



**Engaging with our
Communities**

**Cornwall Council's
Submission for
Civic Office of the Year
2015**

Background



2015 for the Civic Office of Cornwall has been a year of achievement. A radical reshaping of the support for the Civic Office resulted in the establishment of a new team who have embraced their role and gone from strength to strength, enabling the Chairman and Vice Chairman to reach out to the community and enhance the relationship between the people of Cornwall and the Council.

Support for the Chairman was previously based on a traditional personal assistant model with the PA based in Democratic Services. A restructure, driven by the need to make savings in the Council budget and increase efficiency, identified the need to rationalise and improve the Civic support and raise the profile of the Chairman and the Civic Office. Following this restructure support moved to the Communities and Customers Service as part of an enhanced Cabinet and Civic Office to support the political leadership, the Lieutenancy, and manage the Chief Executive's support.

This joined up approach is based around a Lead Support Officer who supports the Chairman and the Lord Lieutenant and she is further supported by two Cabinet and Civic Office Assistants and managed by the Cabinet and Civic Office Manager. This ensures that community engagement is at the heart of the Council's political leadership.

The Council strategy includes the aim of **Engaging with our Communities** and the new Cabinet and Civic Office team were given the following objectives for the year:

- *to establish new working arrangements to create an effective executive office that unites support for the Leader, Cabinet, Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Lieutenancy*
- *to promote Cornwall, managing the reputation of the Council and building trust with partners and the public;*
- *to protect and improve the reputation of the Council through effective communications and civic engagement; and*

The team embraced these objectives and set about defining the tasks and actions required for success.

Quality and Innovation

New ways of working

On taking up the new post the priority for the Lead Support was to quickly integrate the support into the new Service whilst providing high quality assistance to the Chairman with a seamless transition to the new arrangements. Being co-located with the Cabinet enabled links and synergies to be identified quickly.

For example, as the team has immediate sight of all the invitations to senior elected Members, gaps are filled with the Chairman stepping in for Cabinet Members or the Leader and vice versa. This has earned the respect of partners and community organisations who having invited representation from the authority can generally be assured that someone at a senior level will attend to support their event.

This innovative approach ensures complete visibility of which Member is attending which event. It heads off some tricky politically sensitive issues when organisations have inadvertently invited an inappropriate Member to their event and embarrassment can be avoided by early communication and intervention with the organisers.

Despite the Lead Support role also supporting the Lord Lieutenant there is always a team member available to assist the Chairman. Electronic diary and correspondence management means that the whole team can access and have visibility of engagements and outstanding correspondence. This is an improvement on the previous support as if the PA was away for any reason this impacted the continuity of support.

Establishing a programme of positive community engagement

Once the team was established they planned a programme of positive community engagement for the year with the aim of reaching as many parts of the community as possible and re-engaging with staff that had been through testing times following restructures driven by substantial budget cuts. Cornwall's geographic spread offers a real challenge when trying to ensure that the Civic office is visible across the County, with some 540,000 residents and geographically the largest council in the country, which is why this was such a relevant aim to achieve.



CORNWALL CIVIC AWARD

In order to focus the re-engagement a theme of **'recognition and reward'** was agreed with the Chairman. The following groups were targeted: community champions, voluntary organisations, organisations which 'achieve' for Cornwall and young people.

A Civic Award scheme was created to encourage Members to nominate local champions. Anyone was eligible to be nominated, not just volunteers but also those who regularly 'go the extra mile' in their day to day jobs. Thirteen recipients and their families attended a Civic reception and received a certificate and gift from the Chairman in recognition of their efforts. Feedback from those who attended was unanimously positive and the Awards were widely covered in the local press across Cornwall. It was envisaged that our own Civic Awards scheme would highlight those within the community who may be eligible for consideration and inclusion in the Honours list, offering guidance and assistance through the nomination process to those who may be unsure how the system of nomination works.



Receptions were also held for the volunteer groups nominated for a Queens Award for Voluntary Service; the organisers and volunteers of the International Male Voice Choir Festival (a bi-annual festival in Cornwall featuring choirs from around the world); the players and committee of the victorious Cornwall Rugby Football Union team who won the County Championship Cup at Twickenham and those involved in the Interceltic Festival in Lorient, Brittany which does much to showcase the best of Cornwall to Europe. All of these groups rely on people who work selflessly and tirelessly for the good of others. By officially recognising their efforts the Chairman and Civic Office provides a method by which people



can be recognised and thanked with the resultant positive press coverage encouraging others to also get involved and support their local communities.

Pro-active steps were also taken to identify suitable opportunities for community engagement.

During a catch-up meeting with the Naval Regional Officer, it was mentioned that a detachment of Nato Mine Countermeasure vessels were due to visit Falmouth, a local port. The Civic Office offered to hold a welcome reception and suggested this should take the form of Civic Calls for the local Town Mayors. A successful event was subsequently held at County Hall; the NATO Commanders had the chance to engage with Civic leaders from all parts of the County; the Town Mayors felt included and the Regional Naval Officer was particularly grateful for the support. Undoubtedly this event also raised the profile of Cornwall with the ships company.

During the year young people and schools were engaged via a wide variety of events hosted by the Chairman and organised and run by the Lead Support. Chacewater Primary School Council visited, had a tour of the building and discussed decision making with the Chairman; Penair Academy (secondary school) School Council visited and held a lively discussion and debate in the chamber as to how young people could get involved and engage with decisions that affect them and their communities; Tregolls Primary School held their annual debate in the Council Chamber having researched 'the ultimate survivor' in front of the Chairman and Cabinet Member for Young People and Public Service Foundation Degree Students from Truro and Penwith College attended a Cabinet meeting and held a question and answer session with the Chairman and councillors following the meeting.

Engaging with young people in this way is vital for the future of the authority as it gives them a positive experience of the Council which they share with their family and friends. Feedback from schools is consistently excellent reporting that both students and teachers have really enjoyed the visits and have left the Council having much more awareness of what it actually does for the community.





More recently a hugely successful event was held to bring together all the award winners of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award across Cornwall at a single ceremony hosted by the Chairman at County Hall. The opportunity to host the event was identified by one of the Cabinet and Civic Office Team Members who made an approach to the DofE organiser for Cornwall and culminated in 47 Award winners

and over a hundred of their families, friends, teachers and volunteers attending a really enjoyable occasion. Hosted by the Chairman the event gave the team the opportunity to showcase the Council and raise the profile of the Civic Office with those who have had little direct experience of the authority.

Reaching the hard to reach

The incoming Chairman agreed to fly the Pride flag for the August Bank Holiday weekend and the Chairman officially opened the Pride Festival, taking part in the march. This garnered wide support and received positive mentions on social media by the LGBT community and others. Photos of the flag flying at County Hall were widely shared with accompanying messages saying how proud people were that the seat of democracy in Cornwall was displaying such support which enhanced the reputation of the Council as an inclusive authority.



Following an approach by the Parliamentary Outreach Team for the Lord Speaker Baroness D'Souza, the Chairman hosted an event focused on how we, as a democratic institution, can widen participation and how under-represented groups can get their voices heard in Parliament and beyond. The Lord Speaker chaired a panel made up of the Chairman, a local MP and a fellow councillor (all women) and the Head of Information and Governance.



The panel spoke of their own personal experiences in standing for election

and why they felt it was important to have a wide range of the community to represent the community. The event was really well-received and generated positive publicity for the authority.

In addition to pro-actively arranging events, the Chairman and Vice Chairman continue to attend engagements relevant to their roles. An events calendar has been drawn up to record the engagements attended and those for which apologies were sent. A review has been undertaken on the nature and location of events with a view to encouraging invitations to bridge any gaps in representation.

Engaging with Staff

Efforts were made over the year to raise the profile of the Chairman with staff. One particular problem has been how to appropriately mark the minute's silence on the 11/11 when it falls on a working day as there is no way of sounding a notification in our buildings of the start or end of the two minute's silence to. We noticed that a memorial to those from the Council who fell in WW1 had recently been moved to the Foyer of County Hall following the sale of Old County Hall. The Chairman was approached and asked to hold a short ceremony, organised by the Civic Office at the memorial and an invitation sent to all staff to attend. The response was overwhelming – many staff and senior officers and Councillors attended. Feedback from staff included the following comment "... as a veteran, it meant a lot to see the effort made and also the attendance of such a good number of staff."

Promotion of the Office of Chairman

Cornwall Council, being rural, takes every opportunity to engage in as many ways possible with the community.

When the new Chairman was elected in May, discussions took place about the best way to promote both the Chairman and their civic role and it was agreed that a Twitter account be set up. The Lead Support monitors the account and both she and the Chairman make sure that all relevant events are covered. The use of Twitter enables immediate communication of the Civic events, often accompanied by a relevant photograph.



The Civic information on the Council's website has been completely revised and now includes a Civic event diary which promotes the community engagement role of the Chairman. It includes details of how the public can get in touch with

the Chairman and actively encourages invitations from all parts of the community.

These activities are supported by the more traditional methods such as the issuing of press releases to generate publicity for Civic events.

The co-location of the Civic support within the Executive Leadership support team results in the pro-active identification of suitable additional opportunities for the Chairman to take part in relevant events, thus increasing the profile of the Chairman. In addition linking the Civic Office support to the support to the Leader enhances the relationship between the political and civic leads of the authority. The current Leader and Chairman have achieved a positive working relationship, despite having different political backgrounds.



Bringing Hope, Giving Happiness, Creating Memories



A flyer for Kernow Young Carers with a yellow border. The main heading is "Do you help to look after someone?" in red. Below it, text explains that if you are under 18 and care for a family member with certain conditions, you are likely a young carer. It lists services like fun activities and trips, and provides contact information: "actionforchildren.org.uk" and "www.kernowyoungcarers.org". Logos for "action for children", "KYC Kernow Young Carers", "NHS", and "Cornwall and Isles of Scilly" are included. An illustration of two children under a purple umbrella is also present.

The Chairman supports a chosen charity which provides a focus for staff fundraising efforts during the year. The charity, Kernow Young Carers, is very closely associated with the Council as it was set up by a group of staff to provide support for young carers that they would not otherwise receive. The Chairman, supported by the Civic Office staff, both supports and runs fundraising events with the resultant publicity benefiting both the Civic Office and the charity.

Value for Money

One of the main outcomes of the restructure which resulted in the new team was a reduction in staffing costs to provide support for the Civic and Lieutenancy offices. Support was originally provided to the Chairman by a full-time PA and to the Lieutenancy by a part-time Senior Officer. Now support for both the Chairman and Lieutenancy is provided by one full-time Lead Support officer, assisted by two additional days from a support officer.

Ways of working have been streamlined with all invitations to the Chairman and Vice Chairman made by electronic meeting request. Copies of the relevant information is scanned in and attached to the request which means that the Chairman and Vice Chairman need not visit County Hall simply to collect details of their engagements. In addition all team members, supporting the office, are able to access all the relevant details for engagements.



Combining the support to the Lieutenancy with the Chairman ensures that there is no duplication of effort, for example, with the Citizenship Ceremonies (attended by and supported by the Lord Lieutenant and the Chairman) and British Empire Medal investitures (organised by the Lord Lieutenant and supported by the Chairman). The good relationship between the Lead Support, the Lord Lieutenant and

the Chairman is key to identifying and exploiting opportunities for joint working and adding value to events for the community. A good example of this is the joint reception held to recognise those groups nominated for a Queens Award for Voluntary Service.

The Lead Support also provides expert dedicated support for Royal Visits to the County. In particular they support Council venues, advising the organisers on to how to get the very best value and publicity from their visits. Venues this year have included the opening of the brand new Fire Headquarters and the opening of business accommodation built in regenerated mine buildings owned and developed by the Council – both visits achieved wide positive coverage in the local press.

Efforts are made to ensure that, in so far as possible, purchases are made locally to ensure that the budget goes on to benefit local businesses. Hospitality is catered for in as cost effective manner as possible and sponsorship is sought where appropriate and was successfully secured for the victory celebration for the Cornwall RFU Team.

Going Forward

Future plans for the Civic Office include an innovative scheme to engage with former Chairman and Vice Chairman. Following the creation of the Unitary Authority the community did, to some extent, lose a link with their local district via their Chairmen or Mayor. Where there were 14 civic heads there are now only 2. The Lead Support has encouraged the current Chairman to recognise the commitment and service of the former Chairmen and Vice Chairman of the Unitary Authority, via the presentation of a Civic emblem and invitations to attend all Civic events.



It is hoped that not only will the resilience of the Civic team be boosted and more community events supported and attended but that over the coming years a strong cohort of both current and former Civic heads will grow and increase the number of ways that the Civic Office engages with the community.

In Summary

This submission for Cornwall Council's Civic Office to be considered for 'Civic Office of the Year' is supported by both Members and officers. Following a period of great change the Office has not only coped well with the transition but made a real difference in its first year. The service provided to the Chairman is more coherent and embedded at the heart of the organisation; the service to the Council has resulted in greater positive coverage and the service to the community has resulted in wider first-hand engagement between the public and their Council.

The team have been recognised and congratulated by external partners and senior officers alike, examples include:

"I particularly want to thank you for helping us so meticulously and patiently with the planning for our Royal Visit" (*Chris Blount, Secretary Trenance Cottages, Newquay*)

"You have played a key part in ensuring a seamless transition and integration of the various ceremonial and political positions" (*Matt Barton, Assistant Head of Customers and Communities*)

"I am deeply and profoundly grateful to you for your invaluable support and help both leading up to the event and then most certainly throughout the evening. It was a real pleasure to have you with us and I am very grateful indeed for all you did to make the evening run so smoothly" (*Michael Galsworthy, former Vice Lord Lieutenant*)