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A council the city deserves

Reflections on the first 100 days
and plans for the future



Brighton & Hove
City Council

Introduction

It has been just over 100 days since I joined the city council – and around 70 days since I became a resident of Brighton & Hove.

I have had the opportunity to meet with many residents, staff and leaders in organisations across the city, listening to their impressions of the city and the council, their hopes and their views on what we do and how we do it. I've seen how we work with partners in the city and seen how our services respond to significant challenges during the cold weather.

But nearly everyone I have spoken to shares a common endeavour – to make Brighton & Hove a great city because they have a strong passion for the place. This sense of pride is also apparent in the results of the recent Place Survey, which said that more than four out of five people (86%) like their area as a place to live.

While many people often speak highly of the city as a place to live, not as many are willing to speak highly of the city council. Our reputation is not as it should be – despite the fact that we provide over 800 services to residents everyday.

There are future challenges too. Most notable is the tough financial environment which all public services will experience over the next ten years. But there are environmental, demographic challenges as well as increasing expectation on the quality of the services that we provide.

When all these are taken together it becomes pretty clear to me that something needs to be done. We have a great opportunity to seize the initiative and innovate. Rather than having a decade of austerity, I would prefer that we aim for a period of quality and innovation.

Brighton & Hove is a creative and innovative city – it is not afraid to take risks, create

opportunities and push the boundaries of innovation. Now, more than ever, we have the chance to tap into our talents, unlock our creative potential, and innovate – pursue ideas that can make Brighton & Hove an excellent council that delivers first-class public services.

Therefore, this document sets out my plans to transform Brighton & Hove City Council into an organisation that the city deserves – a council that is connected with its city, listens and responds to community concerns. And in time, a council that citizens come to trust and respect because we deliver on our promises.

The test is not only whether it works for us as an organisation, but whether the city sees a real difference - whether we are an organisation that reflects the dynamic, vital and diverse place that we work for.

Observations and context

During the past 100 days I have had the opportunity to look, listen and learn. One thing that stands out above all else is the passion everyone has for the city. In this time, I have witnessed, and personally experienced, many great things that go on in the council and across the city.

I have been impressed with the dedication and passion that people have in their roles. The commitment to delivering improved outcomes for the city is very good and in some parts it is exceptional.

The existing structure and arrangements have enabled the authority to generally deliver a good quality of service to the city, as recognised recently by the Audit Commission. The current structures have, however, created a number of challenges and there are inherent weaknesses holding the council back from delivering a better standard of service and, more importantly, improved outcomes.

We have very good partnership working in several areas (perhaps the most notable in public safety and joint services for children and young people) but this is not consistently applied across the organisation.

Our ability to innovate is often seen at its best in crisis situations (or times of annual budget setting) rather than being part of our day-to-day job. We are often held back by the burden of bureaucracy, which stifles innovation, flexibility and responsiveness.

There is a level of understanding across the organisation that if we pooled our resources, budgets and ideas we can improve the council and, in turn, the city.

We are already beginning to explore new ways of thinking and working (such as the “whole systems” approach to service design and delivery that we are doing through the new value for money programme), but we still find old systems and structures hard to “let go of”.

We are making great progress in some areas, but we don’t always extend our good practice to other parts of the organisation or involve local communities in shaping the services they

need. We must develop a consistent approach to service design and delivery, and we need to collaborate better with the public and partners. We need to encourage bottom-up thinking rather than top-down directives.

Our ambition is to transform lives, inspire innovation and create a council the city deserves.

Challenges

There has been a lot of debate about the future of public services in Britain – not only in terms of funding and cost, but also about personalisation of service, quality, responsiveness and involvement of residents and service users.

We do know that the environment within which we all work will change fundamentally over the next few years. That the challenges of demographic and environmental change, of reducing inequality, of technological advance, of increasing expectations from our residents and service users will drive us to be more agile, more responsive to need and to understand better the place we serve.

Brighton & Hove has weathered the current recession relatively well, following ten years of economic prosperity and with a strong reputation as a retail and visitor destination.

We are renowned for our cultural industries, which include a burgeoning digital media sector, yet employment in the city is still heavily service sector-focused and has a low proportion of employment in production-based industries.

Therefore, we have a responsibility to look ahead and capitalise on the unique potential of our city for growth in new sectors, such as the creative and new media industries,

information knowledge economy, and green-economy industries.

We must not be complacent and risk losing out to other enterprising locations in the upturn, nor lose sight of our own particular challenges, such as limited room for development.

Money

The recent economic downturn has arguably created the harshest conditions since the end of the Second World War. At October 2009, UK public sector net debt was £825billion (approximately 60% of Gross Domestic Product). Many commentators predict public debt will rise to 90% of GDP by 2015.

Some councils around the UK are predicting up to 20% budget cuts over the next three years and that “financial pain” is likely to be shared by other public service partners in the city.

Even if we maintain our current level of formula grant from Government, we must save £45million by 2013-14 or £15million every year over the next three years after 2010-11. And we must do it while protecting frontline services, improving customer experience across the board and delivering better outcomes for the city.

A reduction in resources is not new. Reductions in central government grant or council tax take (in the region of £7million each year over the last three years) have been managed through careful financial planning and varying degrees of service based savings. The negative effects of “salami slicing” bits of money from budgets from services has been reasonably well contained. But the scale of the financial constraints that we must now plan for mean that, if we continue to try working in the same way on a greatly reduced resource base, we will in all probability end up making reactive and ad hoc decisions to the detriment of those that depend on our services.

Our financial position for 2010-11 is good. We are on course to deliver good quality services within budget for next year. And we have implemented the Value for Money programme,

focussing on those areas which have greatest impact on cost, and finding more efficient ways of working. It will help to deliver the savings that we need to make, but not all of them. We are still faced with a savings gap in 2011/12 of around £8m, and in 2012/13 of around £5m. And that’s assuming that Government does not cut our funding grant.

Reputation

So we have an imperative for change. But it is one not only driven by finance.

One of the things that has surprised me most is the huge gap between how residents feel about Brighton & Hove as a place, and how they feel about our performance – not their satisfaction with individual services – but their overall satisfaction with the council. Under half of our residents have a positive attitude towards us.

The challenge of informing and involving residents in what we are doing needs to be met with more vigour and in a more focussed and more coherent way. This is not about “spin” or “feeling good”. If we want to involve communities and individuals in future service design and delivery, it is vital that our reputation for competence and being a “good partner” is better.

Strong reputations are built from within organisations and the people delivering services have a huge impact on service delivery, public satisfaction and, ultimately, our overall reputation. Our staff are highly committed and talented, but their own views (from staff surveys) and those of external assessors question whether they are able, whether they are empowered to take decisions that best meet the needs of our citizens. Unlocking this potential and building competence and capacity to work with communities to innovate and to take on different roles is vital to building our reputation as an excellent council that responds to community concerns.

In short, we need to develop structures and capabilities that are more fluid and agile so that we can think on our feet, move swiftly to

anticipate challenges, and foster a culture where innovation becomes part of what we do and who we are.

Citizens

The council needs to adopt an outward-in approach – we must stand in the shoes of our residents so we can understand their concerns better. By putting our residents first and focussing on their needs, we can start shaping the way we run the council and begin to improve our reputation. We must place greater emphasis on what matters to our residents and focus our efforts in meeting their needs and aspirations.

As an organisation we have to move away from our current inward focus, which has a tendency to make us less comfortable with public scrutiny and challenge. Our reputation has suffered in the minds of our citizens as an organisation that doesn't listen, is bureaucratic and wastes money. I know this is not true, but unfortunately, perception is as good as reality for our residents. So we have to actively listen to our residents and feed back on their concerns and on our actions. We must learn and act on their complaints and encourage a spirit of inquiry that can help us continue learning and connecting with our city.

Partnership working

Strong and constructive partnerships are crucial to sustained improvements to the city now and into the future. We must continue building on our natural tendency to “networking” that enables ideas, information and opinions to be shared but direct these towards city-wide outcomes that improve lives and the place through intelligent commissioning.

Brighton & Hove has made good progress in partnership working over the past few years. Indeed it is known for its strength here. The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) sets out the long-term citywide vision and outcomes; and a Public Services Board (PSB) brings public and voluntary sector bodies together behind a Local Area Agreement. And at a local level,

where partners come together with communities, there is real participation and improvement delivered. The Local Action Teams in community safety evidence this approach well.

There is experience of pooling public service funding or resources under an agreement (similar to Section 75, which brings social services in health and council together). There is a platform to build on and there are high levels of goodwill and co-operation between partners to make this work well.

The Government and IDeA are working together to pilot the new ‘Total Place’ initiative which advocates unifying local public services and partners to deliver improved outcomes for local residents.

Brighton & Hove is well-placed to become a national leader in this area. Although the PSB / LSP has not yet embarked upon a Total Place type exercise (mapping the totality of public service expenditure across the city) I believe it will need to do so.

Strengthening the local economy as a place to visit, work and do business is also critical to the longer-term prosperity of Brighton & Hove. By drawing on the many committed and expert leaders in the city from the public, private and voluntary sectors we can design and deliver better outcomes for the city's economy.

What's holding us back?

Like most other local authorities, Brighton & Hove has taken strides over the past few years to modernise the way it operates, to work better with partners in the public and voluntary sector and to improve the efficiency and quality of the services it provides.

But there are, in my view, some organisational and structural constraints that could prevent us from moving forward, delivering our objectives in the new financial, social and environmental context while better meeting the needs of the city we serve.

I have observed that we have often tended to develop policy and take decisions in a task-focused way. We do not always “join up”

across the council – especially in delivering services. We tend towards thinking “Directorate” rather than Whole Council. We have a very professionally demarcated structure. Different departments, sometimes with multiple layers of management, often doing very similar things but in slightly different ways. This can lead to a lack of clear accountability and needless complexity for citizens. It can be confusing even for colleagues and has a direct relationship to our reputation for competency within the city. It also leads to us duplicating functions and capacity in each part of the council – rather than effectively collaborating, sharing and learning across the organisation.

The divide between the front line and the centre of the organisation is also far too wide – it is a big gap between senior management and staff who deliver services. That means it is often difficult for staff to feel that they can own, have the power to fix, issues that they see. Our hierarchical structure can constrain our ambition and our delivery. It’s also costly and can create bureaucracy, not allowing for a shared view of what needs to be done and how to go about it.

And communication between the existing directorates is not necessarily consistent – we tend to view service users from our own professional perspective (as a planning applicant, a parking permit user, the user of a care home, the parent) rather than from the perspective of resident or citizen.

Feedback from residents tells us that they think we are not uniformly responsive, nor do we consistently apply customer service standards. There is a sense that community participation in decision making, service design and delivery are not consistent or joined together or acted upon.

To be able to fully exploit the opportunities available – both a constant need to improve and to do so within reduced resources – we need to develop a model of working that exploits what we all know, understands what the city needs from us, delivers quality work consistently and allows us to join with others more effectively in helping make the city what it can be.

Conclusion

We need to focus on greater efficiency – starting with squeezing out cost within the city council. We need to take out duplication in what we do, reduce the hierarchy, be smarter at purchasing products and services, look for opportunities to collaborate with others, within and outside the council and the city, to share costs.

But we will need to go further. We will need to re-orientate ourselves to collaborate both within and outside the council. We will need to change our “method” of working to focus less on “our” services and focus more on what it is we are trying to achieve. Inevitably this means we will need to evolve our structures and processes to do this. A fundamental shift away from viewing what we do from our perspective, to one that starts with the need we are trying to address. Where the knowledge and intelligence of the city, its residents and citizens is the starting point for decision, not simply the service that we are trying to provide.

Our new model of working must ensure that we have the right level of information so we can evaluate our choices and make the right recommendations. And we won’t do it alone – we will collaborate with others in the public and voluntary sector to find innovative solutions to address shared concerns.

Indeed, parts of the council are already working in this way – but I believe that the whole council must do so. The way we work, the way we “think” about what we do – the how, the what, our responsiveness to those we serve, has to change.

I acknowledge that this won’t be easy. But we have a duty to the city to improve. We would be failing if we did not anticipate, prepare and implement change so that we are not faced with simply providing less for less. A worse service for more people with less money.

Ready for the future

I am committed to Brighton & Hove. I would not have taken this job if I wasn't prepared to make that commitment to the place as well as the council. I moved my family here because I genuinely believe that Brighton & Hove is a great place to live. And I've had experience of our services as a new resident, which gives a different perspective on how our services are delivered..

I am passionate about public services. I left the private sector because I firmly believe in the public service ethos. In my view, there is no greater good than committing a service to the public for the sake of enhancing social and public value.

However, this is the key – as public servants we have a big responsibility to the public. In the private sector, if a customer is unhappy with a service, they can take their money to a competitor. It is not the same for local councils. Residents are legally obliged to pay their council tax. Therefore, we must – absolutely must – ensure that we provide a high standard of service. This is our duty – it is the implicit contract that we have with our residents and I am determined that we give this great city the council that it truly deserves.

How does our organisation change?

We need to develop a new model – a Brighton & Hove model – that spans not only the council, but other public service organisations as well.

I passionately believe that we need to think differently, act differently, and behave in a way that supports a joint endeavour.

We need to be objective – to use data that we have, and some that we haven't yet fully got – in ways that are transparent, provide guidance and evidence to possible actions, improvements and new innovations. Information that we can honestly evidence to make the positive changes to lives in the city that we turn up to work to achieve.

We need to collaborate much better across the council; and we need to be even better at managing risk.

Brighton & Hove is known in the local government sector for partnership working. The Beacon award last year demonstrates this. But we need a step change here as well. We should not, cannot, and will not be forgiven by citizens if we haven't spent their money wisely – that means we need to really focus on planning and creating services collaboratively – alongside other public sector services, but also the community and voluntary sector – and citizens and service users themselves.

It will mean we have to work more flexibly with others – beyond agreement and separate spending and fuzzy accountability – to shared priorities and outcomes, money and resource, and a true joint responsibility to Brighton & Hove for what is done. Or not done.

I honestly believe that the "how", the "detail", the "knowledge" is in the organisation: in you, in your staff, in our partners, and in the city.

My job is to harness the talent and the energy, to navigate the organisation and the thinking towards a place where real transformation in how we do things, on how citizens "rate" us, on outcomes for those we service – are possible – and delivered for the citizens of the city.

We've turned these into a "model" of what a future city council could look like - a council the city deserves.

The outline

Our starting point, the challenges that we face, are in many ways not unique to Brighton & Hove. Indeed other local authorities and public bodies have been developing their thinking on what the future shape of their

organisations needs to be. How to address the financial, service and citizen challenges. Many authorities – Leicestershire, Birmingham, Essex, Hackney, Westminster, Torbay and Suffolk amongst them – have progressed further along this road and there is much that we can learn from them.

All of them have identified the need to secure the best outcomes from their communities by using all the available resources – regardless of where they “sit”. Indeed this commissioning approach is already being used in parts of Brighton & Hove. It is an approach that links ‘high-level’ outcomes to the actions required from individual services and service providers. These outputs or actions should be understood in the broadest sense as those which are most successful in achieving the desired outcomes; and offer the greatest public value, not simply the cheapest option.

In Brighton & Hove we have pockets of commissioning that are reasonably well developed for example in social care; and they are being developed in housing and community safety. The approach has worked well in the city in a range of “joint projects” – for example with Supporting People. The Housing Repairs Contract letting used aspects of commissioning to ensure that the eventual contract will meet the city’s needs over the longer-term. However, there is no systematic approach (as yet developed) about how this model is used across the council, the sharing of budgets or the capacity to fully develop an understanding of citizens’ needs, and exploiting the opportunity for reducing duplication of effort.

To fully exploit the potential of commissioning we need to implement it at an organisational level – ie it has to be the way we work. This is not about improving or extending general commissioning practice, it is about adopting a whole system change that separates and transforms both decision making and service delivery functions.

For Brighton & Hove City Council to become a ‘Strategic Commissioning Organisation’ it will

require fundamental changes to the organisation at every level. In practical terms this will mean moving from our existing structure of departments to a council consisting of delivery units focusing on serving customers, support units providing shared expertise and commissioning functions to assess need and identify the future shape of services.

This new model proposes a more efficient and agile organisation which will free the organisation from solely focussing on service delivery to become an effective and proactive ‘client’ able to:

- Focus on delivering improvements for people and places
- Challenge current patterns, approaches and costs of service delivery
- Draw on the best of the public, private and third sectors to shape the market and encourage innovative solutions
- Deliver more responsive services through de-commissioning and re-commissioning.

In outline

Members are the decision makers and “commission the commissioners”. With their democratic mandate they set strategic and political priorities, set the budget and oversee outcome delivery. They also test and challenge on the delivery of value for money and efficiency.

They are supported by the Chief Executive and Strategic Directors through accurate and high quality needs analysis and advice.

Any model must allow for the crucial role of the Leader and Cabinet Members in being able to identify priorities (and those areas which are not), address policy and strategy direction and to provide challenge and stretch performance within the council.

The organisational “shape” in this model is fundamentally different to the existing structures within the council. It will comprise of four basic elements.

A revised TMT becoming the body responsible for the **strategic officer leadership** of the

council, ensuring high performance, managing risk and reputation and ensuring that member priorities are delivered. The directors' role won't be that of a service professional lead, and they won't "manage" a department in the sense we know it today. Their role will be to focus on the links between service and the city's need rather than single directorate management. In short, they will spend more time looking at the city's needs and how council services can work together to address those needs.

This group will be responsible for delivering the overall direction, ensuring high performance and for management of risk and reputation of the authority.

Individual directors will focus on specific outcomes and will need to provide policy advice to members, developing and maintaining a viable strategy to meet current and future needs of the city in line with the council's priorities. They will lead in overseeing performance of the organisation and improvements to how we go about our business.

Secondly, a redefined group of **support services** that provides the cross-organisational expertise in areas such as analysis and performance, policy development, procurement, communities and equalities, project management and communications.

Some of these functions are currently replicated across the council with fragmented budgets and staffing. This leads to difficulties in joint working, in getting a consistent and single view of the city's need, creating layers of management and being costly. Our partners tell us that this is not an effective platform to build better joint working. But this is not centralisation.

Whilst line management of the functions will be held by individual directors, their work will be determined and commissioned by the whole of the strategic leadership team. Developing how this will be implemented to deliver the benefits will be a key piece of work as we move on.

I also want to use the opportunity of this pooling of resource to consider whether there is scope for us extending this to other public sector agencies in the city.

One of the key aspects of this model will be the differentiation between commissioning of service and its delivery. The so-called commissioner/provider split.

I want to get to a position where we are able to clearly understand and articulate the needs of the city, determine what activity needs to take place, what services need to be provided, to meet that need, and then commission their provision.

Finally, there are **delivery teams**, the staff across all of the council that deliver the hundreds of services we provide. Their focus will be on delivering the commissioned services and activity, promoting and embedding innovation, and seeking new and more efficient ways of working. They, in turn, would commission the support services, allowing them to focus on their areas of specialism and delivery.

Getting going...

The new model of working will be challenging for us all to work with. It will need refinement, decisions about where individual functions reside and developing the principles for working. It will also put more dependency on data being interpreted so that the needs we must address and the services we provide are good quality, reliable and fully evidence based. It will mean negotiations with partners across the city so that they can understand and respond to this model. Above all it will need staff to bring their innovation, their experience and their proposals forward.

It cannot be implemented with undue speed, but equally we cannot sit back to simply debate the fine detail for every eventuality.

The new model is not separate from other initiatives that are underway in the council. The current Value for Money programme is not only vital for the financial health of the authority, but it is consistent with and

supports the principles outlined above. We must also progress the activities to improve our customer service, improvements from the staff survey and delivery of the Administration and council priorities.

Work is already underway to develop our understanding of the links between our service activity and the outcomes for the city that we are seeking. This is a key first step to understand the existing pattern of delivery and structure and how it could be realigned.

We have created a Performance Board to oversee not only the delivery of the current business plan, but also to start thinking about how service improvements can be developed, and how performance management takes place within the new model.

Over the next few months we will be developing the role, function and structure of the strategic leadership team; the pooled support services and the delivery teams with the intention of having these in place by the end of the year. We will develop the detailed design of the organisation, making sure that the structures are streamlined, focussed and aligned so that we are responsive, we devolve authority responsibly and we maintain clear accountability. We will involve staff at all levels in the organisation to bring their expertise to help design and build the new model of working and we will be setting up various forums, working groups and teams to do this.

Finally...

Brighton & Hove City Council has the potential to become a truly exceptional local authority – one that genuinely listens and responds to citizens, collaborates with public and partners, delivers the best in public services.

There is a great opportunity to unlock the creativity and talent within the organisation to make real change that benefits the city. Our residents deserve no less and in so doing we start to create a council the city deserves.

No doubt we will be confronted by other challenges beyond our influence as we go through this journey. The road ahead will be hard and at times deeply uncomfortable for many. Make no mistake, the challenges will be significant. And significant challenges demand a fresh perspective – a different way of thinking and working.

I want to be honest about these issues now because I don't believe that there should be any surprises. That is not to say that things won't change as we move forward, but one thing is for certain: we cannot stay as we are. We cannot keep delivering the same services in the same way. Financial pressures alone compel us to reconsider how we continue to meet increased demands on our services within limited resources.

We are fortunate in that we start from a strong base. There is a strong sense of shared purpose to improve lives of people and of the city. And there is an abundance of very bright and talented individuals throughout the council to make change happen.

Together we can become an innovative council that delivers better outcomes for residents, transforms lives and creates a council the city deserves. I look forward to working with you to make this happen.



John Barradell
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