

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Plymouth City Council

7th -10th February 2022

Feedback report



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1. Executive summary

“The council deserves the awards it wins” is a direct quote from partners, and it’s this strong leadership of place that makes Plymouth City Council (PCC) a deserving winner of the MJ’s prestigious ‘Council of the Year Award’ in 2021. Pride and passion for the city of Plymouth and its residents is at the core of the council, evident in Members, staff and partners.

PCC is a Council with ambitious plans for the future, illustrated by a clear strategic approach and underpinned by a set of realistic delivery plans. The peer team encountered a council which displays strong leadership across their city, with a deserved reputation for delivering successful regeneration and growth.

Plymouth is Britain’s self-styled Ocean City. The sea, coastline and maritime heritage are some of Plymouth’s greatest assets. It is also home to Plymouth Hoe, a natural auditorium that plays host to many events, such as National Armed Forces Day, Great Britain Sail Grand Prix and the annual British Firework Championships. The Plymouth Sound National Marine Park will be a specially recognised coastal and marine area, important for its environment and community health and wellbeing.

With a resident population of 262,800, Plymouth is one of the largest cities on the south coast of England and the 15th largest city in the country. A further 100,000 residents live in Plymouth’s travel to-work area, and with an economic output of £5.6 billion and 111,500 jobs, Plymouth is the biggest urban area and major regional economic hub in the south-west peninsula.

Plymouth is less diverse than some other cities across the country however it is one of the more diverse areas of the south-west and is becoming more so. At the time of the 2001 census, 97% of Plymouth’s population were White British, whilst by 2011 this had decreased to 93%.

In its final report, the Plymouth Fairness Commission (2014) described Plymouth as a ‘tale of two cities’ due to the deep-seated inequalities and unfairness that exist in the city. There is a long-standing awareness of the deprivation that exists in Plymouth and the city has higher than average levels of deprivation and health inequalities. Plymouth is within the 20% most deprived local authority districts in England. Two areas fall within the most deprived 1% in England while 28 fall within

the most deprived 10% in England, affecting around 46,000 people within the city. Just under 1 in 5 children in Plymouth are estimated to be living in poverty and this rises to one in four in one of the most deprived wards. New data and intelligence shows that the number of children in the city, who live in households in both 'relative' and 'absolute' low income, remains stubbornly high.

Against this backdrop, we found a dedicated and passionate workforce, led by a well-regarded Chief Executive and equally driven and respected senior leadership team, who champion all sectors of the community – from a dynamic growth programme to Child Poverty and an educational attainment improvement programme.

The elected members show their commitment to the communities of Plymouth through exemplary cross-party working on the 'big ticket' items such as the Joint Local Plan and the overarching 'Plymouth Plan' as well as ambitious projects such as the Plymouth Sound National Marine Park, showing a clear focus and agreement on the priorities for the city and the council.

The Council has a track record of delivering through an impressive range of partnerships which are based on trust and have been built over time such as the Growth Board and the Local Care Partnership – something which has paid dividends as the council supported its communities through the pandemic.

The Plymouth Plan, which streamlined over 140 city strategies and plans into one overarching plan for the city for which PCC is the lead organisation with delivery shared across partner organisations - is recognised as the key statement of intent for the council – and partners. The timeframe of the plan, covering the period until 2034, provides a high level of confidence and stability across all sectors.

The Council shows a clear and genuine commitment to improving equality and diversity, addressing the socio-economic challenges facing the City of Plymouth, through working with partners to address educational attainment and strive for equity of access for children from some of the most deprived wards in the country.

PCC has annual elections by thirds – and this electoral cycle presents the council with specific challenges and opportunities which it manages and mitigates in order to consistently manage internal and external relationships.

PCC is without doubt ambitious for its place, but in a new 'post-pandemic' world, the Peer Team would suggest that the council reviews the extent to which it has the capacity and resources in place to deliver all of their stated priorities.

Whilst the council has successfully delivered change activity in specific areas, such as reviewing Business Support, there is now need for a more clearly articulated Transformation/Change plan. This would allow the council to adopt a more planned and co-ordinated approach, making the best use of the allocated resources so that ambition and services can be prioritised for delivery within the council's financial envelope.

The council is aware of the financial challenges and risks it faces and plans to take into account business risk and performance as part of the budget reporting and monitoring cycle. In doing so, promoting a more positive organisational culture of risk awareness will be important moving forward as this will help the council successfully deliver its Corporate Plan.

The council will benefit from a greater emphasis on capturing outcomes and using data and insight to better demonstrate impact and inform decision making.

2. Key recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

1. Capture the learning from the positive engagement the council undertook with partners through Covid and ensure it's not lost – take time to pause and reflect after a period of unprecedented activity and demand, and ensure the approach to consultation, engagement and customer experience is consistently positive.
2. Review key plans and strategies to reflect the post-pandemic 'new normal' i.e. increases in service demand, taking the opportunity to review ambition to ensure it aligns with capacity and resources. Developing a more consistent approach to using data and intelligence (including community insight) to drive service delivery and improvement and inform financial decision making will be fundamental to this.

3. Build on the effective relationships with external partners across a larger geographical footprint to maximise opportunities, especially those offered through the emerging County Deal, and support political leaders to enhance their visibility in these partnerships. As part of this, the council should consider reviewing the Terms of Reference of the Boards and their strategic rationale in order to simplify channels of engagement for all external stakeholders.
4. Continue to move forward proposals to review the electoral cycle to help to reach a lasting conclusion.
5. Undertake an external review of Scrutiny, looking to enhance opportunities for all members to engage with, and influence the policy agenda. Look to support this by refreshing the council's on-going member development offer so that all members can develop and maintain high levels of skills and knowledge.
6. Promote and embed risk awareness across the organisation and continue to address and report progress against key financial risks and external audit requirements.
7. Review capacity and clarity of purpose within the Change Programme to secure wider buy-in and consider securing transformational IT capacity when reviewing current contractual arrangements.
8. Develop a stronger corporate asset management approach/strategy, building in a stronger focus on delivering social value alongside the Growth Dividend and seeking to facilitate and maximise community capacity.
9. Continue to embed rigour and transparency in budget setting and monitoring – both revenue and capital – to ensure that financial challenges and risk are consistently understood and mitigated across the organisation.
10. Embed the workforce strategy including recruitment, retention, and succession planning, and continue to ensure sufficient organisational capacity to satisfy external audit requirements.

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

3.1. The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Councillor Teresa O'Neill OBE Leader of LB Bexley
- Councillor Shaun Davies Leader Telford and Wrekin Council
- Jo Walker Chief Executive, North Somerset Council
- David Hodgkinson Corporate Director of Resources, LB Islington
- Mike Harris Executive Director Business Services/
Deputy Chief Executive, Southampton City Council
- Gabrielle Mancini Service Lead, Customer Engagement and
Transformation, West Berkshire Council
- Emily McGuinness LGA Peer Challenge Manager
- Kathryn Trant LGA Advisor

3.2. Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - Are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - Does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities?
3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges?

5. Capacity for improvement - Is the organisation able to support delivery of local priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

In addition to these questions, the council asked the peer team to provide feedback on their approach to community engagement and empowerment.

3.3. The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. 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 peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. Over the course of 4 days, the team:

- Engaged with over 170 councillors, officers, and partners across 3 days of interviews in addition to further research and reading.
- Collectively spending over 200 hours to arrive at our findings, the equivalent of one person spending almost 6 weeks in Plymouth City Council

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.

4. Feedback

4.1. Local priorities and outcomes

Pride and passion for the place and people of Plymouth are clear at all levels of PCC – we saw a genuine desire to deliver on the vision to be one of Europe's most vibrant waterfront cities where an outstanding quality of life is enjoyed by everyone.

Since 2014, Plymouth City Council has led the development and implementation of the Plymouth Plan, a ground-breaking city plan which looks ahead to 2034. Since its inception, the Plymouth Plan has set out a shared direction of travel for the long-term

future of the city of Plymouth. Plymouth City Council provides overall management and co-ordination of the Plymouth Plan, and the council and all its partners are responsible for its delivery.

Members and officers share a strong sense of ambition for Plymouth and advocate well for their place, using the Plymouth Plan to show a strong narrative and allowing the city to speak with one voice. Members and officers live and breathe their respective roles as community leaders with officers in particular saying they feel they are part of a broader network e.g. Plymouth Alliance – a partnership approach to addressing homelessness in the city by replacing what was previously siloed working with a culture of collaboration, where services are co-designed with the people who rely on them and where people-centred outcomes are shared across the system.

By having a single strategic plan for the city, Plymouth is able to present one version of the truth, one vision, an overall direction agreed and owned by partners and communities. The Plymouth Plan is aligned to the budget setting and capital strategy, and to corporate planning.

All the partner organisations we spoke with cited the Plymouth Plan as providing vital stability and consistency and a welcome level of reassurance that being anchored in cross party support, the Plan and its strategic priorities will endure through changes in political leadership.

The ‘Plan on a Page’ approach to framing the Corporate Plan is effective and ensures there is clarity of purpose amongst members and officers.

The refreshed Corporate Plan adopted in June and covering the period 2021-2025, maintains consistency with the city’s overarching vision and values as expressed through the Plymouth Plan, whilst reflecting the new Conservative Administration’s vision for the city and the Council. In addition, following fifteen months of unprecedented challenges created both nationally and locally by the Covid-19 pandemic, the refresh has provided an opportunity to reintegrate response and recovery activities into the Corporate Plan and the Council’s associated delivery plans.

Plymouth City Council responded well to the Covid Pandemic, stepping up an already strong community leadership role and refocusing services and resources to meet the emerging needs of both residents and businesses. That response and

support ranged from effectively administering Business Support Grants through to co-ordinating an impressive volunteering effort. The council was particularly successful in its response as it was able to draw upon its status as a trusted partner, building on a foundation of strong relationships developed over many years and political administrations. It is now important that the council allows time and space to consciously capture the learning from what worked well during these challenging times – especially in terms of the positive relationships we saw across the health and social care sector, to support a more resilient and sustainable future.

Whilst the revised plan recognises the major task of recovery from the widespread impacts of Covid-19, there is perhaps a need for a greater reflection and review of the Council's priorities and ambitions as set out in both the Plymouth Plan and the Corporate Plan. Ensuring that these priorities reflect the post-pandemic 'new normal', and that changes in service demand, particularly in relation to Adults and Children's and the service transformation required to manage and meet that demand, are fully understood will help with capacity and resource planning, particularly in People services.

Prioritising ambitions to ensure they align with organisational capacity, resources and systems is a critical next step for the council – as is ensuring a more consistent approach to linking outcomes and impact to those priorities. As we go on to explore in the 'Capacity' section of this report, staff are looking to the organisation's leadership to continue to support them to prioritise activities as we emerge from the pandemic recognising that it is not possible to deliver everything at once. A more rigorous approach to using data and intelligence to drive service delivery and improvement will help align financial resources with the areas of highest need.

4.2. Organisational and place leadership

"If you're doing it alone, you're probably doing it wrong" resonates throughout PCC and reflects PCCs long tradition of strong and effective partnership working across the city, involving the public, business, voluntary and community sectors. Many of these relationships have been nurtured over several years, resulting in mutual respect and high levels of trust that have frequently underpinned the joint risk sharing needed to invest in projects.

'One Plymouth' is a well-regarded systems leadership group where leaders from organisations and sectors across the city come together to explore and tackle the big challenges that the city faces. This is just one of the partnerships across the city and region. Others include:

- Health and Wellbeing Board
- Local Care Partnership
- Safer Plymouth Partnership
- Plymouth Education Board
- Growth Board
- Plymouth Net Zero Partnership
- Plymouth Culture
- Destination Plymouth

Partners, and PCC itself are clear that partnerships are not just forums or structures on a page but are dynamic relationships that drive forward progress towards shared outcomes and city vision, something further evidenced by the Joint Local Plan with the neighbouring councils of West Devon and South Hams.

Throughout the pandemic, PCC led on ensuring excellent communications and engagement with all partners – with businesses and community groups feeling well informed and supported. Going forward, whilst the council is undeniably engaged well through established forums e.g. Federation of Small Businesses, opportunities exist to engage more proactively with larger employers, to align investment plans and extend the timeframe of 'A Bright Future 2021 – 2026' to cover a 15 year period. The plan has been developed collaboratively with system partners, and through the involvement of children and young people.

The confirmed Key Stage 4 attainment outcomes indicate that the city-wide Attainment 8 score is now 50.5% which is better than the national average of 48.9%; with Key Stage 4 students' final result in Basic English and Maths average at 51.9%, also better than the national average of 48.4%. This is the first time in many years that an above-the-average attainment outcome has been achieved in this phase group.

An important element of delivering success through the 'A Bright Future' Programme is making sure that children reach their full potential at school. The Plymouth Education Board (PEB) was established to address this, working across the whole system to address continuing low attainment in the city. The positive outcome of the work of the Board can be evidenced by reference to the [LG Inform](#) headline report that shows Plymouth is now seeing results from its improvement journey. The Board works closely with the Regional Schools Commissioner, schools, and the further education sector, as well as with government, and is chaired by the Council's Chief Executive. The work of the PEB has paid off, with the city recently having been announced as one of only four areas nationally to benefit from a share of £10m to pilot new approaches to improving educational attainment. In pioneering this new approach, PCC is championing the interests of some of its most vulnerable residents and again, supporting the creation of sustainable and resilient communities of the future.

PCC effectively deploy a whole organisation approach to multi-faceted and complex issues, for example tackling child poverty. The creation of PCiP (Plymouth Children in Poverty) is a notable example of this with PCC working with business and community partners, to proactively support all the agencies in the city tackling children living in poverty. The PCiP was created by The Child Poverty Working Group, a cross-party group which also includes city partners from the business sector, the voluntary sector and the city's Child Poverty Ambassador from the faith community, and ensures the Cabinet are fully aware of current issues and potential solutions in this priority area.

There is corporate (member and officer) commitment to Children's Services, showing ownership of the issues and meaningful support of a solution-based approach to delivering the improvements needed to improve an Ofsted rating of Requires Improvement following an inspection in 2018. Improvement activities have included a review of fostering services which resulted in actions being taken to address placement sufficiency. The council also has a targeted support service which prevents adolescents coming into care or ensures they are successfully reunified with their families; this approach has prevented 30 children entering care since the start of the programme.

PCC is a well regarded and valued member of the Devon Integrated Care System

(ICS), and its partners appreciate the full part PCC plays in moving forward with the implementation of the Local Care Partnership (LCP) – “Together for Plymouth”. The councils tried and tested approach to prioritising the needs of the community above those of any one organisation is paying dividends in this partnership approach to care and the council is using its voice to advocate well for the people of Plymouth.

Plymouth has experienced some truly tragic events over the past 18 months, including the horrific shooting incident in the community of Keyham. In responding to these events, the council has fostered even stronger community leadership relationships, with members and officers alike being described as ‘community champions’, responding with both professionalism and evident compassion. The council actively encouraged – using newly developed appreciative inquiry techniques – the residents of Keyham to shape and drive their community recovery plan. Replicating this approach in other areas will serve the council well.

The ‘Plymouth Offers and Asks’ document enables the council to advocate strongly for Plymouth, both regionally and nationally. The document is regularly updated and used to advise and inform Plymouth’s three Members of Parliament (MPs). A multi-disciplinary approach draws in knowledge and experience from across the local authority. It is this approach that ensures that the council has the best intelligence to enable them to identify the key issues to be raised with Government.

Plymouth City Council successfully delivers a strategic approach to economic growth across the city. The Plan for Delivering Economic Growth is owned and driven by the Plymouth Growth Board, together with a range of associated thematic boards and partnerships. This approach has identified some high potential opportunities that are based on the city’s businesses, research strengths and natural assets, and are around becoming a recognised centre of excellence for Marine Autonomy (together with digital ocean and clean maritime technologies); an increasing specialism in Digital Health and Biotech; and developing Immersive Digital Technologies.

Through the Resurgam Charter work to connect local residents to newly created opportunities, the council pursues its objectives to deliver inclusive and sustainable growth. Leading the way in terms of delivering economic growth has been a powerful driver for PCC to date and has already delivered a powerful legacy for the council. As

Plymouth - both the council and the city – emerges from the pandemic, and the Plymouth Plan is reviewed to reflect the impact of the last 2 years on demand led services, it's vital that the importance of this changing narrative for core statutory services is reflected in the ambition for Plymouth and that delivering social value receives parity of esteem with economic growth across all services areas.

PCC is incredibly effective within its own city boundaries. The Council also plays a leading role across many regional partnerships. The Council may wish to further develop its work on a larger geographical footprint, including opportunities to share best practice. Whilst partners are sighted on the emergent County Deal proposals, they would welcome further engagement with the council to explore the opportunities - and perceived challenges– the proposal represents.

Partner organisations are often able to access senior officers within PCC and feel they have established effective relationships with key contact officers, but they are less confident in their relationships with senior politicians. This can be attributed to the level of political change the council experiences, with officers providing the stability so often needed to deliver long term growth projects. However, thought should be given to further supporting members to replicate the strong political leadership they have demonstrated with internal stakeholders, across the external partnership landscape.

4.3. Governance and culture

Members and officers at PCC have a good working relationship, based on trust and a shared sense of pride in the city they serve. The Cabinet (elected in May 2021) is committed and enthusiastic and has adopted a learning approach to its first year in administration as evidenced by holding Top Team Development sessions and commissioning this Corporate Peer Challenge in what has been a very challenging 12 month period.

Cross party collaboration is a particular strength and is valued by officers and members alike – senior officers noted that they felt supported by all members in key service areas – for example the ownership of the challenges facing Children's

Services. Members themselves welcome regular briefings with senior officers – be they members of the Cabinet, or the Shadow Cabinet. Officers at all levels of the organisation have welcomed increased engagement with members during the pandemic – something that has been possible through an increased use of technology – and there is a strong desire to see this maintained and increased.

Plymouth has a history of political change with five changes in administration over nine years. However, all members know their city and all face in the same direction, so progress continues despite changes to political control. ‘Big Ticket’ items such as The Plymouth Plan and the Joint Local Plan have cross-party support, so key priorities remain the same, mitigating some of the potential risks associated with an annual election cycle.

We heard a range of views both in support of, and opposed to, the election cycle. Those in favour cited the benefits of regular democratic engagement and the value of democratic accountability, those with concerns referred to a lack of ability to deliver longer term programmes of change and the organisational bandwidth consumed with preparing for annual elections. It is not for the Peer Team to express an opinion in support of either view, but the issues were raised with us and so are reflected in our report. However, we would say that the matter would benefit from some earnest reflection.

Whilst the officers at PCC are respected (and highly proficient) in providing the continuity and stability needed by stakeholders, both internally and externally, this can sometimes lead to the perception that members have lower visibility – we heard from partners that they know who lead officers are but are much less clear on who the lead member is. This is entirely understandable in the given context, but if an annual election cycle is to be retained, consideration will need to be given to ensuring how newly elected administrations can enhance their profile, giving visibility to their political leadership.

In-depth Scrutiny reviews into locally important issues such as the impact of Brexit on the fishing industry, Dental Health, Food Injustice and Child Poverty show that members are able to reflect the voices and concerns of their communities through their Scrutiny role, this is further evidence of the council’s approach to meaningful cross-party working. However, there is room for the Scrutiny function to improve,

particularly in respect of pre-decision scrutiny and a more planned approach to managing the Scrutiny work programme – we heard that existing committees have very full agendas and members can feel they don't have capacity to consider all the issues they feel are important. Officers, and in particular health and social care partners, felt that Scrutiny at PCC works well in terms of holding them to account – although sometimes more probing questions could be asked! Although the new budget scrutiny process introduced ahead of the 2022/23 had some challenges, it led to an inclusive process with recommendations made by the Scrutiny Select Committee accepted by the administration. Building on these positive examples, an externally facilitated review of Scrutiny in its entirety would allow members and officers to reflect on current best practice – both from within the council itself and across the wider sector, and ensure the function is best placed to meet the future needs of the council.

The council has been without a permanent Monitoring Officer for some time, and whilst all parties are grateful to those who have stepped in to provide support on an interim basis, the arrival of the new Monitoring Officer in March will provide a much needed focus on completing engagement with members around the arrangements for the Model Code of Conduct as well as an opportunity to re-affirm the council's commitment to the principles associated with the Code.

As referenced in the next section of this report, senior officers and members are able to articulate some significant financial risks facing the council, however, promoting and embedding risk awareness (as opposed to risk aversion) further as an organisational strength would be beneficial given the change in profile of risk for the local authority e.g. health and social care, financial challenges etc.

4.4. Financial planning and management

The council has been able to set a balanced budget for 2022/23, with recurring savings of £6.2 million, representing encouraging progress with the budget against the challenging backdrop of the global pandemic. However, it has also relied on £9 million one off resource to balance the budget, which will need to be addressed when planning for 2023/24. PCC has effectively delivered budgetary savings over a number of years and has undertaken some reviews e.g. Corporate Services, Adult

Social Care, Children's Social Care and Street Services to develop further sustainable saving options.

The council is rightly focussed on its financial sustainability. This is in the context of the national local government financial landscape which is one of substantial challenges stemming from the pandemic and other demands and inflationary pressures.

The Corporate Management Team have oversight of and receive regular reports to monitor revenue budgets and review progress against budget savings being made in-year. The new Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) brings this reporting together in a more coherent way and now provides a more consistent and robust approach to revenue budget monitoring, within the context of a 5 year MTFP. This is providing the council with a sound framework upon which to continue to develop financial plans moving forward.

Senior Officers and Members should constantly seek to reassure themselves that the council's financial challenges and the framework within which it operates are understood consistently across the organisation – and that steps to address these challenges are owned across all service areas. A further set of financial management improvements are planned to commence in April 2022 – this will include plans to establish a new Capital forum as an effective way to monitor and offer governance across the Capital programme, ideally this will be implemented in time for the start of the 2022/23 financial year. In addition, the Section 151 officer plans to introduce regular financial monitoring of the capital programme, to mirror arrangements in place for the revenue budget and which are currently absent. Senior officers and members should constantly seek to reassure themselves that the council's financial challenges and the framework within which it operates are understood consistently across the organisation – and that steps to address these challenges are owned across all service areas.

The review of Corporate Services which is currently underway is a valuable opportunity for PCC to consider corporate capacity and capability in the context of a challenging and ambitious corporate agenda. This work will support our recommendations around refining (and redefining) the current list of organisational priorities in light of the post-pandemic world in which the council is now operating. The successful delivery of key change projects, such as Business Support, have

delivered financial savings for the council, and should provide the confidence to go deeper and wider to maximise efficiency opportunities as part of a more clearly defined Transformation/Change programme that aligns activity across all Directorates– the need for which from a financial perspective, cannot be overstated.

As stated, the council has prepared a balanced budget for approval for 2022/23 but this is subject to the uncertainty of inflation, future government funding decisions, increases in demand for services and other risks. In considering its financial position going forward the council may wish to consider:

- Continuing to reduce reliance on “one off” budget adjustments. It is noted that the council has balanced its 2022/23 budget with circa £9m of one-off budget adjustments for which recurrent budget proposals will likely need to be found in future years.
- The potential for the council to undertake an efficiency review to assist with balancing its financial position. There is the opportunity to review vacancies, agency staff and vacancy factors on a corporate basis along with potential areas of non-pay.
- Even greater efforts to transform the areas of the organisation with the highest spend and the greatest pressures (i.e. demand led services such as Adults and Children’s Services). There is a view from officers that the council has a large volume of activity underway and greater prioritisation should be considered. This may require additional resources in transformation, change and project management resources.

It would be remiss of the Peer Challenge team not to refer to the significant financial risks that PCC faces. It is the view of the team that the council is sighted on and continues to address the specific risk associated with legacy pension fund decisions. This relates to the pension deficit re-financing which paid £73m off the council’s pension fund liability. It is understood uncertainty remains in respect of the council’s discussions with its auditors however the council advised that it has a contingency plan. Council officers are continuing to be highly focused on this issue and are committed to reporting any additional financial impacts following the conclusion of discussions with auditors.

The Council's Audit Plan includes a requirement for the council to provide an estimate of minimum revenue provision (MRP) for the council's investment properties including a comparison between the council's policy and the CIPFA code. This should be progressed at the earliest opportunity and the revenue impact reported to ensure appropriate levels of accountability and oversight at senior officer and member level.

The council's 2019/20 statement of accounts has yet to be signed off by the auditors with work yet to start on the 2020/21 accounts. This is due primarily to delays caused by consideration of the pension deficit re-financing but also the increased expectation of the Financial Reporting Council on auditors. Work on the 2021/22 accounts would normally be starting around the date of this report ahead of the 31 March 2022 year end. The council does not underestimate the scale of this task and corporate support to the finance team in progressing this will be a key in successfully addressing it.

4.5. Capacity for improvement

In responding to the Covid Pandemic, officers and members of PCC truly embodied the council's 'can do' attitude, living and breathing its commitment to doing the best for its communities. Teams were rapidly deployed to support various public health initiatives, adopting flexible and new ways of working to respond to a situation which changed on an almost daily basis. The organisation quickly embraced a move away from office - based working whilst ensuring service standards were maintained. It was encouraging to hear that there are plans in place to reflect on this challenging period, with a view to building learning into the council's on-going programme of change – particularly a review of accommodation.

Staff at PCC have been working at full capacity during the pandemic, often going above and far beyond their 'day jobs'. Whilst we saw a strong sense of pride at being able to support their communities during the pandemic, we also heard that as we learn to live with covid, they would welcome a review of workloads to ensure they are more manageable going forward following the initial reset of organisational priorities at the start of the pandemic. This reflects our earlier observations highlighting the importance of reviewing priority activities in line with organisational capacity. Taking steps to avoid workforce 'burn out' will help contribute to the council's wider work around recruitment and retention of staff in key services areas such as Adults and

Children's Services and help build organisational resilience.

Staff welcomed the positive and proactive approach to internal communications that was adopted during the pandemic, with the Chief Executive's blog style 'Team Talk' receiving particular praise. It was impressive to see that the needs of the whole workforce had been taken into consideration with hard copies provided to staff without regular email access – and in some cases information directly mailed to their home addresses. Staff are keen to see these positive steps maintained and enhanced as we move out of response mode.

Whilst corporate levels of communication were generally seen as effective, we did hear that the experiences of some staff can vary depending on where they sit within the organisation. Ensuring consistency of both the quality and timing of the information shared with staff across all service areas will be increasingly pertinent as more and more new ways of working are adopted post-pandemic.

PCC is good at communicating information to staff, as borne out by staff satisfaction results, but there is room for further opportunities to engage staff in two way conversations – maximising opportunities for them to influence policy and service design. Staff felt the opportunity to further engage would also enable a sharing of views and thoughts, which would improve morale after a long period of working remotely.

The 2020 Equalities Review was a catalyst for an EDI improvement Journey and clearly evidence of a corporate commitment to equality and diversity, something further demonstrated by a stated commitment to working towards the 'excellence level' of the Equality Framework for Local Government and set out in the council's Equality and Diversity Policy. This is integral to the council's commitment to making Plymouth 'a fairer city, where everyone does their bit'. The Equality and Diversity Action Plan, developed following the 2020 review, is allowing progress to be made towards fully mainstreaming equality and diversity across the organisation – but as the council acknowledges, there is more work to be done to embed the principles and practices across the council. The involvement of elected members in the Equalities working group is proving particularly successful in helping drive improvement in this area forward.

There are some good examples of specific transformational change projects

delivering new ways of working and vital levels of financial savings, such as Business Support. However, this process was challenging for the teams and individuals involved and may have benefited from a clearer organisational narrative around what 'Transformation' means for PCC – and what it means for individuals. We found staff who are willing to engage with, and understand the need for, a clearly articulated change programme. Whilst we read that the council's modernisation programme has customer expectations, supporting and empowering communities, financial sustainability, and reputation as the drivers for change – there is more to be done to ensure that all staff and members recognise these drivers.

We spoke with some very knowledgeable and experienced change practitioners working within the council, and so feel there is potential to successfully deliver a more wide-ranging transformation programme in pursuit of a balanced budget. However, in order to do this, additional resources (both people and finances) for the team will be needed to build capacity and a more cohesive programme. Greater central change capacity will help replicate successful change projects which have been delivered in specific services e.g. Children's Social Work pilots, on a pan-organisational basis, helping to deliver efficient change at a greater pace.

Current IT arrangements support the council well at a transactional level, but there is greater scope for digital transformation at pace to improve services and deliver financial savings. The review in progress now of current contractual arrangements is an opportune moment to map transformational IT needs and aspirations and procure a provider accordingly.

Like many local authorities, PCC has a significant asset portfolio, which it recognises could be used to better effect in meeting organisational objectives. Current asset management arrangements – with various aspects managed in different directorates, means that crucial opportunities could be being missed, e.g. the opportunity to maximise occupancy in one building, given the new ways of working, which may release an asset elsewhere. With an anticipated rationalisation of office buildings, a link to the council's commercial estate could identify development opportunities. This could equally apply to the poor physical assets occupied by partners such as the Police.

The Plymouth Growth Dividend is a well-established and rightly well-regarded

principle, measuring the impact of growth that would not have been delivered without the intervention of the Council. Extending this principle to encapsulate social and community value could help frame thinking and decision making when considering how assets are used and managed, allowing you to use every tool at your disposal in delivering your ambitions for the people and businesses of Plymouth.

The council is acutely aware of the issues it faces in terms of recruitment and retention in key demand-led services – and the impact that this is having on its ability to deliver the desired levels of service. For example, in Children’s Services, individual social workers working with children in care can have caseloads of between 20-29 where ideally, the council would like this to be around 15 and staff have clearly stated that a reduction in caseload would be a more significant deciding factor when considering remaining with the council, over levels of pay. Innovative approaches to appointing whole project teams rather than individuals to reduce caseloads, shows a willingness to explore all options and a solution focused attitude. The new Workforce Strategy is underway and includes measures to address retention and recruitment issues, however, this is not yet embedded sufficiently and consistently enough across the organisation to mitigate risks around recruitment, retention, and succession planning in the medium to longer term.

4.6 Community Empowerment

PCC is viewed by partners as a good organisation to work with, full of ambition and supportive of community groups and organisations as well as residents more broadly. The council’s renewed focus on communications and community engagement includes a clear commitment by the new administration to invest in meaningful involvement despite a challenging financial situation.

The council’s response to the tragic events in Keyham was seen as well-judged and attuned to the needs of the community with community leaders actively engaged and involved – this approach was both effective and positively received and is a tangible example of the council’s refreshed approach to community engagement and empowerment.

Whilst the use of appreciative inquiry methods worked well in supporting the community in Keyham and other effective uses of the methodology have led to improved outcomes in e.g. supporting victims of Domestic Abuse and Green Minds, managing expectations and anchoring engagement in the reality of available resources is vital in order to maintain trust and credibility.

The Violence Against Women and Girls Commission that the council has created in response to local and national incidences is seen as bold and with the potential to deliver lasting outcomes for Plymouth residents.

The council has taken positive steps to invest in digital inclusion, including skills and infrastructure, enabling more residents to engage with the council virtually and perform transactions online, however, more needs to be done to ensure that all residents are able to benefit from this as uptake levels are said by some partners to have been low.

Levels of response to the Council's budget consultation and to similar exercises relating to waste and recycling are impressive as is the Crowdfunder initiative, which funded a community group and is seen as having driven positive change at grass roots level in the community. Capturing the lessons learnt from these initiatives could not only benefit other services areas within PCC, but the sector as a whole.

The Council's Wellbeing Hubs are working well, and the initial four sites are already operating at capacity. The Wellbeing Hubs, developed through a series of collaborative workshops with providers and the VSCE, have a focus on prevention, early intervention, empowering communities and providing support for those in need, designed to reflect the local population's needs, and are allowing the council to build community capacity and resilience.

Whilst there are very obviously some positive examples of where the council's reinvigorated approach to community engagement and empowerment is having a positive impact on the lives of individuals, the approach is not corporately owned overall, instead being spread across the organisation, which can lead to inconsistencies and some opportunities being missed.

Reviewing the terms of reference and strategic rationale for the high number of

boards that operate across the partnership landscape will remove some of the barriers community groups in particular perceive when working with the council. Similarly, some partner organisations find the council's structures and processes slow and hard to navigate, with the potential for duplication.

PCC needs to continue to look at ways to ensure that momentum built up as a result of the Mayflower 400 and the community response to recent events is not lost and that the capacity within the community is retained and appropriately utilised in the longer term.

The Council could be more ambitious with its digital plans by using digital to create real solutions to community resilience concerns instead of focussing on internal and transactional programmes of digitisation.

Social and environmental factors and the needs of the community could be more central to the council's economic growth and regeneration plans in order to have a more tangible impact on the lives of residents as opposed to the perceived focus on financial return in economic regeneration. As part of the review of asset management referenced elsewhere in this report, PCC should look to facilitate more easily the transfer of assets to deliver community focused solutions.

5. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss, and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge. The CPC process includes a six-month check-in meeting. This will be a short, facilitated session which creates space for the council's senior leadership to update peers on its progress against the action plan and discuss next steps.

In the meantime, Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser for South West, is the main contact

between your authority and the Local Government Association. Paul is available to discuss any further support the council requires. paul.clarke@local.gov.uk