



Report of the results of the peer challenge for the CPA self assessment produced by Carlisle City Council, 7th, 8th, 9th May 2003

1. Background

1.1 In October 2002 the Audit Commission published its proposals on the methodology to be adopted for carrying out comprehensive performance assessments (CPA) for district councils, which was piloted in ten "pathfinder" authorities. It was subsequently decided to carry out a second piloting stage, this time for the district councils in one county. A number of amendments were made to the draft methodology in the light of this piloting, but now that it has been finalised one of the central elements remains a self-assessment to be challenged by peers.

1.2 The Audit Commission's intended aims of peer challenge are to:

- Provide an objective, robust and managed external challenge to the self assessment;
- Encourage thinking about strengths and areas for improvement;
- Contribute to producing a strong and forward-looking improvement plan.

A number of different approaches and organisations have been accredited by the Audit Commission to provide the requisite peer challenge to the model that has been developed by SOLACE Enterprises.

1.3 The SOLACE model involves a chief executive and leader working with a facilitator for three days plus a follow up "Challenge Event" the following week. This model has been specifically designed for providing peer challenge rather than being an adaptation of an existing model and meets the Audit Commission's requirements for peer challenge:

- Using credible peers who understand the working of a district council;
- Peers must be independent from the council;
- The peer team must be communicated to and acceptable to the council; The peer challenge must cover the four top level corporate assessment questions;
- The peer team must provide written and verbal feedback to the council.



1.4 The SOLACE model sets out to test the robustness of three different aspects of the self-assessment carried out by the local authority, namely:

- The scope and rigour of the **process** adopted by the authority for producing its self-assessment (e.g. the extent of stakeholder involvement, the breadth and depth of information gathered, etc.);
- The range and honesty of the **content** of the self-assessment (e.g. is it comprehensive and does it appear a balanced document, addressing areas for improvement as well as successes?);
- The council's **capacity to deliver** on the conclusions and address the areas of risk set out in the self assessment (e.g. looking at what progress has already been achieved in the areas where the need for action has been identified, the likelihood of progress being maintained, ownership of the assessment by the council's leadership, the resources likely to be available, etc.).

1.5 **The purpose of the SOLACE Enterprises' model of Peer Challenge is to help the local authority to ensure that the final version of its self-assessment is as accurate a reflection of its current performance, achievements and future capacity as it possibly can be.**

As well as being designed specifically to provide peer challenge for CPA self assessment there are some other distinctive features of the SOLACE model including:

- The emphasis placed on establishing a dialogue with the council;
- The understanding that Peer Challenge is not part of the inspection
- The emphasis placed on the flexibility of the challenge process and focusing on the specific circumstances of and issues facing a council.

2. The Carlisle City Council peer challenge process

2.1 The peer challenge of Carlisle City Council's self-assessment began during the week commencing 4 May 2003 when a provisional timetable of activities was drawn up and background documentation circulated to the challenge team.



2.2 The challenge team was also briefed for the process. The team was:

- Mike Cosgrove SOLACE Facilitator
- Anne Seex, Chief Executive, Norwich City Council
- Councillor John Dobson, Leader of Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council

2.3 On the evening prior to the three-day visit the team met to prepare for the challenge process. In that preparatory meeting the team:

- Reviewed the Audit Commission's proposed methodology for CPA for district councils and the SOLACE model for challenging the self-assessment element of that process.
- Reviewed the background information provided by the authority, including the self-assessment, the related evidence and the additional documentation requested by the SOLACE Facilitator
- Agreed lines of enquiry to be pursued during the visit and additional activities and documentation that was needed to gather information on these
- In the light of that agreement, reviewed and agreed adjustments to the provisional timetable of activities.
- Agreed a *modus operandi* for the process (e.g. team roles and responsibilities)

2.4 The lines of enquiry identified by the team were congruent with the four main questions-

- What is the Council trying to achieve?
- How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?
- What has the Council achieved / not achieved to date?
- In the light of what the Council has learned what does it plan to do next?

However The Team sought substantial evidence about achievement, partnerships, consultation and performance. It also investigated the basis for City Vision and the context within which this strategic policy has been taken forward.

2.5 The team examined the top-level questions and the ten key themes for CPA, but gave particular attention to the issues that appeared from the documentation to warrant particular focus. It was recognised by the team that three people working on site for three days could not look at absolutely everything in the same level of detail and that the process needed to be bounded in some way.



- 2.6 The various methods that the team used to gather information included:
- Face to face and telephone interviews with a cross section of stakeholders from inside and outside the authority - Cumbria County Council, Eden District Council, CVS, NHS Carlisle PCT NHS Health Action Zone, Members from all three political parties, The Housing Tenants Association, Unison, the Police, Council Officers, Officers of transferred services, Chamber of Commerce, District Audit, representative of the HE&FE sector).
 - Small group discussions e.g.- The Management Team, Business Unit Heads, Cabinet Members, Local Business Partners
 - A "table dialogue" session involving group discussions with a diagonal slice of some 20 staff from the authority including frontline staff from a range of units.
 - Meeting partners and staff at various venues (e.g. Sure Start, Brampton Community Centre, Kingmoor Park).
 - An E-mail asking for comments sent out via the Council's intranet to all staff and all elected members, which elicited a number of responses and a detailed discussion about capacity.
 - A tour to familiarise the team with Carlisle City, its partnerships and activities across a wide geographic area and a walk through the city centre.
- 2.7 Throughout the process the team reflected back to the Council what they thought they were seeing and learning which provided the authority with an opportunity to steer the team to look at additional information if they thought that they had not been given quite the right message. It was also intended that this dialogue would help to generate an ownership of our feedback because nothing would come as a surprise.
- 2.8 A week after the three-day visit the team returned to the authority to feedback the results of the information gathering process in a more structured way at a "challenge event". This event was attended by: Leading Members, Management Team, Opposition Members, business unit managers, staff and stakeholders
- 2.9 Although the presentation made by the team was robust and evidenced, the aim was to make this Challenge Event as informal and as non-adversarial as possible.
- 2.10 The results of the process outlined above, including the challenge event, are set out in the remainder of this report which is structured as follows:



- Section Three: Feedback on the top-level question **What is the Council seeking to achieve?** and the three themes that fall under this question namely:
 - *Ambition*
 - *Prioritisation*
 - *Focus*
- Section Four: Feedback on the top- level question **How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?** and the two themes that fall under this question namely:
 - *Capacity*
 - *Performance management*
 - *Strengths*
- Section Five: Feedback on the top- level question **What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date?** and the two themes that fall under this question, namely:
 - *Achievement (quality of service)*
 - *Achievement (service improvement)*
 - *Investment*
- Section Six: Feedback on the top-level question **What does the Council plan to do next?** and the two themes that fall under this question, namely:
 - *Learning*
 - *Future plans*
- Section Seven: feedback on the three different elements for self assessment i.e.:
 - *The **process** by which it was produced*
 - *Its overall **content***
 - *Its **deliverability***
- Section Eight: The Council's response
- Conclusion

In making its comments the team sought to add value by concentrating on those areas where, as peers, they were able to identify issues that had not been fed back to the authority by other commentators, or where it came to a different view on an issue that had already been discussed. While the team took care to note areas of strengths as well as areas for improvement, since the main aim of the challenge process was to stimulate improvement, comparatively more attention



has been given in this report to explaining and evidencing the areas on which the team believes the Council should focus its attention.

3. What is the Council seeking to achieve?

Theme One: Ambition

Strengths:

- Leadership - strong
- Vision-City Vision - excellent
- Partnership – far reaching
- Community – deep and robust

It was strongly evidenced that much good work had been undertaken to determine a robust approach to strategic leadership and community cohesion. The Team were particularly impressed with the contribution that the Council had made in initiating the City Vision and the joint LSP with Eden and in the way that the Council's goals and objectives flow from these broader visions and plans. Key individuals have a sound sense of what is required and their strategic role.

Further Work:

- Clarity
- LSP Mark II
- Education / skills in the local economy (Fender)
- Recent work on urban deprivation in South Carlisle.

The last three of these areas for further work are well-known to the Council and predominate in their comments and plans for the future. The first area represents a view from the Team that the volume and complexity of documentation that has evolved from the City Vision and within the Council may be in danger of becoming a barrier to understanding and may be in need of editing and re-presenting internally. Given the geographical isolation of Carlisle further work is required inevitably to continue to progress the strategic ambitions.

Theme Two: Prioritisation

Strengths:

- Getting there very effectively
- Corporate plan
- External communication
- Strong consultation research and engagement



Without doubt, Carlisle's track record in consultation and engagement is impressive and substantial. The Team were able to see clearly the process by which the Council had taken up the issues of a Theatre and new Leisure Centre initially raised in City Vision, consulted on them as part of the budget-setting and then, in light of the responses, commissioned feasibility studies. Members and Senior Managers were clear that this was part of growing and developing the City's role in the sub-region.

Further Work:

- List the must dos
- Show deprivation / Census
- Internal communication
- Plans and budgets alignment

There needs to be a refinement of existing mechanisms to achieve some sharpening of the existing processes. Internal communication at substantial periods of change needs strengthening.

Theme Three: Focus

Strengths:

- Kingmoor Business Park – dogged success
- Foot and mouth – crisis into triumph
- Housing LSVT is complete (DSO to follow in 2003/4)
- Structures, roles and responsibilities reflect priorities

The Team considered that the drive which has been brought to deriving the Council's goals and objectives from those established by the LSP and City Vision processes exemplified consistent focus. We heard from many partners of how Carlisle responded to the Foot and Mouth crisis in an exemplary manner and then forged a stronger set of outcomes from its experience.

Further Work:

- Use of performance information
- Realistic internal Audit programme
- Further systems familiarity
- Complete front office Reception and CRM

Currently there are a number of activities that are in the process of further implementation, and these are recognised.

4. How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

Theme Four: Capacity

Strengths:



- Member development
- Best Value reviews
- Member / Officer relationships
- Staff training
- Willing to adopt alternative forms of service delivery

There is much to commend the approaches the City has adopted. We heard of extensive Member development and observed good, honest and robust relationships between Members and officers.

Further Work:

- County area forums
- Structural embedding
- Workforce development
- IIP Mark II

Workforce development is recognised by the authority as a priority, given the change agenda and development needs of the staff group.

Theme Five: Performance Management

Strengths:

- Excellent early attempts at Performance Management
- Useful framework for delivering priorities
- Complaints monitoring
- Risk management

The performance management framework is in place and developing further. That, together with a demonstrably thorough approach to risk management and attention to complaints, provides a sound degree of assurance.

Further Work:

- Financial Benchmarking
- Full implementation of MTFP
- Monitoring within Business Units
- Team and individual focus

There needs to be further work to reinforce performance management at a strategic and operational level. As a number of managers and staff have been newly appointed, plans are in train to improve individual performance appraisal.

5. What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date?

Theme Six: Achievement (quality of service)



Strengths:

- Public satisfaction – high
- Benefits self assessment
- Cohesive communities following F & M

Streetscape from personal observationThe Team felt that the results of the NOP research spoke for themselves in terms of the high levels of satisfaction recorded. Even more impressive was the marked change between the 2000 Postal Survey (done in accordance with the Audit Commission requirements) and the NOP research. Such significant increases in satisfaction are extremely noteworthy. Talking with passing members of the public and walking through the streets strengthened this evidence of qualitative change.

Further Work:

- Celebrating success
- Bench marking comparisons
- Relationship with C.C.C.
- Public transport for regeneration areas.

The issue of comparators is acknowledged as requiring further work.

Theme Seven: Achievement (improvement)

Strengths:

- Communities and users acknowledgement of improvement
- PIs upward trend
- City centre excellence – The Lanes
- Improvements match with priorities
- Parish Council and Clerks' network Initiative

Evidence gained much supports these strengths. The direct approach to achievement of improvement is widespread. Improvement through organisational change was introduced incrementally with the appointment of new staff. Actions are priority based.

Further Work:

- Clarity of outcomes
- Reinforce step changes
- Too soon to assess Housing LSVT and Leisure after transfer
- Clarity around agreed baseline



Determining further clarity of desired outcomes and showing how step change can be better assessed will need more work.

Theme Eight: Investment

Strengths:

- Building blocks in place
- Reorganisation completed
- Asset management
- Open to challenge

Investment is soundly based and well understood in a prudent and secure manner. Carlisle City displays openness.

Further Work:

- HR policies
- Medium term financial plan
- Procurement
- Organisational Development

Whilst MTFP and procurement process can be well taken forward, more considered thought should be applied to organisational development because of the speed of change already undergone and the potential future uncertainties.

6. What does the Council plan to do next?

Theme Nine: Learning

Strengths:

- Open and approachable
- Learning from The Millennium
- Use of external advice
- Project management – LSVT and leisure

Some good and indeed harsh lessons have been internalised well. The approach taken towards LSVT and Leisure are pertinent examples.

Further Work:

- Cultural change
- Further partnership consolidation
- Post internal reorganisation consolidation
- Reflection



Reasonably, much good action has been focussed upon service delivery and creating a fit-for-purpose organisation. Yet change across the piece is dynamic, and relationship and sector changes will require additional consideration.

Theme Ten: Future plans

Strengths:

- Continue with City Vision
- Continue with Corporate Planning Process
- Continue BVPs
- Refine consultation processes
- Local Housing Strategy

Both formal and implicit future planning processes give considerable assurance in the manner they are determined and actioned.

Further Work:

- Clearer milestones
- Engagement with the new Business Communities
- Consolidation with new partners e.g. PCT
- Respond to the Fender FE/HE Report

The strategic framework within which Carlisle operates is changing. Engaging and influencing new actors may well require a different order of working to continue the journey towards The Carlisle vision.

7. Process, content and deliverability

7.1 This section of the challenge report sets out the team's findings on the three aspects of the authority's CPA self assessment which the team was charged with assessing namely:

- The ***process*** through which it was produced
- Its ***content***
- Its ***deliverability***

Process

- A good structure
- Very tight timescales
- Key people were not in post
- Good involvement and consultation
- Required a further draft.



The practical difficulty that Carlisle had was that 2 key people who could usefully have contributed to the initial draft were not in post. The timetable was therefore ambitious. The result of the 90-agency consultation had not yet been received at the time of our visit.

Content

- Very detailed
- KLOE
- Needs highlights
- Bring out your achievements and vision

The format and tone of the draft report was sensible and informed. We felt that Carlisle tended not to emphasise their considerable achievements and strengths. Inevitably it required some revision and we hope that it is now easier to 'see the wood from the trees'.

Deliverability

- What will The Inspection Team require?
- Evidence based
- A high level of confidence
- Well able to be delivered

The Challenge Team is of the opinion that the assessment report and its action plan are well capable of being delivered to a high standard with good political leadership.

8. The Council's response to the peer challenge

Carlisle City Council welcomed the challenge process and considers the approach of the Peer Team to have been thorough, helpful and positive; it was an interesting learning experience. It considers the Team's findings reasonable and recognises its strengths and weaknesses within the comments. The Council's self-assessment document and improvement plan will now be amended to reflect the Peers' comments. This should result in documents that have more clarity and focus and which give a more accurate picture of the performance of Carlisle City Council.

Throughout the Team's visit all of the City Council's representatives were eager to provide information and discuss issues. Any additional information that was asked was provided speedily. It seemed to the Team that Members and Senior Managers were actively engaged in evaluating and responding to comments made by the Team in a mature and intelligent way.

The final challenge session was well attended by Managers whom we had met during the course of the meeting and by the Leaders of all three



political parties. The questions raised appeared to be carefully considered and closely related to the feedback that the Team provided.

9. Conclusion

Much good and substantial work has been undertaken in making an honest and robust self-assessment of Carlisle City's strengths and weaknesses within the CPA process. Evidence gathered has been considerable, views and opinions generously given and evaluated.

The Challenge Process was undertaken against a background involving a tight timescale and the aftermath of an election in which no party gained an overall majority. Hence whilst the team saw members from all political parties, we were unable to attend any council meetings simply because of the timing of our visit. This was more than compensated for through the extensive series of interviews and meetings with partners who freely gave us a spectrum of views that endorsed the submission.

These, together with the evidence we have gathered and the assessments made, lead The Team to consider that Carlisle City will meet with the Inspection Team in an open manner, be able to provide all reasonable evidence required; and display a level of commitment to the process that is a true reflection of its achievements and ambition.

Mike Cosgrove on behalf of SOLACE Enterprises

May 2003