



**ROCHFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL
2023/24 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW
& SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

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CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

On behalf of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, I present our Annual Report for the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

The role of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee is to scrutinise the work of the Executive, decisions made by the Executive and to appraise existing services. During this Municipal Year, the following reports were brought to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee:-

- #OneTeam Transformation Programme – Strategic Partnership with Brentwood Borough Council
- Treasury Management
- Community Safety
- The Cost of Living
- Housing and Homelessness
- Highway Rangers Service
- Parks for Nature
- The Mill Arts & Events Centre
- RIPA
- Review of Outside Bodies and Partnerships
- Improvements within the Development Management Team and update on Planning Enforcement
- Engagement with Stakeholders and Residents
- Credit Unions
- Parking for Blue Badge Holders

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee acts as a critical friend and amplifies the voice and concerns of residents. From the scrutiny work, the Committee is able to make recommendations to the Executive for their consideration. Overall, this Committee helps to shape policy, decisions and services to the benefit of all of our District and its residents – now and in the future.

I would like to thank all Overview & Scrutiny Members for their hard work, including attending pre-meetings and individual contributions to working groups throughout the year.



Cllr Mrs Jo McPherson

Chairman of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee

WHAT IS OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY AND WHAT IS ITS ROLE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Overview & Scrutiny is a function of local authorities in England and Wales that was introduced by the Local Government Act 2000 in order to separate Executive and Overview & Scrutiny functions within councils. Members who sit on the Overview & Scrutiny Committee cannot also sit on the Executive to ensure there is a clear separation of the two bodies.

In local government, Overview & Scrutiny refers to a process where elected Councillors examine and review the decisions and actions of the local authority. The purpose of Overview & Scrutiny is to hold the local government accountable, improve transparency and ensure that decisions are made in the best interest of the community.

Overview & Scrutiny Committees are typically set up within local councils to carry out this particular function in which they have the authority to review policies, scrutinise the performance of services and make recommendations to either Executive or Council for improvement. They may also conduct investigations into specific issues or area of concern.

Overall, Overview & Scrutiny in local government plays a vital role in ensuring that the decisions made by the Council are scrutinised, evaluated and ultimately serve the needs of the local community.

The Committee ensures openness and advocates transparency in the way that decisions are taken through the provision of independent and impartial insight as well as implementation of measures to benefit the public.

As per central government guidance, effective scrutiny helps secure the efficient delivery of public services and drives improvements within the authority itself. Poor scrutiny can be indicative of wider governance, leadership and service failure.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Terms of Reference (ToR) for Overview & Scrutiny Committee are:-

“The performance of all Overview & Scrutiny functions on behalf of the Council.”

This Committee has ensured that this ToR has been abided by to the highest standard to upkeep the importance, significance and requirement of the scrutiny function at Rochford District Council during the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP 2023/24

Cllr Mrs J E McPherson
Chairman

Cllr N J Booth
Vice-Chairman

Cllr Mrs D L Belton

Cllr R Milne

Cllr A G Cross

Cllr G W Myers

Cllr Mrs E P Gadsdon

Cllr Mrs S J Page

Cllr J N Gooding

Cllr D J Sperring

Cllr R Lambourne

Cllr I H Ward

Cllr E O K Mason

Cllr S E Wootton

Cllr Mrs C M Mason

WORK PLAN 2023/24

The Work Plan of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee outlines the priorities, objectives and activities that the Committee will focus on during the Municipal Year. The purpose of the Work Plan is to ensure that the Committee's efforts are targeted towards key issues and areas where scrutiny is required.

Key components of the Work Plan may include:-

- i. Setting priorities: the Committee may identify and prioritise key issues and topics that require scrutiny based on the needs of the residents;
- ii. Conducting reviews: the Committee may wish to conduct reviews of policies, services and decisions made by the Council to assess their effectiveness and impact;
- iii. Recommendations: based on its reviews, the Committee may wish to make recommendations to the Executive or Council for improvements, changes or actions to address issues identified, and;
- iv. Monitoring progress: the Committee monitors the implementation of its recommendations and tracks the progress made by the Council.

The Work Plan plays a crucial role in guiding the Committee's activities to ensure a clear focus on key issues as well as holding the Council accountable for its actions.

The Work Plan for the 2023/24 has been fulfilled by the Committee and is as follows:-

5 July 2023

- Treasury Management Annual Review 2022/23
- #OneTeam Transformation Programme – Strategic Partnership with Brentwood Borough Council: Quarter 1 Update
- Annual Report
- Cost of Living Payments to Residents
- Cost of Living

13 September 2023

- Parks for Nature Review
- Report of the Task & Finish Group reviewing the work of the Highway Rangers
- Report of the Cost of Living Working Group
- Update on Homelessness/Housing
- Scoping Document for the review of Outside Bodies and Partnerships

3 October 2023

- #OneTeam Transformation Programme – Strategic Partnership with Brentwood Borough Council: Quarter 2 Update
- Treasury Management Quarterly Update

2 November 2023

- Highway Rangers

5 December 2023

- Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA)
- Treasury Management Quarterly Update
- Community Safety Partnership
- Report of the Task & Finish Group reviewing Outside Bodies and Partnerships

1 February 2024

- Treasury Management Strategy Statement, Annual Investment Strategy and Minimum Revenue Provision Policy Statement 2024/25
- #OneTeam Transformation Programme – Strategic Partnership with Brentwood Borough Council: Quarter 3 Update
- Cost of Living 6 Monthly Update
- Review of Improvements within the Development Team
- Planning Enforcement Update
- Treasury Management Quarterly Update

5 March 2024

- Review of Engagement with Stakeholders and Residents
- Credit Unions
- The Mill Arts & Events Centre – Outcome of the Community Expressions of Interest Process and Future Operating Costs Update

16 April 2024

- #OneTeam Transformation Programme – Strategic Partnership with Brentwood Borough Council: Quarter 4 Update
- Annual Report
- Report of Task & Finish Group reviewing Outside Bodies and Partnerships
- Blue-Badge Parking Holders

SCRUTINY OF THE EXECUTIVE

Rochford District Council conducts a practice of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee appraising the work of the Executive. The Committee meets approximately two weeks before a meeting of the Executive which provides opportunity for Committee to ask officers questions, resulting in the Committee being fully briefed prior to making recommendations to the Executive. This practice benefits the Council as a whole as it aims to minimise the number of call-ins and builds a good working relationship between the Committee and the Executive, as well as officers.

COMMUNICATING SCRUTINY

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee and its functions are Member led; however, the communities of Rochford District Council are able to, and should, influence the Work Plan of the Committee and involve themselves in scrutiny reviews. In the upcoming Municipal Year, despite the Council moving to a Committee style of governance, the new Scrutiny and Performance Committee will continue to promote scrutiny and consider significant local issues affecting the whole District.

SUPPORT FOR OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Committee has been supported by Democratic Services and senior Governance Officers. Senior Governance Officers have offered advice to both Members and officers during and outside of Committee meetings.

Democratic Services produce agendas and clerk the meetings and s first hand, politically neutral advice to Members of the Committee and worked closely with the Chairman on any emerging issues behind the scenes.

The Corporate Leadership Team and Corporate Managers are expected to attend meetings of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and present reports at the request of the Committee and in line with the Work Plan. Additionally, the Executive Lead Members are also invited to meetings to support Lead Officers and aid the Committee in understanding items. The scrutiny process is therefore more robust and effective.

COMMITTEE TRAINING

On Tuesday, 4 July 2023, the Committee received training facilitated by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny.

This training session covered the role of Members in overseeing and scrutinising the work of the Council; the legal basis for Overview & Scrutiny; the relationship between Overview & Scrutiny and the Executive as well as appropriate questioning techniques.

WORK UNDERTAKEN BY THE COMMITTEE – 2023/24

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 – they must also undergo extensive scrutiny by the Committee prior to their recommendation to Full Council.

Annual Review

The Council is required by the CIPFA Code of Practice on Treasury Management and the Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities to produce an annual report of its treasury management activities. The Committee considered this report at its meeting on 5 July 2023 and resolved to recommend the contents of this report to Full Council.

Treasury Management is defined as “the management of the local authority’s investments, cash flows, its banking, money market and capital market transactions; the effective control of the risks associated with those activities; and the pursuit of optimum performance consistent with those risks.”

All decisions on borrowing, investment or financing are delegated to the Section 151 Officer as the Chief Finance Officer and this delegation is documented within the Council’s Constitution.

The regulatory environment places responsibility on Members for the review and scrutiny of Treasury Management policy and activities. The Overview & Scrutiny Committee is therefore required to consider and scrutinise the details of the outturn for treasury activities and compliance with the Council’s policies approved by Members.

It is also important to note that training was provided to Members focusing on treasury management issues and this took place in September/October 2022.

Quarterly Review 2023/24

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee received a quarterly review update report on Treasury Management on 3 October 2023.

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.

The Executive is also in receipt of quarterly updates of the capital programme position.

The Annual Strategy

The Annual Strategy was received and scrutinised by the Committee on 1 February 2024. This report provides further details of actual performance as opposed to estimates and forecasts.

#ONETEAM TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME – STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH BRENTWOOD BOROUGH COUNCIL

At an Extraordinary meeting of Council on 25 January 2022 and an Extraordinary meeting of Brentwood Borough Council on 26 January 2022, it was resolved that a Strategic Partnership between Rochford District Council and Brentwood Borough Council would be implemented alongside the appointment of Jonathan Stephenson as the Chief Executive Officer across the two authorities. The Strategic Partnership became known as “the One Team”.

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee is in receipt of four quarterly update reports to undergo scrutiny during the 2023/24 Municipal Year. The Committee is also granted insight into the service reviews, KPIs, risks and any other significant factors before being recommended to the Executive.

Quarter 1 Report

This report was presented to the Committee on 5 July 2023. It sets out the progress of the OneTeam programme development in the first quarter of the second year of this roadmap from February 2023 to April 2023.

At this meeting, the Committee queried what steps the Council was going to take to minimise risk resulting from the appointments of interim directors. The Committee was assured that a succession plan had been implemented resulting in one of the directors staying at the Council for a longer period of time to minimise the risk of the Council not having a statutory officer appointed. Other interim positions were filled, with a permanent director or split across two acting up directors.

The Committee also noted that there was no adverse impact on service delivery due to the savings accrued as a result of the Partnership. It was also noted that Members would be notified should an instance arise where service delivery was affected. Additionally, performance measures were implemented and would be added to the business case.

Quarter 2 Report

A second update report was presented to the Committee on 3 October 2023 to ensure that Members were informed on the progress of the One Team Transformation Programme.

During this meeting, Members noted that the Communications and HR Departments across Rochford District Council and Brentwood Borough Council had completed their service reviews, and any recommendations were now implemented.

Members also noted that a consultation had taken place across both Councils which were known as the ‘One You’ conversations. These were being held between line managers and reporting officers which acted as a new appraisals programme for officers to discuss individual targets, share their concerns and for line managers, to gain insight as to staff morale.

On top of the recommendation to note the contents of the report, a further recommendation was put forward to the Executive that sought to add a further risk to the risk register relating to staff accommodation and welfare that could impact staff morale.

Quarter 3 Report

A third update report was presented to the Committee on 1 February 2024 to ensure that Members continued to be informed on the progress of the One Team Transformation Programme.

At this meeting, Members noted that those members of staff that had not yet been through the service review process would remain with their designated Council and were not working across the two.

Additionally, Members were assured that those members of staff that did undergo the service review and, as a result, worked across both authorities were aligned with proper governance arrangements with the agreement of Leaders of both Councils. Services were split 50/50 between the Councils unless there were circumstances that required a different percentage split, e.g., where demand on the service was higher in one Council than the other.

Members noted that there was an annual review of the cost split to ensure that neither Council was subsidising the other.

Similarly to the previous report, a further recommendation was put forward that the One Team Transformation Programme be drawn to a close in line with the original time scale of two years to minimise further uncertainty for staff and in order to stabilise the business.

A fourth and final report is due to be presented before the Committee on 16 April 2024, as per the Work Plan.

COST OF LIVING

On 5 July 2023, the Committee received a report from the Director of Communities and Health providing an update on the work undertaken by officers to respond to the Cost of Living crisis to ensure that the Council supported its residents, businesses and staff.

The Committee also welcomed guests from RRAVS, Active Essex and the MegaCentre to address the Committee and provide update presentations on the cost-of-living crisis within the District.

The Council has focused on 6 key themes in response to the Cost-of-Living crisis by utilising a number of communication methods. These are:-

- Support with bills and money
- Support with food and essentials
- Support with wellbeing
- Support to Go Green
- Support for businesses
- Support with work

A collaborative working group is widely attended by key partners. This working group will aid to understand and draw together the support that is currently available across the District. It will also identify any opportunities for further collaboration and any additional resources required in order to provide targeted support for residents and businesses. This group and other key partners supported the Cost-of-Living Roadshow at the MegaCentre on 29 March 2023.

Members noted that resident communication was implemented imminently upon the Council's declaration of the cost-of-living crisis. Officers worked to ensure that the Council's website was regularly updated with clear signposts to the Council's partners that offered resident support. Members were also made aware that information was provided to residents in all formats, e.g., digitally; via leaflets and posters displayed in community hubs and GP practices and face to face.

£5,000 was allocated from the Leader's pot as well as there being additional resources from Rochford District Council to facilitate this work.

COST OF LIVING PAYMENTS TO RESIDENTS

This report was presented before the Committee on 5 July 2023 which highlights a recommendation from Full Council of 21 February 2023, as follows:-

“That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee sets up a time limited working group to determine whether payments should be made to residents within the District affected by the cost of living crisis including: to whom; how; sources of funding and financial amounts.”

The report further set out the Terms of Reference for this working group:-

Purpose

To determine whether payments should be made to residents within the District affected by the cost of living crisis.

Membership

Five nominees by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee – quorum of three.

Meeting Frequency

To be determined by the Working Group

Meeting Business and Decision Making

Papers will be requested and reports produced to aid discussion. Research and reports may be completed by officers or members. The volume of work generated should be mindful of the limited resources available.

Decisions will be arrived at by consensus.

Reporting to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Regular verbal progress updates to the Committee.

A final report to be completed for presentation to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee by October 2023.

The Committee agreed that the following Members be appointed to the Working Group:-

Cllr Mrs D L Belton;
Cllr N J Booth;
Cllr Mrs E P Gadsdon;
Cllr Mrs J E McPherson, and;
Cllr D J Sperring.

A further report, as agreed at the 5 July 2023 meeting, was brought back to Committee on 13 September 2023.

The report outlined that the Working Group used as its Terms of Reference those that were set out in the prior report. The Working Group considered:-

- Direct payments to residents based on criteria to be decided;
- Reimbursement or awards to residents moving into private sector accommodation;
- A specific scheme targeted at Council Tax payers similar to one operated by Uttlesford District Council, and;
- A grant award to a suitable body that could provide experienced advice and signposting residents accordingly to support them.

Consequently, the Committee were advised that £7k was available from the underspend and it was anticipated that there would be an underspend based on the level of demand for Council Tax support as well as any other hardship funds which were often sought by residents after receiving Council Tax bills for the fiscal year. The government allocated the Council with £95k towards the Council Tax Support Fund and the Council has approved £64 from the fund to be allocated to those receiving the Council Tax Support.

The Working Group underwent extensive research and proved thorough scrutiny to be able to identify that it was a necessity for the Council to aid those that need the support the most; however, it was also noted that there was a group of people who suffered from the cost of living crisis that did not meet the criteria to obtain support. The Committee felt it was right to highlight that the Council would support its residents, subject to resource availability. The Working Group had committed to presenting a further report with actuals and costings for Committee's scrutiny.

It was therefore resolved by the Committee that the Interim Director, Resources, allocates £7k from the Council Tax Hardship Fund for one-off use in the current financial year. It was also resolved that the Director, Communities & Health arranges for a grant award of £7k for roadshow style events to assist residents to access support to help them with the cost of living. Furthermore, it was also resolved that the Council considers, as part of the 2024/25 Budget process, the inclusion of ongoing funding of £5k per annum for similar purposes.

PARKS FOR NATURE REVIEW

A report on the Parks for Nature Review was presented at the Committee meeting on 13 September 2023 seeking Committee's scrutiny and review in relation to the findings of the report.

The report provided a summary of the Council's progress of the Parks for Nature programme introduced in December 2021.

Rochford District Council has pledged its commitment to achieve a net zero carbon status for its own managed estate by 2030.

Through the Parks for Nature Public Consultation in May 2021, the Parks for Nature initiative has worked to achieve residents' interest in nature initiatives and to spend more time and money on tree planting and nature conservation.

HIGHWAY RANGERS

The first report was presented before the Committee on 13 September 2023 in which it outlined how the Council has provided the Highway Ranger service, on behalf of Essex Highways. The Committee noted that this service was being funded by Essex County Council; however, until recently, the funding had been removed. Despite there being funding available for the 2023/24 fiscal year, there were no present funding means identified for future years. The Committee was therefore required to scrutinise the future of the Highway Ranger service which was now in question.

The Committee expressed concerns in relation to Parishes within the District maintaining their own open spaces and that it should be decided by the Parishes how the funds were allocated. Further concerns were raised by Members of the Committee as to whether the Council was in a position to allocate £70k towards a service that was initially funded by Essex County Council.

Members noted that the report presented budget for the 2024/25 Municipal Year and that there was a financial gap which the Council was required to address. The Committee was therefore required to decide to make the decision in the longer term to be recommended to the Executive for approval.

The Committee therefore moved a Motion to amend the original recommendation 2: "that a further report is presented to the next available Overview & Scrutiny Committee reviewing the current allocation of SEPP surplus funding and exploring potential savings within the open spaces budget, with a view to identifying a possible budget for the continuation of the Highway Rangers Service in 2024/25."

On 2 November 2023, the Committee received the second report relating to the Highway Rangers service.

This report identified three potential options that could be used to achieve the necessary saving of £70k required to fund the Highway Service. The options presented before the Committee were:-

- i. Repurposing of the SEPP funding allocation
- ii. Reduction in the Pavilion budget
- iii. Transfer of the grounds maintenance allocation from the Car Parks budget

Following thorough scrutiny of the Committee, Members noted that the funds derived from savings accrued through leasing Council-owned pavilions that, as a result, did not fall within the remit of maintenance by the Council, but the leaseholders. Consequently, a budget had become available that could be transferred over to fund the service that had no impact on other service areas within the Council.

The Committee therefore resolved to recommend to the Executive to continue the Highway Ranger service and to fund the service via the financial savings or other alternative means.

HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING

On 13 September 2023, the Committee received report on Homelessness and Housing across the Rochford District. The Committee was required to review and take into account that the housing need in Rochford continued to be challenging with demand for affordable housing considerably higher than supply.

Members noted that many households continued to approach the Council for housing advice and assistance each year for various reasons.

The Council endeavoured to try and find innovative ways to assist and particularly to prevent homelessness, the options available to residents and waiting times to obtain Social Housing were becoming more challenging.

The Committee had to also consider that the continued cost of living crises, including high private rental and mortgage costs as well as the changes to the legislation around the Private Renters Bill, all continued to add pressure to the housing demands in the district.

The Committee debated this item thoroughly and noted the following points:-

- Housing associations were businesses and organisations in their own right and were under the same financial obligations as any local authority and would have to operate within their means, so there were no official obligations that the Council was able to pose on them;
- Turnaround times were low due to more rigorous health and safety regulations which resulted in a slower turnaround across the sector'
- There was a staff shortage and building material shortage; however, conversations were being held between the Council and the appropriate representatives to ensure that properties were not left void for longer than necessary;
- The Council's actions were aligned with the Empty Home Strategy which detailed how the Council could utilise enforcement action if all other means were exhausted, e.g., via written correspondence urging landlords to bring properties back to use, and;
- The Council would support landlords with property grants that could be used to fund works that were required to bring back properties to a habitable standard.

The Committee made an additional recommendation: "that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee requests that the Executive initiates a full review of the Housing Allocations Policy."

REGULATION OF INVESTIGATORY POWERS ACT 2000 (RIPA)

The 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.

On 8 March 2011, Members of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee (known as the Review Committee at the time) agreed to provide a strategic overview of the Council's use of RIPA powers in terms of reviewing the policy and considering quarterly and annual statistical reports on usage.

On 12 July 2011, the Committee agreed that in the interests of saving resources, it would consider statistics and review the Council's RIPA policy on an annual, rather than quarterly basis.

Officers received RIPA training in January 2021 with a further re-fresher training scheduled for 2024.

A specialist RIPA company undertook a review of the Council's RIPA Policy and RIPA Social Media Policy in 2021 and as a result, a revised RIPA Policy and RIPA Social Media Policy were approved by Members at a meeting of the Review committee on 26 November 2021.

The Council last reviewed its RIPA Policy and RIPA Social Media Policy in December 2022, which was approved by Members.

This Committee met on 5 December 2023 during which they scrutinised the RIPA Report. Members noted that the only instances which could trigger the use of RIPA would revolve around fraud, where normal information could not be provided in a transparent manner.

COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP

The Committee received a report at its meeting on 5 December 2023 on the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) between Castle Point Borough Council and Rochford District Council outlining priorities and actions.

The priority areas for action for 2022/23 were identified as:-

- Domestic Abuse
- Violence against Women and Girls
- Anti-Social Behaviour
- Violence (including knife crime)
- Hate Crime

Grant funding provision from the PFCC for 2023/24 amounted to £12,337.00 all of which has been spent commissioning various ongoing projects as follows:-

- i. Walk online e-safety training for Year 5 and Year 6 pupils across the District. This input was designed to educate young people how to remain safe online. The programme was hosted in January 2024 at secondary schools across the District;
- ii. Deliver online Crucial Crew programme on exploitation by County Lines gangs – this was delivered in part in November 2023 with further sessions being organised for next 2024.
- iii. The provision of a Sanctuary Scheme for high-risk victims to provide homes affected by Domestic Violence with extra security, materials (such as chains; window locks; alarms etc.) to improve security and provide victim wrap around tactic;
- iv. Increase trained J9 ambassadors; after the murder of Janine Mundy in 2003, the police liaison officer who worked with the family initiated the J9 Domestic Abuse Initiative to prevent more tragic losses like Janine. The name J9 is an abbreviation of Janine's name in her memory.
- v. Greater public awareness of domestic abuse and the support available, including regular partnership proactive activities and communication campaigns with police;
- vi. Training on hidden harms provided to all taxi and private hire drivers – all taxi licence holders improved their awareness;
- vii. Regular partnership proactive activities and communication campaigns highlighting scams, rogue traders, etc.;

- viii. Working with police and purchasing £1000.00 worth of Community Safety material and equipment, such as purse bells, high-vis slap bands, torches, personal attack alarms and anti-burglary literature;
- ix. The Partnership continued to support Bar N Bus with the provision of funding to assist with the purchase of equipment for the newly acquired Bar N Bus mobile unit, to support youth outreach and detached sessional work across the District for young people, and a contribution towards ongoing costs of a Youth Development worker, and;
- x. Taxi Marshalls for Rayleigh night-time economy at peak times of the year.

The report was thoroughly scrutinised by the Committee as a result of which the following requests were noted:-

- Members wished to see an increase in grant funding provision
- Members expressed support towards Project Minerva and urged nightclubs that are not already part of this initiative to sign up

REPORT OF THE TASK AND FINISH GROUP REVIEWING THE COUNCIL'S OUTSIDE BODY ARRANGEMENTS

At the meeting on 5 July 2023, the Committee appointed Cllrs Mrs J E McPherson, R Milne and Mrs S J Page to the Working Group reviewing the Council's Outside Body arrangements. The scope of the Working Group is to consider the Council's current Outside Bodies and Partnerships to which Members are appointed and to determine how beneficial these are to the Council.

The Working Group was asked to include within the scope of the current review all outside bodies that Members are permitted to attend; consideration of how beneficial these are to the Council; whether there are any Outside Bodies or Partnerships that Members should be attending but are not currently; to review the level of delegated authority associated with appointments to Outside Bodies and Partnerships and to explore how best Members can report back on any Outside Body activity.

At the subsequent meeting on 13 September 2023, the Committee unanimously approved the scoping document in order to commence this review.

On 1 February 2024, the Committee received its first progress report which invited Members to review its findings that included responses from a Member survey alongside Terms of Reference of Outside Bodies from neighbouring authorities.

A further report is due to be brought back before Members of the Committee on 16 April 2024 seeking Members' insight as to whether appointments to Outside Bodies and Partnerships should be made by their retrospective Committees or Full Council.

IMPROVEMENT WITHIN THE DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT TEAM

In November 2022, this Committee received a report on a review of the Council's Planning Enforcement activity. In considering that report, Members made a number of specific recommendations.

In July 2023, a report into the delivery of the wider Development Management services at Rochford District Council and Brentwood Borough Council was completed. That report contained a number of recommendations, which were being actively progressed at the time, through an Officers' Planning Improvement Board, chaired by the responsible Strategic Director.

A report was received on 1 February 2024 in which it provided an update to the Committee on these two, partially inter-related pieces of work and seeking comment on the ongoing improvement programme.

During the scrutiny process, the Committee expressed a number of concerns in relation to the contents of the report. Questions were asked relating to insufficient budgets to ensure a proper delivery of services. Members therefore noted that finances were identified as one of the risks and the report highlighted that it was vital to ensure that the services were sufficiently resourced and funded.

The Committee also noted that the Planning Improvement Board was an officer group that reported to the relevant Strategic Director. The group met on a monthly basis with an aim to check and challenge recommendations and ensure these were implemented accordingly.

The Committee made a further recommendation that: "the Planning Improvement Board reports its findings to Overview & Scrutiny Committee on a quarterly basis."

The Committee sought clarity in relation to the high volume of enforcement cases and queried whether this review had a direct effect on the number of cases outstanding. In response, Members noted that processes, resources and structures were interwound within this review and it was vital that the Tier 4 Corporate Manager appointments within this area were concluded first for officers to be able to progress onto internal systems to tackle the backlog of cases effectively.

The Committee understood that a Tier 4 Manager was successfully appointed before Christmas.

PLANNING ENFORCEMENT UPDATE

In November 2022, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee received a report on a review of the Council's Planning Enforcement activity.

On 1 February 2024, this Committee received a further update report in relation to the Council's Planning Enforcement activity, summarising such activity in the Rochford District for the period between 1 April 2023 and 31 December 2023.

Following on from the original report received in November 2022, the Committee noted that initial investigations continued to take up a significant amount of officer time, with site visits conducted on reported breaches where development is being carried out. Furthermore, the team receive a number of enquiries relating to matters which are outside the planning legislation.

However, over the same period, the team resolved 28% of reported cases through negotiation. This was either by requiring alterations to the development or its removal or inviting the submission of a retrospective planning application. In total for the period, 68% of reported breaches required no further progression to formal action.

The Committee raised various questions around there being means to ensure that conditions on major development were implemented that flagged up time limits associated with these and inspected accordingly. Further questions were raised in relation to enforcement cases awaiting appeal outcome or compliance and whether officers were aware that these cases had been complied with. Officers assured Members that the relevant enforcement notices have been served and the cases were undergoing a period of monitoring. The conclusion of the monitoring period would depend upon whether there was compliance or whether the Council was obliged to escalate the matters further, e.g., through prosecution.

Further queries were raised by the Committee in relation to the 28% of cases resolved through negotiation and whether officers were aware of how many of these cases were achieved through retrospective planning.

The Committee noted in response that there was a typical approach to an enforcement case in an instance where a breach had been identified, officers would initially try to identify a remedy to the breach. In an instance where development would be potentially compliant with the development plan, the first step would be to invite a planning application; any instances that were adverse to development would proceed to enforcement action.

ENGAGEMENT WITH STAKEHOLDERS AND RESIDENTS

On 5 March 2024, the Committee received a report outlining its scope in order to initiate the review of engagement methodology at Rochford District Council to be undertaken.

The Committee noted that this work would consider how to get the best out of consultations that the Council could undertake. The Council consults within its stakeholders on various issues, including the budget, open spaces, e.g., skateparks or other consultations that have an impact. Through consultation, the Council is able to seek views from the community and wider stakeholders which it takes into consideration when undertaking decisions.

Until recently, the Council has not had a consistent approach nor platform to produce or develop consultations in which to engage with its stakeholders. This has changed since the introduction of Engagement HQ under the product title “Engage with Us”. This is a product that has been introduced to assist with the consultation process and to develop a more consistent approach. However, this is purely a platform to enable consultations to be made available in order to reach out to residents in different formats.

As a result, the Council is required to develop a consistent method in which it approaches; how it determines and how it consults its various stakeholders. This approach would include a process to determine who is consulted and the best form of consultation depending on the topic considered and to obtain best response.

The Committee therefore approved the scoping document to permit the initiation of the review of engagement methodology at Rochford District Council.

CREDIT UNIONS

The Committee received a report regarding a Motion on Notice in relation to Credit Unions at its meeting on 5 March 2024.

At the Ordinary Council on the 14 December 2023 a Motion proposed by Cllr Mrs E P Gadsdon and seconded by Cllr S E Wootton was approved as follows:-

“Rochford District Council has a proud record of supporting its residents through the Cost of Living crisis, especially those in financial hardship. There will be some who, through no fault of their own, do not have access to conventional money lenders, and turn to loan sharks which invariably charge extremely high rates of interest, often under illegal conditions. This motion proposes that this council helps protect its residents by signing up to a charger that expresses the Council’s commitments to fighting loan sharks. Furthermore, as an integral part of this there is a “call for action” for the Executive to investigate as a matter of urgency how Credit Unions are working with other local authorities with the intention to create a similar scheme in Rochford to support residents. Any resulting financial implications of this need to be in the 2024/25 budget.”

This report sets out the role of the council in helping to protect its residents by improving access to affordable credit and financial services for low-income households via credit unions.

The COVID-19 pandemic, has been compounded by deteriorating economic conditions and growing inflation, which has led to a cost-of-living crisis. As such, the levels of financial hardship these have generated have increased the need to ensure that affordable and responsible credit is available alongside a strong welfare safety net and direct financial and in-kind support. Credit isn’t an appropriate solution for everyone, but for those who need it to smooth income fluctuations or deal with short-term financial problems, it is vital that it is affordable and helps build financial stability and resilience as part of the longer-term social and economic recovery.

The Council recognises that tackling loan shark behaviour effectively leads to safer communities and neighbourhoods for residents. Consumer awareness of credit unions is relatively low, especially when compared to many high-cost lenders.

The Council is committed to helping residents via credit unions with short-term financial problems and managing uneven income; however, noting that it also builds financial stability and resilience that can prevent future financial problems. Additionally, it ensures that most appropriate outcomes are delivered, aligned with individual circumstances.

By working in partnership with credit unions, the Council can provide widespread and seamless access to affordable finance and thus a comprehensive and robust alternative to high-cost and/or illegal lending.

THE MILL ARTS & EVENTS CENTRE

On 13 July 2022, the Executive agreed to reopen the Mill Arts & Events Centre and it subsequently reopened on Monday, 12 September 2022. A community expression of interest process was started in July 2022 seeking proposals for the operation of all or part of the facility.

At its meeting on 23 February 2023, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee scrutinised the outcomes of the expressions of interest process and the required operating costs for the Mill Arts & Events Centre. The Committee made recommendations to the Executive.

Recommended to the Executive (1) That any future model for the Mill Hall Arts & Events Centre is clear and be brought to Full Council for discussion. (2) That the previous decision to deploy the asset disposal policy be rescinded in the interests of exploring all operating models and associated business cases. (3) That a cross Party Working Group is set up to steer the process. (4) That we revisit, following meaningful market research, the costs of improvement works to the Mill Hall taking into account the needs of a modern media facility. (5) That during the process, external funding options are investigated either by RDC or a partner for the works needed. (6) That the Expressions of Interest process is started afresh and that the invitation to submit an EOI is republished against the revised vision for the Mill Hall. (7) That the Council adopts the use of a collaborative procurement. (8) That before the Executive determines the matter, it is brought to an Extraordinary meeting of Council for debate before the commencement of the pre-Election period. (DAI)

At its meeting on 7 March 2023, the Executive agreed that a future model for the Mill Arts & Events Centre should be clarified and be brought to Full Council for discussion.

On 7 September 2023, Full Council formalised the end of expression of interest process and confirmed clear objectives for the Mill Arts & Events Centre to optimise the market research needed to create a sustainable operating model for the future of the asset.

This Committee received an updated report at its meeting on 5 March 2024 to review the updated information, taking into consideration decisions taken at prior meetings and to scrutinise the process to date. The committee highlighted the time span since the original recommendations were put forward by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in February 2023 with actions still outstanding such as the full market research task.

Recommendation from the committee:

That a cross party working group is appointed by the council at the full council meeting in June 2024 to act as a steering group for the Mill Arts & Events Centre. For officers to prepare Terms of Reference to be presented at the annual council

meeting for this working group. That a meeting of the working group takes place in June 2024.

BLUE BADGE PARKING HOLDERS

This Committee is due to receive a report in relation to Blue Badge Parking Holders at the meeting on 16 April 2024 after which this report will be updated prior to its presentation at a meeting of Full Council in the 2024/25 Municipal Year.

HAVE YOUR SAY

All Members and residents are welcome to attend all public meetings of the Council, which includes meetings of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

Members of the public are also able to contact the Council to bring to the Council's attention any particular area that residents wish the Council to consider. Contact information as follows:-

Democratic Services
Rochford District Council
South Street
Rochford
SS4 1BW

MemberServices@Rochford.gov.uk

It is not within the remit of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee to consider individual cases and it cannot consider planning or licensing applications. These issues should be addressed through the appropriate service area, Committee or Ward Councillor.

Any complaints must be raised via the Council's Complaints Procedure.

To access public documents, including agendas, reports and minutes as well as the public calendar of meetings, please visit: [Rochford Committee Management System \(CMIS\) > Home](#)

If you would like this report in large print, Braille or another language, please contact 01702 318111.