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Chief Executive  
Carlisle City Council  
Civic Centre  
Carlisle CA3 8QG

28th October 2014

Dear Jason

### **Future Council Review – 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> September 2014**

On behalf of the peer team, I would like to say what a pleasure and privilege it was to be invited into Carlisle City Council to deliver the recent Future Council review as part of the LGA offer to support sector led improvement.

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

- Adrian Pritchard, Chief Executive – Colchester Borough Council
- Councillor Tom Beattie, Leader – Corby Borough Council
- Katherine Fairclough, Deputy Chief Executive – Warrington Borough Council
- Bridget Taylor, independent consultant
- Rhea Newman, Policy Manager – Surrey County Council
- David Armin, LGA review manager

### **Scope and focus of the peer challenge**

You asked the peer team to provide an external ‘health-check’ of the organisation by considering the core components looked at by corporate peer challenges:

1. Understanding of the local context and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and has it established a clear set of priorities?
2. Financial planning and viability: Does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
3. Political and managerial leadership: Does the council have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?

4. Governance and decision-making: Are effective governance and decision-making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change, transformation and disinvestment?
5. Organisational capacity: Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas in order to deliver the agreed priorities?

You asked us to give particular attention to how Carlisle can prepare itself as a council of the future and how economic development and planning can further deliver growth. Under the core components, you wanted us to give attention to the effectiveness of scrutiny and your approach to performance management and organisational development.

To deliver this brief, the team have sought to address two key questions to help you prepare for the future:

- How can you best deliver the Carlisle Plan?
- How does Carlisle position itself as a partner and exert influence, in particular to deliver your priority of economic growth?

### **The future council review process**

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The future council review was improvement-focused and tailored to meet Carlisle's needs. It was designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. The 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 team prepared for the future council review by examining 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 3 days onsite in Carlisle, during which we:

- Spoke to more than 80 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 20 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 240 hours to determine our findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than six weeks in Carlisle.

This letter provides a summary of the team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the team at the end of their on-site visit (9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> September 2014). In presenting feedback to you, we have done so as fellow local

government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the review is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

### **Summary of feedback: overall observations and messages**

Members and officers share a strong sense of place and understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing Carlisle – its rich heritage, good transport links and proximity to the Scottish border and many places of historic interest and natural beauty. The council is committed to attracting and sustaining good quality jobs and addressing the dilemma which was neatly summarised to us as ‘making Carlisle a destination as well as a gateway’. The council benefits from clear political direction – the pledges of the new administration which gained power in 2012 have been translated into the priorities on which the Carlisle Plan is based. The council intends to sharpen these priorities further as the Plan is refreshed for 2015 onwards and we think this will help it to maintain impact and momentum with diminishing resources.

The Leader and Chief Executive are well regarded and create confidence in the future direction of the council. Partners suggested that you should build on this by your political and managerial leadership assuming a higher profile across Cumbria and beyond to promote the district. This should ensure that Carlisle – as the only city and a major source of economic activity within the county – at least punches at if not above its weight and continues to attract investment and jobs. Private sector partners believe you have become more business friendly and are willing to engage further with you where tangible benefits are delivered in a timely, focused and sustainable way. But they also perceive that your consultation and decision making processes can be slow leading to lost opportunities. The council needs to continue to make decisions in a transparent and accountable way, allowing for proper scrutiny, but should look to streamline processes and reduce the number of stages involved where appropriate.

The council has made significant investment in organisational development and the Chief Executive has personally championed development of a more empowering organisational culture since his appointment nearly three years ago. We believe this is making a real difference – staff at all levels across the council feel they now have greater freedom to act and demonstrated commitment to both Carlisle and the council. However, they also want a clearer framework – a sense of the parameters within which freedom can be exercised and a performance management framework which measures the impact they are having, underpinned by a willingness amongst all managers to tackle performance issues. They are also concerned that, following the significant savings already delivered by the council, further incremental savings – characterized as ‘salami-slicing’ – is not sustainable in the coming years and clearer prioritisation, in line with the

administration's priorities and pledges, will be required. We believe these concerns can be addressed through using the refresh of the Carlisle Plan; implementing a performance management framework based on a smaller number of key organisational and service success measures and a clearer statement of the parameters – in terms of both service delivery models and behaviours within which the council will operate. The council has delivered significant savings to date. However, a clear cross-cutting savings plan, including end to end transformation, will be needed to deliver a balanced budget in future and overall the council needs to accelerate the pace of change. A focus on a smaller number of key projects may help to achieve this. Taken together, these steps along with continuing strong leadership will enable the council and its people to maintain their clarity, confidence and commitment to deliver for Carlisle.

## **Summary of feedback: current performance, ability and capacity to deliver future ambitions**

### *Understanding of local context and priority setting*

The council's leadership, members and officers demonstrate a good understanding of the opportunities and challenges presented to the district and the strength of the Carlisle 'offer'. This understanding is informed by an extensive consultation – the Listening Council in 2013. The outcomes of this consultation and the political pledges of the new administration are expressed in the Carlisle Plan 2013-16. The vision of this plan is *'to promote Carlisle as a prosperous city, one of which we can be proud'*. The economic growth agenda is weaved through the priorities of the Carlisle Plan, including the growth of high quality business and employment opportunities; working with partners to develop a skilled and prosperous workforce and addressing current and future housing needs. There is an action plan to deliver the economic development priorities that relate to each of the strategic objectives of the Carlisle Plan.

While the Carlisle Plan gives a clear focus on economic development, the team believe that a further emphasis on key priorities is required, along with a stronger sense of how resources follow priorities. We understand that the Council intends to provide this in its refresh of the Plan for 2015 onwards and to articulate its vision and priorities in a way which will help more staff see how they contribute to the delivery of those priorities. Wigan Council's 'Plan on a page' shows how priority outcomes can be expressed on a side of A4, along with some key success measures (more details at <http://www.wigan.gov.uk/Council/Strategies-Plans-and-Policies/CorporateStrategy.aspx>). A fundamental review of resources available and needed to achieve the refreshed Plan should be undertaken. Some areas of current spend will need to be asked to find more savings if resources are going to be freed up to achieve the priorities identified in the Carlisle Plan.

One of the priorities of the Carlisle Plan is to work more effectively with partners. Private sector partners reported that relationships with the council were now much stronger and staff are seen to be business friendly. Partners felt that there is scope for the council's Leader and Chief Executive to be even more proactive in the region and beyond, acting as standard bearers for Carlisle. The council is part of the 'Borderlands Initiative' intended to improve joint working among councils on either side of the border, crossed by many people to work, shop and enjoy their leisure time. The council may well wish to build on this in the light of the 'No' vote in the Scottish independence referendum on 18<sup>th</sup> September. Partners welcomed initiatives to promote the district such as The Carlisle Story and the Ambassadors group, but noted that the latter will benefit from renewed focus. Such initiatives need to be seen through to a conclusion and communication maintained. Some felt that Carlisle did not get as much benefit from the Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) as it should and the creation of more 'shovel ready' projects may help with this. Carlisle shares a seat on the LEP with Eden District Council on a rotating two yearly basis to represent the interest of districts and should make sure it maximises the opportunities this presents.

A challenging but important aspect of developing the Carlisle 'offer' is the improvement of several key public services which are not under the control of the City Council – including children's services and education, and hospital based health services which are rated as underperforming by external inspectorates. Such factors are likely to be considered as part of major inward investment decisions. The council should grasp strategic opportunities to work in partnership with the authorities responsible for these services to help with their improvement journey. Oxford City Council is an example of a district council which has used the General Power of Competence to work with schools to help them tackle educational attainment in primary schools with the aim of helping to improve the skills level of the future workforce (more information can be found in [Empowering councils to make a difference - Case Studies \(LGA July 2013\)](#)). The council is already working with further education institutions such as Cumbria University and Carlisle College – an example is *The Edge*, a programme to help businesses and individuals acquire the skills needed to grow businesses as this may provide a foundation for further engagement with the education sector. As a further example, Warrington Council established a Skills Commission to identify the skills local businesses need to ensure continuing economic growth and how these are being met by the education and skills sectors (more information can be found at <http://www.warrington.gov.uk/skillscommission> )

The Carlisle Healthy City programme may afford similar opportunities with the health sector. The council needs work closely with the acute trust and look to see what wider support it can give in terms of any expansion plans it has; how it attracts good quality staff to work for it; and how the council can look to participate in more community health and wellbeing initiatives which prevent further pressure on the acute side of health provision. The council should consider its economic impact in

terms of commissioned services such as leisure and ensure that the employment, health and educational impact are part of any decision making process on service provision, as encouraged by the Social Value Act 2012.

### Financial planning and viability

The council has delivered a significant level of savings to date - £5.1 million since 2010/11 and frozen Council Tax over the same period. The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) provides a thorough assessment of the council's financial position and requires a further £3.9 million in savings to deliver a net budget requirement of £12.5 million by 2018/19 following continuing reduction in central grants. These savings are 'front-loaded' with £1.8 million targeted for 2015-16. Achieving these further savings is likely to be more challenging, particularly in the first year. The MTFS identifies a number of challenges including financing the capital programme, vehicle replacement, shortfalls in income from assets and charges as economic activity continues to be depressed and uncertainties around the New Homes Bonus, localisation of Council Tax Benefit and the implementation of Universal Credit. Alongside savings the Council has used reserves to help protect frontline services (with underspends reducing the extent to which reserves have been used). The level of reserves is low compared to other councils. The risk assessment in the MTFS puts the minimum level of reserves at £2.6 million. Planned reserves for 2014-15 are just below this level, but are planned to exceed £3 million for the years to 2018-19.

It is therefore important that the council's future transformation programme delivers the required savings – to balance the budget and replenish reserves to better enable the council to respond to unexpected events. Our understanding is that while a plan with specific, quantified savings is yet to be agreed, officers have prepared options for consideration by members. The major proportion of these savings is likely to be provided through transformational change – Smarter Service Delivery (including Digital by Default); Rethinking Waste and new service delivery models. The team believe that the council should agree a clear, quantified cross-cutting plan to deliver savings with realistic but tight timescales and ensure that this is then delivered at pace. Delivering end to end transformation to both realise savings and improve the customer experience may well require the redirection of resources to both programme and project manage change and provide the necessary technical expertise when required. End to end transformation needs to be owned by all parts of the organisation with clear financial savings targets set for every service area, according to their ability to deliver Digital by Default and channel shift transactions and processes.

Staff at different levels from across the organisation shared the view that an incremental, salami-slice approach would not be sustainable and members will need

to make some difficult choices about which services may no longer be delivered in order to protect higher priority services.

Carlisle's financial position is strengthened because it enjoys a significant asset base – valued at £122 million at the end of March 2014 and generating an annual income of some £5.7 million (Draft Asset Management Plan, July 2014). Investment assets valued at £88 million derived an income of £4.4 million. Notwithstanding the difficult economic climate, the team believes that there may be opportunities to 'sweat' these assets more and increase the rate of return. Private sector partners expressed the view that the retail offer in Carlisle has potential for greater development and financial return for the Council. Inviting ideas from the private sector on how to do this and identifying the level of risk required to pursue different options may help inform your thinking and financial planning. A concerted effort to provide further rental properties to existing or new businesses in order to drive further income generation should be considered. The potential to build accommodation which can then be rented to retail or business organisations could also be explored further to seek to turn capital assets into revenue generating income. The LGA's Productivity and Commissioning programme offers a range of resources and examples, including a focus on capital assets and economic growth (more information is available at <http://www.local.gov.uk/capitalassetseconomicgrowth> ). The team understands that Carlisle will be accessing support through this programme to get expert procurement advice to help improve facilities through the re-tendering of its leisure services contract.

### *Political and Managerial Leadership*

The ruling group has established clear political and strategic priorities which are understood by officers and lead the council's strategic planning framework. It is evident that the Executive and senior management team (SMT) share the same vision and the political and managerial leadership appear to work well as a team. The chief executive and his management team are well regarded by members, staff and partners and we heard of strong and positive relationships with district council colleagues.

The chief executive has given considerable attention to changing the culture of the council, to one that is more empowering and encourages individual initiative. Staff at different levels from across the organisation said that they felt much more empowered to do their jobs. There seems to have been a real change in the culture of the council. The next leadership challenge is to make sure that this greater flexibility remains directed at achieving the council's priorities. Staff said that they would welcome a clearer sense of what are the boundaries within which they can operate and type of organisation the council will be over the next three to five years (eg. will it commission more / less services? Will it extend shared services or not? Does it want 'commercialise' more of its services and increase income generation?).

They would also welcome a clearer performance management framework and greater willingness to tackle staff performance issues, as reduced resources mean it is important that all team members make an effective contribution. For example, Council policies and procedures need to be implemented in a way which recognises both the interests of the individual and the organisation – flexi-time was identified as an area where such tensions can arise. The move to empower staff has clearly been successful, but there may now be a need to adjust the emphasis towards the achievement of business objectives.

Members should be engaged in developing expectations and understanding of the new ways in which the council needs to work given the reduced level of resources. Staff need to prioritise their efforts and believe they will struggle to respond directly to the queries and concerns raised by individual residents via their ward members or to provide information to councillors in the way they have done previously. A protocol could be developed to govern aspects of member / officer relations to ensure that members are able to effectively discharge their role as ward representatives, interacting with officers at an appropriate level to make the best use of limited resources.

We have noted the need for a greater sense of urgency to achieve priorities and deliver transformation and to rationalise the number of projects you are aiming to deliver. Political and managerial leadership will be required to demonstrate this change of pace and focus. We also heard instances of communication and suggestions going up the management chain within a directorate before crossing the boundary to another directorate. We sense that there is still something of a silo approach within Carlisle City Council. More cross-council working needs to be encouraged and this should be championed and exemplified by members of SMT.

The council has responded flexibly to opportunities to enable re-structuring, reviewing posts at a senior level when they fall vacant. This is a pragmatic approach which has helped to deliver savings. But this may not be sustainable in the face of the performance and financial challenges which the council is now facing. We heard from some people that the allocation of responsibilities across SMT is not always clear and further clarification could be helpful

### Governance and decision-making

Partners enjoy good relationships with the council, but can find decision making slow at Carlisle, a not unusual frustration with the public sector. The council needs to make decisions in an accountable and transparent way and the Leadership want to engage a wide range of members in decision making and policy development. Within the executive governance model, scrutiny (including pre-decision scrutiny) is one way this can be achieved. However, the council – including members across all groups – should consider if decision making is as streamlined as it can be and if all



stages in decision making are required (for example if there has been pre-decision scrutiny which has been taken into account by the Executive then a call-in may not be adding value or making the best use of limited time). Councils, like other organisations, are working in an increasingly fast moving world and opportunities can be lost when decision making is delayed.

We heard of a number of examples of effective scrutiny, particularly through the use of Task and Finish groups. Examples include the Talkin Tarn country park and Recycling reviews where recommendations were taken up by the Executive. We were also given examples of cross-party working groups which were considered helpful, such as that on the Local Plan. Following the reduction in the level of dedicated support to scrutiny to one officer, a member of SMT has been designated to support each of the three Scrutiny Panels (Community, Environment & Economy, and Resources). The panels are engaging with the SMT sponsor and the Executive in developing their work programmes to ensure that these are aligned to the Council's priorities. The recent decision to instigate a scrutiny review of Business Support is an example of this.

But we also heard of a number of frustrations with scrutiny – a feeling that it was used for political purposes, especially in some instances of call-in; that it was not clearly adding value and that it can add unnecessary stages to the decision making process. There is also reluctance among some members to serve on scrutiny. These concerns are not unique to Carlisle, but we feel that it may be timely to review your scrutiny arrangements to make better use of members' skills and interests and provide a greater focus on council priorities. One option could be to establish a scrutiny commission which could hold the executive to account, along with a policy commission which would establish task and finish groups to develop future policy. These groups could draw on the relevant talents of all non-executive members, and outside experts where appropriate. The separation of scrutiny and policy commissions could be augmented by establishing member panels to champion, oversee and support the delivery of key elements of the council's agenda, building on the previous success of cross party working groups. Possible areas of responsibility could be Growth or Transformation, with consideration of some delegated responsibilities to help speed decision making.

### Performance management

A performance report is provided to the Executive which highlights Carlisle's performance against a limited number of service standards for key frontline services (derived largely from existing or former national performance indicators) and progress against key actions in the Carlisle Plan. Improved performance reporting and clear, planned responsive action will be critical to the council realising its potential. The team consider that the report currently provides an insufficient picture of organisational performance. However, the Council recognises that it needs to

strengthen its performance management arrangements and we noted a real willingness to do so, from both senior managers and frontline staff. There are some good practice examples on which Carlisle can build – such as the focus on sickness, which has reduced such absences, although more remains to be done. Staff indicated that they would welcome more active performance management – to help tackle performance issues and provide more feedback on what they have achieved. The council already uses the *'in the loop'* newsletter to celebrate successes, but more could still be done.

The team suggests that a limited number of critical performance measures are required, including for the corporate health of the organisation and some critical service performance targets; some key cost measures and income targets; along with progress of key transformation projects etc. Some possible measures are suggested below, although we do not advocate adopting all of these<sup>1</sup>. No more than a handful of such targets should form the basis for a corporate balanced scorecard. These should be made available via a simple 'performance dashboard' provided electronically. Each directorate or service needs a similar performance dashboard but again a limited number of relevant, critical measures so performance management does not become burdensome.

Senior officers and leading members should take greater ownership of performance and ensure that action is taken in response to performance information. Identifying an SMT member to lead on performance across the organisation may be helpful. The need for performance accountability within the empowerment culture needs to be clarified and strengthened.

### Organisational development

Carlisle has made a significant investment in organisational development (OD) - in senior management time / commitment, establishing a dedicated team and in training / development opportunities and initiatives to improve the workforce. The Organisational Development Plan covers the following headings:

- Organisational culture
- Partnership working
- A skilled workforce
- Health and wellbeing.

This attention to OD is paying off – we have noted the significant shift to a more empowered culture; staff regard Carlisle City Council as a good employer and

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<sup>1</sup> Corporate health measures could include sickness rates, employee satisfaction. Financial measures could include CTax / NNDR collection rates, treasury and asset management returns. Service measures could include a set of productivity indicators for priority services such as cleanliness, recycling rates and planning, and customer satisfaction / fulfilment at first point of contact. Plus some 'health of the district' measures which may not be entirely in the councils control such as job creation, town centre footfall, educational attainment etc.

recognised the development opportunities available to them. The annual staff survey results are positive – eg. 91% rate the council a good employer, 62% felt valued and 72% that SMT provide strong leadership, continuing positive trends in these and other measures. Staff in the central teams tend to respond more positively, those in service areas such as Local Environment less so. The team note that, while the results of the survey are statistically valid, the 40% response rate should be increased to hear from staff not currently engaging with the surveys.

A management competency framework has been agreed which will help to develop staff to match the sort of council Carlisle wants to be. Staff were engaged in the development of this new framework, including through appreciative conversations to build on existing strengths and move to a more positive culture. The more empowered culture and competency framework have been summarised as '*commitment, clarity and confidence*' – a phrase we found to be widely recognised and supported by staff, and characteristics which will mean the Council is well placed to meet the challenges of the future.

In terms of taking forward the approach to OD, a key challenge will be making sure that opportunities reach all staff and members. We heard from some people that communication and access to development and other OD opportunities could be improved for operational staff, particularly for those based away from the Civic Centre. Some questioned the balance between corporately funded and operationally funded development to meet service delivery needs (such as driver qualifications). However we also heard that operational training budgets can be underspent, suggesting that blockages may be other than funding. Carlisle provides an extensive member development offer, but there may be a need for members to assume greater ownership of their own development and take advantage of that offer especially if they are going to be able to represent their residents in the new ways the Council is seeking to work.

More attention should be given to workforce planning, to make sure the council has staff with the right skills and experience to meet future challenges. This is acknowledged by the council as the next significant OD challenge and it is already giving thought to how it can increase the number of younger staff/apprentices and address future skills gaps. Proactive workforce planning may provide opportunities to take forward your growth and skills agenda and strengthen the council for the future. In the short term the council needs to strengthen its approach to programme management, to ensure the delivery of the various service transformation programmes necessary to achieve the savings that the council requires.

The council may need to consider if its level of investment in OD is sustainable in the longer term. It has achieved some significant successes, such as in culture change, which may not need such active support now that it is more embedded, allowing for greater focus on other areas such as workforce planning.

## **Key suggestions and ideas for consideration**

The peer team developed some key recommendations for you to consider. These are based on what we saw, heard and read. Drawing on our experience of the sector and knowledge of local government improvement, the following are things we think will help you to make best use of your skills and experience, deliver some quick wins, and develop the strengths you will need to see your change agenda through.

### ***To strengthen your ability to deliver the Carlisle Plan:***

- 1.) Establish sharper priorities in the refresh of the Carlisle Plan and ensure that resources clearly follow priorities
- 2) Ensure that a cross-cutting savings and transformation plan is agreed and implemented, to help delivery of the council's priorities and long-term financial sustainability
- 3). Provide greater clarity about how the council will operate over the next few years (including the parameters you will work within and what becoming more business-like means)
- 4). Develop a balanced scorecard (or similar) to measure key aspects of organisational and service performance
- 5). Clarify the need for effective performance management and accountability within a more empowered organisational culture
- 6). Demonstrate and facilitate more collaborative working across the organisation, with the Senior Management Team exemplifying this, supported by a clarification of senior management responsibilities
- 7). Create greater pace in the delivery of change, including:
  - effective programme and project management of your transformation programme
  - consideration of decision making processes to ensure they do not include unnecessary steps.
- 8). Review scrutiny arrangements, to enable members to engage in more effective scrutiny and policy development and take forward the Council's priorities
- 9). Review the protocol for member-officer engagement

**To better position Carlisle City Council as a partner and exert greater influence and deliver your priority of economic growth:**

- 10). Raise the profile of Carlisle within the region and more widely, building on initiatives such as *The Carlisle Story*
- 11). Continue to develop and enhance the initiatives which have begun in order to harness the collective business voice in promoting Carlisle to a wider audience.
- 12). Build on your progress in becoming a 'business friendly council' and spread across the authority.
- 13). Make greater use of the Chief Executives' and Leader's networks to exert influence and leadership
- 14). Take and develop opportunities to work with other partners to help them tackle key elements of the 'Carlisle offer', including improving health and education services

In developing your response to this future council review and more generally, the team encourage you to visit other councils and take advantage of further opportunities (on-line and via workshops / seminars etc) to access experience and good practice elsewhere and to share your achievements more widely.

We have attached a set of slides that summarise the above feedback. The slides are the ones used by the peer team to present its feedback at the end of the onsite visit. We have provided some signposting to examples of the above and other information that will help inform your thinking.

### **Next steps**

You will undoubtedly wish to reflect on these findings and suggestions made with your senior managerial and political leadership before determining how the council wishes to take things forward. As part of the peer review process, there is an offer of continued activity to support this. In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with you and colleagues through the peer challenge to date. We will endeavour to signpost you to other sources of information and examples of practice and thinking.

I thought it helpful to provide contact details for Gill Taylor who, as you know, is our Principal Adviser for the North West. Gill can be contacted via email at [gill.taylor@local.gov.uk](mailto:gill.taylor@local.gov.uk) (or tel. 07789-512173). She is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Hopefully this provides you with a convenient route of access to the Local Government Association, its resources and any further support.

All of us connected with the review would like to wish you every success going forward. Once again, many thanks to you and your colleagues for inviting the review and to everyone involved for their participation.

*David Armin*

Review Manager

On behalf of the future council review team