

# Customer Experience Peer Challenge **Plymouth City Council**

*9 – 11 July 2018*

Feedback Report

# 1. Executive Summary

Plymouth City Council (PCC) is rightly proud of its achievements and is a well led and managed council. The last LGA Corporate Peer Challenge report of PCC in 2015 acknowledged the council's 'massive strides in leading the regeneration of the city' which 'have helped achieve significant outcomes for citizens in terms of improvements to the economy, wellbeing of local people and place shaping. Furthermore, the CPC report also made reference to the council's 'dramatically improved focus, purpose and impact as a public services organisation'. Such strengths have and will enable PCC to improve further and it is within this context that the council requested this Customer Experience Peer Challenge to offer an external perspective of its strengths and areas for improvement.

As part of its continuing improvement journey, PCC is determined to place customers at the heart of all that it does and is intent on making the necessary changes to make that real. The team found that the determination and intent is real and in some instances the customer experience of PCC can be exceptional. However, neither the council nor its services are universally delivered through the lens of the customer. Therefore the experience of customers can vary greatly and this needs to change if PCC's ambitions are to be realised.

Many of the ambitions underpinning the council's intent are reflected within its existing Customer Service Strategy: improve the way we understand our customers, better serve our customers, listen and respond better to our customers. However, we found that for the present this strategy was not yet sufficiently owned, understood, nor enacted across PCC, meaning its implementation at the point of engagement with the customer is inevitably diluted. Likewise, we felt that several of the enabling strategies that would help deliver such transformation are similarly at this stage under developed or under-utilised, notably the council's intent in relation to digital enablement. As such the strategic intent of the council to appoint a Strategic Director to oversee the development of these areas is significant and to be welcomed.

The new post holder will find willing allies. Nearly all PCC colleagues we met with were passionate, proud and committed to the notion of re-orientating the council further and deeper around customers. Yet they also related a continued frustration at not being able to make the progress they want. Issues inhibiting this were: a 'departmental' culture – where primacy of service area or process was evident, or lack of capacity and effective enablement of IT means that there is not a comprehensive focus on the needs and demands of customers across the piece. Furthermore, we heard and saw for ourselves a lack of pace and depth of change - so that whilst the commitment to the focus on customers was stated, the actions didn't always follow. As a consequence we saw that the PCC workforce often had their heads 'down and in' not 'up and out' and as one stakeholder told us changing this 'treadmill mind-set', will be the real challenge. The new Strategic Director must have a clear brief and mandate from the Leader and Chief Executive to drive through change at pace and depth across PCC as a whole. In doing so, they will need to secure the 'buy in' of the whole council, at operational and strategic levels to make that happen.

If PCC's leaders politically and managerially set clear expectations, enable the conditions to ensure that the shift in emphasis on customer happens and then create capacity and align this to deliver against priorities then things will change. To help this we believe consistency, connection and coherence is needed. For example, we heard time and again stakeholders across PCC variously describe customers, citizens, consumers, residents, patients, users etc. in different ways and we found a range of systems and use of technology that reinforced that difference. Furthermore, although the council has many rich data sets, it doesn't always use these to its best advantage and there is a lack of profiling of customers and their needs and wants. As a consequence there is not yet a common mission, language nor uniform approach to engaging with customers - this is a gap that needs to be addressed. This is so much more than nomenclature; it is about the way in which PCC wishes to position itself in a challenging financial, economic and political environment. The leadership is clearly energised and passionate about Plymouth as a place and how PCC can best improve the economic, health and wellbeing conditions for its citizens. But it is insufficiently clear about what the emerging relationship should be between itself as a relatively large city council and its residents and businesses who pay council tax and business rates. PCC must seek to establish that core psychological contract between itself, its customers, its staff and partners-effectively what are the precise 'offers and asks' for customers and how they are best delivered.

We met with many staff, stakeholders and importantly customers - a core message from them is all was that Plymouth is on the up – an expression of pride about the city and its ambitions. Ironically, we found that views about the council didn't always match this and indeed from our brief experience we found many stakeholders perceived PCC quite neutrally. Related to this we heard about a vocal minority in respect of media that was perhaps distorting or diluting the impact of the many positive customer experience stories we were told about. It struck us that PCC needs to get on the front foot with its messaging and communications and be less reactive. The council should draw more closely to, and harness the power of its communities, their assets and advocates therein to ensure it talks about and builds upon the many good things PCC and its partners are doing for and with customers. To that end a more detailed review of the way PCC utilises its communications, media and engagement with communities would be worthwhile.

We found a positive partnership story across Plymouth. The achievement of the 'Plymouth Plan' and the focus on the change, growth and prosperity of Plymouth provided the narrative underpinning this. We found partners are very willing and indeed able to work with PCC to support, enable and importantly contribute to the notion of improved customer experience, once more on a citywide basis. The peer team felt that this would require greater coherence in terms of joint arrangements and potentially new governance to oversee such a wider, deeper, cross Plymouth approach around the customer.

As part of the above a key challenge for PCC will be its own narrative and most importantly, its own narrative in relation to the City. For example, we saw several different approaches to the way the council branded itself or what it was delivering or supporting in respect of the city of Plymouth. Our reflection was those messages were confusing and amplified to us why we found a neutral response from stakeholders to the

impact of PCC – PCC needs to decide whether this ‘passive’ role is the one that will best deliver improved customer services and whether it is serving well the reputation of the council.

We met some inspiring staff at PCC working tirelessly with customers to make a real difference. Many of these are residents, volunteers, ambassadors and advocates for Plymouth and therefore ultimately the council. Harnessing the added value of these staff, telling their stories of success, whether that is the excellent customer experience we saw embodied in some enforcement services, or First Stop Shop, or Public Protection or many more besides is so important. It struck us that as a council, PCC needs to spend more time capturing such experiences, reflecting on what it does well, learning from this and what it could do better, experiencing more, celebrating more and building into its organisational psyche a true learning culture – to date that does not sufficiently exist and again should become a core pillar of the changes the council is embarking upon.

Our final reflection was from all we heard and saw, the changes PCC is intent on and the recommendations we outline in this report are achievable. As said this is a well led and managed council and so in terms of ‘warts and all’ feedback, it is now for PCC and its partners to engage with their customers to make this meaningful, resilient and truly happen.

## **2. Key recommendations**

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some ‘quick wins’ and practical actions. Additionally, the peer team has highlighted some of our suggestions in respect of these at Appendix 1. The peer team’s key recommendations to the council are listed below:

1. Undertake a workforce capacity and capability review based upon customer experience and as part of this:
  - Appoint the new Strategic Director and focus on strategic leadership capacity
  - Ensure that departments and service areas refocus on placing customers at the heart of a linear, consistent and coherent cross council approach.
  - Harness PCCs workforce to act as volunteers, ambassadors and advocates for both the council and customers
  - Capture staff ideas and potentially disruptive innovative solutions for improved customer experience
2. Introduce a PCC definition of customer and commence a consistent narrative around customer experience
3. Establish organisation-wide customer profiles, based on the wealth of data already held, and use these profiles to inform service re-design from the customer perspective
4. Consider the value, timing and effectiveness of undertaking a ‘health check’ for the council’s communications function and overall approach to ensure that it enables the effective delivery of the council’s overall strategic intentions in respect of customers

5. Review both the structural/functional alignment of core services e.g. housing delivery, homelessness and demand and integrate key services to move the 'first stop shop' into a true 'one stop shop'
6. Implement a council and city-wide digital strategy with high level strategic sponsorship
7. Develop a corporate consultation and engagement strategy which is appropriately resourced
8. Undertake a comprehensive brand audit and review brand hierarchy
9. Define and communicate the psychological contract between PCC and its customers/businesses/residents- what are the exact asks and offers?

### **3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach**

#### **The peer team**

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

- Cllr Simon Blackburn, Leader - Blackpool Council
- Martin Reeves, Chief Executive - Coventry City Council
- Alison McKenzie-Folan, Deputy Chief Executive – Wigan Council
- Polly Cziok, Director of Communications, Culture, and Engagement - LB Hackney
- Fiona Worrall, Director of Neighbourhoods – Manchester City Council
- Richard Stevens, Managing Director – Plymouth Citybus
- Bren McInerney, Community Volunteer from Gloucestershire
- Emily McGuinness, Advisor – LGA
- Paul Clarke – LGA Peer Challenge Manager

#### **Scope and focus**

PCC chose to undertake a peer challenge with a focus on 'Customer Experience', which is a key feature of its Corporate Plan and core values. The intention of the challenge was to explore what PCC is doing to date (baselining) and how this might be further developed/changed to enhance 'customer experience' into the future. Importantly, the peer team was commissioned so PCC could record its strengths in this area but for the team to highlight what they might do better.

The challenge was designed through the lens of how PCC currently and in the future know and ensure that positive customer experience builds trust, improves its reputation and in turn; helps them to better engage and work in partnership with customers and

better manage demand as well as to learn and fine tune services to improve effectiveness and value for money.

The challenge and this report addresses the above through five core areas:

1. Leadership: Does the Council demonstrate leadership and a clear vision for customer experience? (How important is it to PCC? business planning, service standards, performance management, accountability, engagement by and with political leaders, officers, partners)
2. Priority setting: How much does PCC use its understanding of customer experience to drive Council priorities? (What do they know about their customers and who they are? Diversity/segmentation, channels, democratic engagement, sources of data/information, how is this intelligence collated and interpreted into policy and advocacy? How is this communicated? How are resources allocated in response to customer need?)
3. Learning: What is the readiness/inclination of the Council to respond and change based on its understanding of its customers? (Do they know what customers think of them? Do they proactively and thoughtfully seek customer feedback and who from? What do they do with it? Do they have a learning culture to be able to respond confidently and effectively to customer feedback? To what extent are they driven by customer need? Do they change their behaviour as a result and demonstrate that back to customers?)
4. Capacity to deliver: Is PCC's organisational capacity aligned with its aspirations for customer experience? (Are they set up as a customer experience organisation? How do they communicate with residents and let them know what is happening through all their channels? How successful are they at marketing its organisation and services? Engagement mechanisms to inform and drive intelligence, performance measures, business planning, skills, communication, ICT systems / processes)
5. User Experience: What are PCC's key stakeholders' experiences of the council? (How are they doing? How do customers experience PCC's services - as consultees, as service recipients, community/sector representatives etc.?)

### **The peer challenge process**

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

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

- spoke to more than 220 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders
- gathered information and views from more than 37 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading
- collectively spent more than 270 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 8 weeks in Plymouth.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (9-11 July 2018). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

## 4. Feedback

### 4.1 Leadership

PCC's leadership team are self-aware. They have many strengths in terms of the leadership of change, focus on improving the city and council and placing customers increasingly front and centre within this. The Leader (and indeed the previous administration's Leader) and Chief Executive are real champions for a 'customer first' approach but they know there are significant gaps and issues to be tackled. A key challenge is to establish a consistent and coherent customer experience, irrespective of where people engage the council and to what end. This doesn't mean one size fits all, but it does mean one approach reinforced time and again. This in part is why they commissioned the peer challenge – they have begun a positive conversation with stakeholders about change, they welcome external challenge and are intent on embedding tangible improvements.

There is a good base from which to build and improve and we found several examples of strong leadership in a number of areas which are reflective of a council refocussing on customers. The work being done on the council's ground breaking integration of health and social care services, with and through partners, communities and customers in establishing a range of first class services is evidence of this – the latest being the development of wellbeing hubs. The hubs are a great example of a cross agency, cross city, community and customer focussed programme. However, whilst such programmes are ahead of the curve and new and developing, we found that across the spectrum of customer experience, despite the examples of good practice, there is inconsistent messaging around intent, application and understanding of direction within the council and across some of its partnerships in respect of the customer.

The new Corporate Plan and 100+ pledge commitments offer a real opportunity to promote and embed customer ambitions further and deeper and realign these to the Plymouth Plan. The Plan is new so understandably the intentions behind these are not yet well understood across all services and partners. Therefore, now is an ideal time to develop and promote this new strategic framework for the council through the eyes of the customer. We suggest that a common mission, language and uniformed approach to engaging with customers is embedded within that planning framework and that the council becomes clear about what we deemed as the 'core psychological contract' between itself, its customers, its staff and partners. Effectively we mean being clear about what are the precise 'offers and asks' for customers, partners and staff and addressing the key questions about how are they best delivered and how best does PCC organise itself, its operations and its partnerships full square behind this?

Addressing, answering and delivering against the questions posed above will involve a new and refreshed impetus from PCC to espouse the values and culture of the organisation and ensure they are embedded in and through its workforce. We found several examples where a 'customer first' approach was very evident in the way services were designed, delivered and reviewed, for



example in parking services we found frontline staff who identified that customers with dementia and their friends and family would benefit from specially designed bays and parking meters – their work is now recognised nationally. Likewise, we heard about an officer who met a young adult with autism who was fascinated by the processes and procedures used in Parking Enforcement. The officer had some safeguarding concerns, but rather than using this as a reason to prevent further engagement, together the team worked with a local charity and arranged for the young resident to be sent copies of the regulations and regular meetings with enforcement officers – the young man now intends to work for the council. This was not part of any formal strategy, just a team who intrinsically put the customer first and managers who have created an empowering work place. The Multiagency Safeguarding Hub is another excellent example of the benefits of colocation and cross-departmental working which puts vulnerable people first.

However, in contrast of the inspiring stories above, we also came across ‘departmentalism’ and associated approaches and behaviours that reinforce ‘silo working’, which means that the customer’s end to end relationship and journey with PCC is inhibited as frequently people default to: ‘my customer’, ‘my service’, ‘my department’. A good example of this was perhaps the missed opportunity of reinforcing a ‘one council’ message in engaging with new people moving to new estates in Plymouth; it struck us that it would be useful for PCC to reflect on what it offers as a whole to such people and contrasts about what it does as separate interactions with them. It will then be important to organise its operating model and workforce accordingly – so that the customer is centre stage.

We heard mixed messages about staff engagement with the council’s leadership. In some areas it was remarked upon very positively, in others the absence of engagement with the council’s leaders was relayed to us. This is worthy of reflection as it reinforces the consistency message referred to. Some front line services dealing with customers on a daily basis told us that over the past 12 months they have not seen a senior member or officer. In contrast, others commented positively upon the Chief VLOG messages being well received and when she personally sponsors an area of work (e.g. the innovative open source data project) then colleagues feel empowered. However, we also heard that this is then not routinely followed through at senior management or department level and so the impact is that it fades away and is effectively de-prioritised. This is very de-motivating for colleagues and can be characterised as ‘passive dissent’. This does not engender a ‘one council’ approach and as the change and transformation process rolls out the visibility of leadership permeating through and across the workforce will be important. As that happens it will be important for leaders to hear at first-hand what works well and what requires attention, for example how the council could build further, faster and deeper with the ‘Firmstep’ platform, or how its excellent First Stop staff could be better enabled and supported to help PCC deliver a more cohesive ‘one stop’, end to end approach to dealing with customers.

## 4.2 Priority setting

PCC has two key overlapping and intrinsically linked priorities: A Growing City, A Caring Council and significant effort and resource are rightly dedicated to the achievement of these. PCC has been very successful in delivering its priorities and the integration of health and adult social care services and the redesign of pathways associated to transform the customer experience have reaped national acclaim. However, whilst PCC delivers successfully on more complex customer journeys, our overriding impression was that it was less successful routinely for the plethora of customers who are on different journeys with the council, as this is mostly captured and acted upon in a service focused way. Our advice to PCC is to place the customer at the heart of these overlapping priorities and make them the clear and overarching priority – as yet they are not.

One of the most prominent examples of this - and one which was explicitly referred to by everybody on the '21 Bus' and all other key stakeholders who we talked to whilst on site – is the council's approach to the supply of bespoke student accommodation in the City. Through the Plymouth Plan and economic development and growth strategies we saw a consistent prioritisation of skills, employability, the knowledge economy and intrinsic growth potential of the University. At the same time, we saw a clarity and consistency of approach to the strategic enabler of physical regeneration, symbolised by cranes on the sky-line and diggers on the ground, predominantly but not exclusively within the city centre. What was also clear was the frustration of senior leaders at PCC that residents, other stakeholders and media did not understand that much of the supply of student accommodation is not linked in structural terms with the City Council, who simply discharge their responsibilities as a planning and licensing authority. But with respect, this is missing the point. PCC must use the recently commissioned and published economic impact report from the University; push the University as a key partner to engage more in this city-wide debate and to get out with clear messages as to the benefits of bespoke student accommodation in the city centre, not least in respect of releasing significant numbers of houses of multiple occupancy in other areas for Plymouth families to move into. This can be overcome with a strong, evidence-based narrative. (See other University Cities that have ambitious growth plans – Coventry, Leeds, Sheffield and Manchester). Ultimately this is about the 'psychological contract' with the customer, with many Plymouth tax payers still seeing this as somebody else's growth and success – so it must be engaged with through hearts and minds.

We came across a range of impressive data sets within departments across the council. However, our impression was that several of these were managed and acted upon at service level, for example many departments have their own shadow systems to Firmstep and in some instances their own 'mini' telephone call centres. This means that PCC is limiting the potential for such rich data to be utilized effectively for the benefit of customers across the breadth of its services. For example, there is some great work taking place at the street services depot, where data from across the council area is being mapped and technology used to provide real time data to crews and customers alike – e.g. missed bins will be logged immediately and fly tipping hot spots mapped. This will allow a much more responsive refuse / street cleaning service, but is not linked to other services such as ASB reporting or Housing services. We also felt that around its

priority areas that by better using data, more useful customer profiles could be built, which would further inform the way the council responds e.g. the already referred to new customer at a new estate in Plymouth.

PCC needs to also include digital exclusion in its data strategy; currently the first stop shop is turning people away who need help filling in forms and meanwhile the Citizens Advice Bureau have a steadily increasing number of people being referred from the first stop shop for assistance with forms. One social worker advised us that they now have to accompany some of their people with more complex needs to the shop to assist with form filling, which doesn't always get them to the point they need to and isn't a great use of the social worker's time.

In respect of priorities we were told often enough by PCC's partners and external stakeholders to warrant a comment within this report, of an impression that the council is always in 'election mode'. The point here relates to an external view that as a consequence PCC often takes a short term focus on delivering around specific key projects at the expense of longer term fixes for customers, which is potentially limiting the effective use of resources to respond to customer need across the range of service delivery. Our main advice is to ensure synergy between the ambitions that are laid out in the new corporate plan and the list of pledges the council is now promising on and ensure the customer is at the heart of these.

We heard frequently about a perception, from several customers, external partners and PCC members and staff, that priorities are sometimes perceived to be driven by media (and social media) headlines. As a consequence we were told PCC is at times more of a reactive council rather than holding firm to an agreed strategic position. We did not have sufficient time to consider this fully but it will be an important reflection for the council as effective engagement and communications needs to be planned and managed strategically. This should be on both CMT's and Cabinet agenda.

We came across a range of 'good policies', the Customer Services Strategy is an example, as it sets out clearly: the way the council serves customers, how they can interact with the council, what the customer experience is or should be and how staff can gain satisfaction from serving customers well. However, we found variable knowledge, application and compliance with such policies when we spoke with people and this will be an important issue for PCC to address in whatever approach to placing customers at its heart is established – it must have a policy and it must be adhered to.

### **4.3 Learning**

It is clear that PCC is intent on gearing its focus around customer - everyone we spoke with is bought into this but there are issues to address so it becomes real. Specifically, the council will need to re-orientate its workforce, systems and engagement with customers. The key to unlocking this is to understand what the 'customer' is. For example, when we spoke with stakeholders there was a vast range of views expressed about how a customer is defined: who a customer is,

what needs to be done to better respond to them and who should lead or take responsibility for this i.e. what is within the gift of an individual, a service, a department, the council, the various partnerships etc.? Therefore whilst there is a readiness to respond and change there is no clarity about why and how and this, needs to be addressed. In line with our earlier comments it will be important for the council to spend time with stakeholders to establish the 'contract' between its customers, its staff and partners, which has a sound foundation, is socialized and understood, is acted upon and becomes a dynamic, changing and ever responsive approach to the way PCC goes about its business.

There is much to build upon and in terms of 'best in class', we came across or heard about many outstanding services, staff and innovations at PCC, for example the work with taxi drivers around supporting them in being city ambassadors or promoting safeguarding, the 'Playing with Open Data' approach, some fantastic individuals in the First Stop Shop using their skills, experience and expertise within that team to help customers reach good outcomes, the remarkable staff at the crematoria and in taxi licensing. The Trading Standards staff and their 'Buy with Confidence' scheme was remarked upon and we heard about some brilliant work in environmental health with food outlets. We heard about Library staff who demonstrated an excellent understanding of demand and how best to meet this (they even opened on voluntarily on Christmas day to ensure the needs of residents were met.). At the depot a skills audit was undertaken and several team members were reassigned from refuse collection duties to data mapping/system design/customer liaison based on their existing, but previously unquantified skills and experiences. The work with PCC and statutory partners, and children and families with special education needs in order to build and furnish a new and specialist resource was both genuine and authentic. The breadth of good practice was truly amazing and the range of data and intelligence available is equally breath-taking.

Yet the practices and approaches referred to above do not appear to be routinely analysed, codified and used to inform, shape and develop new, different and innovative ways to improve customer experience at scale. A further important point is that within many of these front facing areas there appear to be commercial opportunities that could fund additional resource and improve capacity to deliver services, yet these weren't being exploited to their full potential. As such PCC needs to further nurture a learning culture ( and possibly a more commercial outlook), where this becomes part of the core DNA of the council – a clear example of this is that the council and its health partners have shared national stages promoting, quite rightly their ground-breaking integration – yet that same approach is not practiced routinely in the city and even less so within the council.

We have remarked upon the skills, experience and customer focus shown by staff in the First Stop Shop – they are an amazing team, well led, who take a pride in what they do, work collectively as a team to share learning, for example from the complaints they receive we heard how they acted upon them to improve services to customers. They are a credit to PCC and yet they are at times let down, sometimes by system failure and down time, sometimes by people

elsewhere in the system not fulfilling their responsibilities for updating information, sometimes by a lack of integration across the system .As an example, colleagues from Community Connections are co-located in the First Stop shop, but are 'in another department'. From a customer perspective, this means that they could have to explain their service request several times. There were comments that front line staff 'are not allowed' to give advice on certain matters because that service insists calls are transferred to them rather than addressed via a customer advisor. Customer experience within services works well but workflows across the organisation are not sufficiently mapped (nor customers adequately profiled) to allow effective self-serve or for a 'one and done' approach to be successfully implemented.

In the same way that success is not systematically logged and learning identified, PCC would benefit from a more proactive and systematic approach to complaints handling, which will hopefully be resolved by the recent appointment of a Customer Liaison Manager. Currently, contact centre staff are often the gatekeepers of complaints and they are effective in addressing and resolving complaints which relate directly to services provided by the contact centre. However, they can only pass on complaints relating to other services and we found no evidence of a feedback loop that a) allows a single point to monitor the effectiveness of responding to complaints b) allows the customer to be kept updated and c) allows the organisation the opportunity to spot trends and use data to inform continuous service improvements. A good example, which perhaps reflects some of the above is, we were told if a call is made and a complaint raised about the need for grass cutting, that if that customer wishes to combine this with a hedge cutting complaint the system is not configured to log the hedge cutting element as it will not allow the combined complaint.

#### **4.4 Capacity to deliver**

PCC is intent on prioritising the customer experience but it is not currently set up to do this effectively – it will need to build focus, capacity and modify its culture if this ambition is to be realised. For the present we came across a 'too busy' culture, where departments and services were completely focused on delivering, but there was little time for reflection or strategic thinking. Some of the impact of service redesign and restructure we were told, is a residual legacy that job descriptions and role accountabilities have not been updated, resulting in some people's sense of personal failure; one supervisor told us "I am responsible for customer service, but I am so focused on delivery I never get to it" their line manager said "we don't expect you to" but it's still in her job description. So whilst there is a willingness to engage with change but there is a frustration by many at the lack of strategic clarity around customer agenda. If such clarity is created, if capacity is built into the change process and if it is seen through resolutely, it was clear to us that given the 'sign up' we came across to change that this is as feedback 'very doable for Plymouth City Council' but it will require a recalibration of the council's workforce capacity and capability based upon customer experience.

Other things will need to change if PCC is to realise its ambitions for customers. For example, the council adopted 'Firmstep' as a means of delivering an effective technological customer service platform. The system has the capability and capacity to help enable PCC to achieve many (but not all) of its ambitions to accelerate channel shift, implement end to end customer solutions and do so in a timely efficient way. The system is 'hard wired' in several areas of the council but not in others and the capability it offers is not, we were told being fully utilised. The peer team found that such under-utilisation was characterised by: a lack of understanding around its benefits, insufficient investment in system design, services which had chosen not to be sufficiently engaged, or others with a 'license' to operate other systems. Our advice is that PCC should proactively identify Firmstep as a corporate solution and positively sell its benefits and embed its usage.

PCC has a proliferation of ICT systems, data capture tools and locally-designed and owned bespoke toolkits. These are sub-optimal, unproductive, not least as most require manual input but above all aim to solve discrete, locally identified problems in the main and not the overall determination to gain better insight into the end user and tailor services and interventions accordingly. So this is crying out for a coherent council-wide digital strategy, which links to the customer services strategy. But PCC must not stop there, as it must seek to link this with the city-wide utilisation of the Internet of Things, open data sharing, systems integration across partners and key city-wide digital infrastructure, linked to future proof ultra-fast broadband and 5 G connectivity.

We believe that there is the capability within the council's communications team to help PCC focus on and reach out to customers more effectively. However, we found a service that was reflective of the 'too busy' culture, with insufficient time and space for strategic planning, for being proactive in terms of engaging customers and one which appeared reactive and driven frequently by the local, at times political demand and one with a risk averse culture and lack of license to operate. For example, the lack of proactivity around the council's social media outputs was very telling. In turn the linking to, and influence of communications, over other aspects of customer engagement was not as strong as it should be, a good example of this was social media pages directing customers to telephone lines rather than online services.

We came across many examples of services that PCC either delivers, commissions, works in partnership with or supports. We found that for its own services that marketing is hampered by a fragmented approach to branding – we came across several different styles and formats, which did not enable us and therefore certainly not the customer to know 'who does what'. As a consequence the current approach inhibits the council's opportunity to capitalise on good news, in a number of cases such as Livewell and PCH for example, customers perception of their brands and service levels was more positive than the councils, despite delivering services on behalf of or in partnership with the council. Furthermore, we found a lack of clear brand architecture between the council and the city. A good example of this is the high profile of the Ocean City brand, which positively perceived by customers and stakeholders, but not necessarily

associated with Plymouth City Council. Where ambitious projects are undertaken, new brands are created – for example Community Connections, and the Plymouth City brand therefore becomes synonymous with more ‘traditional’ council services and misses opportunities for positive association.

#### **4.5 User experience**

We met with many key frontline services who clearly have an excellent working relationships with customers and came across several examples of staff who are clearly going ‘the extra mile’ They are wonderful public servants who PCC we know will be proud of and we would encourage their stories to be told. We heard about parking enforcement services staff making connections in respect of dementia and autism, about children's services where there is compelling evidence of the voice of the child being heard, about extra care housing staff engaging with customers in such a warm and supportive way, of waste crews looking out for residents to keep them safe, of street scene staff working hard to put the customer at the heart of everything they do. These and many more besides demonstrate the impact that PCC and its staff can make.

The peer team clearly met many stakeholders and importantly customers. As one might expect they gave us mixed feedback, which no doubt reflected their experience with the city and council. So we heard about how good Plymouth’s parks, open spaces, and children's services were. We were told Plymouth is a great city to visit and work in, with lots going on – ‘Plymouth is on the up’. In contrast people we spoke with had concerns around refuse collection, benefits advice and opportunities for young people. Importantly when people spoke about the city they were generally uplifted but when they spoke about the council, they were neutral or passive. Yet many of the features that people spoke positively about were a direct result of the council’s wonderful efforts and achievements-PCC needs to work better at promoting to customers how it is helping to improve Plymouth.

We came across inconsistencies in terms of the user experience. The ‘First stop Shop’ is resourced by dedicated and skilled staff but they are clearly not well enough equipped to deal with the full customer journey. We came across ‘down time’ of systems in the First Stop Shop, elements of ‘mini call centres’ in some Departments and some areas where there was resistance to transferring services to the council’s main hub, an example of this is school admissions, where we felt there was confusion over responsibility and accountability. As already reported the user experience is therefore impaired in many respects by the way that PCC currently orientates its services, structures and processes and as such this needs to be addressed

As already referenced there is a lack of integration between community connections service, the First Stop Shop and the contact centre. Conducting a flow analysis and constructing customer profiles (using existing data including Mosaic) could be a quick win for PCC if service boundaries are transcended to ensure a seamless customer journey. For example, why not start with housing

and homelessness customer journey as it was clear to us that the lines of responsibility between Plymouth Community Homes and the council are not understood.

## **5. Next steps**

### **Immediate next steps**

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

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

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



## Appendix 1

### **Quick wins**

- Endorse 'Playing with Open Data' approach and stick with it
- Arrange sessions for colleagues across the Council to hear about your innovative approach to multiple, complex needs through the ALLIANCE
- Conduct a flow analysis e.g. why not start with housing and homelessness customer journey
- Undertake a diagnosis of systems downtime in the One Stop Shop and Customer Contact Centre
- Leader/Chief Executive roadshows on importance of learning from the best practice in PCC and partners on approaches to customer experience.
- Communicate as a council about rationale for student accommodation, growth as part of city plan