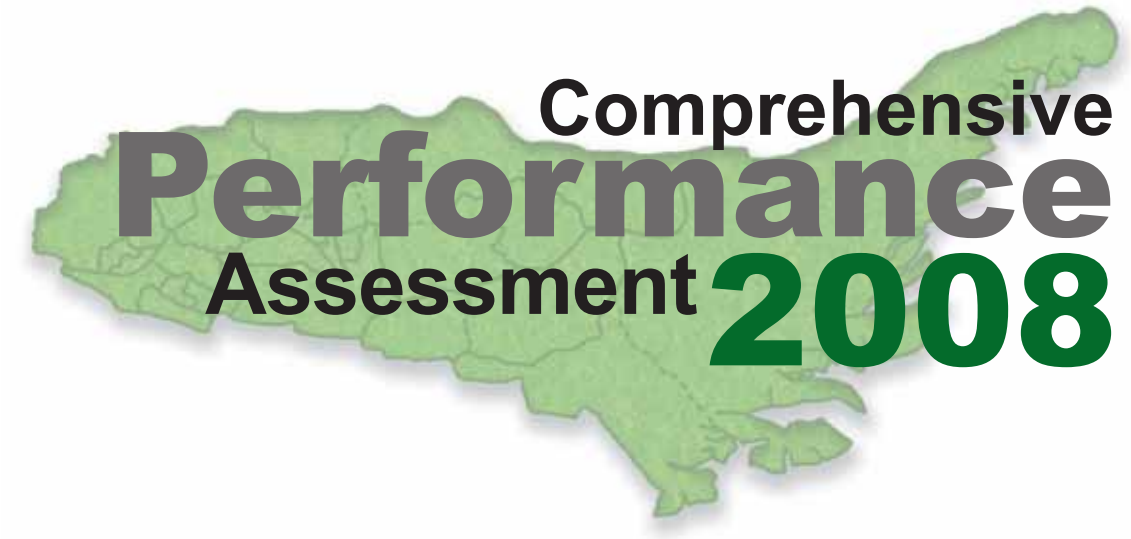
Rochford
District Council



Comprehensive Performance Assessment 2008

Corporate Self-Assessment

making Rochford District the place of choice in the County to live, work and visit

Version control:

Draft self assessment v*X ddmmyy*.doc

Version	Date	Changes
3	070308	Updates to sections 4.2 onwards Removal of bullet points (for drafting purposes)
4	120308	Changes following SMT discussion Included Context section – work in progress Removed prompting bullet points in section 5.
5	130308	Proof reading and misc. changes. Entry of Showcase material and addition of material re tourism.
6	140308	Accept track changes; edit showcases
7	260308	Redrafting Context and Summary Section
8	280308	Redrafting Context and Summary Section; edit showcases
9	310308	Redrafting Context and Summary Section; edit showcases
10	010408	Redrafting Context and Summary Section; edit showcases. Included text on Health Inequalities (in Context)
11	020408	Minor changes to context and summary; updated showcases
12	040408	Inserted introductory letter (Leader/CEx); started glossary; incorporate amendments (version originally issued to Review Committee)
13	090408	General amendments, including show cases. Started highlighting hypertext links.
14	110408	Two column format; inserted context map; various additions/amendments

Glossary of Terms

Abbreviation	Description
CDRP	Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership
CPA	Comprehensive Performance Assessment
CYPSP	Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership
Defra	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
ECC	Essex County Council
ICT	Information Communication Technology
IDeA	Improvement and Development Agency
IiP	Investors in People
LAA	Local Area Agreement
LDF	Local Development Framework
LSP	Local Strategic Partnership
MTFS	Medium Term Financial Strategy
NVQ	National Vocational Qualifications
RRAVS	Rayleigh, Rochford and District Association for Voluntary Service
SOCITM	Society of Information Technology Managers
SMART	Specific. Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timebound
SMT	Senior Management Team
TGSE	Thames Gateway South Essex

Rochford District Council's Corporate Self-Assessment: April 2008

Much has happened in the District since we received our first Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of 'Weak' in 2004. We want our residents to be assured that their District Council is committed to continuous improvement, keen on meeting their needs and delivering services to their satisfaction. Hence, we welcome the chance to prove our capability to the Audit Commission through this Corporate Assessment.

We are in the throes of realigning our corporate planning to the emerging Essex Local Area Agreement and facilitating a refreshed Sustainable Community Strategy. Our 'business' planning processes will ensure that we focus and manage our resources and partners to deliver our priorities, informed through consultation with our communities. We are well positioned to represent our communities on wider partnerships, such as the Essex Management Board, the Essex Partnership Forum and Thames Gateway South Essex.

We have tackled under performance of services and have taken difficult decisions in determining and managing the best provider for services and a measure of our success is the high customer satisfaction results received.

The Council has risen to the challenge of the previous CPA and we are confident that the corporate assessment will demonstrate that the Council now deserves a higher rating, in recognition of its achievements and improvements.

Signed:

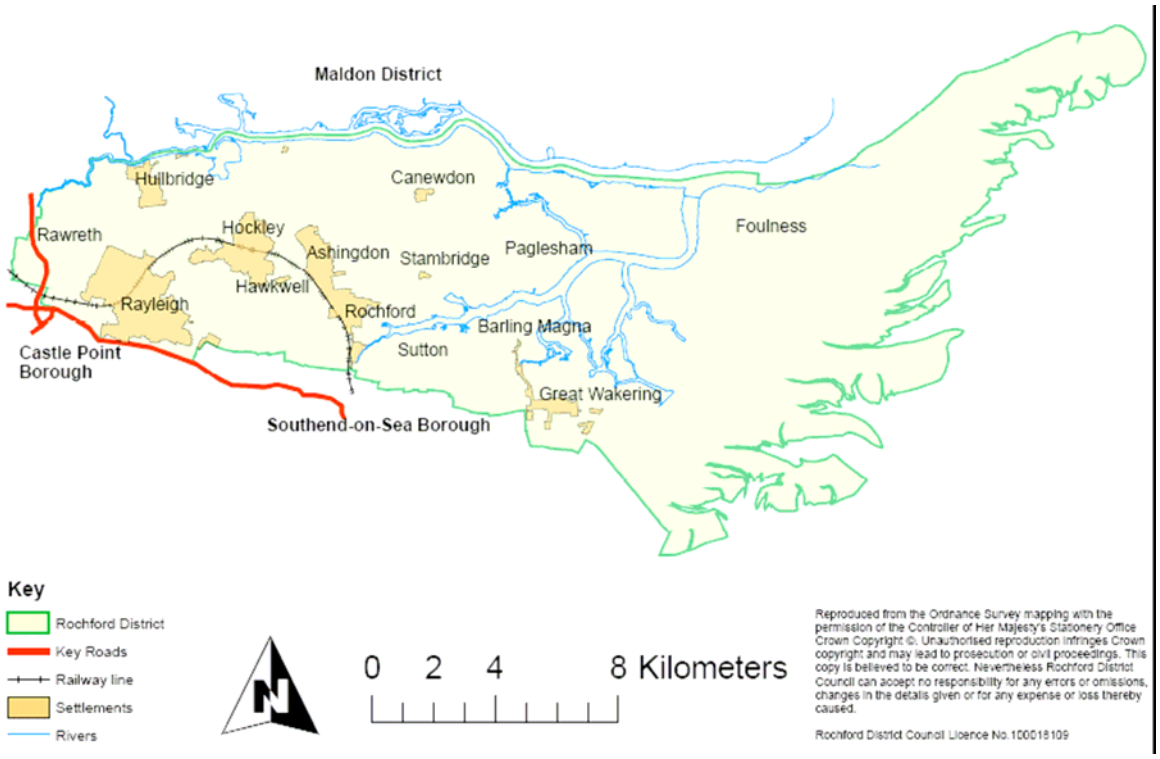
Cllr Terry Cutmore
Leader

Paul Warren
Chief Executive

Context and Summary

The Council's vision for Rochford District:

To make Rochford District the place of choice in the County to live, work and visit



Rochford District is situated in south-east Essex, within a peninsula between the rivers Thames and Crouch and with the North Sea to the east. The south of the district adjoins the urban areas of Southend-on-Sea and Castle Point. Much of the district's 65 square miles is designated as green belt and there are many miles of attractive coastline and nationally important areas of salt marsh. Foulness Island and some adjoining areas in the east of the District are under Ministry of Defence control.

The following pages give further insight to the District against the constituent elements of the Council's vision. For each element (to live, work and visit) there are some key facts, a brief overview and a statement of what the Council is doing to address the challenges.

Rochford District Council's Evidence Base

The analysis of the District which has informed this self-assessment, the revised Sustainable Community Strategy and our corporate planning process has drawn upon the following sources:

- Rochford Futures – research commissioned from Local Futures Group.
- The Council's Access to Services Strategy.
- The Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (South East Essex Primary Care Trust and Essex County Council).
- The Third Sector Review conducted by the Rayleigh, Rochford and District Association for Voluntary Service (RRAVS).
- Background work done by, and with, the County Council in respect of their new Sustainable Community Strategy and the second Local Area Agreement (LAA2).
- Our work around the Local Development Framework.

Living in Rochford District

Living in Rochford District – some key facts:

- A population of 78,489 (census 2001) that is predicted to grow to some 81,000 by 2021.
- We have an ageing population: in 2001, 22.99% of our residents were 60 years old and over with the expectation that by 2021 the number of residents aged 85 years and older will approximately double (then representing some 3.3% of the District's population).
- Life expectancy is high across the District, currently at 80.3 years and the highest of Essex Districts, but there are considerable variations at ward level with no obvious reasons.
- Young adults (aged 15-24 years) represented 10.23% of the population in 2001 but this group is expected to fall by 1.1% by 2029.
- In 2006, 80% of pupils in the District gained 5 or more high grade GCSEs; this was the best result of all Essex Districts.
- Relatively low deprivation, being 316th least deprived out of 354 districts
- Our residents have more access to the internet than the average in Britain (at 71%) and we have experienced users (85% started using the internet more than 3 years ago).
- There are small numbers of people who have characteristics which make them vulnerable to social exclusion, the biggest group likely to be those with hearing impairment.
- The population from mixed or ethnic minority backgrounds is only 1.7% although estimates predict a 4% growth between 2001-2004 (source: ONS). The black and minority ethnic (BME) population is relatively dispersed amongst the urban settlements
- The largest town, Rayleigh, and the other two main settlements of Rochford and Hockley, have good rail connections to London and there is access to the A127 London-Southend Arterial Road and then to the A12 and M25.
- London Southend Airport is situated within the District and the airport and surrounding area are part of the Thames Gateway regeneration area.
- House prices in the district are relatively high with an average house price at £224,837 (2006) and an average income of £20,051.

Rochford District is generally a prosperous part of the country, despite only having a modest share of 'knowledge workers', the typically higher paid employees. This is reflected in relatively low deprivation, being 316th least deprived out of 354 districts. However at the ward and sub ward level there are pockets of deprivation with one Super Output Area (SOA) in the top 10% most income deprived in the country. Prosperity is also coupled with average levels of inequality and a relatively healthy resident population that experiences low levels of crime.

Challenges:

We have an ageing population which, combined with average obesity rates (in adults aged 16 and more) and mental health admissions to hospital, suggests longer term care needs of residents with health related issues.

Future social cohesion will be a challenge for the district, with different aspects of social life increasing the chances of social isolation. The growth in IT dependency could widen the 'digital divide' and may be compounded by the ageing population and growing generation gap. More young people are electing to stay within the parental homes as the cost of entering home ownership becomes increasingly difficult.

Rural locations such as the District are increasingly destinations of choice, whether for young professionals seeking a better quality of life, new arrivals seeking employment, or second home owners. Whether people looking to relocate choose Rochford District or surrounding areas as their home/place of work, there will be consequences for services, employment and social cohesion.

Although life expectancy is generally high in the District, there are considerable variations at ward level, between 75 years and 86 years. There are no clearly identifiable reasons for these differences. Some cancers, particularly lung and breast cancers, are increasing and rates are above Essex and East of England averages, as are rates for respiratory disease mortality for males.

The Council has worked with South East Essex Primary Care Trust and other local authorities to conduct a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment of future health, care and wellbeing needs and this has identified priorities for Rochford District:

- Lifestyle choices – stopping smoking, tackling obesity and increasing rates of physical activity
- Cancer mortality
- Dealing with an ageing population and its impact
- Access to services
- Quality of life issues – more parks and open spaces, cleaner streets and waste management, activities for young people.

The Council is responding to the challenges by:

- Investing in the development of a comprehensive Access to Services Strategy and Action Plan to ensure that all sections of the community have equitable access to services.
- Tackling the problem of affordable housing, in conjunction with our recent housing stock transfer, to deliver a greater variety of accommodation needed to meet increased demand as well as the different age, lifestyle and affordability profiles of residents.
- Improving services and amenities to build a cohesive and prosperous future for the District – multi-agency work to help underachieving young people, improving access to mental health facilities, supporting young carers and working with others to reduce the fear of crime.
- Developing capacity in the District by re-energising Third Sector provision.
- Providing more youth facilities and sport facilities.
- Working within the LSP to support the Ageing Population theme in the emerging new Sustainable Community Strategy.
- Working within other partnerships to address crime and disorder, children and young people and health and older people issues.
- Improving its overall Quality of Life offer.

Working in Rochford District

Working in Rochford District: some key facts:

- 39,000 residents are in employment, with unemployment at 1%.
- 79% of the working age population were in employment between March 2003 and February 2004 (compared to GB average of 75%)
- 21,000 jobs in the district, mostly retail, wholesale and service sectors
- Only 5 businesses employ more than 250 staff
- There are 7 industrial estates located within the District and work is underway on the new Rochford business park close to the Airport.
- Port and marina facilities exist on the River Crouch with a wharf and warehousing at Wallasea.
- A high proportion of the workforce commutes out of the district – 30% to Southend, 14% to London and 24% elsewhere.
- 91.6% of young people aged between 16 and 24 are in full-time education or employment.
- Compared to other Essex Districts, Rochford has the highest percentage of residents who have the equivalent of NVQ level 3 and above.

The District has a small, but reasonably productive, and enterprising economy. Although the District does not record significant levels of 'high skills', nevertheless there is a solid foundation of basic and intermediate skills that underpins the local economy and supports a healthy share of knowledge-driven jobs.

Challenges:

The growth of the local economy, balanced with the demand to retain environmental attractiveness and the high level of out-commuting is a challenge for the council. The small local economy is vulnerable to economic downturn and with the out-commuting there is a risk that spending power of residents is not retained within the district. Whilst the transport infrastructure offers the capability for air, rail and road commuting, the infrastructure is at risk of congestion, and thus economic prosperity and the weak local transport provision threatens social inclusion with more isolated communities.

The Council is responding to the challenges by:

- Developing the capacity and use of the Third Sector.
- Engaging with the business community through hosted 'Business Breakfasts'.
- Including the New Business Start Up Initiative in the Council's Key Actions (2008-09).
- Engaging in County-wide and sub-County partnerships for Economic Development and Transport to ensure that the District has a 'seat at the table'.
- Working with partners on economic development opportunities.
- Utilising its spatial planning power through the LDF process to identify opportunities for economic development, underpin wealth and address transport infrastructure deficits.
- Supporting Community Transport and innovative schemes such as the Disabled Taxi Vouchers initiative

Visiting Rochford District

Visiting Rochford District – some key facts:

- Approximately 85% of the District is green belt with many miles of unspoilt coast line.
- The District has the fourth lowest carbon footprint in Essex
- The three main settlements of Rochford, Rayleigh and Hockley are each less than one hour from London by train
- There are 3 Sites of Special Scientific Interest – the Crouch and Roach Estuaries; Foulness; and Hockley Woods
- **Etc.**

Rochford District is predominantly rural in character, with miles of unspoilt coastline and attractive countryside. Located 14 miles from the M25, the District offers easy access from London and from Europe and beyond. Journey time to the District from London by train is less than an hour.

The historic towns of Rochford and Rayleigh, are well served with shops and amenities and contain several buildings of historic interest, including a rare 18th century Dutch Cottage, the 12th century Old House and a recently restored, 17th century Mill. Rochford town centre is one of the few remaining examples of a medieval cross street pattern in the UK, and Rayleigh has the remains of a motte and bailey castle. Ashingdon Church, built on the site of the Battle of Assandun, dates from the 11th century.

Alongside the outlying towns and villages the District includes the historic Hockley Woods (which is the remains of a royal forest), the developing Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park and the Roach Valley Conservation Zone. A pioneering wetlands project is being progressed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) on Wallasea Island and the island of Foulness is internationally famous as a haven for wildlife.

Challenges:

The District does not seek to attract mass tourism, but rather to make available attractions of specific interest, complemented by the usual range of facilities expected by vistors. However, there is a tension between delivering economic development and preserving the environmental quality of life of the area. Clearly the extensive coastline, along with rising sea levels, brings the risk of flooding to the District. Conversely, the opportunity exists to develop marinas and yacht clubs to serve the needs of the sailing community.

The Council is responding to these challenges by:

- Positioning the District as the 'green' offer in the Thames Gateway.
- Managing the development and maintenance of green spaces, including open spaces refurbishment and country parks.
- Resourcing a new Urban Street Tree Planting Programme.
- Producing a tourism guide for the District.
- Utilising its spatial planning power to develop the District's visitor potential and ensure there is capacity to meet potential demand for overnight accommodation.

Delivering our vision

The Council operates within Shire District, two tier arrangements. It has 39 Councillors (currently 30 Conservative, 5 Liberal-Democrat, 1 Rochford Residents and 3 vacancies), elected by thirds.

Until 2006, the Council operated a committee system with five policy committees. The CPA inspection in 2004 identified that the Council's overview and scrutiny process in particular needed improvement. Following a Member-led review, a single new Review Committee was established to conduct overview and scrutiny work. The political decision making structure was also significantly changed following the Local Government White Paper and the Council now operates with an Executive Board, chaired by the Leader of the Council, and three Area Committees, the latter giving the Council a solid foundation from which to develop better engagement with, and decision making, by communities. To strengthen the scrutiny function, the Review Committee is now chaired by a member of the main opposition party. In addition, there is a Standards Committee, an Appeals Committee, a Licensing Committee and a Development Control Committee.

The Chief Executive heads the officer administration and he is supported by two Corporate Directors and six Heads of Service; together, these comprise the Senior Management Team. The Council currently employs 211 full time equivalent staff.

There are 14 Town/Parish Councils covering the whole district and some District Council Members also serve as Parish or County Councillors.

Partnerships have always been important to the Council – to help increase capacity and co-ordination, to harness the commitment of local community organisations and to use the strengths of the private sector to deliver high quality services and to innovate, for the benefit of our customers. We recognise that increased partnership working will be important in the future. We have a clear framework to ensure that we focus our time and resources in partnerships that add value and that provide proper standards of governance.

The Rochford Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) was reviewed and revised in 2006 to ensure consistency with the first Essex Local Area Agreement (LAA). It is chaired by the Leader of the Council and is organised to deliver and report progress through blocks that mirror those in the Local Area Agreement (LAA). The Council has a very successful Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) and Members and officers play leading roles in the LSP, Thames Gateway South Essex Partnership and the development of the Local Area Agreement. Essex is developing LAA2 and the LSP is increasingly focusing on those aspects that can only be delivered by effective partnership working.

The Council's total net expenditure for 2008/9 is £12.34m, an increase of 18% on 2007/8. This is primarily due to the additional costs of the environmental contracts and concessionary fares. The Council is drawing down balances of £1.48m to reduce the impact on council tax. The level of General Fund balances has been built up over the last few years to prepare for the contract renewals which we foresaw would be a major cost, because of the additional level of service offered leading to increased recycling. The normal level of General Fund balances is based on a risk assessment approach and the minimum level has been identified as about £1.4m. By the end of 2008/09, balances will be £1.4m. During 2009/10, the balance remaining on the Housing Revenue Account will revert to the General Fund.

The Capital budget for 2008/09 is £2.72m, compared to £990K in 2007/08. The main item of expenditure is £1m on the purchase of bins for the new recycling contract. Capital reserves will be around £1.8m at the end of 2008/09 and the main sources of capital receipts are from housing and sale of assets.

Council tax (Band D properties) for 2008/09 is £188.01, an increase of 4.87%.

What is the Council, together with its partners, trying to achieve?

1 Ambition for the community

1.1 Are there clear and challenging ambitions for the area and its communities?

The Council has sought to address the concerns about ambition raised in the 2004 CPA assessment. Building on the existing Community Strategy, the Council is driving the production of a new Sustainable Community Strategy that is well informed by community-based research and will be supported by SMART action plans. The golden thread is evident from the Community Strategy through our Corporate Plan (aligned to our Medium Term Financial Strategy) to Divisional Plans and, ultimately to individual Performance & Development Reviews.

1.1.1 The Community Strategy for Rochford District was published by the Local Strategic Partnership in April 2004 and describes the vision for the area against 6 key themes:

- **Feeling safe**: to reduce both the level and fear of crime and to make the District a safer place for people to live in, work in or visit.
- **Looking after our environment**: to protect and enhance the natural and built environment for present and future generations.
- **A good education, good skills and good jobs**: to enable all residents of the District to access high quality education, training and skills development opportunities to ensure a thriving local economy now and in the future.
- **Healthy living**: to improve and promote the social, physical and mental health of everyone in the District by providing a variety of choices for leisure and free time pursuits and first class healthcare.
- **Getting around**: to improve people's ability to get across and around the District.
- **An inclusive community**: to promote active and responsible citizenship, creating a community inclusive of all groups and enabling everyone to fully participate in activities that improve their quality of life.

1.1.2 These individual visions can be collectively summarised as:

To make Rochford District the place of choice in the County to live, work and visit

This is Rochford District Council's vision and it is underpinned by 6 corporate objectives within our medium term corporate plan:

- To provide an excellent cost effective frontline service for all our customers.
- To work towards a safer and more caring community.
- To provide a green and sustainable environment.
- To encourage a thriving local economy.
- To improve the quality of life for people in our District.
- To maintain and enhance our local heritage.

1.1.3 The vision and objectives have been widely shared with partners and stakeholders through partnership arrangements, and communicated to the wider community through the District newspaper, Area Committees and other engagement techniques. Council staff understand the Council's vision and objectives and how the Council is delivering these through regular team briefings and annual sessions with the Chief Executive and Council Leader.

1.1.4 The Council's Corporate Plan describes the 6 corporate objectives over a three- year time frame; it is essentially the business plan for the Council. Additionally, each year the Council agrees a Key Policy and Actions paper setting out for the coming year the Council's immediate priorities, which are then incorporated into SMART action plans in Divisional Plans for services. Pending the publication of the new Sustainable Community Strategy, the Council has taken steps in the interim to ensure that its staff and partners have clarity about the Council's own ambitions and objectives. In February 2008, the Council agreed a paper entitled 'Vision to Reality', derived from visioning sessions with Members (and in particular the Executive Board), which articulates, at a point in time, the Council's key themes and areas of work it wishes to progress over a period (currently up to 2021). This is not a substitute for any other corporate or statutory plan but its purpose is to inform Council staff and partners about the Council's ambitions for the community. It is also a public document that serves as a vehicle for on-going community engagement about the Council's aspirations for Rochford District.

1.1.5 Partnership (CDRP) brings together Police, County and District Councils, the Parishes, community and voluntary sector groups to tackle crime and the fear of crime, and has been recognised by the Government Office for the East of England as a highly effective partnership being the best performing in its family group delivering the greatest reduction in crime.

1.1.6 The Council is a full and active member of Thames Gateway South Essex (TGSE) Partnership to deliver regeneration across South Essex. We have levered in funding **[insert figure – total £s over last 3 years]** to enhance town centres and our country park. We are working closely with neighbouring Southend Borough Council, to undertake a joint assessment on the future of London-Southend Airport and its environs. The Council is also working closely with TGSE to fulfil its role as the 'green part of the gateway' and develop high quality spaces for the enjoyment of the local residents but also for the wider South Essex community. Following the development of linkages with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) around the District's 'wildlife offer', the Council is supportive of the RSPB's proposal to develop a wildlife haven of international significance in the north of the District, the Wallasea Wetlands Project.

1.1.7 The Council has played a full and active part in the Essex Local Area Agreement, with the Chief Executive being a member of the Essex Partnership Management Group (LAA1) and chairing the Safer and Stronger Communities Co-ordinating Group of LAA1. The Chief Executive is now on the Essex Management Board in respect of LAA2 and chairs the newly formed County-wide Strategic Group around Community Safety and Drugs, Alcohol and Substance Misuse. The Council and LSP priorities have been aligned to those of the Essex LAA where appropriate. In the development of the new LAA, the Council and its partners are aligning to meet County, District and local need. The Council, the LSP and its partnerships will be agreeing to specific targets where there is alignment to deliver improved outcomes for the local communities.

1.1.8 The original Community Strategy was developed largely through consultation between 2002-03. We have continued to seek out information and understanding of our communities through new innovative approaches, for example the on-line consultation for planning policy. We have also developed our understanding from work around the information sources in our 'Evidence Base' (please see Page X). The information gathered has also contributed to the refresh of the Rochford District Area Profile, published on our web site, which provides a definitive, common source of key data about Rochford District and its communities.

1.1.9 There are currently 5 specific groups reporting into the LSP, each has an action plan for 2004-09 and progress is monitored through exception reporting to the LSP Executive.

1.1.10 Whilst the current Community Strategy has provided a focus for planning and delivery, nevertheless we have recognised the need to improve this key document. There is scope to improve target setting and action planning, and we have taken the opportunity with the development of the new Essex Local Area Agreement to revisit the strategy. The LSP commissioned research (Rochford Futures - published in November 2007) has identified, together with other community intelligence in our evidence base, some new priorities for the LSP. Additionally the LSP has reflected on its own operation and, in order to give better focus, it has decided that:

- supporting statutory partnerships (eg CDRP, CYPSP) should deliver their strategies and be more effectively monitored by the LSP, and
- the LSP's own focus and action plans would be of most value if they concentrated on projects that require partnership delivery.

1.1.11 The intention is to deliver a new Sustainable Community Strategy for Rochford District by the end of July 2008. Meanwhile, the Council is reviewing and revising its Corporate Plan for 2008 onwards, for approval in June, taking on board the budgetary decisions of the Council, the aspirations contained in Vision to Reality, and the emerging themes in the Sustainable Community Strategy. Any new targets and objectives emerging from the new Sustainable Community Strategy will be picked up in the Council's Divisional Planning process, beginning with the budget development process from October 2008. Building on the experience of the first Community Strategy, the new Sustainable Community Strategy is better informed about the needs of our communities and will be better developed with a clearer focus through challenging, SMART action plans and underpinned by our robust performance management system.

1.2 Are ambitions based on a shared understanding among the Council and partner organisations of local needs?

The Council, with its LSP partners, has developed a joint evidence base on which to develop its new Sustainable Community Strategy and Local Development Framework, and to influence the shaping of the Essex wide LAA to ensure local needs are addressed within it. This evidence base has brought agreed understanding with all partners about the needs, challenges and opportunities for the economic, social and environmental well being of the District

1.2.1 The Council and its partners are using the evidence base (please see page X) to develop joint key actions to address these needs within the new Sustainable Community Strategy. This baseline evidence is already being used to shape future service delivery in the Council's Access to Services Strategy and has been developed from a number of sources, including:

- **Rochford Futures** – specifically commissioned by the Rochford LSP in September 2007 and undertaken by the Local Futures Group. This has resulted in a report on 'future drivers of change' that will shape the environment within which the District Council and its partners will operate.
- **County-wide Sustainable Community Strategy survey work and background for LAA2** – as part of the process to develop the county-wide Sustainable Community Strategy and LAA2, a number of surveys have been undertaken that provide the Council with a range of information on the communities within the district and their changing attitudes to a number of issues. This survey work will continue under LAA2, for example tracker surveys.
- **Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) –** As part of the Local Development Framework the Council has produced a SCI setting out how it will consult people in the new planning system and has already undertaken a range of consultation under that process.
- **Access to Services Strategy –** customer insight profiles have been built up by our consultants, Tribal, and including BME and groups at risk of disadvantage.
- **Joint Strategic Needs Assessment –** by the Primary Care Trust and the County Council for the future health, care and well-being needs for the District.

1.2.2 The Council has greatly improved its approach to community engagement by using a much more diverse range of engagement techniques. Service users have been involved in a number of service development initiatives, including:

- the revision of benefit forms;
- focus groups in different localities to shape the new waste management contract;
- focus groups and telephone surveying to better include disadvantaged groups in the development of the Access to Services Strategy;
- engaging young people at youth events;
- going into and working with schools to get young people to engage with the Local Development Framework.

1.2.3 The Council has also used roadshows to get into communities and engage them. The District has a small BME population that is dispersed widely across the District and without any recognised representative organisation; the Council recognises that engaging these groups is difficult. However, with Castle Point and Maldon Councils it has secured money through the Building Capacity East fund to undertake work to map and engage these and other minority groups, and to establish engagement arrangements. This joint working ensures that groups are not overly consulted but a systematic framework can be established so that groups can have the opportunity to input into decision-making and service issues.

1.2.4 The Council has recently refreshed its Citizens' Panel to increase the size of the panel in order to make it more robust and increase the number of people that can be engaged, but also to be able to identify needs and trends at the sub-district level. The Citizens' Panel is seen as a useful engagement tool, but is seen as one of a basket of engagement techniques. The Council will also continue to use its District newspaper and website to engage and inform people.

Improving community engagement – on-line planning consultations:

Our Planning Policy team have introduced an on-line consultation system for the Local Development Framework, along with other measures to increase public participation. The on-line consultation system addresses two primary needs:

- As a database of people/groups interested in planning policy who are automatically consulted;
- To enable access to and viewing of new planning documents for consultation. Additionally the system allows for on-line responses and collates and analyses the responses.

Efforts are made to engage with diverse community groups via exhibitions, use of the local media as well as working with local groups, such as residents groups and Parish Councils. As a consequence, this facility is enhancing community engagement and influnencing decision-making.

1.2.5 The Council works with and supports the Rayleigh, Rochford and District Association for Voluntary Service (RRAVS), the District's voluntary sector infrastructure organisation. RRAVS has undertaken a needs assessment of local third sector groups to inform the sector's development needs and the data gleaned from this is being used by all partners to support the sector in the long term. The Council and partners have also worked closely with the voluntary sector in developing and agreeing a new Compact.

1.3 Does the Council with its partners provide leadership across the community and ensure effective partnership working?

The Council has robust, established working relationships with the County Council and is actively engaged in a number of partnerships with County service functions, such as youth services, represented on the LSP Executive Board. The LSP has been restructured to align more closely with LAA1 and the District LSP priorities are being delivered through similar blocks to LAA1. The Leader and Chief Executive are key figures in providing community leadership in Rochford District through the LSP and in representing the interests of the District and its partners in other partnership arenas, eg Essex County Council and Thames Gateway.

1.3.1 The Chief Executive was instrumental in establishing the first LSP and has initiated and managed change in the LSP governance arrangements, ensuring that it responds effectively to the changing partnership agenda.

1.3.2 This partnership ethos is also reflected in the Council's Values:

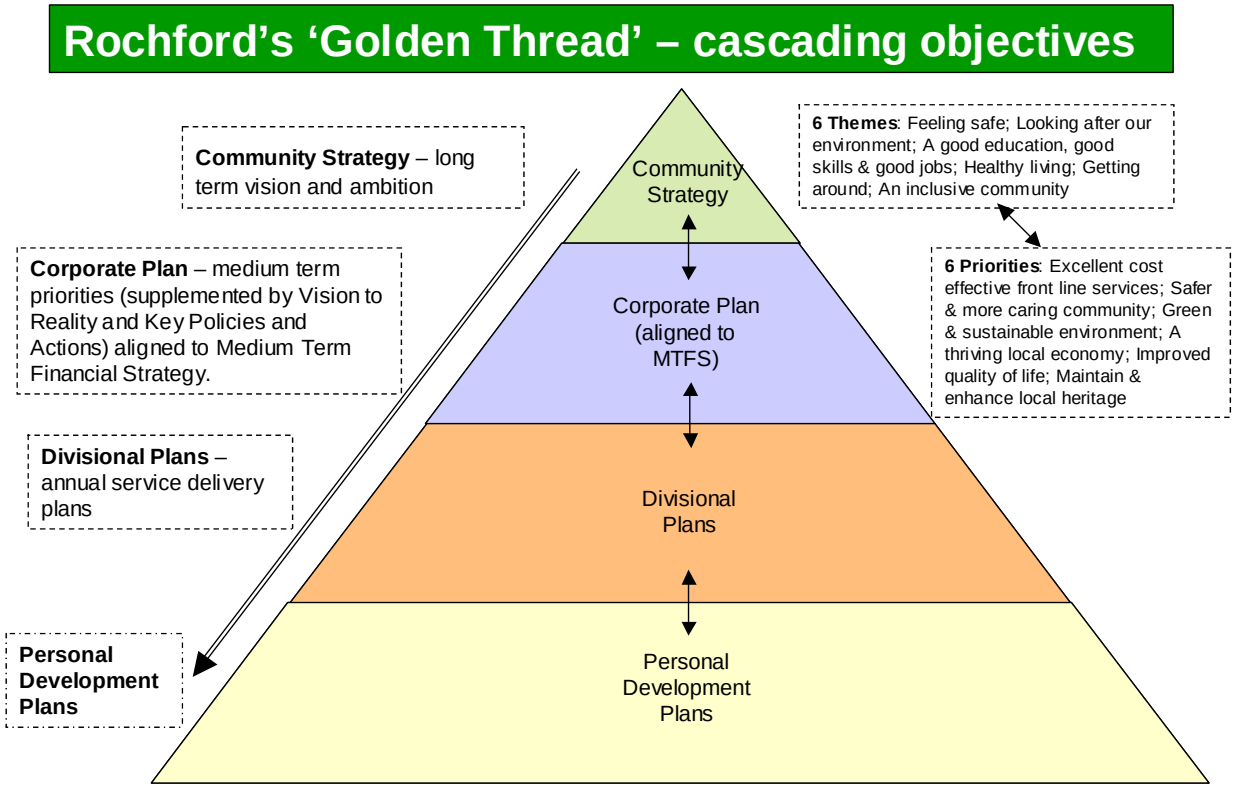
- Be an open, accountable, listening, responsive Council.
- Put the customer and citizen at the heart of everything that we do, delivering services in a caring and sensitive manner.
- Coordinate the management of resources with an emphasis on sustainability.
- Value the contribution of partners, employees and citizens, trusting each other and working collaboratively.

1.3.3 The Council is open to challenge about service provision and has a history of working with the private sector. Following strong tenant support, we have in the last year completed our housing stock transfer to ensure that we meet the Decent Homes Standard by 2010, but the newly formed Rochford Housing Association (RHA) also contracted to deliver some 50 affordable homes per year through this transfer. We have not backed away from taking difficult decisions where there is a clear benefit to our customers.

2 Prioritisation

2.1 Are there clear and robust priorities within the ambitions for the area?

The Council is clear about its priorities and has established the 'golden thread' to ensure the delivery of those priorities. Staff and Members understand the priority actions for the following year through the Key Policies and Actions paper agreed by Council every February. These actions are mirrored in the Medium Term Financial Strategy and link directly to the Corporate Plan objectives, which in turn support the delivery of the Community Strategy.



2.1.1 Since 2006 the Council has operated a Divisional Planning and Budget Preparation Process with the following key features:

- June/July: Review of Corporate Plan and MTFS
- Summer: Divisional Planning starts having regard to MTFS pressures, efficiency savings, national agendas, etc
- November: First Member Away Day – reaffirming Corporate Plan, identifying MTFS risks/issues and priorities and non-priorities
- December: Heads of Service develop options reflecting Member Away Day outcomes.
- January: Final Member Away Day – decision on priorities.
- February: Budget and MTFS agreed. Vision to Reality and Key Policies and Actions approved.
- February/March: Divisional Plans finalised with 'challenge' process
- March/April: Performance & Development Review process begins leading to Personal Development Plans

2.1.2 Consequently the Council reviews its medium term planning on an annual basis and identifies the immediate annual objectives agreed by Council. These are then embedded into Divisional and Personal Development Plans. The most recent Staff Survey (2006) reported that 70% of staff "have sufficient understanding of the Council's aims and objectives" and that 82% agreed that "they have the information they need to do their job". The more recent Investors in People (IiP) assessment identified that one of the Council's key strengths was: *"the degree to which staff understand their contribution to the Council and feel valued."* Furthermore the Assessor stated that: "*All those I spoke with were able to explain clearly the objectives of the Council and their team.*"

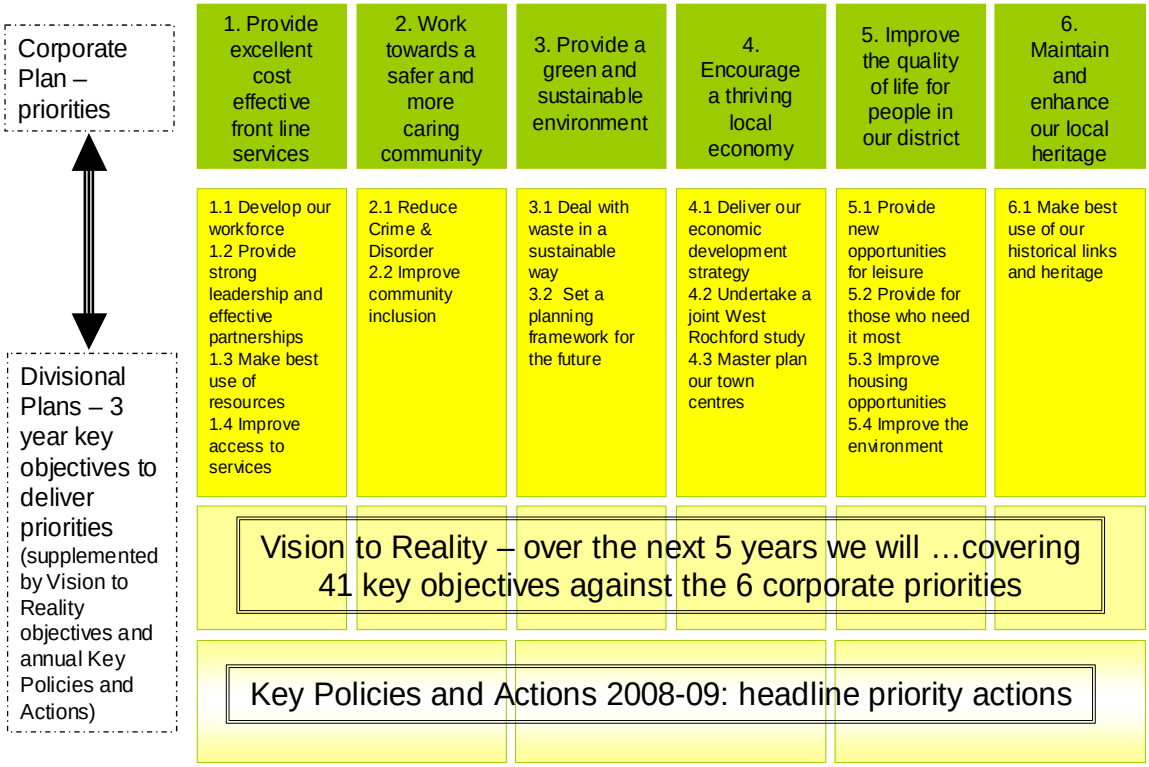
2.1.3 Through our consultants (Tribal) for our Access to Services Strategy, we are getting a far better understanding of the needs of our communities, especially those in groups at risk of being disadvantaged. We are linking this to training for members and staff on Diversity Awareness and specific training on the Equalities Standard; we are proud of our achievement of Level 2 of the Equality Standards Scheme and we are confident of achieving Level 3 by September 2008.

2.1.4 We seek to deliver joined up services to our residents. For example, in response to the needs of residents we have introduced a Handyman/Gardening Service, delivered through the Springboard Housing Association, which is proving to be extremely popular. This initiative also links to the reducing fear of crime targets of the CDRP (through reducing the risk of opportunistic crime targeting homes with unkempt gardens) and prevention strategies of Adult Social Care (in preventing falls and hospital admissions of elderly people). We also support Young Carers, working with the RRAVS, to attend an accredited leadership skills course to promote confidence and self-esteem; 16 children have taken part so far. More than 50 young carers have received funded swimming passes from the Council to access the Virgin Leisure Centres; this not only enables these socially isolated and vulnerable young people to meet a peer group but also to engage in a healthy and fun activity on a regular basis. Both of these examples demonstrate the Council's efforts to improve the Quality of Life for residents in District.

2.1.5 The Council has established a balance between national agendas and local priorities. For example, we are addressing housing issues (eg affordable housing), regeneration, recycling and crime reduction (the Council's CDRP being recognised as the most successful CDRP in the East of England) on the national agenda; we continue to deliver other national agendas on e-Government, procurement and equalities. Whilst doing this, the Council is still addressing local needs, eg improvements to Rayleigh Mill as a visitor attraction, the Handyman/Gardening service; investing in youth facilities such as the mini football pitches around the new Rayleigh Leisure Centre.

2.2 Is there a robust strategy to deliver the priorities?

As outlined in 2.1 above, the Council has a clear framework of strategies and plans with a golden thread to ensure that the Council's objectives, and thereby its part in addressing the Community Strategy, are delivered within the agreed budget 'envelope'.



The Divisional Planning and Budget Preparation process enables an integrated approach to service and financial planning to ensure that the Key Policies and Actions (ie priorities) for each year are delivered within the budget envelope in the Medium Term Financial Strategy. Additionally, in February 2008, the Council agreed a paper entitled 'Vision to Reality', informed through the Divisional Planning and Budget Preparation process, which articulates the Council's ambitions at that point in time. It projects ambitions for the future (currently for 2013, 2017 and 2021) in order to inform staff and partners of the possible future direction for the Council. This allows partners, in particular, to be cognisant of the Council's thinking in developing their own their forward plan. 'Vision to Reality' supplements, rather than substitutes for, the Council's Corporate Plan.

2.3 Is robust action taken to deliver the strategy?

The Council's processes ensure that priority actions are identified and then embedded into Divisional and Personal Development Plans. Corporate resources are deployed to challenge services in developing the Divisional Plans, SMART Action Plans and Targets. Regular reporting to officers and members ensures that these actions are delivered. Members make difficult decisions and keep their focus on achieving priorities.

2.3.1 The Key Policies and Actions paper headlines the priorities for the forthcoming year in terms of:

- Policy Developments;
- Service Improvements; and
- Key Projects.

2.3.2 Performance Management Officers act in a challenging role to services in developing Divisional Plans, ensuring that SMART action plans and targets are developed and take account of the Key Policies and Actions priorities, Equalities and Risk Management.

2.3.3 The Council recognises that the same degree of rigour and robustness needs to be applied to the LSP framework. It is the aim of the Council to extend its performance management framework arrangements to monitor the new Sustainable Community Strategy and the agreed actions that flow from it.

2.3.4 Members keep track on the progress of the Key Policies and Actions through a quarterly performance monitoring report. They take difficult decisions when necessary to ensure priorities are delivered. For example, a priority is the extension of the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park where, despite objections from the landowner, a Compulsory Purchase Order has been issued to realise the extension.

2.3.5 Additionally members receive regular reports on progress being made to implement decisions. This is a constructive process that allows members to hold officers to account and reinforces the political decision making process.

What is the capacity of the Council, including its work with partners, to deliver what it is trying to achieve?

3 Capacity

3.1 Is there clear accountability and decision making to support service delivery and continuous improvement?

In 2007 the Council moved from a fourth option to leader and executive model following a structural review of the authority. This has improved clarity and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of both members and officers in the schemes of delegation and there is a constructive, healthy and professional relationship between the two. An Officer Code of Conduct and revised Member Code of Conduct were adopted in 2007 and comprehensive training provided for both. The new officer structure is developing an environment for cross-cutting work driving continuous improvement.

> *"Senior officers and members lead by example. People said they felt the culture in the authority was transparent and that leaders were honest. ....it was widely reported that relationships between senior officers and councillors was positive. They work well together and respect each other."*
>
> *- Ethical governance health check, March 2007 - IDeA*

3.1.1 In section 2.1 there is an overview of how our robust corporate planning processes ensure members are fully engaged in considering and determining priorities and then, subsequently, in challenging and monitoring progress.

3.1.2 The Council also welcomes external challenge and seeks to learn from the experience, for example, the IDeA Peer Review and Ethical Governance Health Check. This openness is also reflected in both the member and management arrangements of the Council. All Council meetings are held in public and agendas and minutes are published on the internet. The decisions of Management Teams at all levels are recorded and published on the intranet.

3.1.3 An officer restructuring in (2006) has helped to develop better cross-council working. The Senior Management Team comprises the Chief Executive, Corporate Directors and Heads of Service. Additionally, the Chief Executive and the two Corporate Directors each lead on one of three cross-council working groups – Strategy & Partnership; Service Development & Improvement; and Staffing and Resources – and jointly they review all performance exception reports as a Performance Assessment Board.

3.1.4 The Council has also reviewed the effectiveness of scrutiny and used the move to new political arrangements to improve scrutiny. An opposition member chairs the one Overview and Scrutiny (Review) Committee and the chairman or any three members can call-in any decision. Additionally the function has a dedicated Overview and Scrutiny Officer and a modest budget for investigative work. The findings of the Review Committee are presented to the Executive Board and/or Council.

3.1.5 There are a number of examples of the work of the Review Committee that have resulted in better outcomes for residents of the District:

- CCTV Call in: where the Policy, Finance & strategic Performance Committee reconsidered its decision to replace analogue cameras with digital versions and subsequently saved £29,000.
- Bus Services Review: where following a broader review of bus services, the District Council successfully lobbied the County Council to subsidise a new bus route for residents in a remote caravan park to give them access to Rochford Town Centre and a GP in Ashingdon.

3.1.6 Risk management is now embedded in the Council. There is a Corporate Risk Register that is kept under review by the Corporate Risk Group that meets on a regular basis, and the minutes of which are published on the intranet. Divisional Plans include a risk assessment and reports to Council include risk implications.

3.2 Does the Council, with its partners, develop its capacity effectively to change and deliver its ambitions and priorities?

The Council recognises that being a relatively small organisation requires it to manage its resources wisely and to adopt processes and practices that are proportionate to the Council's available capacity. There are new member and officer arrangements in place that give clearer focus and encourage cross-council working. The Council has a long established track record of successfully 'outsourcing' service provision and using partnerships and external funding where demonstrated that this provides best value.

3.2.1 The Council has restructured both political and management arrangements in order to give the Council greater focus on priorities and capacity to deliver its plans. The Leader, Cllr Terry Cutmore, has a high profile in partnerships, chairing the LSP and Groundwork Trust for South Essex, and is a member of the main Thames Gateway South Essex Board. Paul Warren, one of the longest serving Chief Executives in Essex, is also active in the TGSE and has strong partnership links with Essex Districts and the County Council; for example he is a member of the Essex Partnership Group (overseeing the LAA2) and chairman of the new County-wide Community Safety, Drugs and Alcohol Strategic Partnership The move to an Executive Board has enabled greater member ownership of issues, for example the Executive Board Member for Environment has been instrumental in reviewing and promoting the revised waste management contract. The Deputy Leader, Cllr Hudson, led the review of Overview and Scrutiny that resulted in one Review Committee.

3.2.2 The revised management structure has a clear Internal - External provision split and joined up working is achieved through the 3 cross-Council management teams, each of which have a number of officer working groups reporting into them. These teams help to develop Council-wide approaches, for example the Service Development and Improvement Team have the responsibility: "To develop the Council's agenda in terms of Value for Money and cost benchmarking of the Council's activities and operations. " The Council now has a draft VFM Strategy that will include a programme of VFM reviews as part of the drive to deliver the national efficiency targets and ensure delivery against the MTFS. There is a revised Procurement Strategy which encourages new approaches to securing VFM, for example, best bids against a fixed budget for procurement of play spaces equipment; a cost (40%) versus quality (60%) assessment of tenders for new contracts – grounds maintenance, street cleansing and waste management. We have used partnership working to deliver cost effective diversity training, realising some £28,500 savings by not commissioning as a single customer.

3.2.3 We strive as a Council to get the best out of our existing workforce through sound people management and to lever in additional resources as and when advantageous to do so. We have a Workforce Development Plan aligned to our priorities and we have been very successful in reducing sickness absence from an average of 9.44 days per employee in 2004-05 to 7.49 in 2006-07 and a further reduction to 5.25 (unaudited) in 2007-08. This has been in part down to training to re-energise managers to tackle absence and also in part to staff incentives, such as the reward scheme for attendance and an enhanced flexible working scheme. We have recently enhanced the offer to staff on sickness absence with a contract with DHS to manage the sickness absence process. At the same time we have been re-accredited as a whole council Investor in People; indeed our assessor has commented that we exceed the standards.

3.2.4 In seeking to achieve our service delivery objectives, we assess the opportunities to work with organisations, as 'partners' and/or 'contractors'. We have an established track record of working with the private sector – for example a long-term contract for IT (currently with Sungard). The Council has sufficient ICT resources to deliver its priorities. There is significant progress towards realising the benefits from e-government for residents as well as for Council staff. We have invested in our underlying infrastructure to a 'thin client' environment that enables home and mobile working, providing a more flexible approach to service delivery.

3.2.5 The Council has an approved ICT strategy and has established an ongoing ICT strategy reserve of £250,000 to ensure that the strategy can be delivered. The website has been re-launched with improved navigation and a wide range of information and online services, giving greater choice and access for residents. 80% of respondents to a user poll thought that the new website was an improvement; indeed SOCITM have reclassified our web site as Transactional, being only one of 5 Essex Districts to have achieved that level.

Rochford District Council Web site: e-enabled applications

Residents can:

- make payments on line for services including council tax and car park penalty notices;
- access planning applications, previous planning decisions, property history and map based information;
- make planning and building control applications online and access planning consultations ;
- find out details of their local councillors and their refuse and recycling days;
- apply for jobs at the Council;
- make complaints, comments and compliment.

Residents have access to a number of Council transaction systems and accessibility is made easier through access tools for changing font sizes, for listening to the web site and for language translations.

3.2.6 The Council is proud of its history of working with the private sector to introduce innovative ways of improving services and delivering better value for money. In 2004, our Revenues and Benefits Service struggled with capacity and consequently was delivering a poor service to residents. We reviewed the situation and created a back – front office split and engaged Capita to manage our first point of contact for the service (in reality from a contact centre in Coventry). By redirecting staff vacancy funding to an external provider, we created space for our Council Office based staff to deal with more complex cases with greater care and attention to our customers. The service performance has transformed, not only in national processing performance standards but where it matters - customer satisfaction with the service to some of the most vulnerable/disadvantaged people in our community.

3.2.7 We also seek external funding as appropriate in building our capacity. Recent examples include support for the Access to Services Strategy that is helping to improve our approach to equalities and diversity. The Access to Services inspection report of 2007 contained four key recommendations, namely:

- develop and implement a customer access strategy supported by robust action plan to ensure delivery;
- extend the Council's knowledge and understanding of community access need;
- establish a systematic approach to managing and improving value for money to ensure services are effective, efficient and economic; and
- increase the Council's knowledge and understanding of accessibility.

3.2.8 To provide additional capacity and expertise to deliver this priority area of work, we were successful in bidding to Building Capacity East and received a grant of £157,000. We have used consultants, Tribal, to help develop the Access to Services Strategy (which was approved by members in December 2007) and the Council is developing a comprehensive change management training programme for the Senior Management Team and middle managers. This is a bespoke programme and will clearly state the expectations of a manager/leader in the Council; it will be mandatory and complemented by the on-line academy. As a consequence, we are seeing in our strategies and plans an integrated approach to the successful delivery of diversity, human rights and user focus.

3.2.9 We also look to work in partnership with the Third Sector to strengthen our capacity. We have a grant funding framework with the Citizen's Advice Bureau being one of a number of beneficiaries. With other Voluntary Sector organisations we have introduced Service Level Agreements to ensure that our funding is delivering value for money against our priorities. For example, this year we increased funding to RRAVS but with a Service Level Agreement to ensure that [.....].

3.2.10 The Council also participates in a Joint Liaison Group with its immediate neighbours of Southend and Castle Point Councils. There are formal meetings at Member level to foster the common interests and to shape the agenda of South East Essex at the highest strategic level for the mutual benefit of all three Authorities. This adds to the capacity of all the Councils.

3.2.11 However we have identified an area for improvement in adopting a more consistent approach to project management. We have recently produced a project management guide for Rochford District Council that is, in essence, a proportionate and risk assessed application of the Prince2 methodology. This does need to be contextualised in that because of the enabling

nature of the Council, any major project necessitating the rigour of Prince2 will be externalised. Therefore the Rochford District Council methodology is designed to:

- clarify the potential client roles in Prince2 and give a general appreciation of the methodology; and
- give a framework for other projects recognising key best practice components rather than designed to equip staff to operate at a Prince2 practitioner level.

4 Performance Management

4.1 Is there a consistent, rigorous and open approach to performance management?

Since CPA 2004, the council has risen to the challenge to improve its approach to performance management, including user focus, and this has delivered benefits in service performance. Service and financial planning are integrated. The performance of service delivery partnerships is managed appropriately and significant performance improvements have been achieved. Performance management arrangements for the Local Strategic Partnership will be strengthened with the revision of the Sustainable Community Strategy. Members are actively engaged in performance management and receive appropriate data to elicit challenge and enable scrutiny. The Council welcomes feed back and learns from the few complaints that it receives.

4.1.1 In 2004 the Council's performance management was described as having more weaknesses than strengths with concerns on: performance measurement being under developed in some areas; performance management being inconsistent across services; the Council being unable to assess cost effectiveness of services; and risk management being embryonic. Much has changed since then and this has been recognised by the Relationship Manager in his judgement that "performance management is becoming increasingly embedded." This has been achieved through the implementation of the performance management framework with the following key components:

- Ensuring the Golden Thread of objectives flows from the Ambitions (Community Strategy), through the Council's Corporate Plan and its priorities into Divisional Plans, and then into Personal Development Plans via the Performance & Development Review process.
- Aligning service (Divisional) planning with the Corporate Plan, which in turn reflects the Medium Term Financial Strategy.
- Introducing a data quality strategy – raising awareness of the significance of good data quality to underpin performance management, in particular reporting.
- Introducing quarterly reporting of key indicators against the corporate priorities only to members who also receive a mid-yearly report on all BVPIs and progress reports on the Council's Key Policies and Actions for that year. Introducing scrutiny of performance by the Chief Executive and Corporate Directors (as the Performance Assessment Board) in the format of a quarterly exception report.
- Member monitoring of the progress made on the implementation of decisions.
- The Service Development and Improvement Management Team who review performance issues across the Council and develop council-wide approaches to performance improvement, eg Value for Money. Similarly, the Staffing & Resources Management Team has developed the Council's approach to procurement.
- The Council's Values which reflect the importance of user focus and service improvement, working in partnership as necessary.
- User focus is also included in the Council's Competency Framework (NB Customer/Client Orientation) which is used in job profiling and the Performance & Development Review process.

4.1.2 Together these changes have delivered a user focus on achieving priorities and a means of reviewing progress. Supporting processes, eg Divisional Planning and Budget Preparation, are now established and reviewed and improved as necessary.

4.1.3 Strategic Service Delivery Partnerships, in particular ICT, Revenues and Benefits, Leisure, Grounds Maintenance, Street Cleansing and Waste Management, have formal performance management arrangements. These include performance measures and targets set and reviewed on a formal and regular basis. Examples of improvements in service delivery include:

- Reducing the number of missed bins.
- Wet side changing room improvements/refurbishments.

4.1.4 Whilst the Council's own performance management arrangements have improved significantly, it is recognised that there is scope to improve those for the LSP. Currently the LSP block chairs report progress against the action plans regularly to the LSP Executive but improvements will be made in the arrangements with the new Sustainable Community Strategy to make action plans 'SMARTer' and thus give a sharper focus to the management of performance.

4.1.5 The Council welcomes external challenge from regulators and peers and seeks to address areas for improvement arising from these exercises. Similarly the Council welcomes customer complaints and has an established complaints procedure that is easily accessible for residents. Complaints can be made in person, by telephone, in writing, by email or by online form. Satisfaction with complaints handling has risen from 4th to 2nd quartile. Additionally the Local Government Ombudsman's annual report on the Council for the year 2006-07 was very positive about the low level of complaints received of which in that year none required a report or local settlement.

"When we complete an investigation we must issue a report. I issued no reports this year and for the first time in three years no complaints resulted in a local settlement. This is a significant achievement for the Council."

"At my visit to your Authority last May I found that the overall performance of the Council was good in terms of how the Council deals with complaints from the public. Things were put right quickly and the fact that I did not uphold any complaints against the Council .. would seem to indicate that it is maintaining its performance in this area."

"My staff only had to make enquiries on four complaints last year and your average response time was 20 days, well within our target time of 28 days."

- Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter (2006-07)

4.2 Do the Council and partner organisations use their knowledge about performance to drive continuous improvement in outcomes?

The Council has adopted a robust approach to target setting to drive continuous improvement in service delivery via the Divisional Plans. Performance information is regularly monitored and reported appropriately to members. Service Delivery partnerships are performance managed by the client. The Access to Services Strategy continues to help improve the Council's understanding of its diverse communities. The Council welcomes feed back from residents and regulators and can show examples of change as a result of this feed back. The Council voluntarily initiated an Improvement Panel to support the improvement post-CPA 2004. The revised Sustainable Community Strategy will have an improved performance management framework that reflects the Council's experience and desire to implement robust performance management arrangements.

4.2.1 Performance management is an area that the Council has endeavoured to improve since the CPA in 2004. Our efforts can be evidenced in respect of:

- Introducing robust challenge to our target setting as part of the Divisional Planning and Budget Preparation Process. This developed from the work undertaken by the Relationship Manager and External Auditor with service managers in 2007.
- We have moved from a routine reporting of all indicators in 2005-06 to performance reporting focused on key priorities and targets from 2006-07 onwards. This includes:
  - Quarterly reports on the Key Policies and Actions for the year (with 22 indicators) to all members and discussed at Executive Board. This report also contains progress of key projects for the Council.
  - Mid-year performance report summarising performance trends and achievement against target for all national and local indicators.
- Members have received formal training in 2007 and 2008 in the Council's approach to performance management, together with some technical skills on analysis of data to enable challenge, and positive feed back was received.
- Year on year improvements to the Divisional Planning process to ensure that the golden thread is evident with SMART targets and that the plans specifically take account of equalities issues and risk management.
- The development of an in-house performance management system to improve the quality of reporting, including data quality aspects, which has helped to identify more easily areas where performance issues need to be investigated.

4.2.2 The Council is keen to learn from inspection and regulation; recommendations are properly considered by the Council and action taken as appropriate. Following inspections of Environment Services and Access to Services, the Council has taken steps to improve. The whole improvement agenda, including 20 Improvement Plans, has been overseen by a voluntarily initiated Improvement Panel (chaired by the Relationship Manager and with representatives from the Government Office and external auditor). The recent focus of the Improvement Panel has turned to the future agenda rather than monitoring the largely completed improvement plans.

4.2.3 Feedback from complaints has led to service improvements, for example, complaints about refuse collection and missed bins led to a review of systems and closer working with the previous contractor, resulting in a significant reduction in the number of complaints in that area.

4.2.4 The internal complaints reporting process has been reviewed to improve corporate knowledge and understanding of user-feedback. The formal reporting process sets out how complaints information is used in service areas to identify improvements, followed by reporting into the management structure and the Executive Board.

4.2.5 We also obtain user feedback from mystery shopping. We have developed a joint approach with our neighbouring authorities of Castle Point and Southend to mystery shop service areas across key channels of customer contact. Feedback from the mystery shopping is assessed in each service area and lessons are learnt, for example:

- additional web pages have been produced in revenues and benefits, including a more obvious invitation to customers to make contact if their questions are not answered, and
- frequently asked questions have been developed in the waste team.

4.2.6 The feedback has also been assessed on a corporate basis at the Customer Access and Consultation Group and the Strategy and Partnership Management Team. Corporate issues that have been addressed include the need to standardise the 'sign off' used on emails and consistency in application of telephone answering procedures.

What has been achieved?

5 Achievement and improvement

[Please note: for this section of the self-assessment there will be a short summarising narrative followed by brief case studies against our priorities.]

5.1 What level of quality has the Council with its partners achieved (and/or not achieved) in relation to its services, priority areas and impact on local quality of life?

In the context of rising customer expectations and with increasing demands for greater efficiency on a small district council, Rochford has continued to achieve high customer satisfaction results (relative to national averages). The District has the best performing CDRP in the region delivering improved quality of life by reducing crime. In other key services, eg Revenues and Benefits, we have seen a massive change in performance ensuring that some of our most vulnerable residents receive what they are entitled to with great customer care, recognised by the Chartermark award. The Council is continuing to deliver improved outcomes against its stated priorities.

5.1.1 Rochford is one of the smaller District Councils yet is still exposed to the demands for efficiencies against the backcloth of greater customer expectations. In this respect it is pleasing to note the 2006 national surveys of customer satisfaction demonstrated that:

- Overall customer satisfaction with the Council was 62% compared to the average for districts of 56%;
- Customer satisfaction with the standard of cleanliness of the District was 77% compared to the average for districts of 69%;
- Customer satisfaction with the local recycling facilities was 76% compared to the average for districts of 72%;
- Customer satisfaction with the Council's household waste collection service was 88% compared to the average for districts of 79%;
- Customer satisfaction with the parks and open spaces was 82% compared to the average for districts of 73%;
- Overall user satisfaction with our Planning Service at 79% was above the average for Single Tier and County Authorities (72%).
- Overall tenant satisfaction with our Housing Service was at 88%
- Satisfaction of tenants with their participation on the management of their housing service was at 79%

5.1.2 In terms of outcomes arising from partnerships, the CDRP is an excellent example of success. The latest performance report (January 2008) shows Rochford District as being the lowest in our family group for 'All Crime' and 'British Crime Survey'. The CDRP has previously been commended by the Government Office on its excellent performance. Low crime reduces the fear of crime which in turn delivers a better quality of life for our communities.

5.2 How much progress has the Council made?

*Using Audit Commission data, we are close to the average for Districts in improving the number of performance indicators over the last three years. Significantly, 36% of our performance indicators are now in the top quartile which is higher than the average for 'Good' councils and just short of the average for 'Excellent' councils. Using our local basket of indicators that measure our progress in delivering our priorities, we can demonstrate that we are meeting **[x]** % of our targets.*

5.2.1 We believe that the Council can demonstrate significant improvements in the delivery of key services. We have turned around weak services into good performers (eg Revenues and Benefits; Planning) and have introduced new services in support of our own and partners' priorities. We are proud of our Handyman/Gardening Service, operated through the Springboard Housing Association. We joint fund (with the County Council and CDRP) this service which has seen a rapid increase in uptake. Clearly the maintenance of gardens and the exterior of homes reduces the risks of opportunistic crime; similarly such services help to prevent falls in the home and therefore hospital admissions, thus enabling people to stay living in their homes. Thus the service contributes successfully to the national and County Council priorities of crime reduction and independent living.

5.2.2 One service area where the Council has sought to achieve step change improvement is that of recycling. This was reinforced by the service inspection in 2006 which considered the service to be only fair. Whilst customer satisfaction is relatively high with local recycling facilities, nevertheless the Council has been struggling to meet its targets set by Defra. For some years now financial provision has been planned for increased costs with a new contract that includes a significant improvement in the level of recycling (at least doubling from the current level of around 19%). A major procurement exercise was undertaken in 2007 with a new waste management contract being phased in from 1 April 2008, with a step change in our recycling collection commencing in early June 2008. In parallel the Council has been working on promoting recycling and education to increase participation.

5.2.3 The Council is assured of the success of the new contract in that the new contractor (SITA) has devised and is implementing a detailed mobilisation plan to ensure that contract requirements are being met from the start of the contact.

5.2.4 TO INSERT ANALYSIS OF YEAR END PERFORMANCEREPORT (re Executive Board 23 April).

5.2.5 There follows a brief 'showcase' of improvements delivered for our residents against our priorities to help demonstrate our achievements and improvements:

Achievement and Improvement against council priorities:

Corporate Objective 1:

Provide an excellent cost effective front line service for all our customers:

Showcase 1: Revenues and Benefits

Assessed by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in 2004 as a 'fair' service with performance measured to process claims as: new claims – 43 days; change of circumstances – 36 days. For 2006-07 performance had improved to 31 days and 16 days respectively and the most recent results are at 23 and 9 days. This was achieved by outsourcing the front-office function to Capita and internal changes including a new career scheme linked to competencies that has reduced staff turnover. The service has been awarded a Chartermark for excellence in customer service and has Crystal Mark accreditation for some if its documentation. The service is actively pursuing improvements, including working with McMillan Cancer Care to support claimants at a most stressful time. From a different perspective the service is also a party to the Voice Risk Analysis Pilot to reduce fraud.

In summary, better outcomes for residents whilst receiving better customer care from a service delivering improved value for money – a success story.

More ...

Showcase 2: Planning Service Improvements

In 2005 the Government considered that the Council would not achieve its target of processing 60% of its major planning applications within 13 weeks (as measured by BVPI 109a) by March 2007 and so named the council as a Standards Authority. Through an internal review, a number of process improvements were implemented such that the target was in fact exceeded by March 2007 (some 78% of applications within 13 weeks). Unaudited figures indicate that for 2007-08 performance has continued to improve to 95%.

Also, the Council's Review Committee scrutinised the operation of the planning enforcement service in 2006/07 and made several recommendations for changes to service delivery. One of the recommendations was to submit the enforcement guide for crystal mark accreditation, which was obtained in March 2008. The guide is intended to provide a readily accessible summary of planning enforcement for the district's residents, and is available in hard copy or for download from the Council's website.

Showcase 3: Web site development

The website has been identified as a major channel for customers accessing information and services online. The Council has made the website a priority investing resources, including a new post of Web Manager, to improve accessibility, navigation and content management.

We sought the opinions of the website users both internally and externally. The website ran a user exit survey for about a year; this gave us feed back on customer likes and dislikes and what features they would like to see in the future. The subsequent redesign of the web site incorporates an overhaul of the navigation system and layout of information to ensure accessibility for everyone. The project took just 8 months and a new website was launched in February 2007. An initial user poll that ran for the first 3 months of the new website showed that 80% of users thought that the new website was an improvement.

We continue to improve our new website and launched an online consultation in February 2008 called "Your Website Your Way". The results from this consultation will form the basis of a website strategy which will look at how we will be taking our website forward over the next 3-5 years.

The Society of Information Technology Managers has classified the web site as 'Transactional' – only one of 5 within Essex councils.

The redesigned web site has enabled, for residents and others, easier access to on-line applications and information in connection with the Council.

More ...

Showcase 4: Refuse collection service improvement: missed bins

The number of waste collections being missed was escalating in 2004-05 and this was giving rise to customer complaints.

A review of the operation of the waste collections was undertaken and the Council's contract monitoring officers were specifically allocated to checking roads, following both non–recyclable and recyclable waste collections. Any missed bin was reported immediately to the Contractor's Crew Supervisor and the crew was sent back to the location to effect a pick up. This approach had the dual effect of achieving a speedy remediation of the problem and encouraging crews to be more diligent in collection. The collection process was thus re-engineered to make collection of missed bins a higher priority than scheduled collections, thereby maintaining the pressure to do the job " right first time".

An improved service to residents with fewer missed bins and a speedier response to those that were missed. We have halved the percentage of missed bins (2004-05 to 2007-08) whilst at the same time customer satisfaction with household waste collection (2003-2006) has increased from 85% to 88%.

More ...

Corporate Objective 2:

Work towards a safer and more caring community

Showcase 5: Extra care housing scheme

The Council owned a traditional sheltered housing scheme in Rayleigh which was assessed as being unfit for purpose compared to modern standards. It was adjacent to a piece of vacant land earmarked for an older persons' housing scheme.

Working with the County Council, and in particular the Supporting People Team, and the Housing Corporation, bids were received for the remodelling of the sheltered housing scheme into 22 affordable rented flats and a new elderly persons' extra care housing complex (of 30 flats) was built on the adjoining land. The scheme required over £1.9 capital funding from the Housing Corporation and was developed by the Swan Housing Association.

Both schemes were opened in Spring 2006 and have successfully contributed to improving the quality of life of a number of residents.

More ...

Showcase 6: Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP)

Reducing crime is the primary objective the Council's Community Safety team. For 'All Crime', comparing 2004 (which is the time period since our last Community Safety Strategy and Audit) with 2006/07, there is a significant decrease in offences. Complementary to this, there has also been an increase in people feeling safer after dark by 6%.

Action taken includes:

- Initiatives to reduce vehicle crime, including public awareness campaigns and safer parking areas.
- Establishing a 'no cold calling zone' in one area of the district.
- Targeted initiatives such as cycle theft.
- Enabling year 9 students to understand the risk of drugs and alcohol, anti-social behaviour and peer pressure through 'Infology', a pioneering interactive educational initiative.

This achievement was acknowledged by the Government Office for the East of England Home Office:

"Since April 2004 Rochford has reduced BCS crime by 26.8% against a crime target to March 2008 of 13.5%. This, in % terms is the biggest decrease across the whole of the Eastern Region.

This is a monumental achievement and something all the partners should be very proud of."

More ...

Showcase 7: Southend Road Car Park

The main concern was that of large groups of young people gathering in the car park causing noise nuisance and anti-social behaviour, often in the evenings/night-time.

The Council tackled this through the implementation of byelaws prohibiting ball games, deploying covert cameras, sending letters to parents of youths acting in an anti-social manner, regular patrols by the police's partnership officer, the relocation of the recycling banks, the installation of bike restricting gates and additional fencing.

This has resulted in a significant reduction in reported anti-social behaviour. This achievement was applauded by residents at a public meeting in recognition of the work done by the Council.

Showcase 8: Homelessness – improved services

The housing/homeless service had been underperforming with a significant proportion of cases to determine homelessness taking longer than the target of 33 days and this was noted in the CPA report of 2004. Additionally, there was a national drive to reduce the number of families placed in temporary accommodation, measured by the introduction of BVPI 203 in 2004/5 with the government aiming to reduce such cases by 50% by 2010.

A review of the homelessness service and case work was conducted and the following measures was introduced:

- Additional staffing (initially on a temporary

basis) but subsequently made permanent • Increased focus on homelessness prevention and finding permanent accommodation using a mix of; dispute mediation, a Council funded rent and deposit scheme, deposit bonds, and negotiation with existing or potential landlords • A revised Lettings Policy and nomination arrangements which gave greater priority to homeless families
• A risk based assessment of outstanding homelessness cases to clear the backlog and ongoing monitoring of the progression of cases. These actions have resulted in: • a significant improvement in the % of homelessness cases determined in 33 days from a low of 40% in 2005/6 to 97% in 2006/7 and 98% in 2007/8 (PI - RDC 9.3); • a reduction in the average number of families in temporary accommodation from 48 in 2004/5 to 26 in 2005/6, to 17 in 2006/7 – a total reduction of 64% (PI BVPI 203).

Corporate Objective 3:

Provide a green and sustainable environment

Showcase 9: Recycling – improved levels of recycling

To improve the level of recycling the Council targeted collections from blocks of flats and caravan parks.

BVPIs show that for recycling the Council's recycling rate has increased to 19.45% (unaudited) and that the number of households participating in recycling has increased from 88% (2006) to 97.4% (2007 - unaudited).

Showcase 10: Hockley Woods/Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park – development and expansion

In 2000 following a petition from residents, the Council acquired former farming land at Blatches Farm from the County Council in order to develop the Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park. In 2007 the initial five year development plan came to a successful conclusion with improvements including:

- a significant increase in bio diversity with six different woodlands.
- A lake in excess of 300m establishing aquatic vegetation and fauna
- New bridleways.

Residents have been consulted about future expansion of the park and the feed back identified that the main reason for visiting the site was to enjoy the open space. 76% of respondents to a survey supported expansion and the survey results have been discussed at Area Committees. On-going consultation is planned.

In November 2007 the Executive Board approved a Compulsory Purchase Order for land to the east and west of the park together with the acquisition of further land to the west that includes an area of ancient woodland.

The development has been achieved in part by securing grants from various sources, totalling over £250,000, some on-going.

More ...

Showcase 11: Environmental Campaign – "making Rochford cleaner, greener and safer."

The 'Environmental Campaign' is an initiative that takes place once every quarter (over 4 weeks) to clean up 'hot spots' that have been identified by Contract Monitoring Officers via inspections and complaints. The previous main contractor, Service Team, was involved as well as some volunteer groups, eg Church communities and Rivercare Group.

Over the 9 campaigns since September 2005, there has been on average 169 tasks completed per campaign resulting in an average waste collection of 19.38 tonnes. This campaign will continue with the new Waste Management contractor (SITA).

Showcase 12: Climate change – reducing the Council's energy use

As part of the Council's commitment to reducing its Carbon footprint, a number of buildings have had boiler replacements. The latest condensing boilers and controls have been installed, including intelligent controls which learn how the buildings operate and optimises the use of boilers to predetermined conditions. As a result there has been a reduction of 40% in gas usage.

Another improvement has been in the use of water. Toilets have been refurbished over a two year period with the use of low level cisterns with dual flush, non percussive taps and waterless urinals. The hot water system has been changed to provide hot water at point of use, removing stored hot water systems and cold water tanks. Low energy light fittings and more efficient ventilation have also helped to reduce energy use.

Overall the estimated savings are £2,300 per year in energy and over 1 million litres of water. Removal of cold water storage has also produced efficiency savings in removing the need for disinfecting the tanks (costing previously some £2,000 per year).

Corporate Objective #4:

Encourage a thriving local economy

Showcase 13: Rayleigh Town Centre enhancements

A successful bid for Thames Gateway funding resulted in the implementation of an enhancement scheme for Webster's Way and the adjacent public car park. External funding of £700,000 from Thames Gateway was agreed for the delivery of the project.

The project delivered environmental enhancements along the length of Webster's Way, which provides the main route into the town's largest car park. This included:

- New paving and kerbs
- New wall and railings between the car park and Webster's Way
- Improved street lighting
- Connections to the bus stop for real time information
- New planting scheme
- Improved link between the car park and the High Street
- Link with earlier town centre enhancement works
- Improved access to the car park
- Raised Puffin crossing across Webster's Way
- Extension of existing CCTV network

More ...

Showcase 14: Regeneration – Rochford Town Centre

Towards the end of the last century it was recognised that the historic Rochford Town Centre needed to be regenerated. The Council put into place a planning policy framework to focus on improvements to the appearance and character of the town centre and to promote the development of a new retail store on a site north of the market square.

A new development incorporating a supermarket, library and housing was opened in 2007 and a number of highways improvements were implemented. The Council also worked with the South Essex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust who secured in excess of £20m funding for the redevelopment of the remaining section of the former Rochford Hospital site into a state of the art facility for dealing with mental health patients. The new facilities opened in early 2008. In West Street, the Council issued compulsory purchase notices on three properties that were then passed to a preservation trust for renovation.

Consequently much of the town centre has been regenerated bringing a balance of renovating a historic town centre and new health and residential facilities.

More...

Showcase 15: Business Breakfast Meetings

Prior to the Programme being implemented in 2005 there were no regular events or programmes to connect with businesses. RDC had a limited profile with the business community largely governed by issues such as planning, regulation and enforcement. Events such as this help portray the Council in a more positive light.

RDC recognised the need to find a way to engage with businesses that would also

- raise RDC's profile and promote the Council in a proactive fashion
- enable RDC to pass on key information about its services and also to make businesses aware of other support services and opportunities that were available to them.
- help to build a network of local businesses that could support each other and share knowledge and expertise
- Help demonstrate the accessibility of the Council to the business community and receive information and intelligence back from the local business community about issues relevant to them

To date, the events regularly attract between 60 and 80 people but on occasion have attracted up to 100 representatives from the local business community.

RDC regularly receives extremely positive feedback from attendees through the evaluation reports. The continued success of the Programme is attributable to implementing the suggestions and comments made through the feedback process.

Showcase 16: Business support activities

- Leveraging funding for various activities (eg Rochford Market Town Health Check; environmental improvements to 6 industrial sites)
- Business Matters Newsletter produced twice a year, which is circulated to around 2000 businesses located in the District. This Newsletter gives an update on economic activities and events.
- The Council has provided £15,000 funding to assist Rochford, Rayleigh and Hockley Chambers of Trade and Commerce for website development and branding to help raise awareness of their business support activities.
- The Council has contributed £3000 sponsorship for the Echo Southend Business Awards 'Environmental Awareness' category. Several businesses located in the District have been finalists.

Corporate Objective #5:

Improve the quality of life for people in our district:

Showcase 17: The Leisure Offer – Rayleigh and Clements Hall Leisure Centres

The management of the Council's leisure facilities has been outsourced since 2002 (Holmes Place, now Virgin Active) . The first phase of the 20 year contract was to upgrade the Clements Hall Leisure Centre to a standard comparable to private health and fitness clubs, but with normal local authority pricing levels. Extensive refurbishment was also carried out to the Mill Hall to create a modern Mill Arts & Events Centre.

In 2006 the next phase of upgrading our leisure facilities was completed with the new Rayleigh Leisure Centre and involving some £3.3m funding from the Council. The facilities again reflect the standard of private health and fitness clubs but also include additional facilities, eg an indoor bowls hall. Usage at the centre has increased month on month; Vigin Active's own mystery shopping initiative has recently placed them top of the whole group (including private clubs) for two consecutive months.

Residents now have a significantly enhanced, portfolio of high quality leisure facilities that are spread across the District. Customer satisfaction has increased as has usage levels.

Additionally, as part of the contract, Virgin Active fund the cost of the Council's Sports Development and Arts Development Officers and contribute £20,000 per annum towards the production of the Council's newspaper, Rochford District Matters. Before this contract Arts Development was not resourced and so there has been a significant increase in provision and profile.

This partnership has brought many advantages to the community.

More ...

Showcase 18: Housing Stock Transfer

The Council was required to consider how it would ensure that all Council-owned homes would meet, as a minimum, the Decent Homes Standard (DHS) by 2010. This assessment and the proposed solution had to be signed off by the Government Office by July 2005.

A robust stock condition survey was carried out to assess the costs of meeting both DHS and also higher standards which were requested through extensive consultations with tenants. A housing needs study was also carried out. A full appraisal of potential options was completed with assistance from specialist housing finance consultants and with the active participation of tenant representatives. The Council considered the option appraisal outcomes and resolved to transfer all its housing stock to a local housing association, operating within a group structure. A parent group housing association was selected and a formal transfer offer document provided to tenants, followed by a tenant ballot which resulted in nearly 83% of those voting in support of transfer. Throughout the whole process there was extensive communication with tenants. The Council subsequently agreed to the transfer and this was completed in September 2007.

Tenants had the opportunity to express their preferences about the ownership, management and improvement of their homes. Under the new arrangements, tenants have an active role in management and policy through representation on the Board of the new Rochford Housing Association.

The housing association will be investing more than £40 million in major works and improvements over the first 10 years following transfer, with about £27 million being spent in the first 5 years. Over the same 10 year period, the Council would only have been able to spend about £16 million and would have had to make service cuts to spend the money on improvements.

More ...

Showcase 19: Supporting young people

The Council endeavours to support young people to reduce the incidence of anti-social behaviour and to improve quality of life.

In Great Wakering youths were creating a nuisance by congregating outside shops. After consulting both youths and adults in the community, the Council installed a Youth Shelter at the leisure centre.

Many young carers are vulnerable being at risk of social exclusion and under achievement. The Council worked with its Leisure partner and RAVS to offer free swimming passes to young carers to enable participation in healthy activity as well as engaging with peers in a social setting. The number of passes issued has now quadrupled with over 60 young people taking advantage of the scheme. Additionally the Council has funded a number of young carers to attend specially accredited leadership skills courses design to build confidence and self-esteem. So far 16 young people have benefited from this course.

Showcase 20: Supporting older people

The Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership identified a risk to older people who were unable to care for their gardens- from opportunistic crimes targeted at their home because of its untidy condition. Essex Social Services was also concerned to enhance older residents' independence and prevent falls by older people struggling to maintain their gardens.

Building on an existing Home Improvement Agency and "Handy-person" scheme run by Springboard Housing Association, the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership and Essex Social Services agreed to fund a gardening service for vulnerable people on low incomes, predominantly elderly residents. In return for a modest hourly charge, vulnerable residents are able to access a reliable and trustworthy service.

The service was established in 2003/04 when 47 gardening jobs were carried out. District Council funding for the scheme has increased – most recently in 2007/08 by an increase of £27,500 to be used for both this and the Handyperson service- and in 2007/08 603 jobs were completed. The service enjoys high user satisfaction – the most recent survey reports that 100% of customers were either satisfied or very satisfied.

The Council introduced the Rochford Home Maintenance and Adaptation Grant (RHMAG) in 2004 which provides grants of up to £10,000 for repairs and smaller adaptations (to make a property more suitable for an occupier with a disability). They are also used to top up "Warm Front" grants where the cost of work exceeds that grant scheme. Each year approximately 50 RHMAG grants are awarded to vulnerable residents. Satisfaction levels are high, the latest figures being 84%.

Corporate Objective #6:

Maintain and enhance our local heritage:

Showcase 21: Rayleigh Windmill restoration

The Windmill had been the home of the Rayleigh Historical Society since the mid-1990's. The building was deteriorating and receiving little interest.

The Council set up a Windmill Committee (comprising representatives from the Council, National Trust, Rayleigh Town Council and Rayleigh Historical Society) to consider the refurbishment and potential use of the building as a sustainable project.

Thames Gateway funding was secured for the renovation of the historic mill. The interior has been transformed to provide 4 storeys of modern display facilities with public access to upper floors of the Grade II listed windmill.

The restoration has been a great success; the windmill is now a major tourist and educational attraction. The use of the windmill has increased to 2000 footfalls a year (2006-07) and the museum is open 2 days per week. Recently the windmill has been registered as a site for small weddings. The Council is in partnership with the National Trust to develop the adjacent Motte and Bailey Castle and ensure a sustainable future for the building. This has been a significant achievement in maintaining and enhancing our local heritage.

More ...

Showcase 22: Conservation Area Appraisals

The Council recognised the importance of preparing up to date appraisals of its 10 conservation areas together with the preparation of associated management plans. The work, undertaken by consultants, was issued for public consultation before Council approval.

The appraisals, available on the web site, provide vivid and graphic information about the history of the conservation areas and have been well received by residents and stakeholders.

Showcase 23: Heritage Awards

The Council introduced an annual Design and Heritage Award scheme in 2002 to promote and reward high quality design, innovation in development and excellence in the renovation of historic buildings. Additionally, this helps to drive up the quality of the built environment and spaces that people use regularly.

The awards have been extremely well received and there has been excellent publicity for the winners.

The Council uses the scheme to demonstrate its commitment to improving the environment for its residents.

Showcase 24: Listed Building Grant Scheme

The repair and maintenance of listed buildings is expensive and owners of such buildings are in effect charged with being custodians of the important architectural and historical heritage that contributes to the character and attractiveness of the District. The grant scheme provides some assistance towards the repair of important historic features, eg windows.

This helps to protect and safeguard the future of statutorily listed buildings within the District

More ...