

Corporate Peer Challenge **Council of the Isles of Scilly**

10 – 12 January 2018

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

The Council of the Isles of Scilly (CIOS) is making good progress across a range of areas. The new Chairman and Vice Chairman are steadfastly focussed on creating a sustainable future for the Islands and improving the council's leadership and performance. Refreshing the Corporate Plan, which it is in the midst of being done, is a key task, and if key stakeholders are well engaged, it will enable the council to work purposefully towards achieving its ambitions.

Those ambitions are summarised as a number of key priorities in the draft Corporate Plan, covering core issues, such as 'Smart islands', Waste and the integration of health and social care. The council is developing a Medium Term Financial Plan, focussed on helping it achieve sustainability over the next 3-5 years and this is a positive step. It will be important to ensure that its finance plan aligns to the priorities in the Corporate Plan, as at present it does not. Furthermore, both plans must then be translated into clear programmes of work, with sufficient capability, capacity and focus to ensure they are both successfully delivered.

These key building blocks, which the council is putting in place, demonstrate its increasing maturity, capacity and improvement – much has been achieved since the last Corporate Peer Challenge in 2015. Through effective partnership working, it has increased its own resilience and the sustainability of the Isles of Scilly. Central to this has been the ability to influence national government and key stakeholders to attract grants and inward investment to improve the airport and the road infrastructure, as well as improvements in terms of food safety and the positive outcomes in respect of its children's services inspection. All of these are significant achievements.

The Inter Authority Agreement (IAA) with Cornwall Council is a further example of an effective partnership, which aims to deliver far more robust and effective financial and IT capability within CIOS. This and other strong partnerships, where there are appropriate governance arrangements in place, such as the Futures Board and Smart Islands Partnership all demonstrate the real will and intent of partners to come together to tackle real issues of importance. Our challenge to all these partners is to now harness their shared capacity as a collective and clarify joint priorities, key deliverables and as the team heard from a number of people, 'get us all on the same page'.

Getting 'on the same page' became a key message of the peer challenge team both across the partnership spectrum but also within CIOS itself. The elections in 2017 delivered both a planned reduction of councillors and several new ones too; a new governance structure has also been established. At the same time, there has also been changes within the senior officer team. Now is an ideal time for the council's politicians and senior managers to better align, so they collectively focus on delivering the ambitious agenda for both the Islands and the council. This is a key issue to address since we believe that greater time and effort establishing a high performing 'top team' will really reap benefits into the longer term. The council has limited resources and therefore creating clarity around roles, responsibilities and engendering trust and focussed and positive working relationships across the piece, to develop a shared sense of purpose, will create a strong platform to progress.

Now is a good time for the CIOS to take stock and consider its future role and intentions. In some areas, we remained unclear about the council's role, policy position or full intent – transport, tourism, growth and commercialism are examples of these. Furthermore, within the context of regional governance structures, specifically in terms of health and social care and the economy, it will also be important for the council to consider options for future operating models. Consideration should be given to the longer term operating model for CIOS itself (and the skills needed for that), including what services it directly provides itself, what services it commissions, what services are delivered with one or more partners and what services are only provided by other organisations.

While much progress is evident since the last CPC, the council knows it has still much to attend to. Of prime importance, is addressing the recurring theme that all stakeholders raised with us in respect of communications. This is impacting negatively in terms of the way CIOS engages with its communities, keeping its staff group informed and empowered, and informing residents and others of its key decisions. As a consequence a coherent communications strategy is a clear recommendation from the peer challenge. This strategy should include utilising the benefits of social media and enabling services through the connectivity of the council's website.

We left the council with a list of fundamental 'to do's', as we believe the absence of these is limiting its capability. This is therefore a key recommendation from the peer team- the list we proposed is set out at Appendix 1. They reflect some of the core disciplines of a modern, effective and accountable public body, such as having a robust corporate planning cycle with aligned to robust budget setting and monitoring processes.

In the view of the peer team, if the council, with its partners, attends to some of the key messages and recommendations within this report, as well as the 'Test of Assurance' and 'Financial Arrangements' reports referred to in section 3 below, it will be going a long way to making strong progress and helping to provide improved outcomes for the Islands and its residents.

2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations:

1. **To ensure the refreshing of its Corporate Plan has the maximum impact, the council should make sure that:** there has been appropriate engagement with key stakeholders, it aligns with the developing Medium Term Financial Plan and it is translated into clear programmes of work, with sufficient capability, capacity and focus.
2. The council should **develop a coherent communications strategy to respond to the areas of concern highlighted throughout this report** which in the view of the peer team are negatively impacting on its reputation, performance, service connectivity, community and staff engagement.

3. **The council should develop its ‘top team’ of senior members and officers** focussing on the delivery of its priorities and the key enablers which will help make that happen, including clarity of outcomes, roles and responsibilities, trust and transparency.
4. **As it translates its priorities into programmes for delivery the council should seek the necessary skills, expertise and capacity to enable it to deliver these to best effect** – specifically in respect for its plans for housing growth and development, where there is a range of expertise and knowledge available across the local government sector.
5. **The council should review the effectiveness of its new political governance arrangements** by May 2019 to ensure they are achieving the outcomes that were set for them and in the meantime, ensure that members are supported as effectively as possible in terms of their ongoing development needs.
6. **Review with partners how both they and the council might create additional collective programme management capacity** to further enable the delivery of their joint priorities and plans.
7. **Develop a workforce plan** which reflects the structure, skills and ability required to deliver the Corporate Plan, is focussed on the present but also future role of the council (and its future operating model) and incorporates appropriate recruitment and reward strategies.
8. **Review and incorporate the recommendations and key findings of this report alongside that of the LGA led ‘Test of Assurance’ and Financial Management’ reports.**
9. **Review the list of ‘to do’s’ outlined in Appendix 1** (plus the list of bullets within the finance section of this report) as a matter of urgency. These are key matters for the council to attend to and are limiting its capability and capacity to deliver as effectively as it might.

3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at The Council of the Isles of Scilly were:

- Cllr Clarence Barrett, London Borough of Havering
- Jane Portman, Managing Director, Bournemouth Borough Council
- Helen Gorman, Assistant Director (Legal and Democratic Services) Bolton Council

- Paul Clarke, LGA Challenge Manager.

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges cover. These are the areas we believe are critical to councils' performance and improvement:

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. Leadership of Place: Does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. Organisational leadership and governance: Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?
4. 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?
5. Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

As part of the above the council were keen that the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) helped them:

- take stock of the progress that had been made since the last CPC in 2015, and
- to gauge how it might strengthen the council's narrative of place and its leadership role.

Furthermore, in December 2017, prior to the CPC, two specific but related pieces of work were carried out by the LGA, on behalf of the council. Both of these were undertaken in November-December 2017 and have been sent to the council. These were:

1. A test of assurance in Social Care-including a consideration of future options in respect of this.
2. A progress report on financial management arrangements by the council.

This report addresses within its main body the issues the council wanted peer help and advice on. At various points it also refers to the pieces of work above, both of which have produced specific recommendations.

The LGA advice is that any action plan CIOS produces in response to the CPC should take account of all three reports.

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge every 4 to 5 years. The council of the Isles of Scilly (CIOS) had a Corporate Peer Challenge in 2015. Where relevant to do so, findings from that previous peer challenge have been referenced in this report.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent three days onsite at CIOS during which they:

- Spoke to more than 45 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders
- Gathered information and views from more than 25 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading
- Collectively spent more than 110 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 2.5 weeks in CIOS.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (10th – 12th January 2018). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

4.1 progress that had been made since the last CPC in 2015

The last CPC was in 2015 and the council asked for a stock take of progress since then. Many of the strengths and areas to address identified at the time are highlighted in our executive summary and covered throughout the relevant sections of this report. It is important to note that CIOS published the CPC report and subsequently approved an action plan. It has or is, tackling many of the recommendations that were made and we have listed some of the key areas of progress below:

- There has been material progress in respect of the council's 'leadership of place' evidenced by its strong and improving relationships with national government, the refreshing of the corporate plan, the emerging priorities and focus on 'big ticket' issues, such as 'Smart Islands' the clear engagement we witnessed with key regional/local stakeholder in terms of the future ambitions and sustainability for the Isles of Scilly – all of which is delivering significant benefits to residents and has the effect of enhancing the council's standing
- The council is demonstrating evidence of delivery in respect of key projects which underpin that leadership role. They have helped deliver significant inward investment to deliver core infrastructure improvements, notably the airport and road network
- CIOS has shown its performance in some key areas is very strong. The outcome of its Ofsted inspection in 2016 bears witness to this and should not be underestimated. Likewise its leadership in adult social care is strong and it is making a real contribution to the future sub regional plans in respect of health and social care (see Test of Assurance Report)
- The significant capacity issues in respect of IT and underlying management issues relating to finance which held it back are being tackled far more effectively than in 2015. The IAA with Cornwall Council is offering the necessary skills and expertise that had previously been absent in those areas. While further improvement is needed, the council is now far more self-aware and has developing plans in place to address these deficiencies (see Financial Management Progress Report)
- CIOS has looked to streamline and improve its governance-the reduced numbers of members in May 2017 aligned to the encouraging number new members are evidence of real purpose and intent. We saw members receiving a good induction, we saw members taking responsibility for their development and a desire to instil stronger governance arrangements. This is still new and work in progress but a good start.

In other areas less progress was evident. These are reflected in our executive summary, recommendations and the core body of this report. Three in particular are worthy of reference here as they are a break on improvement:

- There continues to be a lack of effective joint member/officer and ‘top team’ working which is impacting the council’s strategic leadership
- CIOS has not made sufficient progress in how it communicates with residents, staff and other key stakeholders
- Some core processes and systems which are reflective of a modern public body are still under-developed: programme, performance and risk management are three examples of these.

4.2 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

CIOS is refreshing its corporate plan and there are a range of emerging priorities. These are based upon transformational projects, which will benefit the isles and its residents, these include: Smart islands, Waste, IAA, water and sewerage treatment, integration of health and social care, Local Plan and housing. All stakeholders we spoke recognise these as key issues, amongst others, for the council to address for the future sustainability of the islands and helping to reduce costs.

At present this plan is ‘works in progress’. A key task now is to develop and confirm these priorities further so they are ‘owned’ and well communicated within and across CIOS. Once this is done they should then be aligned to the financial and resource capacity of the council and translated into delivery programmes with clear outcomes and accountabilities, so real change happens.

The council, alongside its partners have worked hard to develop and engage communities in respect of some of the projects above. An example of where this has worked well is the structured and well managed approach to proposed changes in respect of water and sewerage arrangements. This both outlined the scope of the potential changes to current arrangements but also the impact and associated improvements for residents specifically. It would be useful to build upon this by undertaking well managed, outcome focused engagement across the range of current priorities so that people know, understand, help shape and influence change through effective community engagement. From this a coherent and consistent narrative of the council’s role and influence can emerge, which properly describes the impact it is both seeking and helping to deliver for and with its communities.

As CIOS develops its priorities and narrative around change it will be important that it makes its position and role plain in some other key areas. This is especially true in terms of both tourism and transport. Some stakeholder described its position in respect of tourism as passive and others were not clear about its longer term aims for the sustainability of transport connectivity. As such the narrative of change described in the paragraph above must confirm the council’s aims for tourism and transport, so it forms a coherent story where everyone is crystal clear about the CIOS’s roles and intentions.

We met with a range of the council’s partners – and just like the council, they all have limited capacity but a willingness to work co-operatively for the benefit of the Isles of Scilly. Our view is the overall capacity of those partners could be enhanced by

developing a joint set of ambitions, with projects to deliver them and collectively developing programme management capacity, to help deliver these shared priorities. In such a way the partners will be 'getting on the same page'.

4.3 Leadership of Place

The Chairman and Vice Chairman were newly elected in May 2017. It was clear to us that they have a passion for Scilly and a deep-seated desire to ensure the council plays its part to the full in influencing positive change. Following a Boundary Commission Review the number of elected members has reduced from 21 to 16, and several were elected onto the council for the first time. This has clearly helped CIOS make financial savings. It has also created an opportunity for the leadership and members, new and old, to offer their 'fresh eyes and fresh voices', to engage with the communities they serve, about the future of the Islands and of CIOS too. Utilising the opportunity of the emerging corporate plan provides an ideal vehicle for members to be seen leading this so they are at the forefront of the leadership and improvement for both the councils and Scilly.

There is an extensive range of key projects and approaches that are shaping and driving positive change and the council is using its leadership to influence these to good effect. The fact that the Isles of Scilly's Smart Islands programme was included within the government's Industrial Strategy speaks volumes – it is a cutting edge programme supported by £2.95m of LEP funding with a focus on more effective use of energy and some key outcomes which will benefit the community significantly if achieved (20% reduction in electricity bills by 2020, 40% of the islands' energy demand met through renewable generation by 2025, 40% of vehicles being low carbon or electric by 2025). Alongside these are significant improvements to other key infrastructure areas: notably the airport development, waste and recycling, food safety and the roads. As such it is very evident that CIOS is demonstrating unequivocally how well it can and does undertake its 'place shaping and leadership' role.

CIOS has a progressive and productive engagement with national government and its chief executive especially has been very proactive on behalf of the council to enable this to happen. All of the projects above and more besides are enhancing the reputation of CIOS on a regional and national platform. This means the council is able to position itself more strongly than before, for example it is positioning the Islands as an ideal 'testbed' environment for trialing new and progressive approaches for national and regional policy development, for example in terms of energy, waste, and the integration of health and social care. The relationship and profile this is generating for the council and Scilly with national government is a real strength – it is a council and a Place, which has as many 'offers' to national government, as 'asks' from it.

As the council's leadership works actively to promote the economy and infrastructure of Scilly positive changes are taking place. CIOS has ambitious plans in respect of housing growth and affordable housing – wanting to establish a viable framework for enabling development and the delivery of new homes to address the acute needs of its community. This is clear evidence of a council looking forward with purpose but the challenge is capacity, and as its plans develop it will be important that it engages with

and calls upon the necessary capacity and expertise externally as well as inside to inform and help it deliver its ambitions in respect of housing.

The council is partnering to good effect with Cornwall through the IAA, which is bringing additional capacity and expertise to bear in key areas including finance and IT. Another important development is the newly established leadership board with Cornwall Council and the full range of key stakeholders across the Duchy and Scilly. This provides an important strategic platform for all partners to collectively develop and promote their joint aims to national government. It would be useful for both the council and the Board to reflect upon how this significant partnership could be built upon further.

Finally, to inform this CPC, the LGA undertook a 'Test of Assurance' of CIOS's leadership and future options in respect of social care. That report overall paints a positive picture and usefully makes some specific recommendations for improvement or review, including how in health and social care, CIOS need to be clear about outcomes it and its partners want to achieve and how this might best be delivered. The council should take account of this as it responds to the findings of the CPC.

4.4 Organisational leadership and governance

We have referred to the range of new members on the council, following the elections in May 2017. We had the opportunity to meet with many of them and it is encouraging to see and hear about their ambitions for Scilly and the council. As a cohort, there is now a more diverse group of members which better reflect the communities they serve.

CIOS introduced new governance arrangements in May this year. It has streamlined and simplified its arrangements, placing a greater emphasis on decision making at full council and the introduction of one Scrutiny Committee. We did not see any political meetings during our visit but they are streamed via social media and in the view of the peer team, the new arrangements should be given sufficient time to fully bed in. This is again good 'work in progress' but there are clearly changes and improvements that will need to be made including: a proper forward plan, further attention to timing and presentation of reports to enable members to make good and informed decisions, along with strengthening the arrangements it is putting in place to ensure there is an effective scrutiny function. However, it was refreshing to see members seeking external peer support as they come to terms with their new roles and chairing responsibilities. The peer team suggest that a more formal review of governance and decision-making takes place by May 2019, to enable the new arrangements to bed in and work in practice – any such review and evaluation should have an agreed set of outcomes in mind.

In some areas the council informs and engages well with its members – the member induction pack we saw and the positive feedback we received from new members confirmed this as a glowing success. It is an approach that should now systematically be built on so members are regularly updated, briefed and informed and encouraged positively in their development by the council. Such progressive approaches and engagement with members undoubtedly has a knock-on impact for the effectiveness of member and officer relationships. The 'lead member' role was introduced following the May elections in 2017 and we were pleased to see members taking on their 'brief' areas with great dedication. Many have sought out peer support from experienced councillors

elsewhere to help them with their roles and this is very positive. Alongside the review of the new governance arrangements it would be useful for the council to consider whether to formalise the 'Lead Member' role, so there is specific clarity of role and purpose. However, overall it appears to be creating leadership capacity and encouraging better working relationships.

It was evident that some members have developed effective working relationships with some senior officers based on mutual respect and managed expectations. However, this is not universally true. In the peer teams view it is fundamental for the future success of the council that it builds a stronger member and officer team as for the present this is not the case. There are issues around mutual trust, ineffective communication and lack of clarity of role and purpose. All of these are hindering the effectiveness of the council's leadership and need to be addressed. The refreshed corporate plan offers the joint leadership team of senior officers and members an ideal vehicle to purposefully address this. We believe they should spend dedicated time together confirming priorities and ambitions and focus on the effective delivery of the corporate plan. In doing so, where necessary with external support, they should re-establish some of the key enablers which will help make that happen well, including clarity of outcomes, roles and responsibilities, trust and transparency.

It was our privilege to meet with many of the council's staff including the Extended Leadership Team, the group of front-line managers below the senior team. This group is now regularly meeting and working through cross cutting corporate issues – this has the potential to be built upon so it becomes even more proactive. Both they and all staff we met are positive and want to be more effectively engaged – they are proud of the council and what it seeks to do. They can and should be real advocates for CIOS within their communities and to help them with this the council should harness this strong sense of good will, through structured and regular communication and engagement with its staff groups.

It is important that the council develops further the key stakeholder groups and opportunities above but at the same time instils the rigour and discipline required of a modern effective public body and puts in place a 'golden thread' for effective performance management. The refreshed Corporate Plan should help establish and drive clear service plans with outcomes and targets. This must be accompanied by some core building blocks which are either missing or not well adhered to and this limits capacity. For example, the council needs to put in place effective performance reporting, risk and programme management and full compliance with staff appraisals linked to targets, so that all staff know what is expected of them and deliver accordingly.

4.5 Financial planning and viability

From a low base, the council is now making progress in financial planning and monitoring and we saw an increasing clarity, understanding and accountability in respect of its financial arrangements. The IAA with Cornwall Council and the influence of their Finance Manager who acts as CIOS's S151 officer is creating a much stronger basis for trust and progress. For example, the 2017/18 council budget is based on a sounder footing than budgets in previous years and all the members we spoke with are far better sighted and knowledgeable in terms of finance than they had been previously.

Alongside this the introduction of better financial systems and practices is likewise setting in place a far more robust set of arrangements. As such we believe the council is starting to turn around the legacy issues in terms of finance that have held it back, created uncertainty and sometimes lack of trust internally.

For the moment, the 151 officer is rightly caveating his messaging until the new finance system is introduced (1 February 2018) and then properly embedded, so he and the council can be assured of accurate data and compliance with systems. Alongside this the IAA is also providing change management workshops within CIOS so all key stakeholders know and understand what is expected of them in terms of financial management. As such this isn't just about financial systems but instilling a clear culture of accountability. The council has rightly consolidated the number of decision makers in terms of finance until the systems.

Through the work of many, but the chief executive especially, the council has been proactive in attracting inward investment and grant funding to help support some of the major capital programme as these projects are important for the future sustainability of the Islands. They are also important for the council's future financial sustainability, since they will also contribute to reducing revenue costs into the future e.g. waste, water and sewerage treatment. As such it will be important that CIOS plays a full and active role in the Fair Funding Review consultations as this will be a platform for it to feed in some of the significant funding issues and challenges into a formal process, one being the Fire and Rescue Service which currently costs the council, we are told in excess of £300k but for which they receive a grant of circa £25k.

The council now has a Medium Term Financial Plan emerging which will help it chart its financial strategies over a longer period. That plan identifies a structural deficit in CIOS's finances of £390,000 per annum ongoing. So whilst there are many positives to report, the size of the problems the council faces into the medium term should not be underestimated and appropriate plans and action needs to be established to respond to this.

With a better platform from which to operate there are some pressing issues for the council to attend to which we believe it is usefully to very plainly set out below:

- set a budget for 2018/19 as a matter of urgency-reflecting its demand pressures and saving requirements and plans
- start annual budget planning for 2019/20 in the period April-June 2018
- ensure its MTFP identifies the issues to be tackled and the means by which the council will remain financially sustainable over the next 3-5 years and then beyond
- Align the refreshed Corporate Plan to the MTFP – so it can be turned into credible delivery plans
- Undertake regular and timely financial monitoring, for both revenue and capital throughout the year, informing members of spend and projected out-turns
- Track 'agreed savings' on a regular basis to ensure the options are being delivered in line with the agreed budget

- Put in place consolidated and integrated arrangements in respect of :finance, risk, performance and programme management, so they are ‘all on the same page’
- Establish its policy and practices in respect of commercialism and investment, aligning these to its ambitions and help it address its financial pressures.

Finally, to inform this CPC, the LGA’s undertook a specific piece of work which reviewed the progress of CIOS’s Financial Arrangements. That report provides more detail and made several specific recommendations in terms of the council’s financial planning and viability and the council should take account of this as it responds to the findings of the CPC.

4.6 Capacity to deliver

We found that the council was quite self-critical and whilst that is a useful discipline as it helps focus on what needs to be done it is important to reflect on how it has enhanced its capacity to deliver, especially since the last CPC. For example, the IAA has been a real ‘game changer’, by providing that core senior expertise capacity in finance and more effective governance. It reflects the sense of purpose and partnership between Cornwall Council and CIOS that has, is, and will into the future, significantly create a far more solid platform for increasing resilience and building capacity in respect of finance, IT and potentially more besides.

Furthermore, we came across some great innovations harnessing capacity on an international stage. For example, the Smart Islands Programme, is putting the Isles of Scilly and the council ‘in the shop window’ in terms of the national Industrial Strategy and the links, engagement and added capacity that partners such as Hitachi bring with their international expertise and willingness to add capacity to the delivery of projects so they achieve real outcomes should not be underestimated.

Also, the council has a ‘Good’ Ofsted judgement in respect of its Children’s Services. CIOS and the residents of Scilly should be very proud of this top performing service. In other places where the Ofsted outcomes haven’t matched CIOS’s, the capacity of those councils has been seriously drained. It is important that CIOS reflects on what it does well.

There is a new political administration and alongside this a new senior officer team. As described in the view of the peer team the council should now build upon their individual skills, knowledge and experience for the benefit of CIOS and Scilly as a place. It was very evident that many of the right components are in place but it needs nurturing and coalescing, since for the present at least not everyone is ‘on the same page’. In the view of the peer team, dedicated time to undertake joint development for this ‘top team’, with a focus on delivering the council’s Corporate Plan is a fundamental building block to help enable future success.

As already reported we came across a range of council employees all of whom were very keen to ‘make a difference’. CIOS has new and emerging priorities and will also need to respond to the challenges of public service reform nationally and regionally too. Within this context it is important that the council regularly reviews its officer structure

and deployment of staff and in the peer teams view the council's staffing plans need to keep pace with such changes. As such in our view it is important that CIOS spends dedicated time to ensure it has a fit for purpose office structure with the right skills. To enable this it should create a workforce plan which reflects the structure, skills and ability required to deliver the Corporate Plan, is focussed on the present and future role of the council, incorporates appropriate recruitment and reward strategies and is then delivered upon.

A key issue to be addressed will be the effectiveness of the council's plans and approach in respect of communication. Ironically, within a workforce of just over 100 and servicing a population of just over 2,500 the failures of an effective communications strategy raised its head time and again. Structured, outcome and evidence focussed engagement is not the norm and it should be as its absence impacts negatively in terms of the reputation of the council. There is more CIOS can and should do to improve this as it is especially passive in utilising the benefits of social media and not as far forward as it could be in respect of using its website to enable services or to engage with residents. Consequently, adopting a coherent and effective communications plan is an important recommendation from the peer challenge.

In the executive summary of this report we referred to a number of 'to do's' that the council needs to attend to as they are key enablers to create and maintain capacity. They are listed in Appendix 1 and in the peer team's view should be responded to so that CIOS becomes a modern and effective council. These include developing a digital strategy to improve service capacity, programme and project capability to support delivery of your corporate and partnership priorities, a performance management framework and reporting to ensure the council remains on track.

CIOS is a good partner and is seeking to engage proactively within and across Cornwall, the South West and nationally too. Organisations such as ADASS, ADCS and the LGA are national bodies who are always willing and able to support the council. It would be useful for the council to reflect upon how the various improvement agencies and bodies regionally and nationally can support them to best effect with their sector led improvement ambitions.

5. Next steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on many of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Andy Bates, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Andy's contact details are: Email andy.bates@local.gov.uk

In the meantime, we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

Follow up visit

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the council assess the impact of the peer challenge and demonstrate the progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team. It is a lighter-touch version of the original visit and does not necessarily involve all members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the council. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next 2 years.

Next Corporate Peer Challenge

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Review every 4 to 5 years. It is therefore anticipated that the Council will commission their next Peer Challenge before 2022.

Appendix 1

The List of 'to do's recommendations

- Establish a robust corporate planning cycle
- Establish a robust budget setting and monitoring cycle which aligns to the above
- Put in place a performance management framework and reporting cycle including benchmarking
- Have a disciplined approach to programme and project management including risk management
- Ensure public reports are clear and of high quality
- Develop and publish a forward plan for council decisions
- Clarify the role of lead members
- Provide continual professional support to all Members.