

Report of the results of the 'Peer Challenge' of the Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA) 'self assessment' produced by Dartford Borough Council in October 2003

1. Background

In October 2002 the Audit Commission published its proposals for 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'.

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. Dartford Borough Council chose to utilise the model that has been developed by SOLACE Enterprises.

The SOLACE model involves a peer chief executive and peer council leader working with a SOLACE facilitator (usually a former chief executive) for three days on site plus a follow up "Challenge Event" after the site work. 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 Challenge Team must be acceptable to the council
- The peer challenge must cover the four top level corporate assessment questions
- The Peer Challenge Team must provide written and verbal feedback to the council

The SOLACE model also tests 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.)

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 CPA 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 Dartford Borough Council peer challenge process

The peer challenge of Dartford Borough Council's 'self-assessment' began during the week commencing 6 October 2003 when a provisional timetable of activities was drawn up and background documentation circulated to the Challenge Team. The Peer Challenge Team was also briefed for the process. The team was:

- Patrick Kelly , SOLACE Facilitator
- James Gravenor, former Chief Executive, Easington District Council
- Councillor Jim Hakewill, Cabinet Member for Best Value, Kettering Council.

On the evening of 13 October 2003 prior to the three-day site visit (from 14-17 October 2003) 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)

The Team concluded that it would need to gather evidence across the following lines of enquiry as set out below:

- Understanding of council's ambitions by staff, members and officers
- Use of budgeting to reflect council priorities
- Communications and consultation
- Staffing issues and member development

- Effectiveness of partnerships
- Performance management
- External challenge
- Measurement of achievements
- Future plans

The four top level themes of the CPA are

- 1. What is the Council trying to achieve?**
- 2. How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?**
- 3. What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date**
- 4. What does the Council plan to do next?**

The Team collected evidence where possible around all these four top level questions and the ten key themes for CPA, but gave particular attention to the issues that appeared from the draft self-assessment and other documentation produced by Dartford Borough Council to warrant particular focus. It was recognised by the Team that three people working on site for three days could not look at everything in the same level of detail and that the process needed to be bounded in some way.

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 (including the Council's political and organisational leadership, Opposition Councillors, the local police commander, the Editor of one of the local newspapers, representatives of the trades unions and staff consultative group, representatives of the local health service, private sector partners, and senior officers from neighbouring authorities)
- Facilitation of a specially convened meeting of Scrutiny members to discuss the performance of the Council, the self-assessment and the effectiveness of scrutiny
- A 'table dialogue' session involving small-group discussions with a 'diagonal slice' of thirty staff from the authority (including 'frontline' staff)
- Attending various meetings and events (including meetings of the

Cabinet Advisory Panel, the Cabinet, the senior management team and the Local Strategic Partnership)

- An e-mail from the Team asking for comments sent out via the Council's intranet to all those staff on email.
- The Team also had an escorted tour of the Dartford district and saw something of the main settlements in the Borough.

Throughout the process the Team reflected back to the Council through the Executive Director what they thought they were seeing and learning. This continual feedback provided the Council 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 the Team's feedback because nothing should come as a 'surprise'.

Following the three-day site visit in October the Team returned to the authority on 23 October 2003 to feedback the results of the information gathering process in a more structured way at a "Challenge Event". This event was attended by:

Deputy Leader of the Council
Other Executive Members
Scrutiny Committee Chair
Chair of Best Value Review Committee
Managing Director
Executive Director
Cabinet Secretary
Other chief officers and senior managers

There were apologies from the Leader and representatives of external partners.

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. The Challenge Event was an important additional means of evidence gathering. Despite the short period between the Event and the submission of this Report it resulted in significant revision of the Team's draft report in the light of the response to the presentation and the further evidence provided by the Council following the Event.

The results of the Peer Challenge 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 first top level question '**What is the Council trying to achieve?**' and the three themes that fall under this question, namely:

- *Ambition*
- *Focus*
- *Prioritisation*

Section Four: Feedback on the second 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*

Section Five: Feedback on the third top level question '**What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date?**' and the three themes that fall under this question, namely:

- *Achievement (in quality of service)*
- *Achievement (service improvement)*
- *Investment*

Section Six: Feedback on the final 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, namely:

- *The **process** by which the self-assessment was produced*
- *Its overall **content***
- *Its **deliverability***

Section Eight: The Council's response

Section Nine: Conclusion

In making its comments the Peer Challenge Team has sought to add value to the draft self-assessment 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.

Whilst the Team took care to note 'areas of strengths' since an important aim of the challenge process is to stimulate further improvement, attention has also been given in this report to explaining and evidencing the areas on which the Team believes the Council should focus its attention in order to effectively deliver its ambitions for the Dartford district.

It has to be said that the challenge process itself stimulated the provision of a lot of additional relevant evidence from the Council, particularly following the informal feedback session at the end of the third day of the site visit. This has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of potential 'issues for discussion' in this report.

3. What is the council trying to achieve?

Ambition

Strengths

Dartford Borough council is an ambitious authority with a clear and realistic view of its overall goals for the area of Dartford.

These are outlined in its current corporate strategy which aims to make Dartford the 'place of choice' for residents, employees, employers and visitors. The council has shown leadership in its approach to the development opportunities in the area and has sought to take advantage of those opportunities to further its aims.

Within its overall corporate strategy the council has identified six major themes.- citizenship and community, housing, environment, regeneration, leisure time and corporate health. These themes also form the basis for the council's Best Value Performance Plan

These themes are also evident in the council's community strategy which it has drawn up in partnership with its neighbouring authority, Gravesham and Kent County Council in the Kent Thameside Local Strategic Partnership.

The council has embraced partnership as a means of realising its ambitions and has been involved in a number of partnerships including Kent Thameside, Thames Gateway and with the private sector. Examples of this partnership approach include the development of North Dartford, the creation of the Darenth Country Park and most recently the Dartford Town Centre initiative.

The council's overall goals are well understood by staff and by partners. The recent emphasis on service delivery, particularly in the environmental sphere, is also well understood by staff and managers.

Issues for discussion

The council has undergone a change of political control as a result of the May 2003 elections. However, due to the sudden death of a candidate, elections for three seats in one ward had to be postponed. This meant there was a degree of uncertainty as to the formation of a new administration and matters were not finally settled until late June.

The new council has rightly begun the process of revising the corporate

strategy on the basis of its political goals but at this stage it is not clear how much change is intended. There have been mixed messages given to senior managers and partners about the new council's plans.

We found a number of instances where partners were unclear and in some cases fearful about the council's intentions for their partnership arrangements. For example, the council's future commitment to the Local Strategic Partnership has become a matter of concern among some of the partners in the LSP.

The council is set to adopt a new corporate strategy at a meeting on December 15th but it is not clear what process will be used to arrive at the new strategy. Existing levels of consultation with residents, apart from a few notable exceptions, appear to be weak. The council must be able to demonstrate that its core strategy has ownership from the people it represents. This needs to be validated by evidence of consultation with local people and organisations.

What is the Council trying to achieve?

Prioritisation

Strengths

Dartford 's priorities are clearly set out in corporate targets based on the six themes and service plans set out departmental priorities in relation to the corporate targets.

There are some examples of consultation being used to determine priorities. For example the Swanscombe Neighbourhood Renewal Fund study has been used to establish priorities in service delivery for that community.

There are also instances of budgets being revised to match priorities for example in the refurbishment of playgrounds and the environmental improvements in the innovative Deep Clean programme.

Issues for discussion

Some of the difficulties in regard to the council's ambitions are also apparent in relation to its specific priorities. Apart from the Deep Clean programme and its stance on travellers issues, it's not clear how the council intends to take forward its service delivery agenda.

The Community Strategy, for example, has a very wide range of objectives but there is a lack of clarity as to which of these objectives the

council intends to prioritise and how they will fit in with the council's own corporate targets.

It is also a matter of some concern that despite the community strategy having been agreed in March this year, there are as yet no examples of action plans being agreed to take those objectives forward. The LSP which must be a key vehicle in achieving some of the council's objectives for the area is in danger of losing momentum.

The council also had a policy of targeting certain wards with high levels of deprivation as 'priority communities.' It is unclear whether the council intends to continue with this policy which allowed the council to draw down a significant amount of external resources.

We have also been unable to ascertain what is not a council priority. We recognise the difficulties in the public handling of sensitive matters in this area. Members in particular were conscious of the disbenefits of publicly identifying services which were not priorities. - but the council should be able to give some evidence of striking out the low priority areas and concentrating resources on the higher ones.

Poor internal communications have hampered the council's ability to deliver on its priorities and has prevented some of the cross departmental working needed to deliver objectives. We welcome the council's plans to adopt a communications strategy and would recommend that this be completed speedily. Consultation is generally good although some partners feel the council could do more to involve them in discussions on its plans and communicate its decisions to them.

Although we have mentioned some examples of budgets being moved to match new priorities we feel that overall budget frame works needs to demonstrate that budget planning can be swiftly aligned to council priorities.

Finally, there is some evidence that there may be conflicts arising between local and national priorities. As part of the Thames Gateway area, Dartford has been identified as one of the areas for growth, but it is unclear at this stage whether the council's new approach to affordable housing will match government priorities in this area.

What is the Council trying to achieve?

Focus

Strengths

As noted earlier, there has been a strong focus on areas of service delivery such as the Deep Clean programme. There is evidence that budgets have been reallocated in line with this focus - extra money has been allocated to tackling graffiti, for example.

The council also identified a major problem in relation to recruitment and retention and has maintained its focus on this matter through a series of initiatives, including the pay and benefits review and the stress survey. The recruitment of graduates in the Cabinet Secretary's area shows both an innovative approach and recognition that with vocational training young people can quickly deliver results.

These moves demonstrate the council's ability to stay focused on issues which matter to it. Other evidence is furnished by the consistent use of S106 agreements to further the council's priorities on affordable housing and design quality.

The council's commitment to partnership working has meant that it is now involved in a large number of partnerships which places a severe strain on its resources. Rightly it is conducting a review of these in order to focus those resources more tightly on those which align with its priorities.

Issues for Discussion

The council does need to address a number of issues which may detract from its focus. For example, forward planning mechanisms do not appear to be adequate for members to carry out their roles at cabinet or scrutiny level. This leaves the council open to the risk of being blown off course by other events and issues.

The council's cabinet advisory panel system is a laudable attempt to include more members of the council in decision making and provides an improved method of keeping all members informed.

However, the system as devised at the moment does detract from the cabinet's primary strategic role. The inclusion of non-strategic items on the agenda, including ward-related matters such as road closures, means that the advisory panel meetings are lengthy and unfocussed, using up a considerable amount of time and resource. We witnessed one meeting

where 14 officers were in attendance spending 4 hours on an large agenda which included major and minor items. The council is anxious to strike the right balance between local accountability and strategic decisions but it does need to look again at the structure it has chosen.

There is also a potential constitutional issue with regard to the panels. It would perhaps be worth seeking advice on the implications of members taking part in a debate on a decision via the advisory panel and then taking part in scrutiny of that decision.

Finally, whatever system the council agrees it ought to be included in the council's constitution.

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

Capacity

Strengths

The council has a generally well motivated staff and morale has been good overall since the introduction of the pay and benefits review.

The managing director and some senior managers are respected by partners and by staff.

The council has a sound financial base with a significant level of reserves which it plans to utilise in the medium term and there has been an improvement in the amount and quality of information for members.

Issues for discussion

There are a number of serious concerns about the council's capacity to deal with the ambitious agenda it has set itself.

There are areas of underperformance at management level which need to be addressed.

Member officer relationships are not as good as they need to be. Members and officers admitted that Dartford has had a highly charged political atmosphere particularly since the modernisation agenda was introduced in 2001. This has led to some instances of inappropriate behaviour. Members will need to be mindful the protocols relating to member/officer relations at both junior and senior level and to be cognisant of the manner in which they conduct themselves particularly when there is disagreement.

It is also incumbent on senior officers to be aware of and understand the political context in which they are operating and to respond flexibly to political direction.

Accessibility of senior members was cited as a problem which makes decisions slower and sometimes leads to misunderstandings. There may be a need to look at member support arrangements.

There is a need for further input to member training, possibly along lines of the member development programme recommended by the Kent CC audit of corporate governance, commissioned by the council recently.

Partnership is another area where there may be some issues for the council. Dartford is involved in a number of partnerships and this of course does place a strain on resources. From members we detected a frustration with the concept of partnership in some areas and a feeling that they should 'put Dartford first.' The council is right to conduct a review of its partnerships but delivering many of its aims and objectives will require working closely with other agencies, statutory, voluntary and private.

Of necessity, partnerships do require investment in time and effort on the part of officers and members and this may be frustrating when the council is anxious to meet list immediate aims. However, partnership working - focussed strongly on achievable outcomes on an agreed timescale - will pay dividends. But partners will need to be convinced that the council itself has a commitment to the partnership, a clear set of priorities and the resources to match them. This is particularly important in the context of Dartford - which is a key part of the Thames Gateway communities plan.

There are also concerns about the council's ability to deliver on its ambitious programme - particularly in the field of regeneration and planning where the scale of the challenge is enormous and the councils resources are already stretched. The demands in particular of its regeneration proposals in North Dartford and the Town Centre coupled with its input into private sector proposals in sites such as Ebbsfleet and Eastern Quarry will stretch its resources considerably. Conversely, there is a superb opportunity for the council to demonstrate community leadership in delivering these exciting and far reaching plans.

Partners in public and private sector expressed concern that it may be overwhelmed by the scale of this demand and there were worries amongst staff, managers and members about the impact that these major issues would have on delivery of services. The council will have to carefully plan its response to these issues and match its resources to cope with the pressures.

Dartford has also struggled to make effective use of scrutiny. In the past it has been used more as an oppositional tool and the scrutiny function continues to suffer from not having any significant dedicated resources. There have been some exceptions to this rule - for example a scrutiny report on the established of a youth council did become council policy. And many of the new scrutiny councillors demonstrate an appetite and enthusiasm for the task. But they will need adequate levels of support in order to fulfil the potential of this function.

How has the Council set about delivering its priorities?

Performance Management

Strengths

The councils service planning is referenced to the corporate strategy and targets reflect existing priorities.

The council has recently introduced a new performance management framework and competency framework and is planning to increase the monitoring of its key targets and performance indicators.

The council has also made changes to the budget cycle to take account of recommendations and improvement plans emerging from Best Value.

Issues for discussion

Although there are a number of areas of good practice in performance management and there are some examples of performance management issues being dealt with outside formal processes. There is a need for standardisation of data and reports in order to make comparisons easier.

The council was aware of the need to improve its performance management procedures - following the abolition of its performance related pay scheme and the references to performance issues in the External Auditors letter of 2000/, and has responded to some of the issues identified, but the council's responses have lacked sufficient rigour to tackle the weaknesses in performance management.

Currently performance issues are reported quarterly to cabinet but we would like to see an established mechanism for more detailed regular reports to portfolio holders - not to micro manage departments but to ensure cabinet members are kept abreast of issues. This would enable them to monitor problems and also any actions taken to address those problems.

We understand that the council is reviewing its Best Value processes and is examining ways of drawing up local indicators of relevance to local residents priorities. this is welcome but it would also be useful to see more evidence of the work of the Best Value review committee.

The council's approach to risk management is important in the light of the many challenges it faces and the opportunities presented by its situation as part of the Thames Gateway . The rapid development of a robust risk management strategy should therefore be a priority.

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

Achievement in Quality

Strengths

The council has some good services. For example, it has achieved a 2 star rating for revenues and benefits and is making a beacon council application for this service. It also received a two star rating for planning and land services.

It has also been very active on the development front using its own resources to 'pump prime' development and lever in extra resources from the private and public sector. Notable successes include the creation of the Darenth Country Park via a partnership deal, the creation of the Green Grid and Managing Marshes projects.

The council has also used its planning powers, in particular S106 agreements to achieve quality in developments such as those at Ingress Park (an RTPI award winner) the Crossways Business Park and at the Bluewater shopping centre. These are all in line with the council's strategic aims.

There are other examples of smaller scale projects - in the Temple Hill priority community - where partnership with the faith community has delivered an exciting and imaginative project which will benefit local people.

Issues for Discussion

There are a number of issues relating to service quality. for example, only 24% of BVPP indicators are the top quartile and although there have been examples of the council using the Best value review system to tackle

issues of underperformance in some areas - notably in the street scene, there is insufficient evidence of a systematic approach to achieving quality across the range of services.

In addition, some indicators are falling and the council needs to demonstrate how it intends to address this.

Finally, the overall satisfaction rate with council services is below the median for districts. However, the council's approach to service delivery is part of the review of its corporate strategy now under way and Dartford's new approach may be more apparent when this review is complete.

What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date?

Achievement in Improvement

Strengths

The council can point to demonstrable improvements in services which would be clearly felt by residents. It has doubled recycling rates following the review of its waste collection contract.

It has cut staff turnover rates - high staff turnover invariably has an impact on the quality of service delivered to the public.

The council's housing strategy moved from an average to an above average rating and there have been improvements in services such as estate cleaning and in the housing stock.

Access to public transport has been another notable achievement with concessions for elderly and young people leading to an increased usage of local routes.

The council's intervention in the quality of development in the area has also led to visible improvements in the environmental and aesthetic quality of some of the new neighbourhoods.

Issues for Discussion

The council suffers from not having a systematic method of measuring the impact of its initiatives. In some cases this is being addressed - for instance the council is introducing better survey methods to test the impact of its work on community safety. This is important in view of the considerable investment that the council and its partners have made in community safety in the town centre and in priority communities.

The council has a complaints procedure but does not have a way of using the procedure to identify problem areas and measure user satisfaction once action has been taken to remedy the cause of complaints.

Although there were isolated examples of the use of external challenge to improve services, - Best Value reviews, benchmarking clubs and external audits, again there does not seem to be a systematic approach which would help to create a culture of improvement across departments.

In addition, the lack of rigour in the council's performance management regime has up to now inhibited the development of an improvement culture. However, now that the performance management framework is under way, this may change.

What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date?

Investment

Strengths

The council has a good track record in securing extra resources from other agencies to tackle some of its priority areas - for example Sure Start, Childrens Fund and URBAN funding

It has invested and continues to invest in staff.

The council has also used its resources to promote development for example at North Dartford and in the Town Centre.

It has applied its planning resources to improve quality in development -all of these are in line with its priorities.

It has also been willing to invest its capital resources in its own housing stock - for example via the window replacement programme.

Investment in the Fastrack public transport initiative and the concessionary fares young people are designed to assist existing communities to access new jobs and training is another good example

Issues for Discussion

However, given the council's overall financial health and significant level of reserves, there is a widespread view that the council is cautious in its use of financial resources - although it is recognised that there are now plans in hand to utilise those reserves. The words 'risk-averse' were used on more than one occasion and although it is clear that Dartford is willing to

take some risks - in assembling land for the North Dartford development, for example, it is also clear that its lack of a risk management strategy may have hampered its ability to use its resources in the most effective way.

There has been a history of budget underspends and although this has been due to better than expected income generation (i.e. from carparking charges and planning applications) rather than failure to spend budgets, it does suggest that a very tight rein is kept on finances and expectations are lowered rather than allow the risk of an overspend.

There is a lower level of delegation to middle managers than in similar authorities. Some managers complained that this restricted innovation and left them feeling disempowered.

The new administration's pledges on limiting council tax rises to inflation will impose restraints on longer term investment - so this may be an issue in later years.

6. What does the Council plan to do next?

Learning

Strengths

There are examples of the council learning from failure - for example in recycling or drawing up an e-government strategy, the introduction of joint area and street scenes inspections.

The housing department has demonstrated a willingness to engage tenants and residents in tackling areas of underperformance and in improving services.

The council also commissioned Kent County Council to audit its corporate governance arrangements.

Issues for Discussion

Learning is not systematically shared across the authority and although this does not prevent individual services moving forward it does mean the council cannot benefit in a collective way. More could be done to identify national best practice and translate the appropriate parts into improvements in services.

A communications strategy would be a good starting point to enable the council to improve on sharing its learning.

The council needs to properly examine its past failures and successes - particularly in relation to its corporate goals. For example, although it set out a corporate strategy as long ago as 1989 - with *Dartford 2000* - this does not appear to have informed subsequent strategy.

In addition, the council plans a 3 year review of corporate targets for 2004 - this presumably has been superseded by its overall review following the change of administration - but we could not find any interim measurements of which of these targets were achieved.

The lack of a performance management framework does reduce self-awareness and this may be less of a problem once the new framework is up and running.

But the council does need to be aware that in some areas, staff and indeed, managers complained of a residual 'blame culture' which stifled learning and impeded innovation.

Finally, the council needs to properly use scrutiny as a learning tool. The original scheme was changed after a review but members expressed a lack of enthusiasm and interest in the powers of scrutiny and it appears to have been hampered by a lack of cross party agreement. We would suggest that the council invest in further member and officer training in this area and consider establishing separate budget and staffing arrangements. The council should also consider a review of scrutiny arrangements after a period of 12-18 months.

What does the Council plan to do next?

Future Plans

Strengths

The council continues to have a major interest in the regeneration of the area and is actively pursuing development opportunities in North Dartford and the town centre as well as involving itself in the development of Ebbsfleet and the Eastern Quarry.

The Fastrack initiative is also an integral part of its plans for the future.

It is understood that the council intends to bring an extra focus on the integration of existing communities with the new communities who will arrive as a result of the development. Some work in this area has already been carried out at Temple Hill and Swanscombe but it will be a considerable challenge in the future.

The council has also embarked on a options appraisal for its housing stock in order to secure the future investment needed in this area.

The council is also continuing to focus on its staff with a training needs survey. This has the advantage of identifying where staff development resources could most usefully be deployed but also helps to improve staff relations.

Issues for Discussion

Some areas of future plans are unclear however. At this stage the council had not reached a settled view on its new corporate strategy and thus the resources needed to match the new priorities - although plans are in hand to ensure that budget processes will be closely aligned with the new priorities.

There is also some concern over the council's commitment to partnerships in the wider geographical area - partners were unsure whether a 'Dartford first' policy would mean the council displaying less interest in joint bids and projects. This could have an impact on the council's ability to secure external sources of funding and a prolonged period of uncertainty could be damaging for the council in the long term.

More evidence will also be required on the Council's future plans for engaging with stakeholders and residents. For example, is the 'Dartford Talking' programme to continue and if not, what will replace it?

We also identified a need for more capacity building in relation to the considerable challenges which Dartford will face in the future. More member training and support will be required in order ensure that they are able to meet the demands of the council's community leadership agenda.

7. Self Assessment

Process

The self assessment process is an important part of the overall CPA. We were aware that the council was anxious to produce a draft in good time for the team to examine it and this meant that the document was very much a first attempt.

However, it was clear that members and staff throughout the authority were involved to some extent in drawing up the self-assessment. Members of the cabinet had seen the document but not scrutiny. We would recommend that as many members as possible are involved in commenting on the final assessment.

We would also recommend that further staff involvement is encouraged in a managed way perhaps by the use of focus groups or departmental meetings.

There was no evidence of any external involvement in the draft self-assessment but we would recommend that this is also part of the process on agreeing the final self-assessment.

We suggest that a project team and/or cross party steering committee be set up to handle the self-assessment process - one with some form of 'internal challenge' to ensure that the document accurately reflects the authority.

Content

The self assessment document was clearly an early draft. Whilst recognising the effort put in by staff to make it as comprehensive as possible given time constraints we felt that the content needed to meet the following criteria:

- Wording should flow well
- There should be a single writing style
- Make sure you represent yourselves adequately.
- Clear links between issues around nine themes, key challenges and targets and progress to date and action
- Make sure points in scoring table reflect text in the body of the report.
- Bullet points are better
- Highlight Council's achievements and things you need to do better
- Ensure you have evidence to back up statements - BV data, customer surveys
- Make it easy to read - get a PR professional to look at it
- Address each of the CPA themes - if not clear - get advice
- Highlight council's role in community leadership
- We felt that the case studies were useful but would have greater impact if there were fewer and that each one clearly set out the council's aims, the measurement of impact and a clear linkage to the CPA themes.

Deliverability

The self assessment must be a honest and clear headed statement of how the councils itself - with due regard given to its strengths and genuine achievements as well as a clear statement of how the council will tackle areas of weakness.

The document must show how the council will use its assets (sound finances, good staff morale, landholdings) to achieve its goals.

It must contain a clear corporate strategy and delineate any 'quick wins' that the council has already achieved, evidence that difficult decisions have been taken and the council's efforts on cross cutting issues.

Finally, it should also set out how the council will link the main themes of the CPA to achieve its aims and how it will avoid the risk of complacency.

8. The Council's response to the peer challenge

The council received the Peer challenge team with great courtesy and helpfulness. Officers and members were very open about the challenges the council faced and responded well to inquiries and were willing to take part in discussion. It was clear that they were keen to gain as much from the challenge as they could.

At the challenge event, the council received feedback without defensiveness and in an atmosphere of thoughtful debate on the points raised.

There was a general acceptance of the main points raised in the report and it was clear that many of these were being acted upon even as the report was written.

9. Conclusion

Dartford is a place that has an exciting future with many challenges for the community and the people who lead it. The scale of those challenges are considerable but the council has taken a number of steps to meet them, and in particular, we would single out its emphasis on quality development and the good work it has done on retaining and training staff.

We feel that the new administration of the council needs to quickly establish its priorities, evaluate its partnership arrangements and reassure its partners that it is still committed to partnership working. Improvements in member/officer relations, performance management and internal communications will go a long way to establishing a sound basis for progress in the future.