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## ETHICAL GOVERNANCE HEALTH CHECK – MARCH 2007

### 1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report presents the outcome of a light-touch ethical governance health check carried out by the Improvement & Development Agency (IDeA) and Audit Commission at Rochford District Council on 27 and 28 March 2007.

### 2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Members are invited to consider the report attached at Appendix 1 and consider its recommendations.

### 3 THE HEALTH CHECK

- 3.1 The purpose of the health check was to:
- provide the Council with an opportunity to reflect on what ethical governance means to the authority
  - highlight the Council's strengths in relation to ethical governance
  - identify any areas where Rochford might need to further develop its ethical governance arrangements
  - help the Council ensure that high standards of ethical governance are maintained

#### Findings

The attached report details the findings of the review team under the headings Leadership, Communication, Relationships, Accountability, Management of Standards and Team Working. Each section contains examples of what is working well and areas for further consideration.

#### Recommendations

The report concludes with 11 recommendations, repeated here with officer comment.

1. The Council needs to clarify the role of the new Executive Board and whether joint responsibility is an interim arrangement with a move to portfolio responsibility.

Comment -The health check occurred at an early stage in development of the new system and before any decision had been taken by Council. This undoubtedly contributed to the "confusion amongst councillors and officers" It is recognised that it will take some time to bed in the new model and a review will take place in the autumn cycle. Further training for both Members and officers on the new structure should be considered.

2. The Council should move to an independent chairman of the Standards Committee. It may be useful to consider whether the chairman comes from within the current body of independent members or whether it would be more satisfactory to undertake a recruitment exercise, perhaps considering respected members of the public, for example, from a professional or academic background.

Comment - the Council has decided that control of all committee chairmanships will remain with the administration with the exception of the Review Committee, which is chaired by an opposition member. This will remain the position pending changes in legislation arising out of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill.

3. The Council should review the composition of the Standards Committee to ensure full engagement and take full advantage of the enthusiastic independent members.

Comment – this appears to be linked to both the preceding and following recommendations but it is not clear how a review of the composition of the Standards Committee is to achieve the stated objectives?

4. The Council should explore a broader remit for the Standards Committee to take a more proactive and investigative approach, reviewing particular aspects of the way in which the authority conducts its business. This should be seen as building on the positive relationships and culture within the Council and to help further promote the ethical governance responsibilities. Independent Standards Committee members observing how councillors operate within meetings is a useful method to review ethical behaviour and provide constructive feedback.

Comment – The Standards Board for England's move to a more strategic role is likely to put increasing pressure on local Standards Committees to undertake investigation and determination of complaints. Members may wish to consider whether a broader remit for the Committee is appropriate at this time. Independent members are welcome as observers to all meetings of the Council and its Committees.

5. Explore alternative ways of engaging councillors in continuing learning and development, particularly for the experienced councillors and those that do not fully avail themselves of the opportunities provided by the training programme. Alternative methods could include: mentoring, visits to other authorities, seeking peer feedback on specific issues e.g. chairing skills, attending conferences, taking on short-term additional responsibilities, feeding back to peers on their own experiences and learning, etc. An area for exploration with these councillors may be how they view the role of the Standards Committee in setting the training agenda. For example, whether this is viewed as positive or because of a perception that the Standards Committee has a

controlling function, as a way of imposing training upon them resulting in resistance to participate in development activities.

Comment – the authority has already engaged in various alternative methods of training. Members may wish to consider whether a more co-ordinated approach to the various channels of improvement and development should be undertaken.

6. Build on the complaints monitoring reports sent to the senior management team to inform members and influence their policy developments.

Comment – complaints monitoring information should be provided to the Executive Board on a similar basis as it is presented to the Senior Management Team.

7. Develop the potential of the Rochford District Matters newspaper to inform and gather feedback from residents. Stronger links could be made to the council's web site, with opportunities for undertaking 'temperature check' questions on particular topics. The results and any resulting actions could then be published in subsequent issues of the newspaper.

Comment - a Consultation Strategy is in place but consideration is being given to improved methods of consultation including those suggested.

8. Build on the team briefing and chief executive's and leader's post election briefing sessions to communicate and engage with officers on the new political arrangements, how this will affect them and their relationships with councillors.

Comment – team briefings and post election briefing sessions continue to develop. The most recent sessions have included information on the new political arrangements.

9. Explore further the Access to Services review to ensure that minority groups in the district are being engaged with and their needs addressed. Improving the race relations' awareness training may help councillors identify alternative methods of engaging with hard to identify and reach groups.

Comment – an action plan has been agreed following the Access to Services review and this is currently being implemented. Members may wish to give consideration to further awareness training.

10. Improve awareness of the whistle blowing policy and how it is being used.

Comment – the policy might usefully be included in Part 5 of the Constitution. Officers are made aware of the policy as part of the induction process and by

reminder at team briefings. The Personal Development Review process could be expanded to include a section on ethical awareness issues.

11. Ensure the Standards Committee, all councillors and relevant officers are briefed and trained on the revised code of conduct.

Comment – relevant training sessions have been offered to both members and appropriate officers. Following requests from participants there will be follow up sessions later in the year. This could take the form of an invitation to all members to attend a Standards Committee meeting for discussion around issues arising from the new Code.

#### 4 FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1 Following the health check, the Audit Commission and IDeA undertook a workshop for members and officers. Although only a short period of time was available at the end of the workshop to consider a possible action plan the following suggestions were put forward by those who participated as worthy of further consideration;

- Improved relationships through the new political structure
- Action taken on recommendations recorded to indicate a positive direction of travel
- Greater transparency – actively taking things forward
- A clear, proactive rather than reactive role for the Standards Committee
- Effective localism – improved communication
- Independent member engagement
- Parish clarity on agenda (Parish member awareness raising)
- Improved Member awareness on Whistle Blowing

- 4.2 A draft Action Plan is attached at Appendix 2.

#### 5 RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

- (1) to consider the recommendations arising out of the Ethical Governance health check and
- (2) to adopt the appended action plan subject to any amendments proposed by the Committee

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**Background Papers:-**

None

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