

ROCHFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL: CORPORATE PEER REVIEW

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report seeks the Executive Board's formal response to the recommendations outlined in the IDEA's Peer Review report to the Council.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The Peer Review report was first considered at the Executive Board on 26 September but any response was deferred pending the presentation given by members of the Peer Review Team the following week (Minute 322/2007). Now that the feedback session has taken place with Cllr Mrs Claire Denman from Crawley Borough Council, it is opportune to consider the key recommendations arising from the report and agree a course of action. A copy of the published report is appended.

3 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1 Set out below are the main recommendations from the report for Members to consider, discuss and agree appropriate action points. Officer comments are given as possible actions to aid consideration and development of an appropriate action plan.

Ambition

Articulate more clearly and confidently a clearer vision for the area, with easily understood objectives and outcomes that can be translated into future actions.

Member Training will be undertaken in respect of visioning and possible actions and outcomes. Further work is currently underway with the Executive Board around the clearer articulation of the Council's vision. The aim is to input this work into the budget process and the Member awayday in November, taking on board input from the consultation processes in place. Once budget and priorities are agreed in January, it is aimed to produce a Council document 'From Vision to Delivery', which will be circulated to key partners and stakeholders and promoted internally to staff. The key aspects of this document will shape the Corporate plan for 2008/2009 and the main messages will be publicised via Rochford District Matters, the Council's website and other key media.

Prioritisation

Review and revise the alignment between the community strategy, the vision, corporate plan and other plans to identify the 'golden thread' in order to ensure a sharper focus on resource allocation to the priority areas.

Sharper alignment around the golden thread will be achieved through the work outlined above, the production of a new corporate plan, and the work underway on a new sustainable community strategy. By next April, the key linkages between the main documents should be more transparent.

Build on existing work and make excellence in customer service a cross cutting priority. This will ensure that all staff can contribute to the success of the organisation.

This will be achieved through the budget prioritisation process and the current ongoing work around Access to Services. An Access to Services Strategy will be presented to the Board at its December meeting for consideration.

Provide greater clarity on what you have de-prioritised, and evidence the moving of resources from these areas.

This will be achieved through greater clarity and transparency through the budget process around priorities/non priorities and the allocation of resources as a result.

Decision-making and Scrutiny

Develop and support all Members so they can contribute fully to the capacity of the Council, in their Executive, Scrutiny or policy development roles, and in their external roles, as community leaders.

The Standards Committee is currently considering the training and development needs of Members via the production of a new training and development plan for Members for 2008/2009. These issues can be taken on board in that consideration.

Members need to lead policy development and have greater input in the development of key corporate documents.

The work around visioning and the budget process should assist in the delivery of this.

Scrutiny Review Committee needs to work more closely with the Forward Plan to ensure that plans and budgets are examined at the appropriate stage of the planning cycle, for maximum corporate benefit.

The linkages between the Executive Board's Forward Plan and the Review Committee's work programme will be further developed for 2008/2009 to ensure this is very apparent. Meanwhile, the Review Committee might wish to formally review the Executive Board's Forward Plan to determine whether it

can add value to the decision making process, for maximum corporate benefit.

Customer focus

Area profiles and a thorough analysis of non-users need to inform service design and delivery. This is important for value for money decisions as some members of the community may not need, or require, as much support, or even the provision of certain services; however, the converse may also be the case. It is important that the Council can clearly demonstrate their approach to customer focus in this way.

The ongoing work around Access to Services and the preparatory work around the new Sustainable Community Strategy should help deliver this, through providing better, more up to date information on the communities that make up Rochford District, potential users and non-users.

Communication and community engagement

Communicate and promote more effectively with the public and other stakeholders, so there is a broader understanding of what the Council wants to achieve. It is critical to balance local interests against wider community needs, particularly in relation to the LDF.

See the work under 'Visioning' above. The re-consultation around the LDF 'core' strategy will also be important in this respect.

Delivering through partnerships

Continue to improve and strengthen partnership working in order to deliver the Council's plans and strategies. More work needs to be done with the business community on strategic economic issues, and grassroots partnerships need to be developed to support the Area Committees.

The Council will continue to work with the local chambers and meet with them on a regular basis. Also, through the Economic Regeneration Sub Group of the Rochford Local Strategic Partnership, the Council will attempt to develop a dialogue with businesses around the key strategic economic issues.

Performance management

Ensure a clearer alignment between targets, the community strategy and the corporate plan in order to embed a performance culture across the Council, and to ensure that measurement of performance drives improvement.

The current performance management framework as it has been developed seeks to do this and will continue to drive the improvement agenda.

Resource Management

Sharpen and refresh medium term corporate financial planning and focus on longer-term financial planning in order to set out more clearly the future scenario for the council. This should include key priorities, what will be done, and how it will be funded over the next 5 years

This relates to vision and the budget process. This will be achieved through the budget process when the priorities and non-priorities are defined, along with an agreed 5 year budget strategy to secure effective implementation.

Change and project management

Accelerate the pace of change throughout the organisation in order to achieve step change in the improvement agenda. RDC should ensure that the need for change is owned by all Members and staff, and is understood by partners and stakeholders.

The Council has already achieved many things through the outsourcing of several of its key frontline services and innovative approaches to partnering with the private sector, as demonstrated through the leisure contract. The recent transfer of the Council's housing stock represents another significant milestone, as do the recent changes to the political decision making process. The next key driver for 'step change' will revolve around the Access to Services work currently underway and the impact that has both in terms of the shape of the organisation and the delivery of services.

Organisational design and development

Develop an effective mechanism to share good practice and learning between department and service areas, in order to maximise the use of resources.

Internally, this is being driven by the Service Improvement and Development Management Team, who will provide the framework to ensure learning and development is shared.

In relation to member development, the member training and development programme continues to look at best practice elsewhere and ensure good examples/experiences are incorporated in the agreed programme. Also, in terms of Members' policy and scrutiny development, the Review Committee looks at best practice examples to learn from experiences elsewhere.

Managing people

Senior Management Team (SMT) needs to set aside time for development as a new team to ensure it has the capacity to transform the Council. SMT should present itself as a team of managers dedicated to leading the organisation on the improvement agenda and each member of the team should act as an ambassador for the many good changes being introduced. To achieve this, there needs to be a clearer understanding at this level of the vision, purpose and direction of the Council.

SMT has agreed to set aside 4 sessions per year to work on this, plus working on specific management development and project issues. In addition, the Executive Board and SMT will also schedule 4 joint meetings per year to focus on the bigger issues confronting the Council.

Managers need to take responsibility for the consistent implementation of corporate policies and procedures, and to ensure that all staff are kept informed of progress and new emerging issues within the Council.

There is commitment from SMT to achieve this and procedures will continue to be developed in line with the Workforce Development Plan and Investors in People to ensure that communications are continually worked on across the Authority.

4 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The Peer Review acknowledges the solid progress the Council has made over a period. However, it is important that we continue to develop and improve; otherwise there is a reputational risk to the Authority and the ultimate risk of more direct involvement by either the Government Office and/or the Audit Commission.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The recommendations as outlined and the suggested actions do not in themselves require additional resources at this stage. However, it is likely that through the budget process there will be priorities for action identified which will need adequate resourcing if they are to be properly implemented.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 It is proposed that the Executive Board considers the recommendations outlined in the Peer Review report and determines its priorities for action, along with a detailed action plan.

Paul Warren
Chief Executive

Background Papers:-

None

For further information please contact Paul Warren on:-

Tel:- 01702 318199

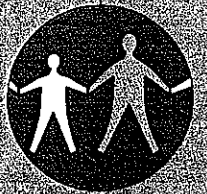
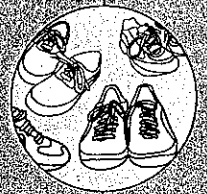
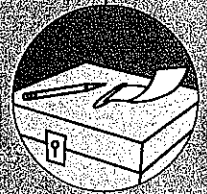
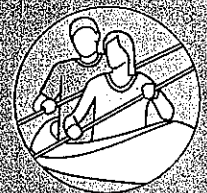
E-Mail:- paul.warren@rochford.gov.uk

If you would like this report in large print, braille or another language please contact 01702 546366.

supporting local government
improvement

corporate peer review visit

Rochford District Council
09–13 July 2007



IDeA
Layden House
76-86 Turnmill Street
London EC1M 5LG
telephone 020 7296 6600
facsimile 020 7296 6666
email info@idea.gov.uk
www.idea.gov.uk



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Corporate Peer Review

Visit to Rochford District Council

9 – 13 July 2007

Summary

Rochford District Council (RDC) has made good progress since the CPA inspection in 2004. The political and administrative leadership are committed to delivering projects that support the corporate objectives of the council and staff are ambitious and well motivated. A Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is in place, partnership working is established and the council is open to a range of approaches in service delivery. A new political structure has the potential to improve the decision-making process and there is evidence of a willingness to take difficult decisions, for example, the housing stock transfer. The council is playing a more significant role in sub-regional matters and this is to be welcomed.

RDC enjoys a high level of customer satisfaction and the community newspaper 'Rochford District Matters' helps to keep people informed. There are mature relationships with external partners and examples of joint service delivery that has led to efficient services and well managed projects, with expenditure in the lowest quartile nationally. Financial management is good, there is an effective Audit Committee, Asset Management Plan, Capital Strategy, and a Market Place for procurement has been implemented.

Performance Management is improving and sickness levels have reduced. RDC has secured IIP status and level 2 of the Equalities and Diversity Framework. The Leader and Chief Executive are approachable and well regarded by staff, and there is evidence the council has acted upon feedback from earlier inspections.

However, the council faces a number of challenges. RDC needs to develop a clearer vision with easily understood corporate objectives and outcomes that can be translated into future actions. Priorities being delivered are currently project based, rather than strategic, and the current aims are only partially addressed in the budget prioritisation process. The council needs to explore the implications of the new political structure for future working and how the Area committees will develop.

The Executive Board and Senior Management Team (SMT) need to build capacity for strategic planning and decision making. They will need to focus on what is important to ensure that RDC can improve and still stay within its resource limits. The council also needs to accelerate the pace of change throughout the organisation, in order to achieve step change in the improvement agenda.

There is a lack of understanding and application of the community profile in shaping policy and the implications of the Local Development Framework (LDF) are not widely understood. There needs to be more engagement with the business community on strategic issues and grass roots partnerships need to be developed to support the Area committee process.

There is a need for a 'golden thread' between the vision, community strategy, corporate plan and other plans and targets. It is suggested that either the corporate plan is amended or that a stand alone document is developed that stands between the corporate plan and the LDF to clearly link strategy to delivery. Such a document needs to be in a language that is clearly understood by Members, officers and stakeholders and is seen as a working document that effectively helps to deliver the business objectives of the council.

Managers should take responsibility for meeting targets and a stronger corporate group is required to achieve sustainable improvement. Wider buy-in is needed from all Members and managers to achieve step change in the organisation. There is scope to improve Member engagement, Scrutiny needs to demonstrate greater impact, all Members need to adopt the community leadership role and take responsibility for their learning and development, as a key resource to the organisation.

The council could be more effective in selling itself and its achievements, improved internal and external communication is crucial, given the speed of progress. There is a stated commitment to change, however the ability of the council to take difficult decisions will be tested by conflicting priorities, for example, encouraging a thriving economy and protecting the green belt.

The key will be that given available resources, and the increased drive towards improved efficiency, it is the needs of the community that demonstrably drive these decisions.

Recommendations

The recommendations of the peer review team are set out under the headings of the IDeA benchmark of the 'ideal' local authority.

Following the peer review, it is recommended that the council should:

Ambition

- Articulate more clearly and confidently a clearer vision for the area, with easily understood objectives and outcomes that can be translated into future actions.

Prioritisation

- Review and revise the alignment between the community strategy, the vision, corporate plan and other plans to identify the 'golden thread' in order to ensure a sharper focus on resource allocation to the priority areas.
- Build on existing work and make excellence in customer service a cross cutting priority. This will ensure that all staff can contribute to the success of the organisation.
- Provide greater clarity on what you have de prioritised, and evidence the moving of resources from these areas.

Decision-making and Scrutiny

- Develop and support all Members so they can contribute fully to the capacity of the council, in their Executive, Scrutiny or policy development roles, and in their external roles, as community leaders
- Members need to lead policy development and have greater input in the development of key corporate documents.
- Scrutiny review committee needs to work more closely with the Forward Plan to ensure that plans and budgets are examined at the appropriate stage of the planning cycle, for maximum corporate benefit.

Customer focus

- Area profiles and a thorough analysis of non-users need to inform service design and delivery. This is important for value for money decisions as some members of the community may not need, or require as much support, or even the provision of certain services, however, the converse may also be the case. It is important that the council can clearly demonstrate their approach to customer focus in this way.

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Delivering through partnerships

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Change and project management

- Accelerate the pace of change throughout the organisation in order to achieve step change in the improvement agenda. RDC should ensure that the need for change is owned by all Members and staff, and is understood by partners and stakeholders.

Organisational design and development

- Develop an effective mechanism to share good practice and learning between department and service areas, in order to maximise the use of resources.

Managing people

- SMT needs to set aside time for development as a new team to ensure it has the capacity to transform the council. SMT should present itself as a team of managers dedicated to leading the organisation on the improvement agenda and each member of the team should act as an ambassador for the many good changes being introduced. To achieve this, there needs to be a clearer understanding at this level of the vision, purpose and direction of the council.
- Managers need to take responsibility for the consistent implementation of corporate policies and procedures, and to ensure that all staff are kept informed of progress and new emerging issues within the council.

Background

1. The visit to Rochford District Council was part of the programme of corporate peer reviews of local authorities arranged by the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA). A peer review is designed to help an authority assess its current achievements and its capacity to change.
2. The benchmark of the 'ideal authority' was used to provide the basis for this assessment.

The Benchmark Framework

Themes	1. Leadership & governance	2. Customer focus & community engagement	3. Resource & performance management	4. Organisation & people
Elements	1.1 Ambition 1.2 Prioritisation 1.3 Decision making and scrutiny	2.1 Customer focus 2.2 Communication & community engagement 2.3 Delivering through partnerships	3.1 Performance management 3.2 Resource management 3.3 Change & project management	4.1 Organisational design & development 4.2 Managing people & diversity

3. The peer review is not an inspection. Rather it offers a supportive approach, undertaken by friends, albeit 'critical friends,' and its intention is to help a council identify its current strengths as much as what it needs to improve.
4. Peer review is part of an ongoing change process, whereby the recommendations from it can, along with CPA recommendations, inform improvement planning.
5. The members of the peer review team were:
 - Roy Templeman, Chief Executive, Chester-le- Street District Council
 - Councillor Claire Denman, Portfolio holder for planning and economic development, Crawley Borough Council
 - Kamal Mehta, Deputy Chief Executive Harborough District Council
 - Fatima Vepari, Consultant, IDeA
 - Carmel Gallagher, Review Manager, IDeA
6. The programme for the week was organised in advance and included a variety of activities designed to enable members of the peer review team to meet and talk to a spectrum of internal and external stakeholders. Examples of activities the team undertook were:
 - Discussions with the political leadership and senior management of the council
 - Discussions with a range of Members, including meetings for the Executive Board, non exec. Members, and the Leader of the opposition
 - Discussions with and workshops for a cross section of staff, including frontline staff, Heads of Service and SMT

- Discussions with some partners, including contractors, senior managers from neighbouring local authorities, the Audit Commission, the Government Office for the East, and the media
 - A workshop for residents
 - Pre-reading of materials produced by the council, prior to the on-site working
7. The team was appreciative of the welcome and hospitality provided by the council and would like to thank everybody that they met during the process for their time and contributions. The way in which the needs of the team were taken care of by colleagues from the performance team deserves a special mention.
 8. The feedback given to the council on the last day of the peer review reported on the key messages. This report gives a more detailed written account of the findings of the review and is structured around the IDeA benchmark of the 'ideal authority'.

Context

9. Rochford Council was formed in 1974 from the merger of Rayleigh Urban and Rochford Rural District Councils. The former's Council Chamber provides the civic base of the Authority while most services are managed from offices in Rochford which is the geographic centre of the District. There are 14 Town/Parish Councils covering the whole district and a number of District Council Members also serve as parish councillors.
10. Rochford is located in South Essex with links to the M25 via the A127 and A13 as well as direct rail links to London. The district is situated within a peninsula between the rivers Thames and Crouch and is bounded to the east by the North Sea and to the south by the urban areas of Southend and Castle Point. It has marine boundaries with Maldon and Chelmsford district councils and a land boundary with Basildon.
11. The population is around 79,700 within an area of 65 square miles, much of the District is designated as green belt, with miles of attractive coastline, salt marshes and unspoilt countryside complimenting the market towns of Rochford and Rayleigh.
12. RDC provides services to 33,700 dwellings largely within three principal centres of population. Rayleigh is the largest, located in the west of the District. The town contains the site of an ancient castle and landmark 18th century windmill. To the east of Rayleigh lies Hockley, with its once famous spa and then Rochford, a medieval market town that retains much of the original street plan.
13. Each of these towns has a railway station with a fast and frequent service to London. The majority of London Southend Airport is situated within the Rochford District and the airport and its environs are included within the Thames Gateway, a national priority for regeneration.
14. The area is the 316th least deprived out of 354 Districts, with owner occupation at 86% (against a national average of 71%). The number of council dwellings is 1,755 of which 658 are elderly and sheltered units. The proportion of one person households and lone parent households are both below the national average at 25% and 4% respectively. The population from a mixed or ethnic minority background is 1.7%. The elderly population (60 and above) is over 22% whilst around 20% is aged under 16. Life expectancy is above national average. Unemployment is low at 1% with 68% of those in employment commuting out of the district to work. There are an estimated 2,650 businesses in the area but only five employ more than 250 staff.
15. Until recently, the council operated a committee system with five Policy Committees bearing responsibility for policy and service developments within their remit. In May 2006, a new Review Committee was established following a Member led review of the process. The political decision making structure has again been reviewed in the context of the Local Government White Paper and emerging legislation. As a result, from this municipal year the council is operating an Executive Board and three Area Committee structure. The chairmanship of the Review Committee has also passed to the main opposition party.
16. The Council has 39 elected Members and has a Conservative administration as follows: 32 Conservative, 5 Liberal Democrat, 1 Rochford Residents, 1 Independent at the time of the review. The Chief Executive, supported by two Corporate Directors, heads the council's staff structure. Heads of Service then lead the

management of particular service areas. A new organisational structure has been implemented over the past year which sees the separation of external, front line services, from back office support services, including the creation of an Information and Customer Services Division.

17. The council employs 238 full time equivalent staff, with key services contracted to the private sector, for example; refuse collection, recycling, street cleansing, grounds maintenance, leisure management and the IT service.
18. The council's vision is to make the district "the place of choice to live, work and visit". The community strategy, which was developed by the local strategic partnership (LSP), sets out a 5 – 20 year strategy for the area. The council's work is under pinned by its corporate plan 2007 -2010, focusing on the following 6 corporate aims which directly support the community strategy;
 - Provide quality, cost effective services
 - Work towards a safer and caring community
 - Provide a green and more sustainable environment
 - Encourage a thriving local economy
 - Improving the quality of life for people in the district
 - Maintain and enhancing local heritage
19. In achieving the vision, RDC is committed to work in accordance with a set of organizational values. These are to:
 - Act with integrity
 - Be open and transparent about what we do
 - Respect others and treat people courteously and equally
 - Be responsive to customer needs and requests
 - Always try and improve on what we do
 - Work with others to improve what we do, both directly and through partnership working

In April 2006 RDC, with other partners, signed up to the Essex Local Area Agreement (LAA) in order to focus on common objectives and to target services towards those in greatest need.

Ambition

Strengths

- ✓ Good physical infrastructure to support ambitions that Members are informally discussing e.g. river, airport, rail, environment etc.
- ✓ Good practice in specific projects underway e.g. urban regeneration in Rochford, Cherry Orchard Park and leisure facilities
- ✓ The political and administrative leadership are committed to delivering projects that support the corporate objectives of the council
- ✓ General willingness among Members to produce a clearer ambition and direction for the Authority
- ✓ Staff are ambitious, 'up for change' and motivated to improve

Areas for improvement

- RDC needs to develop a clearer vision with more easily understood objectives
 - the vision and direction need to be supported by strategic, operational partners and stakeholders e.g. tourism strategy, regeneration, vibrant market town
 - a political / managerial framework is required for discussing future vision and strategy
 - SMT / Executive need to find time to focus on the strategic leadership of the organisation
 - over dependence on Local Development Framework bringing forward strategic direction
 - unclear what priorities are being drawn upon to develop the Sustainable Community Strategy
 - Some difficult decisions need to be addressed in shaping the vision
20. RDC benefits from a good physical infrastructure to support the ambitions that Members are currently discussing. The road, and rail networks provide for transport routes into the area, and fast access to London, and the airport and waterway have the potential to link the district to other regional centres and further a field. During the tour of the area, the peer review team saw evidence of good practice in projects such as the town centre regeneration in Rochford which includes high density, good quality development. The Cherry Orchard project and improved leisure facilities are other examples of ambition being translated into actions that support the corporate objectives of the council.
21. The council is working to improve the quality of life of its residents and are committed to delivering projects that support the corporate objectives. The LSP Board is chaired by the Leader of the council and is clearly seen as the leading partnership, locally. A number of other partnerships, including the Crime and Disorder Partnership and the local Economic Regeneration Forum report to the LSP. RDC is a key partner in the Thames Gateway regeneration project; the Leader and Chief Executive play active roles and have secured additional funding to support quality of life in cross-cutting issues on behalf of the community.
22. There is a general willingness among Members to produce a clearer ambition and direction for the authority, and good ideas to bring that vision into life. Executive Board Members have strong and forward thinking views that need to be refined in terms of outcomes and strategy, which can be progressed by SMT. The Sustainable Community strategy is to be developed in the Autumn, this provides a vehicle to

- refine the vision which will be a key driver for community leadership and to ensure ambitions are widely understood and achievable.
23. Staff are ambitious and motivated to achieve change and improvement. In service terms, there is evidence of the council's aspirations for high performance in key area, such as customer satisfaction. The council is also rightly proud of its parks and working with the Police to reduce the fear of crime contributes to achieving the desired outcomes.
 24. However, there is a need to develop a clearer vision with easily understood objectives, linked to the community strategy which can be translated into future outcomes. Feedback to the peer review team indicated the need for a more defined sense of purpose with clear ideas of what could be achieved on the ground. There is currently little sharing of these ambitions and no clear view as to how engagement with the local sub regional economic partnership and other stakeholders will help to achieve the ambitions of the council.
 25. The vision and direction needs to be supported by all strategic and operational stakeholders, in order to secure wider commitment and connections between ambitions and key strategies. There is limited knowledge of the council's visioning work across the organisation and externally. Failure to significantly widen and deepen the knowledge of the vision, to staff and the wider community may well be a cause to inhibit the further delivery of the council's ambition.
 26. There is a need for a political/managerial framework for discussing future vision and strategy. Consideration should be given to developing a shared narrative, which the council can use to clearly and confidently articulate its organisational and economic vision for the area. This narrative should connect the council's historic and current position, to its future aspirations and should be widely communicated in a way that is easily understood, both within the organisation and externally. Such a narrative would assist the council to be more outward facing and overcome the gap in knowledge and understanding, which was clearly evident to the peer review team, when speaking with residents.
 27. Following on from above, SMT and Executive Board need to make time to focus on the strategic leadership of the organisation. Although the structure is relatively new, it is important that Members and officers explore the challenges and dichotomies facing the council in a way that enables honest discussion and sharing of ideas. There is some evidence that challenge is avoided, for example the last two inspections identified the lack of clarity around ambition, and that "the aspirations were not clearly articulated".
 28. In terms of delivering the council's ambition, the review team considered there was an over dependence on the LDF to define strategic direction and translate vision into action. As stated previously, all the strands of work need to be more connected; tourism, economic development, affordable housing and enhancing the local heritage. The LDF is a new approach to spatial planning but it needs to be rooted in a clear locally distinct vision for the community and what the council wants to achieve. There is a stated engagement with Thames Gateway and the 'green grid' but this is not well articulated in terms of a plan, (possibly regeneration strategy?), that sits above the LDF and deals with redevelopment of market towns, aspirations to utilise the river, tourism infrastructure and business infrastructure, around the airport.

29. It was unclear what priorities are being drawn upon to develop the Sustainable Community strategy and there was some evidence the LDF was seen as the driver for this, rather than the LDF flowing from the Sustainable Community Strategy. There is a need to ensure that the emerging plans and strategies identify outcomes that reflect the council and partners' aspirations for the future.
30. Some difficult decisions need to be addressed in shaping the vision for the authority. There is a stated commitment to change, however the ability of the council to take difficult decisions will be tested by conflicting priorities. Tourism is a priority but there is a lack of evidence to facilitate this, or to identify what the offer might be, or how tourists will be accommodated in the area. There is an identified need for affordable housing but little evidence of political support to deliver more affordable homes, in the context of the regional plan allocation.

Prioritisation

Strengths

- ✓ Prioritisation around budget process and 5 year financial strategy is well established
- ✓ Some recognition of residents opinions in developing projects and project based working
- ✓ Focus on leisure services to provide new facilities and joint ventures is a model of good practice
- ✓ Prioritisation in the development of operational partnerships and discussions on shared services demonstrates an openness to new ways of working
- ✓ New political structure has been prioritised to produce a more effective governance structure
- ✓ Prioritised targeted improvements in some service areas e.g. development control

Areas for consideration

- Lack of the 'Golden Thread' – Vision – Objectives – Strategy – Delivery Outcomes-
 - Tourism without Tourism Strategy
 - Priorities are project based rather than strategic
 - Community Strategy, Corporate Plan and project actions of the council are loosely connected
 - Staff are not fully aware of how their jobs relate to the direction of the authority
 - The council needs to consider organisational priorities across the services e.g. customer excellence
 - Current aims of the council are only partially addressed in the budget prioritisation process
 - There is little evidence supporting the confidence of Members and senior officers in achieving prioritised targets
31. There is a well established 5 five year financial strategy and the review team were given evidence to support the prioritisation around the budget process. The annual budget setting system is widely understood and well regarded by Members and officers. There is some recognition of resident's opinions in developing projects and project based working, for example, feedback from a recent car park survey has been produced in leaflet form to advise participants of the effect of their comments. Responses from the street scene survey are being fed into the new contract specification, and short term issues such as a requirement for additional dog waste bins are being delivered.
32. The focus on leisure services to provide new facilities and joint ventures is a model of good practice, which other authorities are learning from. The work with Virgin Active has delivered improved leisure amenities in line with priorities. The review team were impressed by a range of community facilities, such as The Mill, that have been secured through working in partnership and innovative use of resources.
33. Prioritisation in the development of operational partnerships and discussions on shared services demonstrates openness to new ways of working and a flexible approach to the method of service delivery. There is significant evidence of the council entering into partnerships to provide delivery of front line services as well

as partnerships with other councils and the private sector, to share costs. Work with Chelmsford and Castle Point are good examples of improving service delivery through joint working and the alliance with Capita for out of hours cover has improved access for the community.

34. The new political management arrangements have the potential for a crosscutting approach to delivery of the priorities, in line with medium term goals and longer-term aspirations. RDC can demonstrate that it has redirected resources to priority areas, to produce targeted improvements, for example, development control and revenues and benefits services.
35. However, 'the golden thread' between the vision, objectives, strategy and the delivery of outcomes were not always clear to the review team. There is a need to provide further evidence to demonstrate the linkages and alignment between tourism, for example, and mechanisms to deliver the required outcomes. There is evidence of work to support key priorities e.g. sustainable environment and a number of good ideas were articulated to the team, parks, bio-diversity, reducing the carbon foot print; but these need to be brought together in a holistic manner.
36. Priorities appear to be project based rather than strategic, the focus is mainly on service delivery rather than 'place shaping'. There is a lack of commitment to accept national and regional policies, for example, on affordable housing, where the council's own work indicates that a higher level of provision is required. The review team suggest that project plans need to have a more strategic focus with cross cutting objectives, identify outcomes rather than outputs, with evidence to indicate what will change as a result.
37. There is evidence that Members and staff, met by the peer review team, could describe what the council's priorities are, (In the 2006 staff survey over 90% of staff strongly agreed or agreed with the statement "I am clear about my objectives and what is expected of me". However, some staff are not fully aware of how their jobs relate to the direction of the authority. Consideration should be given to ensuring that the implications of priorities are understood much more widely and how individual members of staff can contribute to meeting them. This should include further work with SMT and other managers to ensure a wider and more consistent understanding of the council's priorities.
38. The council needs to consider organisational priorities across the services and ensure more cross-cutting themes in plans and strategies. In looking at the new vision and objectives including something around customer excellence could ensure quick wins for the council, as there evidence to support this is a real strength.
39. The current aims of council are only partially addressed in the budget prioritisation process, for example, encouraging a thriving local economy. There is limited evidence of what this means in terms of working with the business community or implications for planning and development control. Consideration should be given to revisiting the approach to medium-term financial planning to ensure a sharper focus on allocating resources to the council's priorities and a filtering process on how bids relate to existing aims.
40. The review team were concerned about the lack of evidence supporting the confidence of Members and senior officers in achieving prioritised targets, particularly around recycling which is a critical BVPI for the council. There is public confusion about the process and the renewal of the contract could add further

perplexity to the process. RDC needs to make clear the respective responsibilities the council and its partners have for delivering the priorities and ensure progress against them is kept on track. Member support will be critical, so that difficult decisions are made to ensure continuous improvement on key targets and priorities.

41. There is a need for the council to be able to provide clearer evidence of its non-priorities and therefore, the areas for disinvestments. For example, a view emerging during the week was that objectives and priorities were open to broad interpretation. Therefore, being clearer of the council's non-priorities would assist to raise awareness overall of the prioritisation debate to all Members and staff, as well as to partners and residents.

Decision –making and Scrutiny

Strengths

- ✓ New political management systems have the potential to improve the decision making process and community engagement
- ✓ Member training in place and strongly supported by some Members
- ✓ Good strength of relationship between Leader, Deputy Leader and Chief Executive
- ✓ Made some difficult decisions e.g. Executive structure

Areas for consideration

- limited understanding of how the new political management systems are likely to develop
 - scrutiny function needs to link to the vision and objectives of the council
 - the council would benefit from targets in Member development,
 - staff would like to see a raised profile for leading Members, particularly the Executive Board
 - ability of the council to make difficult decisions will be tested by conflicting priorities
 - the Executive and SMT need to build capacity for strategic planning and decision making
 - the Chief Executive needs to further develop senior management to be leaders in the organisation
 - the scope and influence of Member Champions is yet to be established
 - little evidence of Member involvement in the development of key corporate documents
42. The new political management systems have the potential to improve the decision making process through clearly identified Executive and non-executive functions. The Executive Board could support corporate capacity to deal more effectively with crosscutting issues, while at the same time focussing on service-specific requirements, in order to drive forward change. The Area committees and revised Scrutiny process has the potential to widen community engagement to inform the decision making process and to increase the profile of elected Members within their community.
43. Member training is in place and is strongly supported by some Members. The review team heard feedback from Members on the benefit of developmental sessions; however they expressed a view that all Members needed to avail of this opportunity in order to keep abreast of changing legislation and the implications of new emerging policies in RDC. The ethical framework underpins productive working within the council.
44. There are good working relationships between the Leader, Deputy Leader and the Chief Executive, They are good ambassadors for the council, have a shared understanding about what needs to be done and the energy and commitment to achieve their aspirations. The annual staff meeting is appreciated by staff, the induction process is good and the Core Brief works reasonably well as a conduit between the strategic leadership of the council and front line staff. This augurs well for the future to build the council's capacity and demonstrate further achievement.

45. RDC has demonstrated that where necessary, it can make some difficult decisions. The housing stock transfer and the move to Executive arrangements are examples where Members have taken decisions in order to move the authority forward.
46. However, there are opportunities for improvement within the context of decision-making and Scrutiny. There is limited understanding throughout the organisation of how the new political management systems are likely to develop. Although it is early days for the process to embed, more needs to be done to ensure all Members develop their understanding of how they can contribute in the new structure. The Area committees will need to be resourced, their function clarified, and purpose promoted to the wider community. It is critically important not to raise unrealistic expectations in areas where the council may struggle to deliver.
47. The Scrutiny function needs to link to the vision and objectives of the council and it needs to be more strategic. Good practice suggests a link to the Forward Plan and aims and priorities of the council. Scrutiny is more likely to create impact by focussing on a smaller number of cross cutting issues that can make a difference to the community.
48. The council would benefit from targets in Member development for example, adopting the IDeA Charter. It was clear to the peer review team the council benefits very significantly from some really good Members. However, in order to further build the capacity of the council and maximise the talent of Members, consideration should be given to increasing the role of Members as advocates of the council, and the profile of Member development. This is about maximising the potential of Members through investing in their development, for example through:
 - The adoption of personal development plans for all Members
 - Attendance of Executive and other leading Members at external events in order to learn about good practice elsewhere
 - Ensuring that all Members participate in mandatory training, for example development control
 - Consideration of securing Charter Status for Member development
 - Encouraging better attendance on the full range of training sessions run internally
 - Ensuring a comprehensive approach to Member support and development
49. Feedback from staff indicated a desire for greater visibility of Members, particularly Executive Members. Split site working is a barrier, and for a small authority there was limited communication between teams. However the peer review team wished to highlight the opportunity that exists to translate the pride which is expressed by many staff of working in a part of the organisation, to pride in working for the organisation as a whole. There is also an opportunity to help staff understand more about what happens elsewhere, overtly celebrate success and ensure that learning is captured and shared across the organisation, in order to maximise resources.
50. The ability of the council to make difficult decisions will be tested by conflicting priorities. There are challenges around affordable housing and protecting the green belt, resources and the capacity to deliver on ambitions. The council needs to consider that a range of issues or unforeseen circumstances may divert the

agenda. There can be a tendency to rely on key individuals in specific areas and this could pose a risk for the council:

51. The Executive board and SMT need to build capacity for strategic planning and decision making. There are currently some meetings between service managers and Executive Members but given the new structure, fresh approaches are required to ensure there is clarity around how to; address challenges facing the organisation, maximise joint working, establish clear lines of communication and accountability. There needs to be formal SMT/Executive meetings for strategic planning and for 'blue sky' visioning, in addition to what currently happens at budget planning days. The peer review team were of the view that these steps would help to deliver step change and lead to more robust decision-making.
52. The Chief Executive needs to further develop senior management to be leaders in the organisation. Key to achieving this will be to continue strengthening internal communications. In particular, in discussions with staff, the need for improved two-way communication between the top and bottom of organisation was highlighted. Such an approach would help underpin the suggestion made by the peer review team that the council would benefit from developing and articulating a shared narrative which connects its past and present position with its aspirations and future plans.
53. The scope and influence of Member Champions is yet to be established and there is little evidence of Member involvement in key corporate documents, e.g. the corporate plan or economic development strategy. Member Champions have the potential to an important resource to the authority in terms of their contribution to corporate thinking and strategic decision making. This needs to be addressed to avoid any duplication of effort, lack of understanding of responsibilities and to avoid any confusion with the role of Executive or Scrutiny Members. In discussions with non executives, the need to improve internal and external communications was also raised. A Member Champion for development and training could promote the benefits of development to all Members, explore good practice in other authorities and pick up the suggestions identified earlier to ensure that all Members contribute fully to the corporate decision making process.

Customer Focus

Strengths

- ✓ High level of public satisfaction borne out by statistics
- ✓ Residents commented on good accessibility to the council e.g. planning portal, website, receptionists, telephone response
- ✓ RDC and external service providers carry out a number of customer surveys to help shape the quality of service

Areas for improvement

- There is a lack of understanding and application of the community profile in shaping policy and services
 - There is no evidence of political commitment to address the needs of hard to reach groups
 - There is a gap between council action and resident experience in some areas e.g. recycling red bags, leisure and Virgin Active
54. RDC secures a high level of customer satisfaction across a range of services, 62%, which puts the council in the top quartile nationally. This is a significant achievement given the rising level of community expectations and that the trend of resident's satisfaction is falling generally. Feedback indicated a fast pick up on telephones and speedy responses to written enquiries. Some positive views about the way in which staff interact with the public were also expressed to the peer review team. Particular mention was made of helpful and friendly reception staff. Corporate branding is good, including the visitors guide, which promotes Rochford as a tourist destination. The peer review team wished to highlight that it is generally accepted that there is a correlation between reputation, branding, customer focus and excellence.
55. Residents commented on the good accessibility to services and their satisfaction with the range of access channels. A wide range of payments can be made online including business rates, council tax, benefits overpayments, housing rents and car parking penalty notices. Planning and building control applications, job applications, reporting of environmental problems and complaints can all be made online. The website is speech enabled and has a text only option. RDC has secured maximum points on eplanning and the 2 main towns have staffed reception centres which are DDA compliant.
56. RDC and external providers carry out a number of satisfaction surveys to ensure services are being delivered to meet the needs of customers. The Citizens Panel has the potential to become a useful sounding board for proposed changes to service design or delivery. The peer review team were impressed by the range and quality of leisure provision which is a real strength for the council.
57. However, there is a lack of understanding and application of the community profile in shaping policy development and services. While recognising that RDC has achieved significant progress since CPA in 2004, there is a growing understanding that in the improving world of local government, maintaining the 'status quo' is not an option. More work is required redesigning services around the customer base to ensure that services are customised to the needs of the community and clear evidence of this is available prior to CPA. This is important for value for

money decisions as some members of the community may not need, or require as much support, or even the provision of certain services. However, the converse may be the case, where hard to reach groups are finding it difficult to access or understand services being delivered and a new approach may need to be considered for these members of the community. There is no evidence of a commitment to address the needs of hard to reach groups or understanding of who they might be. A Youth Council is in place but not yet embedded or not well known.

58. In order to demonstrate the council's customer focus, there is a need to be able to provide further evidence of engagement with disadvantaged groups, promoting social inclusion and demonstrating that consultation exercises are fully representative. This is another area where a Member champion could lead the development of new thinking and innovative approaches to improving customer focus.
59. There is a gap between council action and residents experience in some areas. There is some confusion about who is delivering services, for example in leisure, where residents expect to use loyalty cards, which are not accepted in council outlets. Recycling is another area where lack of knowledge of the current system leads to misunderstanding. In the light of further changes to the waste collection system, it is important that the public are clear about how they can contribute. This may well be an issue of miscommunication but given the priority to improve recycling targets, this needs to be rectified as a matter of urgency.

Communication and Community Engagement

Strengths

- ✓ Good community newspaper and public information
- ✓ council website appears well used
- ✓ Communications on projects is reasonably good e.g. Rochford mental health facility
- ✓ Examples of good work with young people at point of delivery

Areas for improvement

- Public and stakeholders don't understand the council vision
 - RDC needs to publicise more what's happening in the District;
 - New community leadership role of Members yet to be defined
 - Stakeholders don't feel engaged at the initial stages of a project and have limited input into decision making
 - The importance of the LDF for spatial planning is not understood
 - Mixed awareness of who local councillors are and what they do
60. RDC is committed to keeping the public informed through a range of channels. The review team had positive feedback on the website, which is well used and the council newspaper, 'Rochford District Matters'. Communication on some projects is good, particularly on big issues like the Rochford mental health facility. There is a regular forum for developers and quarterly meetings are held for contractors who value these opportunities to share information and develop their understanding of key issues.
61. There are a number of projects taking place across the district including town centre regeneration, the green corridor and good examples of work with young people. The review team were impressed by the graffiti and community art project and Rayleigh Mill. These are examples of what can be accomplished through creative thinking and a willingness to explore new approaches.
62. Feedback to the review team indicated a lack of understanding from a range of stakeholders of the council vision. Some of this may link back to the lack of clarity around objectives and priorities and the need for Rochford to develop a strong brand so that the community are clear about what the council wants to achieve. RDC needs to publicise more what's happening in the District, promote its achievements and ensure Members act as ambassadors for the council. The peer review team wished to highlight the need for the council to be fundamentally customer-centred if it is to secure its objective of improved CPA rating and to continue to improve communication and the shared vision with its community.
63. Stakeholders do not feel fully engaged in projects and have limited input to the decision-making process. For example, the overriding message from the workshop with residents was the need for the council to seek to improve its consultation and communication with residents, and importantly, provide timely feedback on the results of the consultation. Clear parameters are required so that those being consulted are clear as to what is their level of influence. It is important to provide a context for all consultation and to ensure that consultation is never used as communication. Consultees are not always aware of the amount of weight their views will carry, if it is not made clear to them at the outset.

64. The new community leadership role of Members is yet to be defined. A key theme emerging during the peer review was that of the Area committees and what this means for stakeholders and its implications for the ward councillor as a community leader. Given the requirements of the White Paper, it will be increasingly important for the council to clarify this agenda and at the same time increase support and development to Members in order to equip them further for their 'ward councillor or front-line Member, as community leader' role, which will continue to emerge.
65. The importance of the LDF for spatial planning is not fully understood by the community. Consideration should be given to engaging with the wider community through the Area committees, perhaps. This is an example of where effective communication and community engagement can prepare the ground to ensure that local people are involved in developing the vision, agreeing priorities and making decisions. It would also ensure that Area committees secure a higher public profile and demonstrate they have the potential to become a powerful link between the council and the community it serves.
66. Lead Members need to adopt a more visible and prominent role in order to present the broader picture of what the council is about to residents, partners and staff. Feedback to the review team indicated some confusion as to who provides services between the county and RDC. Whilst this is not unusual in 2 tier areas, there was limited knowledge about work being done with the Youth Council or achievements in reducing crime, and the Area committees are viewed with suspicion by the Parish Councils.
67. Following on from above, there was mixed awareness of who local councillors are or what they do. There was no evidence of strategy to increase electoral turnout or specific measures to target under represented groups. A number of councils promote the role of the councillor via the website, and Local Democracy week is another opportunity to publicise the community leadership role and responsibilities of local councillors.

Delivering through Partnerships

Strengths

- ✓ Partnership working has facilitated the creation of Cherry Orchard Country Park
- ✓ Well regarded client / contractor relationships and mature relationships with external partners
- ✓ Strategic HR partnership with County and districts in tackling area wide Organisational Development (OD) concerns
- ✓ Improving working relationship with neighbouring authorities
- ✓ Good input into region wide processes and organisations
- ✓ Some local examples of grassroots partnerships e.g. with Parishes

Areas for Improvement

- Strategic partnerships are not being maximised for joint visioning (with some exceptions)
 - lack of evidence of engagement with business community in development of the economy
 - More opportunities to develop joint working across service providers
 - The Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) could be more effective in delivery of strategic planning
 - Grassroots partnerships need to be developed to support the Area Committee Framework
68. RDC has an impressive list of achievements through partnership working, which is a key strength. The creation of Cherry Orchard County Park is in line with council objectives and there are good leisure and recreation facilities which are enhancing the quality of life of the local community.
69. Partnerships with clients and contractors are good and the council has mature relationships with a range of external partners. The review team saw a number of outcomes from this work during their tour of the area. Contractors value the regular meetings which provide an opportunity to debate issues of mutual interest. The community transport scheme feel well supported by RDC and the council has been active in support for the CDRP. Partnerships with the police have resulted in work targeting alcohol and drug abuse. The community safety officer has an office in the local police station and productive working relationships have been established.
70. The strategic HR partnership with the county is helping to address OD issues like recruitment and Equality and Diversity training. Work with neighbouring authorities is increasing at both Member and officer level. RDC meets partners regularly to plan and report progress. There is good preparation and strong follow-through.
71. The Leader and Chief Executive are active at a regional and sub regional level; the review team had positive feedback on their contribution to the Thames Gateway project and the LSP. The potential of the LAA to deliver improvement and secure additional resources for priority areas, is understood and being acted upon. A number of grass roots partnerships are being nurtured and are adding value at a local level. Facilities for the youth have been improved through joint working with Parish Councils.

72. However, strategic partnerships are not being maximised for joint visioning, with some exceptions like Thames Gateway and Green Grid. For example a tourism strategy could be supported by a local tourism partnership, Economic development could be progressed through engagement with the business community on more strategic issues like town centre regeneration and how to maximise the potential of the close proximity to the airport. The review team heard feedback that indicated the Chamber of Commerce agenda focussed on car parking and Christmas lights. This represents a missed opportunity to bring together key stakeholders to work with communities of interest to address major challenges facing the community.
73. With the externalisation of service provision there is an opportunity to develop joint working across service providers. It will be helpful for the council to be able to provide more evidence of the governance arrangements of key partnerships. Where local authority funding is being spent through the council's partnerships, it is important to be able to demonstrate clear lines of accountability with the partnerships being clearly performance managed.
74. Feedback to the review team indicated that the CDRP needed to focus more on strategic planning. There is an opportunity to contribute to designing out crime and youth engagement strategies. More broadly, within the Government's expectations for the role of local strategic partnerships and sub-regional partnership working, there is an opportunity for the council to build its capacity by continuing to improve and strengthen its partnership working.
75. Grass roots partnerships need to be developed to support the Area committee framework. There are opportunities to build on existing good practice to develop more joint activities that have the potential to benefit local communities.

Performance management

Strengths

- ✓ Performance Management system in place with Divisional plans
- ✓ In some services performance management has led to improvement e.g. Development Control
- ✓ Some managers are committed to performance management

Areas for consideration

- Divisional plans do not connect with Corporate Plan and Community Strategy objectives
 - Performance management is inconsistent.
 - 44% of BVPIs and 34% LPI targets were missed in 2006/07
 - More involvement of staff in service planning to inform Divisional plans
76. RDC had worked hard to develop its performance management system with a number of building blocks in place including Divisional plans to improve the approach to target setting and monitoring achievement. A sub group of SMT has led a more rigorous approach to business planning, progress is reported to Members and feedback from external auditors is positive.
77. In some service areas, a focus on performance management has led to service improvement. For example, breakthrough was achieved to address poor performance in the revenue and benefits service and development control improved, as a result of concerted effort. Some managers are committed to performance management by allocating regular times to manage performance and talking up its importance.
78. However, more needs to be done to embed a performance culture across the council. Divisional plans do not connect with the corporate plan or have clear links with the community strategy. This had been referred to elsewhere as the absence of a 'golden thread'. There is also an opportunity to consider reinvigorating the annual service planning process by ensuring the use of SMART targets to drive improvement and the wider involvement of Members in setting targets for the council as a whole, and for setting service specific targets.
79. Performance management is inconsistent and managers need to take responsibility for meeting all targets; this was a consistent theme arising from the peer review. In discussions with staff, it appeared that there is not always a sufficiently strong or consistent culture of managing performance. Consideration should be given to instituting a more challenging approach to the setting of service delivery and improvement targets by engaging the new and emerging role of SMT sub groups and Executive Members. Good practice from elsewhere is a regular 'performance clinic' where issues are discussed, learning shared and solutions explored. This would also provide support for managers in areas where performance is not achieving the desired levels.
80. Although the performance trend is upwards, there are some concerns. RDC has missed targets in key areas relevant to CPA and the use of Resources/VFM assessments, for example 44% of BVPI and 34% of LPI targets were missed in 2006/07. Whilst 55% of indicators have improved, 29% have declined. There is a need to ensure that the direction of priority performance indicators is upwards, including against that of other benchmarked local authorities. However,

it was not clear to the review team if there are improvement plans in place for under performing services or how areas for improvement are prioritised given the scarcity of resources. There was anecdotal evidence that this is being addressed, however more evidence of a systematic approach is required.

81. The peer review team wished to highlight that key to further embedding a performance improvement culture is to be able to demonstrate that changes are put in place as a result of customer feedback and monitoring of complaints. There was anecdotal evidence of this taking place, (in waste management, for example), and the complaints monitoring process will need to fully embed. However all opportunities to capture customer feedback need to be systematically monitored to ensure that lessons are learnt, changes in service design and delivery are implemented and learning is shared throughout the organisation
82. There was inconsistent involvement of staff in service planning to inform Divisional plans. Providing this information in an easy to understand format, would enable staff and Members, including Scrutiny, to be more aware of how they can contribute what is improving and to celebrate success where appropriate. It will also ensure a more proactive approach in leading and championing performance management and that as result, planned improvement has been achieved, and that unplanned declines in performance have been reduced.

Resource Management

Strengths

- ✓ Sound financial management and budget planning process
- ✓ There is a MTFS, Asset Management Plan and Capital Strategy
- ✓ RDC is delivering efficient services with expenditure in the lowest quartile nationally and resident satisfaction remains high
- ✓ There is an effective Audit Committee in operation and a Market Place for online procurement has been implemented
- ✓ Access to Services Group embarking upon development of a council wide approach to business process reengineering (BPR)
- ✓ Improved Use of Resources score in some elements within Use of Resources

Areas for consideration

- Budget Planning has limited evidence of alignment to the MTFS in the context of corporate priorities
 - No report or briefing paper (with financial implications) on certain matters discussed at SMT
 - little evidence of organisational buy in on Value For Money / Efficiency
 - The basis of the use of Capacity Building Fund monies is not driven by the business needs of the council
 - Divisional Plans do not link to the budget book or show how risk will be managed
83. Sound financial management and budget planning processes are in place. The level of reserves is good, external funding, e.g. Planning Development Grant (PDG), is secured to drive improvement and joint working with other partners has ensured best use of available resources. Key strategies and plans are in place, for example MTFS, Asset Management Plan and Capital Strategy. This enables the council to make informed decisions to deliver its priorities and strategic objectives. The peer review team were impressed by the range of HR initiatives designed to increase capacity and the organisational commitment to develop and support staff at all levels.
84. The council can demonstrate a record of many achievements, not least a proven record of delivering many good services and high levels of customer satisfaction. In terms of specific service costs, based on CIPFA statistics and compared to Essex authorities and 'nearest neighbours', the 2005/06 estimates for service expenditure place Rochford as 6th and 11th lowest respectively for expenditure on central services and has resulted in RDC being in the best quartile nationally. Given the breadth of change on-going in the council, staff appear to be well motivated and highly appreciative of the fact that they work in an authority that is supportive and friendly, that does not have a blame culture and where relationships are open and honest.
85. The review team had positive feedback on the work of the Audit committee and RDC was an early partner in Essex Marketplace, an online procurement system that enables purchasing from contracts negotiated by partners. These have all delivered value for money through lower costs.
86. RDC is committed to delivering services in the most cost effective way; an Access to Services group is embarking upon development of a council wide approach to

BPR. Gershon savings of £82,000 were achieved. An improved Use of Resources score was also achieved, within some elements:

87. However, budget planning has limited alignment to the MTFS in the context of corporate priorities. It seemed to the review team that business planning appeared to be confused with budget planning. Consideration should be given to sharpening and refreshing medium term corporate financial planning and focussing increasingly on longer-term financial planning in order to set out more clearly, the future scenario for development. This should include a focus on the programme of activities of what will be done, and how it will be funded over the next 5 to 10 years.
88. Briefing papers to SMT lacked information on the financial implications of key actions and there was little evidence of an organisational culture of the Value for Money/efficiency agenda. VFM principles were not routinely discussed and there was limited evidence that internal reviews and Scrutiny reports had led to VFM improvements.
89. The use of Capacity Building Funds for BPR did not appear to be driven by the business needs of the organisation. Although the bidding process can have tight timescales, more consideration is required to ensure there is clarity about the outcomes, how areas for BPR are identified and who are the best people to delivered the results.
90. Divisional plans do not link to the budget book or show how risk will be ameliorated. Although risks were identified, they were mainly a series of actions and there was no evidence of planning to minimise the impact of risk. It was not clear to the review team how the performance of the LAA, LSP or Gershon efficiencies would be managed.

Change and project management

Strengths

- ✓ Well managed projects within existing capacity
 - The Rayleigh Mill
 - Rayleigh Leisure Centre
 - Rochford Town regeneration
 - Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT)
- ✓ Need for change is recognised at senior political and managerial level

Areas for consideration

- Inadequate communication of the work of the 3 SMT groups leads to confusion
 - Little evidence of shared learning from well managed projects
 - Wider buy-in needed from all Members and Management group to achieve step change
91. RDC demonstrates its ability to deliver significant change through a number of well managed projects. These include; Rayleigh Mill, Rayleigh Leisure Centre, Rochford Town Regeneration and the LSVT of the housing stock.
 92. The need for change is recognised at senior political and managerial levels. There is evidence that a variety of approaches are used to help drive change.. RDC benefits from good Member and officer working relationships and a desire for change and improvement. The peer review team was impressed by staff pride in the area served by the council and the pride expressed in working for their particular services. During discussions with staff, it became apparent that there is a generally shared appetite for one-council learning and accelerating the pace of change.
 93. However, there has been inadequate communication of the work of the 3 SMT sub groups, which leads to confusion. Consideration should be given to making sure that the implications of this structure are understood by all. There is a need to systematically cascade the information throughout the organisation, in order to achieve maximum impact. The sub groups would benefit from strengthened terms of reference in order to 'raise the game' by providing them with the authority to challenge traditional ways of working, propose amendments and hold people to account for delivery and non-delivery.
 94. In the view of the peer review team, it is critical to speed up the pace of change and make it consistent across the organisation. The council should ensure the rationale for change is communicated more widely throughout the organisation so that the need for change it is owned by all Members and staff. This includes challenging and changing pockets of 'inconsistent cultural attitudes'. This will help to ensure that individuals are clearer about their contribution to change and improvement. There was little evidence of learning from well managed projects, which is picked up later in this report.

Organisational Design and Development

Strengths

- ✓ Staff are well motivated and have an enthusiasm for change
- ✓ Processes in place to gather feedback from staff
- ✓ Recognition against external standards; Investor in People, Equalities and Diversity Framework Level 2
- ✓ Some evidence that feedback from external reviews / inspections is acted upon

Areas for Improvement

- Lack of understanding of leadership and management:
 - accountability
 - duplication
 - communication between departments
 - Unclear role of the Corporate Policy Unit in the organisation
 - Absence of designated time for SMT and Executive Board for forward planning
 - Need an 'effective' mechanism to celebrate success, share good practice and learning between department and service areas
95. Staff are well motivated and have an enthusiasm for change. The council benefits from having a committed workforce with a readiness to explore new approaches to service delivery, an impressive record of partnership working, good Member and officer working relationships and an appetite for change and improvement. Staff who met the peer review team, indicated that they were 'up for the challenge' and that they were committed to the success of their services.
96. Processes are in place to gather feedback from staff. 96% of staff have annual appraisals, with six monthly follow ups and some managers do regular 1:1s to build relationships and informally brief staff on key issues. The annual all council event provides the opportunity to explore new emerging issues, the Core Brief includes a mechanism for upward feedback and the staff sounding board deals with operational issues. The review team suggest the staff sounding board could be extended to include issues that are more cross cutting and strategic.
97. RDC had secured external recognition and validation of good people management practice that is aligned to organisational need. This includes IIP and level 2 of the Equalities and Diversity framework. The IIP process was well received and helped to keep staff motivated to move the organisation forward. The council is committed to change and improvement and there evidence that feedback from some external reviews and inspections have been acted upon. In commissioning this review, the council has demonstrated its desire critically to evaluate its performance and keep on track with its journey of continuous improvement.
98. However there is a lack of understanding of leadership and management and inconsistency in its application across the council. Accountability has been mentioned elsewhere in this report, where managers do not always take responsibility for ensuring corporate policies are implemented within their services. There appeared to be areas of overlap, particularly within the SMT sub groups and communication across the departments was not as effective as it might be. The review team would also suggest that more work is needed to ensure the corporate policy unit is more closely integrated into all other organisational activities.

99. There is limited evidence of designated time for SMT and Executive Board for forward planning or 'blue sky' thinking. It appeared to the review team that SMT away days seemed to focus mainly on budget setting and that future planning was operational rather than strategic. Consideration should be given to ensure the Forward Plan process create the time and space to develop the vision, objectives and outcomes of the council. This would help to address the fact that staff think the vision is currently 'too vague'.
100. RDC needs an effective mechanism to share good practice and learning between department and service areas. In a small authority informal learning will take place, however it is important that the value of learning from experience is recognised and a procedure is put in place to maximise the benefits. The peer review team suggests that the council gives consideration to seeking out further opportunities to:
- Share and capture learning both within the council and externally
 - Develop a mechanism for post project evaluation to influence future policy
 - Celebrate success
 - Showcase good practice
 - Raise its profile to its residents and to others more widely, by communicating what has been achieved
 - Strive for recognition of its services and performance at the national level.

Managing People

Strengths

- ✓ sickness level has improved
- ✓ Performance Development Review (PDR) informs training and development needs
- ✓ Workforce Development Plan in place and track record of developing staff
- ✓ Leader and Chief Executive are accessible, approachable and well regarded by staff
- ✓ good practice in internal communication, e.g., Core Brief, Members Bulletin, Intranet being developed

Areas for Improvement

- Core Brief is not uniformly delivered including the upward communication from staff
- Inconsistencies in application of policy e.g. sickness and compassionate leave
- Staff would like more contact with Members
- there is a need to record compliments as well as complaints
- No team development (as opposed to individual learning) for SMT

101. The council has worked hard to improve sickness absence levels to the current figure of 8 days per annum. Concerted efforts through SMT and commitment from service managers have resulted in achievement in this area which is now in the top quartile for district councils. Staff are well motivated and believe RDC has improved over the past 5 years.
102. PDRs inform training and development needs, the council can demonstrate a track record of staff development. This is underpinned by HR policies and approaches designed to meet business needs and resolve HR issues. A workforce development plan is in place to deliver improved service performance and RDC is addressing skill shortages by a planned approach to re-skill existing staff, and are looking to share skills with partners and neighbouring authorities.
103. The Leader and Chief Executive are accessible, approachable and well regarded by staff. Meeting the Chief Executive is part of the induction for all new employees, which includes an overview of what the council wants to achieve and issues discussed at the annual all staff event. This helps to ensure that new starters are aware of the challenges and priorities of the council.
104. There are a number of good examples in internal communication, e.g. the Core Brief, Members bulletin and plans for a new Intranet to aid corporate understanding. This will result in an e-learning academy for Members and officers.
105. However the review team had feedback to indicate there are inconsistencies in the application of policy and practice across the council. The Core Brief is not always part of a team briefing; there are examples of where managers handed it to staff to read without an opportunity to explore the implications, or to provide upward feedback. The rationale for key decisions is not always communicated to all staff; there were examples of some staff being directed to read the minutes online, if they raised a query. Similarly the practice varies around the application of the policy on compassionate leave and sickness absence; some described it as 'taking a hammer to crack a nut'. Frontline staff would prefer this to be managed by their manager or HOS.

106. A recurring theme during the review was that some staff would like more contact with Members in order to gain a wider understanding of their contribution to the organisation. There is a need for more cross communication between departments, for example, customer service is an area where cross fertilisation of ideas could lead to improvement from within. Staff would also value more recognition for good work by their managers and for compliments to be recorded as part of the comments and complaints procedure.
107. SMT needs to set aside time for development as a new team with responsibility for transforming the organisation. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, a stronger focus on strategic leadership is needed to ensure RDC is equipped to deal with the challenges ahead. It is critical for this group to become more than 'the sum of its parts'. There are opportunities for work with the Executive Board, however these need to be prepared for and recognised as a key component of organisation development and people management.

Carmel Gallagher, Review Manager on behalf of the Peer Review Team
IDeA August 2007