

ACCESS TO SERVICES – SERVICE INSPECTION REPORT

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report introduces the Access to Services – Service Inspection Report, which was published by the Audit Commission last month, for Member information and agreement as to the way forward. A copy of the Report is appended.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 An Access to Services inspection of the Authority was undertaken in December 2006 by inspectors employed by the Audit Commission. The inspection lasted 5 days and trialled a new inspection methodology around “Access to Services”, which was being piloted across a handful of Councils, including Rochford before being used nationwide. The trial was a useful learning exercise for both the inspectorate and the Authority, and a report on the inspection, focussing on an assessment of the Council against the methodology being piloted, has now been produced.
- 2.2 The inspection was extremely wide ranging covering both corporate and service aspects. One of the areas on which we’ve fed back to the Audit Commission is in relation to the relative weighting and balance attached to the corporate verses the service aspects and vice versa.

3 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1 The Audit Commission’s inspectors have rated the current “Access to Services” provision of the Authority as “Fair”, highlighting examples of good practice and areas where we need to improve. Given the newness of this type of inspection in this subject area, the detail of the methodology and the fact that this was a pilot, such a conclusion seems appropriate, as there are a number of aspects around “Access to Services”, in its widest interpretation, which we are currently building upon.
- 3.2 The inspection focussed in part on our ability to engage, and be seen to be engaging with “hard to reach” groups, which by definition are difficult to access. Nonetheless, we are taking action to address this, which is acknowledged. The inspection also seemed to focus on 2003 Best Value Survey data around customers’ satisfaction with the handling of their complaints. It placed less emphasis on the 2004 CPA inspection view that corporately, complaints were being used to identify improvements. Also, whilst we have yet to formally receive the 2006 Best Value Survey details, early indications are that we’ve much improved upon the 2003 position, in terms of customer satisfaction with the handing of complaints.

- 3.3 Whilst the current judgement of “Fair” is seen in overall terms as a reasonable one, the future direction assessment as “Uncertain” is disappointing. The inspectors’ main concerns were around capacity, size, commitment and resourcing together with clear leadership, both politically and in officer terms. The political leadership issue will be addressed in part if we move towards a new decision making structure; similarly, it is proposed organisationally to retitle the “Head of Administrative and Member Services” as “Head of Information and Customer Services” to provide a greater customer focus and sense of priority to this growing area of work.
- 3.4 An internal officer group has been established to develop an Access to Services Strategy and Action Plan. The conclusions of that group will be reported into Members in due course for decisions on detailed action to be taken. A workshop session has already been held with the Audit Commission inspectors to help feed into the proposed actions and assist the Council in progressing its work in this area.
- 3.5 The recommendations outlined in the attached report have been discussed with the Audit Commission as representing a positive way forward and clearly, if Members were to adopt all four of the recommendations as set out, then that would effectively demonstrate that the Council is committed to improvement in this area.

4 CORPORATE RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The publication of reports by the Audit Commission and the judgements contained therein impact both internally and externally upon the perception of the Council and its reputation.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Within the 2007/2008 agreed budget, and in anticipation of this report, specific resources were identified to pick up and develop various aspects associated with the recommendations outlined in the report. That said, the production and delivery of those recommendations depend on Member and officer commitment and there may be aspects which arise, particularly as an Access to Services Strategy and detailed plans are drawn up, which require further consideration in terms of the resources required.

6 RECOMMENDATION

- 6.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**
- (1) To note the report as outlined.
 - (2) To agree to the four recommendations as set out on pages 11-13 of the Commission’s report and receive quarterly reports as to progress on their

implementation, acknowledging the change in post title outlined in paragraph 3.3.

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Background Papers:-

None

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