of DCC's performance in relation to each
  - facilitated discussions with each group of stakeholders to consider in greater detail DCC's progress since the original peer review
  - interviews with leading members of the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat Groups, the Chief Executive and the Deputy Chief Executive
  - discussions facilitated by DCC staff with groups of participants on the authority's current position in relation to the fifteen competencies which comprise the LGIP's benchmark of an ideal authority
- 7 The day's events were very well organised by Elphia Miller, which was much appreciated by the IDeA reviewers. Thanks should also be given to DCC's facilitators.
- 8 The information gained through the discussions on DCC's position in relation to the benchmark of an "ideal" authority is held by DCC and it is for the authority to make appropriate use of the material.
- 9 This report draws together the information gained through the large-scale workshop and the facilitated discussions with stakeholder groups, and the interviews in order to provide DCC with feedback on its progress in relation to the key recommendations of the original peer review. Photographs of the continuums on which the participants plotted their views forms Appendix I to the report.
- 10 It should be noted that whilst discussions took place during the visit with a large number of individuals, an in-depth analysis of the authority is not possible during the course of a single day. There is an extent therefore to which the conclusions set out in this report are impressionistic.

### **Progress Made Against the Key Recommendations of the Peer Review Report**

#### **Develop a Vision for Derby City Council Underpinned by a Corporate Strategy with Clear Priorities and Outputs/Outcomes**

- 11 There was strong agreement amongst all parties that DCC has made good progress in developing a widely understood vision and priorities for the Council. The six themes of the vision in particular were known to staff at different levels throughout the authority and there was evidence that the priorities are being used to inform a comprehensive service planning process.
- 12 It was less clear, however, how far measurable outcomes have been developed for each priority in order to ensure that they are being implemented effectively. The Council is planning to pick this matter up through its 2002/2003 Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) which is to serve as its corporate plan. In so doing it needs to consider not only setting itself targets in relation to the statutory performance indicators but also compiling local targets and indicators.
- 13 Currently, for example, the BVPP summary document reports progress on "*a great place to live*" through statistics relating only to museum attendance and numbers of missed refuse collections. There is no data around sport, arts, transport and culture which are all areas DCC has identified for improvement.
- 14 The BVPP will be an important means of reporting back the progress that is being made against priorities to an external audience. However, consideration should also be given to making such information available through other mediums which some people may find more accessible. For example, the newly created Area Panels could be used to report progress against priorities at a more local level.

#### **Ensure that Senior Management and Members have the Time and the Space for Strategic Thinking**

- 15 The continuum showed a spread of views in relation to this recommendation with frontline staff in particular being unconvinced that the revised political and managerial structures had enabled further time to be allocated to strategic thinking.
- 16 Senior staff, however, felt that there is a greater focus on the big issues by the Chief Officer Group (COG) and this is borne out by the fact that every second meeting now being partly used for discussions of a more strategic nature. There have also been at least one Awayday with the Executive to consider the future direction and priorities for the authority. This was warmly received by some senior officers who felt that there needs to be more joint working of this nature.
- 17 There is a restructuring of the corporate centre of the organisation in progress, which is aimed at enabling senior staff to focus more on strategic rather than operational matters.
- 18 At Member level there was a view that the new political structures should have led to a greater concentration on strategic issues but that this potential has yet to be fully realised.
- 19 In common with many authorities that have only recently changed to the new arrangements, DCC is finding that the Executive is sometimes considering items with more of an operational

than strategic focus. Whilst officer delegation has been increased in order to facilitate the new model, it will be important to keep this matter under review to ensure arrangements are operating with maximum effectiveness.

### **Facilitate the Spread of Learning from Innovation within the Organisation**

- 20 A Management Network is currently in the process of being established which should provide an opportunity for learning to take place about good practice and innovation across the organisation.
- 21 DCC has also increased the opportunities for staff generally to hear about the work of the Council with five “face to face” employee conferences being held in October. These are initiatives that need to be developed and built upon.
- 22 There were mixed feelings at the large-scale workshop about the amount of progress that has been made in relation to this recommendation with some feeling that learning does take place but still on a somewhat piecemeal basis. The new mechanisms being put in place may assist in ensuring that this is more widespread.

### **Show its Staff that it Values them and Ensure that they have a Full Range of Development Opportunities**

- 23 Not surprisingly many staff at the workshop were keen to discuss this particular recommendation. The continuum shows that the majority of staff feel that some progress has been made in the authority showing its appreciation of them. Certainly initiatives such as the employee conferences referred to above and the new monthly staff newsletter which is used to publicise employee successes are means by which staff can be made to feel included and valued.
- 24 The authority has also taken some steps to improve secondment opportunities and has secured funding to look at work/life balance initiatives including more flexible working. It now needs to ensure that it makes the necessary commitment to follow through any measures which will assist individuals and at the same time improve, or at least maintain, service delivery.
- 25 Notwithstanding these areas of progress, it was clear that many of the frontline staff present did not feel that any significant changes in levels of appreciation had filtered down to their level. There was a recognition that access to training and development, whilst still dependent to an extent on individual managers, had generally improved and this was appreciated. However, what many frontline staff would value is personal acknowledgement by managers of good work done or efforts. This may mean little more than a simple thank you.
- 26 It is recommended that this message be conveyed to managers at all levels in the authority and that consideration also be given to a more formal type of recognition for efforts made, perhaps through a monthly award scheme of the type popular in retailing. Such internal awards have been adopted by some authorities, such as Suffolk County Council, who would doubtless be pleased to share their experiences.

**Give Sufficient Priority and Weight to the Review of Political Structures with a Clear Timescale in the light of the New Legislation**

- 27 The continuum showed that largely all stakeholder groups agreed that there had been progress made in relation to this recommendation, and indeed DCC did introduce its new political structures in December 2001. Priority was given to arriving at a solution which all of the political groups had an opportunity to shape. Member peers from other authorities were used in order to facilitate discussions to support this process.
- 28 The introduction of the new arrangements has by and large gone smoothly. There are inevitably some small teething problems which need to be resolved, particularly in relation to the flow of information now that non-executive members no longer have traditional Committees on which to sit. However, these will no doubt be addressed as both Members and officers become used to operating the new system over time.
- 29 Scrutiny is to be very well supported by officers once all vacant posts have been appointed to. This should assist in the promotion of policy development work by the Scrutiny Commissions.
- 30 The Area Panels seem to have got off to an encouraging start and afford an opportunity for Members to operate in a new environment.
- 31 The review team was impressed by the level of comparatively high level of morale amongst non-executive Members so soon after the new system has been introduced. This would appear to be a reflection of the preparation work, which DCC undertook with the assistance of the Alliance consultancy. It will be important, however, for all aspects of the new arrangements to be kept under review in order to ensure that this early success is built upon.

### **Enhance the Provision of Member Training and Support**

- 32 The continuum shows that most people, including members, agree that some progress has been made against this recommendation.
- 33 An induction programme is being put in place to support those gaining seats for the first time at the May election. Most Members now have home computers as opposed to none at the time of the original review.
- 34 Some training has been held to support the introduction of the new political management arrangements. However, there was widespread acknowledgement amongst all those Members to whom the review team spoke that more needs to take place.
- 35 In particular it would be helpful if these concentrated on skills development rather than information as it is clear that this is what will be needed to support the successful execution of new roles and responsibilities.
- 36 Training in relation to the chairing of public meetings would, for example, assist Members' involvement in the new Area Panels. Successful scrutiny may also require further development opportunities to be made available. At a very practical level given that paperwork is onerous, training in speed-reading may be helpful to some Members.
- 37 There is a longstanding cross-party Member Services Working Party, which could be used to assist in the development of an appropriate programme to support the new arrangements.

### **Revisit its Best Value Processes and Structures both at Officer and Member Level**

- 38 The continuum showed that all those present agreed that good, or at least fair progress, has been made in the development of Best Value processes. Those people at senior management and member level who were most likely to have been involved in reviews were the most positive. However, participants generally tended to agree that action had been taken in relation to this recommendation.
- 39 The Best Value review process has been simplified and there are now fewer, more cross-cutting reviews than previously. DCC has had a number of positive reports from the Best Value Inspectorate, which indicate the progress that has been achieved.

### **Adopt a More Positive and Pro-active Approach to Media Relations**

- 40 DCC is currently establishing a Head of Communications post who will head a unit of five staff. In addition there are officers within some departments who are responsible for marketing and communications.
- 41 Since the review the authority has appointed consultants to look at current practice and to produce a communications strategy and handbook. This is programmed for completion in April 2002.

- 42 The views expressed by those present at the workshop on progress in relation to media relations was, however, very mixed with as many people agreeing that improvement had taken place, as disagreeing. It would seem likely therefore that whilst work has been undertaken within the authority in order to strengthen its approach to media relations and communications more generally, this has yet to feed through to performance on the ground as yet.
- 43 Certainly there were views expressed by some external parties which echoed the findings of the original review, namely that DCC tends to be defensive in its dealings with the press and does not promote itself nationally and locally as positively as it could do. The authority needs to be aware that such perceptions are still current outside the Council and that changing these will be one task facing the newly established Unit.
- 44 For this reason it is important that communications and media relations is placed high on the Council's agenda and that the new Head of Communications is given the managerial support and backing to act with authority across the council and its constituent functions.

### **Devise and Implement an Effective Performance Management System.**

- 45 There was general agreement at the workshop that some progress has been made in relation to the establishment of a performance management system and this was borne out in the stakeholder discussions. The vision and priorities have been used as the basis of service plans and the managers responsible for producing these were clear about the linkages.
- 46 Performance management was one of the areas of work covered by the Alliance consultancy and a workshop was held for senior managers and Members on their relative responsibilities in this area. The final consultancy report identified ten objectives that DCC needed to achieve in order to embed a performance management systems and culture.
- 47 Broadly speaking, some progress has been achieved in relation to each objective and mechanisms for the effective management and monitoring of performance are therefore beginning to be put in place. COG and the Executive are, for example, now receiving quarterly performance information. This system is, however, in its early days and it is clear from discussions that the production of more timely and focused information requires further attention.

- 48 It is recognised that the creation of a performance management culture and systems takes some time. DCC needs to continue to move forward in relation to this work and to involve staff and Members throughout the Council. Overview and Scrutiny bodies and the Area Panels have a role to play in looking closely at performance. Officers down to the frontline need to be clear of their roles in delivering the Council's vision and priorities. COG and the Executive must therefore continue to emphasise their commitment to performance management and use pro-actively the material being produced to reinforce this.

### **Produce a Strategic Vision for ICT which takes Account of Emerging Technologies**

- 49 There was a range of views expressed on the continuum in relation to ICT progress with middle managers in particular divided on this issue. This may reflect, however, frustrations at the operational level rather than views about a strategic vision.
- 50 It is clear that good progress has been made in strengthening the relationship with Capita to whom the service is outsourced its support services, and the Council is currently giving consideration to extending the contract.
- 51 A three-year ICT strategy is currently in the process of being formulated and an E-Derby Day, which was open to members of the public, was recently held.



### **Overall Conclusion**

- 1      There are many areas in which DCC has made good progress since the original review. In particular there is now much greater clarity about the overall vision and priorities for the authority. The new political management arrangements are functioning effectively and are generally viewed in a positive light, and the authority has achieved some good reports for their Best Value reviews.
- 2      Communications have been given greater priority and the importance of a performance management framework and culture is beginning to be recognised.
- 3      In many respects therefore the message of the final follow-up visit is for the leadership of DCC to continue to see through the work it commenced in response to the peer review, and on which it received support from the Alliance consultancy last year.
- 4      In particular it needs to ensure that the vision and priorities are translated into comprehensive targets so that progress can be tracked easily both internally and externally. In so doing it will be essential to promote an organisational culture which recognises good performance and tackles poor performance. This is linked to the point made by frontline staff about the need to ensure that their efforts are acknowledged and valued by the authority.
- 5      DCC also needs to ensure that its senior managerial and political leadership is continuing its efforts to focus on strategic issues and that mechanisms such as levels of delegation are facilitating this.
- 6      Finally it will be essential that the training and development opportunities be made available to ensure that members have the skills needed to fulfil their new roles, whether they be on the Executive, scrutiny bodies or Area Panels. This will be of particular importance for those who will be joining the council for the first time in May 2002.

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