

ROCHFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

REVIEW COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2021/22



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CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

The Review Committee is pleased to present our Annual Report for 2021-22. This report gives an overview of the work that we have undertaken during this Municipal Year. It also provides information on the Overview & Scrutiny function at Rochford District Council.

The Review Committee is committed to shaping Council policy, advocating community wellbeing, as well as holding the Council to account as part of the Committee's effective review process. The Committee's strengths lie within efficient scrutiny of key decision documents, Council services and policies, as well as thorough scrutiny of the work of the Executive. The Review Committee makes crucial recommendations as necessary in line with the work done by the Executive to hold decision and policy makers accountable for the benefit of the district's community.

Our Work Plan derives from areas that we, as a Committee, feel that we can improve and provide a wider benefit to our local community. We always ensure that the voices and concerns of the public are heard, whilst ensuring that key decisions have been made with the best interest of our residents as the main focus of our debates and review processes.

During the past year, we have received valuable support from various officers, such as the Leadership Team and Democratic Services Team, as well as officers from various service areas. By working together with our Council's officers, the Review Committee is consistently supported and therefore is able to support the proper functioning of Rochford District Council. We hope that this unity and collaborative working between the Review Committee and officers will continue to strengthen in future Municipal Years.

This year we have received valuable advice from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS), giving us insights on how we can work most efficiently, with the Council and Executive to ensure robust accountability for decision-making. I hope that the lessons learned from the CfGS will continue to be applied by future Review Committees and to continue the great work going forward.

The Review Committee is and will always be committed to providing non-politically charged, neutral and objective advice focusing on issues that are integral to Local Communities. We will always make recommendations that aim to improve our services, and as a result, improve our district.

I would like to express thanks to my fellow Review Committee Members for their continued hard work and commitment to making this Committee work exactly as it should. I would like to highlight that it was challenging to return to physical meetings; however, by working together, we were able to adapt to these challenges, whilst ensuring that we continued to serve our residents through the Covid-19 pandemic.

Cllr Stuart Wilson

Chairman of the Review Committee

INTRODUCTION

The Local Government Act 2000 requires local authorities to constitute a committee that carries out Overview & Scrutiny functions.

O&S committees carry out a supportive and investigative role, overseeing and scrutinising the work of the Executive as well as other Committees and the Council as a whole. The Review Committee is a fundamental pillar in ensuring that proper governance is always implemented.

Councillors appointed to the Review Committee are expected to adopt a deliberative investigative and evidence-based approach while casting aside pre-determinations. Scrutiny should work in an open, transparent, inclusive and accountable manner whilst remaining open-minded and objective.

The Review Committee in 2021/22

This Annual Report provides an outline of the work conducted by the Review Committee in the 2021/22 Municipal Year. Similarly to last year, it is difficult to overlook the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on the functioning of the Council which affected the Review Committee alongside other Committees. During the pandemic, the Review Committee met remotely; however, with the expiration of section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 on 7 May 2021, Councils have returned to physical meetings.

The return to physical meetings continued to pose its own challenges with the ever-changing legislation and strategic obstacles that the Review Committee, alongside the other Committees, had to overcome and adapt to, as the normal functioning of operations began to return to their pre-Covid state.

Rochford District Council's response to Covid-19 was scrutinised at various stages by the Review Committee, which was highlighted in the 2020/21 Annual Report. In 2021/22, the Committee continued to scrutinise the Council's response to Covid-19, alongside other significant operational matters carried out by the Council.

Rochford District Council's Review Committee is composed of 15 Members of the Council who collectively possess vital knowledge and expertise and come from various political backgrounds. This diversity within the Committee ensures that the process of overview and scrutiny is conducted objectively with varying opinions igniting valuable debates and questions.

As a Council, we are proud that our Review Committee Members come together to scrutinise and review matters and offer their expertise to formulate recommendations based on carefully analysed evidence.



MEMBERS OF THE REVIEW COMMITTEE



Cllr Stuart Wilson
Chairman



Cllr Mrs Jo McPherson
Vice-Chairman



Cllr Roger Constable



Cllr Robin Dray



Cllr Ian Foster



Cllr Mrs Eileen Gadsdon



Cllr James Gooding



Cllr Brian Hazlewod



Cllr Mrs Christine Mason



Cllr Gary Myers



Cllr James Newport



Cllr Mrs Carol Pavelin



Cllr Mrs Lauren Shaw



Cllr Phil Shaw



6.5 Cllr Mike Wilkinson

WORK PLAN - 2021/22

6 July 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treasury Management Annual Review 2020/21 • Covid-19 Update from Acting Managing Director
7 September 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Management of Public Open Spaces
5 October 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ RIPA
2 November 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Audit of Overview and Scrutiny
30 November 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treasury Management 2021/22 Mid-Year Review • Audit of Overview and Scrutiny
13 January 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Pre-Scrutiny of Proposed Report to Council re. Strategic Partnership with Brentwood Borough Council
8 February 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Treasury Management Strategy Statement, Annual Investment Strategy and Minimum Revenue Provision Policy Statement 2021/22
1 March 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Safety Partnership • Disposals Framework
5 April 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Approval of the Annual Review Committee Report 2021/22

TREASURY MANAGEMENT

The Council is required to receive and approve, as a minimum, three main treasury related reports each year. These reports must incorporate a vast array of policies, estimates and actuals. The reports are required to be adequately scrutinised before being recommended to Full Council.

The Capital and Treasury Management Strategy:

This covers:

- the capital plans (including prudential indicators);
- a minimum revenue provision (MRP) policy - how residual capital expenditure is charged to revenue over time;
- the treasury management strategy - how investments and borrowings are to be organised, including treasury indicators, and;
- an investment strategy - the parameters on how investments are to be managed.

The Mid-Year Treasury Management Report:

This report provides Members with an update on the progress of the capital position, amending prudential indicators as necessary and also considers whether the Treasury Strategy is delivering its objectives. It will also consider whether there are any policies requiring revision. Additionally, the Executive will be in receipt of quarterly updates of the capital programme position.

The Annual Strategy:

The Annual Strategy Report provides details of actual performance as opposed to estimates.

The Review Committee considered these reports in July 2021, November 2021 and February 2022.



COVID-19 LESSONS LEARNED

The Review Committee considered a report on Covid-19 Lessons learned on 6 July 2021. The report set out lessons and provided updates regarding the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic following the previous year's reports.

The report outlined the severity of the Covid-19 outbreak and drew particular attention to the high case rates within the district, which at one point were the highest in the country. The report also recognised that by January 2021, the vaccination programme across Essex had begun with thousands of people vaccinated through 5 hospital vaccination centres and 34 GP surgeries. Members of the Review Committee praised Rochford District Council and all other parties involved for setting up vaccination centres and being able to find the appropriate accommodation to deliver the services efficiently to residents.



The Chairman noted that the Council's Business Rates Team had distributed c.£23.6m in grants to businesses during 2020/21 under various government schemes. Furthermore, resulting from the 5 January 2021 report to the Committee, the Council had undertaken a survey of its staff, with a response rate of over 70%. The survey focused on three key areas: wellbeing, engagement and occupational stress. Officers as a whole felt that there was a high level of awareness of 7 of the 8 main forms of wellbeing support offered to staff. Staff were also highly positive about the Corporate updates via Zoom and the weekly emails received from the Acting Managing Director at the time. It was further concluded that the vast majority of departments across the authority flagged as having high levels of work intensity and large volumes of work, with some concern expressed regarding the ability to take regular breaks.

Members of the Review Committee also noted and reviewed feedback received from Members of the Council which highlighted that some Members felt that they required skills development and training to assist them in working in a digital environment. It was subsequently agreed by the Standards Committee that support should be given to those Members who needed it, aimed at improving confidence in IT.

Members of the Review Committee focused on the Council's return to physical meetings. The Flexibility Regulations that had provided local authorities with the flexibility to hold remote meetings during the pandemic expired midnight on 6 May 2021. The Government had emphasised that physical Council meetings must be compliant with public health guidance regarding health, hygiene and social distancing. The Review Committee recognised the significant challenges faced by the Council, given that the size and fixed layout of the Council chamber declared it unsuitable for meetings in terms of Covid-19 security.

The Review Committee having debated a number of ideas relating to appropriate venues for meetings, unanimously agreed in line with officer advice that Swayne Park School, Rayleigh would be most suitable to meet Covid-19 compliance. This was done with particular consideration for the space of the hall, hygiene practices and strategic challenges that were minimised by selecting this venue.

Members recognised and reviewed the ongoing impact of Covid-19 in line with changing legislation, which presented many challenges.. Members of the Review Committee highlighted that the period 2021/22 is uncertain; however, welcomed that ongoing matters would be reported by officers to Members of the Review Committee for review.

The Review Committee emphasised that there was a risk should the Council fail to learn lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic, that it would not be well placed to deal with any future emergency situations. A programme of real time learning had been running, which looked at the experience of dealing with the pandemic and applying it to the way that staff and Members worked. Members discussed the review process of how the Council dealt with communications and the implications of an increase in staff working from home with regard to Business Continuity plans.

Members of the Review Committee also highlighted that there was an opportunity to apply learning from the pandemic more generally in order to improve future operating practices across the Council in maximising the efficiency and cost-efficiency of delivering our day-to-day services, through the acceleration of flexible working practices and increased digitalisation. This can be seen through recently approved business cases of SharePoint being universally utilised across the Council as well as moving towards digital Committee and Council agenda/reports through the upgrade of CMIS. As well as complying with Covid-19 requirements of moving towards digitalisation, it also complimented the Council's aim of being carbon neutral by 2030.

MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC OPEN SPACES ^{Item 6}

At a meeting on 7 September 2021, detailed discussions were held with regard to the work of the Member Working Group on the management of public open spaces within the district.

The Review Committee had set up a Member Working Group which conducted thorough investigations around the management of Public open spaces within the District including personal research and led to the commissioning of a report by officers from Birketts and detailed maps of relevant areas. The Working Group held a number of meetings which compared various options for management of the various Public open spaces.

The Working Group carried out extensive research which focused on concerns previously raised with regard to utilising private management companies for the maintenance of the district's public spaces. The group concluded that whilst there were benefits to private arrangements which included resident control over the level of expenditure and the level of upkeep, the demerits could potentially outweigh the benefits.

The Working Group further noted that the advantages of private management included the fact that it was a tested option with the flexibility to tailor this option on a case-by-case basis as well as ensuring that there would be a fairness of treatment to residents in respect of payment for the maintenance of the open spaces. As part of the Group's extensive review process, it also outlined the disadvantages of private management and recognised that it could be unaffordable through retained staff costs or the rising costs of maintenance. It also highlighted that the District or the Parish Councils could end up being 'the last resort' or funding could face significant cuts which would negatively impact the level of maintenance received.



RIPA

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000

RIPA sets out the authorisation requirements for all covert surveillance done by public authorities where that surveillance is likely to result in obtaining private information about a person. The surveillance includes monitoring, observing or listening to persons, their movements, conversations or other activities and communications.

At the meeting on 5 October 2021, Members reviewed the use of RIPA over the past year as well as amending certain aspects of the policy in respect of staff changes during the year.

At the meeting, the Review Committee satisfied itself that the Council is utilising its powers effectively prior to recommending the Policy changes to Full Council. Members recommended and reviewed various means of providing further resource to officers with regard to RIPA training which included sharing resource with other local authorities as well as going out to various training institutions to ensure that the Council's officers are receiving the best quality training.

The Committee also looked at possible ways to constructively utilise the Act in compliance with judicial permission that has to be obtained when seeking to use the policy as well as agreeing to review each individual matter on its own merit with officer support.



AUDIT OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

CENTRE FOR GOVERNANCE AND SCRUTINY (CFGs)

In 2019, a Local Government Association Peer Review was undertaken which examined Rochford District Council as a whole and identified key areas for improvement. Within these areas, performance of the overview and scrutiny function was highlighted as an area of focus, with the following statement made: "the Council also needs to strengthen the scrutiny function which Members said does not play a positive role in policy development."

The work of CfGS to audit and review the operation of the Review Committee had been postponed until later 2021 due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which were felt shortly after the completion of the Peer Review. The work commenced in July 2021 and involved CfGS undertaking a day of onsite meetings with Members and officers, observing the recordings of previous Review Committee meetings and reviewing key documents.

This Review Committee considered the key findings and recommendations arising from this audit and at a meeting on 30 November 2021, developed an action plan to deliver and meet the recommendations of CfGS with the support of officers. The action plan formulates part of the Review Committee's ongoing work plan and will be done as an iterative process until completed.

The Review Committee also constituted a Member Working Group that dealt with matters arising from the CfGS report on an ad hoc basis.

Delivering the recommendations, as set out in the CfGS letter will enable Members to receive more robust and more timely reports resulting in more robust challenge of decision-making. It will also aim to strengthen the relationship between the Executive and the Review Committee, providing continuous improvement and strengthening governance and will empower the Committee to strengthen scrutiny and challenge.



ROCHFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL & BRENTWOOD BOROUGH COUNCIL PARTNERSHIP SCRUTINY

The Review Committee undertook pre-scrutiny of a report on collaborative working between Rochford District Council and Brentwood Borough Council at a meeting on 13 January 2021.

The Committee pre-scrutinised the Council's proposals of a strategic partnership with BBC, including a number of recommendations. The Review Committee provided robust and constructive scrutiny of the report and developed extra recommendations that strengthened the review process for when the Partnership between Rochford District Council and Brentwood Borough Council commenced.

During the review process, Members of the Review Committee outlined the importance of resident feedback of how the Partnership could potentially affect services received. Further recommendations were proposed and put forward by the Review Committee that included:-

- the s113 Agreement making provision for robust Exit Arrangements and a Member-led Conflict Resolution process;
- that the s113 Agreement would come to the Review Committee for scrutiny before its execution;
- that any feedback from residents as to the impact of the Partnership on services was regularly sought and reported upon, and;
- that there would be an early review of technology in Phase 2 of the Transformation Programme to identify any threats and/or opportunities.



COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP

This report was presented to the Review Committee on 1 March 2022 with an update on the delivery of the joint Castle Point and Rochford Community Safety Partnership priorities and actions.

In line with the statutory duty under Section 6 Crime and Disorder Act 1998, the Castle Point and Rochford Community Safety Partnership produces and implements a partnership plan for reducing crime and anti-social behaviour.

The priority areas for action for 2021/22 were identified as:

- protecting vulnerable people;
- anti-social behaviour, and;
- violence - which included knife crime

The outcomes of the Castle Point and Rochford Community Safety Partnership during the year and are ongoing have included:

- the extension of Walk Online Project - these are online sessions to all Year 5, 6 and 7 students across the district. Over 1,600 primary school children have participated, with overwhelmingly positive feedback from a sample group. The feedback included over 70% of primary school children rating the sessions as either 'very good' or 'excellent', with the % increasing to 81% for secondary school children.
- joint working with other authorities across Essex to provide a Crucial Crew aimed at Year 6 pupils that tackles the issues of exploitation linked to County Lines drug supply.
- continued support for outreach work undertaken across the District by Bar "N" Bus.
- sanctuary scheme support for victims of high-risk domestic abuse.
- provision of funding to Essex Police to facilitate specific policing operations on the district.



DISPOSALS FRAMEWORK

The Review Committee scrutinised the Disposals Framework during its meeting on 1 March 2022. The Committee also developed recommendations to the Executive as to how the Framework could be further developed to ensure that it continues to inform Members of any future asset disposals that would reflect and promote the Council's objectives.

The Council resolved to agree the Disposal Framework at a meeting of the Executive on 5 September 2018. The Framework is key to achieving and delivering efficiency for managing the Council's assets as well as considering challenges, i.e., disposal of surplus assets in light of a challenging financial environment as well as ensuring that the Council's assets are fit for purpose.

Examples of where the Framework has assisted Officers, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder and Leader (inclusive of both completed and ongoing projects):-

- Hawkwell Pavilion - surplus asset repurposed to deliver community workshops and activities by Essex Hackspace
- Ashingdon Pavilion - refurbished for new Parish Office
- Crown Hill, former public convenience - aimed to be refurbished and reopened as an alternative use
- Great Wakering Public Conveniences - leased to Great Wakering Parish Council
- Land at Cagefield Road, Stambridge - freehold sale of land with the benefit of a planning permission



The Review Committee outlined the importance of maintaining Council owned assets and ensuring that they are utilised to their maximum capacity and are fit for purpose. As part of the scrutiny process, the Review Committee also formulated the following further recommendations to the Executive:-

- consideration of environmental and community/social value issues to be included in the Disposal Framework;
- that during the disposal of assets, it would be ensured that community groups are not disadvantaged in their ability to bid for assets, and;
- that a working group be established, under the auspices of the Portfolio Holder for Commercial, Business, Local Economy and Leisure to consider the use of risk assessments to inform disposal options.



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