

# The MJ Achievement Awards 2014

## Oxford City Council Best Achieving Council Submission



**Oxford City Council - Building a world-class city for everyone**

## Best Achieving Council

### Summary

Oxford City Council is one of the local government success stories of recent times.

Six years ago, the Council was failing. Subsequently, it has improved its performance and efficiency year on year. As a result – and in spite of substantial government spending cuts and the impact of the recession - it has been able to safeguard the vulnerable from cuts in the services that they require, deliver significant new investment in the city’s infrastructure, and avoid compulsory redundancies in the Council’s workforce. The City Council is now providing strong and visible leadership to the city and playing a key role in regional partnership working.

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### Submission

### Background

Six years ago, the Council was characterized by:

- ineffective managerial leadership
- poor relationships between senior councillors and senior managers
- high costs and relatively poor performance
- low staff morale
- high levels of staff sickness
- poor relationships between unions and management ▪ fraught relationships with key partners and stakeholders.

The Council’s ambitions for the city were high and the commitment of its staff to public service was deep. However, it lacked the management capacity to turn its ambitions and commitment into practical achievements. These failings had resulted in a “weak” CPA assessment, a failed unitary bid, and frustrated ambition within the organisation.

### Building an efficient, effective council

Today – in large part due to strong leadership and a strong partnership between councillors, managers, staff and trade unions - Oxford City Council is one of the most creative and effective councils in the country. The



relentless quest for ever greater levels of efficiency is at the heart of its success.

Peter Sloman's priorities on taking over as Chief Executive six years ago were to:

- boost capacity and competence in the senior management team.
- forge close working relationships with  
Bob Price's new political Councillor Bob Price, Chief Executive Peter Sloman administration. and the Customer Services team at the Customer

Service Excellence accreditation presentation

Significant progress has been made in both of these areas.

### Management capacity

Recruitment has improved, with managers being appointed on the basis of a strong track record in specific rather than generalist areas. We have also continued to invest in traditional performance and programme management training. However, the main aim has been to encourage managers and staff to embrace new ways of thinking and working. Leadership, coaching and team-building skills, developing business acumen and the ability to 'think outside the box', are all critical. Increasingly, the Council sees coaching and mentoring as being at the heart of successful management. These approaches can generate higher levels of staff engagement with what the Council is trying to achieve for the city.

Structural changes have helped to improve the quality of management. All major Council initiatives are now delivered through a series of cross-service programme boards which are designed to minimise the silo mentality. Operational changes have also helped in this regard. The establishment of the council's corporate call centre, for example, has radically reshaped the relationships between departments and between front and back office staff.

### Councillors and managers

The relationship between councillors and managers has been transformed. A robust but mutually respectful and supportive relationship between councillors and senior management has developed. The ruling Labour Group is highly disciplined, with senior councillors now fulfilling a powerful strategic role, entrusting day-to-day management to officers. There is shared ownership of the Council's corporate priorities with City Executive Board portfolios reflecting the priorities in the Corporate Plan.

### Outcomes

The senior leadership team had the shared aim of building an efficient, effective council. That partnership has so far delivered:

- fewer but better managers

- around £8 million in efficiency savings over the last four years alone with a further £3.7million planned over the next four
- high quality services with around 75% of performance targets met or exceeded
- a single corporate call centre, one council number, and an extremely ambitious Lagan CRM implementation. Our call centre deals with nearly 263,000 calls annually. Last year we resolved 90% of queries at the first point of contact
- modernised offices with a 30% reduction in space
- flexible working practices, including home working
- streamlined support services and processes
- a mature and productive relationship with Trade Unions
- 41% reduction in sickness absence as a result of improved staff morale and robust performance management
- a Living Wage for all Council staff and contractors.

### Efficiency as a means to an end

For Oxford City Council, efficiency is not an end in itself. Rather it is an essential prerequisite if the Council is to deliver its mission to the people of Oxford.

Oxford appears to be a thriving city with many opportunities for work and leisure and - for many residents - this is the daily reality of their lives.

However, the city has major inequalities in life chances.

The Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010 Football match at Wood Farm places Oxford in the top half of the most deprived local authority areas in England. Twelve areas, in the south and east of the city, are among the 20% most deprived areas in England. These areas experience multiple levels of deprivation - low skills, low incomes and relatively high levels of crime.

The senior leadership team believes passionately in the creative role that local government can play in the life of local communities - in particular by helping people in the city's more deprived areas to help themselves to a better future.

Working with councillors, strategic partners and citizens the senior leadership team has developed a corporate planning and delivery model which clearly aligns the Council's priorities and budgets with the needs of the city's communities. They want to build a world class city for all of Oxford's citizens. They are turning this ambition into reality by delivering five corporate priorities:

- Meeting housing needs
- Strong and active communities
- Cleaner greener Oxford



- An efficient and effective council.

[Read the Corporate Plan on our website.](#)

### Delivering results

The Council's efficiency improvements have been summarised earlier in this submission. A summary of results across other corporate priorities indicates the level of the Council's ambitions for the city.

#### A vibrant and sustainable economy

- injecting more than £134 million of capital investment into the city's infrastructure (e.g. through house-building and leisure) over the next four years, and creating over 900 new jobs
- investing £400k per year to improve the life-chances of our young people, and the city's skills base, by increasing educational Design for new £9.23m swimming pool in attainment in deprived areas where results Blackbird Leys have historically been poor. We are funding and leading these programmes even though the Council is not the education authority
- investing £150k per year to provide apprenticeships at Oxford City Council.



#### Meeting housing needs

- working through an innovative joint venture with Grosvenor Estates to build a new community of nearly 900 homes at Barton Park, including a new primary school, community recreation facilities and parks. The Council is also building 113 new homes on other sites in the city
- investing £13.6 million over the next four years to upgrade kitchens and central heating in Council homes
- investing over £1 million per year to improve Land at Barton Park environmental and parking measures on Oxford's estates
- enforcing standards in the private rented sector more proactively. Due to very high house prices, one in five Oxford residents live in houses in multiple occupation.



#### Strong and active communities

- investing £240k per year to improve access to sporting and cultural activities for young people in areas of greatest need



- complete a new competition pool in Blackbird Leys and continue to improve our other leisure facilities so that we can provide private sector quality at public sector prices. Oxford is now in the top quartile for adult activity in Oxfordshire, from being one of least active areas in 2006
- continuing to provide free swimming for Christmas Light Festival lantern parade 2013 under 17s, particularly for those in areas of greatest need
- continuing to invest in culture and community events.

### Cleaner greener Oxford

- investing £666,000 in capital and on-going revenue funding of £100,000 per year to extend the successful weekly food waste collection service to the 15,000 flats in the city
- spending an additional £12,000 per year on a door-to-door campaign to improve recycling and street cleanliness through encouragement and enforcement
- leading the OxFutures project to mobilise large-scale investment in energy efficiency Street sweeping in Jericho projects. Kick-started by a £1.3 million grant from Intelligent Energy Europe, OxFutures aims to leverage investment of £15 million into local energy projects over the next three years. The aim is to achieve a 40% reduction in local carbon emissions by 2020 and to mainstream low carbon economic development.



### Partnership working

Many of the challenges that face Oxford cannot be solved by Oxford City Council on its own and improved partnership working is another important achievement.

Historically there have been significant political differences between the conservative county and district councils which surround Oxford and resolutely non-conservative Oxford City Council.

Squabbles between the city and county councils used to feature as regular front page View of Oxford from South Park entertainment. Over the last six years, the City Council's current leadership has moved beyond this and has pursued a strategic course which is in the interests of the city and its region.



The City Council has, for example, worked with the County Council, the other four Oxfordshire district councils, the Local Enterprise Partnership, the universities and the science facilities at Harwell and Culham, to deliver a successful City Deal for Oxford and Oxfordshire. As a result, around £95million of public money will be

invested in Oxford and the surrounding areas. The City Deal builds on the potential of the area to deliver world-leading technology and business innovation. It will create more than 18,000 long-term jobs in high-tech areas, in addition to the likely 30,000 construction jobs needed for the area’s development. From the City Council’s point of view, a key benefit is that it will also accelerate the delivery of 7,500 new homes by 2018 through the combined Oxfordshire Housing Programme. The City deal builds on the success of previous partnership initiatives.

**Providing local jobs for local people**

The senior leadership team believes in the reality of partnership working - not just the words – and a strong partnership and open dialogue between councillors, managers, and trade unions - is at the heart of the Council’s success. The changes that they have driven through the Council have built on the deep belief in the public sector ethos that pervades the Council’s workforce.

The Council has not been swept along by the view that the private sector is necessarily the only provider of efficient and innovative services. Rather, it has a clear preference for in-house provision – public enterprise - where it can match or exceed the market. Where many other councils have been entering into strategic partnerships with the private sector,

Oxford City Council has been carrying out rigorous and prioritised Fundamental Service Reviews and investing to improve management competence and efficiency. A Fundamental Service Review of our waste management service, for example, resulted in our in-house service delivering better cost and quality than private sector competitors. As a result we have consistently improved our recycling rate – from 20% in 2005–6 to nearly 45% currently. This makes us one of the top-performing city areas. We are reducing the amount of waste sent to landfill year on year.

As the selfless and tireless performance of our DLO staff during the recent floods demonstrates, providing local jobs and local services for local people results in a level of commitment that would be hard to match through an outsourced contract. Investment in our services is now also enabling us to generate income through trading with external organisations, e.g. by providing housing repairs and parks maintenance services. In the face of on-going cuts from central government this incomes



Council officers distributing sand bags

contributes to maintaining services and jobs.

The City Council’s approach to improvement has transformed its relationships with Trade Unions. Councils across the country are reducing staff and the main desire of the local unions is obviously to avoid compulsory redundancies. The Council, which

genuinely believes that its staff – many of whom are also local residents - are its major asset, also wants to avoid this.

On this understanding management, Unison and Unite have agreed innovative pay deals which involve:

- a partnership payment linked to savings, performance, and attendance targets
- performance-linked increments
- A 5-year-deal negotiated outside the national agreement which secures the Council’s budget position while at the same time giving staff an annual 1.5% cost of living increase for the next four years in exchange for no strikes
- a Living Wage of £8.36 per hour.

Long-term, partnership-based planning is protecting staff interests and public services. Since these arrangements have been in place, there have been no compulsory redundancies, and the Council has been awarded IIP and the Customer Excellence Award.

The Council’s preference for in-house services where these provide best value helps to strengthen the link between the elected local authority and the community it serves. Local democracy delivering local services staffed by local people suggests that we really are all in it together.

**Conclusion**

The key message from the Council’s leadership has been that a house divided will fall and we are all much stronger when we work together in a shared cause – in this case, the importance of public service and the role that public service can play in the community. Not every member of staff has shared the vision or been able to make the attitudinal and professional changes required and these people have moved on. Overwhelmingly, however, unions and staff – as demonstrated



Staff conference

through innovative pay deals and the award of IIP

– have seen the sense in this approach. The Council, and the city, is stronger as a result.

Councillor Bob Price  
Leader

Peter Sloman  
Chief Executive



Oxford City Council

Oxford City Council



CUSTOMER  
SERVICE  
EXCELLENCE



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