

**Dover District Council
Follow-up Report
01 October 2001**

Local Government Improvement Programme

First Follow-up Visit to Dover District Council
October 01 2001

Introduction

1. The peer review of Dover District Council (DDC) took place between 11 and 15 September 2000. The review report identified a number of key issues, which DDC needed to address to continue moving forward.
2. Following a review, an authority is visited twice more within two years in order to assess its progress against the key recommendations in the report. The first follow-up visit with which this report is concerned took place on 1 October 2001. The team conducting the follow-up visit were Philip Bostock, Chief Executive, Exeter City Council, Peter Hillman, Executive Member, Northumberland County Council and Jan Wickham, Review Manager, Improvement and Development Agency, who were all members of the original peer review team.

Programme for the Visit

3. The programme for the visit and its timing were discussed and agreed in advance with the authority. It comprised discussions with:
 - the leader of the council and the chief executive
 - the head of corporate policy and personnel
 - the leader of the opposition
 - the corporate management team
 - a group of heads of service and middle managers
 - a group of non-executive members
 - the executive
4. At the end of visit initial verbal feedback was given to the leader of the council and the chief executive.

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5. In the course of a one-day programme it is not possible to examine in-depth all the areas highlighted by the original review report. This report presents the findings in relation to the key recommendations. In addition, at the time of the visit DDC was facing the need to make significant budget savings, which would necessitate a restructuring and some voluntary redundancies. The report also comments on the way in which the authority is handling this difficult situation.
6. It should be noted that whilst discussions took place during the visit with a number of groups 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 Key Recommendations

Strengthen the Political Leadership of the Council in Order to Provide More of a Balance Within the Member/Officer Partnership and a Strategic Steer

7. DDC is an authority where the leadership of the council has changed on approximately an annual basis over the last 17 years. In May 2001 a new leader and executive were elected.
8. The new leading members are conscious of the authority's reputation for having been "officer-led" which the peer review report highlighted. They are keen to provide greater direction than has been the case in the past. Whilst it is early days in the life of the administration there is strong evidence to suggest that the leader and executive are having some success in relation to this aspiration and that the management team have been happy to assist this process.
9. Leading members have been proactive in indicating to officers the areas they consider should be looked at in terms of achieving the budget reductions.
10. The leader, together with the chief executive, recently fronted the meetings with staff about the budget reductions and this was acknowledged and appreciated by officers. He is also generally visible within the authority.
11. Executive members are keen to have knowledge of, and be involved in the items, which appear on the agendas for their meetings and now defer reports where they do not feel this to be the case.

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12. This is encouraging progress which the review team was pleased to note. The leadership acknowledges, however, that it needs to provide greater guidance to officers through a revised vision, which is currently being formulated. The decisions which are being made in relation to the budget need to reflect this vision. Once it is in place, the leadership needs to be proactive in communicating the vision not only within the council but also outside.

Increase the Capacity of the Corporate Management Team (CMT) to Focus on Corporate and Strategic Issues

13. CMT is working at a strategic level with the executive in order to deliver the budget savings. It now holds meetings exclusively to deal with strategic issues.
14. There has been greater delegation given to officers which has assisted CMT to achieve a stronger strategic focus but it is recognised that delegations will need to be revisited in the light of the new constitution.
15. The managers forum, which involves CMT meeting with heads of service and other managers, still needs to find a suitable format. Managers feel that the subjects which are discussed or brainstormed are often relevant to only a limited number of officers and would prefer the meetings to focus on issues of more general interest. They acknowledge, however, that they have not been proactive in putting forward suggestions when asked.
16. The value of the managers forum is acknowledged as a vehicle for bringing officers across the council together. The group as a whole needs to accept responsibility for ensuring it makes an impact in terms of discussing and carrying forward ideas on issues of importance for the council and the district.

Reviewing its Current Partnership Activity/Positively Pursuing the Community Leadership Role

17. DDC has made good progress in terms of both its partnership working and its community leadership role. It held a second large-scale community event in May 2001 which reinforced the vision for the district and resulted in a community strategy forum being formed with over 200 members from the private, public and voluntary sectors. This is to be overseen by a community strategy board, which DDC will both lead and administer.
18. There are also urban and rural regeneration boards, which will ensure that the interests of all communities within the district are taken into account.

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19. A draft community strategy will be produced for consultation by the end of the year. It is intended that this will *"determine priorities and provide an overarching framework for the provision of services and build and rationalise all existing partnerships"*.
20. This work will provide an important opportunity for some members to increase their profile within the district and with partners.

Reviewing its Current Political Arrangements in order to Provide Greater Clarity around Members' Role in the Community and around Scrutiny

21. DDC is proposing, together with its towns and parishes, to establish community forums, which will act as a means of consultation with the public. It is considered that these will provide members with an additional vehicle for their work within the community and should ensure that there is a formal mechanism for significant local issues to be raised centrally.
22. However, there was evidence to suggest that the role, and in particular the resourcing, of the community forums needs to be thought through in greater detail and these topics should form part of the deliberations around the new constitution. Indeed, members of the review team felt that some quality time needs to be devoted to the completion of the new constitution as it will be critical to the effective underpinning of future structures and relationships.
23. In so doing, it may be beneficial to draw upon best practice elsewhere in terms of community forums as there are many authorities who have a long history of operating such structures.
24. Both officers and members felt that the scrutiny function within the council is improving but that there is still some way to go. It was thought by some people, for example, that the committees find it easier to scrutinise external bodies rather than the council's own activities, and by others that some duplication had arisen between the activities of some recently established working groups and the work of existing bodies.
25. Issues such as these are common to authorities throughout the country as members become accustomed to a totally new way of working. There are measures, however, which can be put in place in order to address these teething difficulties. These include further training opportunities, increased officer support to the scrutiny structures possibly through short-term secondments and visits to other authorities who have been successfully operating scrutiny bodies for some time. It is suggested that DDC give some thought to some, or all, of these options.
26. It should be noted, however, in relation to member training that DDC has worked hard to improve the provision of development opportunities to its councillors. This was recognised by officers and members alike and is commended by the review team.

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Developing Meaningful Consultation Mechanisms Building Upon Existing Networks

27. The establishment of the community forums and the community strategy forum has, and will, add to the range of mechanisms available to the council for consultation purposes.
28. The authority has also introduced a Citizens' Panel since the review took place and a Tenants' Compact has been agreed and signed.
29. Extensive use was made of a range of mechanisms to undertake the consultation around new political management arrangements, including focus groups, doorstep surveys and a newsletter.
30. DDC will need to ensure that it makes full use of the information, which emerges, from its consultation with the public and partners in order to guard against consultation fatigue amongst those approached and to achieve economies of scale.

Reviewing Its Internal Communication Mechanisms

31. DDC has taken some steps to improve internal communications since the review took place. Its internal staff magazine, 'Snapshot' is now produced on a monthly basis. It appears to be generally well-regarded although efforts to obtain suggestions from staff as to how it could be improved were unsuccessful.
32. There have been some all-staff meetings at which the chief executive and the leader spoke about the restructuring which will be a necessary component of the budget savings strategy.
33. There is, however, still scope to effect further improvements, particularly in respect of the current budget saving proposals. Some staff felt strongly that there are areas of council activity regarded as priorities and from within which it would be unacceptable to allow voluntary redundancies. They considered that these areas of service should have been indicated at the outset so that officers working within them who might be interested in voluntary redundancy did not have their hopes raised unnecessarily.
34. They were also concerned that the vision which will underpin the budget decisions has not yet been made clear. Whilst the reasons why this, and the information referred to previously, has not yet been made available are understood, it is important that the leadership of DDC recognises the need to communicate openly and effectively on issues which have such a personal impact on staff. In considering the milestones in the process of the restructuring it will be important to proactively determine the key messages and their timing both in relation to staff, the press and the public.

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35. There is also a need to consider the effectiveness of current communication with frontline councillors as there is evidence to suggest that they feel less well-informed about decision-making since new political management arrangements were put in place. This situation should be assisted when the new publication of key executive decisions comes into effect.

Building Upon its Work in Developing a Corporate Planning Framework and in Producing Management Information

36. DDC has made good progress in the production of management information. It has recently compiled its first comprehensive report incorporating performance indicator data, personnel statistics and an update on Best Value reviews. The information is presented in a clear and succinct format.
37. Whilst the report was presented to members there is evidence to suggest that they have yet to fully appreciate its significance and to enter into discussions with officers on its contents. It may be beneficial therefore for officers and members to discuss their respective roles in relation to performance management in the light of the new political structures.
38. There is also a need to ensure that when the revised vision emerges it informs the service plans which already exist. In its absence heads of service relate their plans to the themes within the Best Value Performance Plan. However, links are often mechanistic at present rather than reflective of corporate priorities truly informing service-based approaches.
39. Similarly the council's own vision will need to reflect its part in delivering the community strategy when this has been produced in order to ensure that the overall performance management framework is both comprehensive and clear.

Developing a Clear Corporate ICT Strategy for the Council

40. The production of a corporate ICT strategy has now been scheduled for 2002 as it is awaiting the formulation of a customer service strategy, which is in turn dependent on a Best Value review of customer services.
41. There has, however, been progress made in some IT-related areas. DDC produced its Implementing Electronic Government Strategy in accordance with government deadlines. Approximately 60 per cent of councillors have now been issued with personal computers and the Internet and email is being rolled out to staff. However, in comparison to many other authorities coverage is still relatively low. This matter will need to be addressed, together with customer access issues through the ICT strategy.

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42. Progress in relation to this key recommendation will be examined at the final peer review follow-up visit in 2002.

Ensuring that Its Budget Process Commences Earlier and Facilitates Member Involvement

43. There are clear signs that leading members are increasingly involved in DDC's budget formulation processes. As mentioned earlier in this report, members have given direction to officers on their political priorities in relation to the current budget in the light of the need to make savings. They have also been clear about the level of savings, which they expect officers to achieve in the current year.
44. In future years, budget decisions will need to be closely allied to the priorities expressed in the vision, those identified by the public through consultation exercises and those contained within the wider community strategy.
45. Monitoring information on the revenue budget is now circulated to all members not only the executive.

Conclusion

46. DDC is an authority, which is currently facing significant change in the light of the need to achieve savings of £2.6m over the next two to three years. This will involve voluntary redundancies and a restructuring of the officer structures.
47. This is a process which will need to be closely managed with clear communication to all parties concerned with a strategy in particular for ensuring timely information is made available to staff.
48. Other key challenges facing DDC include the completion of its new constitution and the full implementation of revised political structures. Particular thought needs to be given to the role and resourcing of the proposed community forums. It is suggested that DDC look at examples of good practice from other authorities with experience of operating community structures in order to assist the development of its own model.
49. There is also work to be done to continue to embed the scrutiny function within DDC. Again it is suggested that the council learn from others, as well as ensuring that appropriate development opportunities and support are available to members who are part of the scrutiny structures.

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50. DDC has, however, made good progress in a number of areas, which formed the key recommendations of the original review report. There is now much clearer political leadership being exercised by leading DDC members and this is generally acknowledged and appreciated by the management team, staff and non-executive members.
51. A good start has also been made in relation to establishing community structures in order to enable the production of a community strategy. This has resulted in a developing framework for partnership activity. These are areas, which are commended by the review team.
52. Further progress in relation to the key recommendations and the new challenges facing DDC will be examined at the final follow-up visit in 2002, together with the council's position in respect of the competencies which form the benchmark of an *'ideal'* local authority.

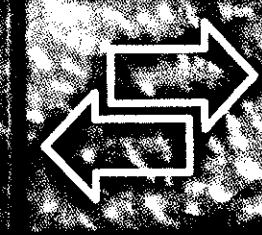
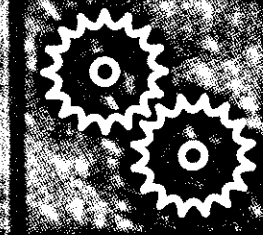
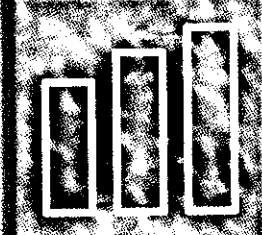
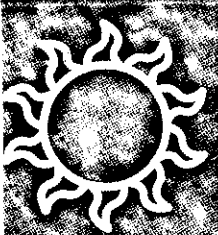
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