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## **COMMUNITY STRATEGIES (Min 235/2000)**

### **1 SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report outlines the Government's detailed guidance in relation to the development of Community Plans and suggests a role for this Sub-Committee in that process.

### **2 INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1 In July 2000, the District Council's Finance & General Purposes Committee considered the draft guidance produced by Central Government in relation to Community Strategies (Min 235/2000). Government has now issued its finalised guidance on the matter and the main details are outlined below:

### **3 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS**

#### **What is a Community Strategy?**

- 3.1 The Local Government Act places a duty on local authorities, including County Councils and District Councils, to prepare community strategies. Such strategies should aim to enhance the quality of life of local communities through action to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of an area and its inhabitants.
- 3.2 A community strategy will have to meet four objectives. It must:
- allow local communities to articulate their aspirations, needs and priorities;
  - co-ordinate the actions of the Council, and of the public, voluntary and community, and private sector organisations that operate locally;
  - focus and shape existing and future activity of those organisations so that they effectively meet community needs and aspirations.
  - Contribute to the achievement of sustainable development both locally and more widely
- 3.3 A community strategy must have 4 key components:
- a long-term vision for the area focusing on the outcomes that are to be achieved;
  - an action plan identifying shorter term priorities and activities that will contribute to the achievement of long-term outcomes;

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- a shared commitment to implement the action plan and proposals for doing so;
  - arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the action plan, and for periodically reviewing the community strategy.
- 3.4 It is recognised that the precise way in which these components are constructed will vary from one area to another, depending on local circumstances. However, the following guiding principles should underpin all community strategies. They should:
- be prepared and implemented in partnership with other bodies – ‘local strategic partnership’;
  - engage and involve local communities;
  - be based on a proper assessment of needs and the availability of resources;
  - involve the active participation of Councillors.
- 3.5 The guidance outlines that the process by which community strategies are produced is as important as the final strategy itself. The key to an effective community strategy will be successful partnership working and community involvement throughout the process. A ‘bottom up’ rather than ‘top down’ approach is indicated.
- 3.6 Many local partnerships have already been set up to fulfil specific objectives, such as Crime and Disorder partnerships and Health Improvement Programmes, Local Agenda 21 strategies, etc.
- 3.7 In recognition of the different stages that Councils have reached, and the challenging goal that fully-developed community strategies represent, the Government does not intend to use the finalised guidance to prescribe a date for their completion. The Government does, however, expect Councils and their partners to assess progress against the requirements set out in the finalised guidance, and to set realistic and publicly agreed targets for putting in place their first community strategies.

### **Key Elements**

- 3.8 The guidance states that an effective community strategy should:
- be developed and implemented by a broad ‘community planning partnership’; the Government believes that this can best be done through the development of a ‘local strategic partnership’;
  - develop a long-term vision for the area, focussing on the outcomes that are to be achieved;
  - identify what the different public, private and voluntary bodies are doing in the area, the gaps in provision that exist and the opportunities to realign activity to better achieve the strategy’s goals;

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- chart what needs to be done to realise the long-term vision;
  - establish the shorter term goals and priorities that will contribute to long-term outcomes;
  - develop an agreed action plan for meeting those shorter-term priorities;
  - set-up systems for assessing and monitoring progress, for reassessing goals and priorities and for reporting back to the community.

3.9 Every stage of the process will require:

- strong involvement of Councillors;
- the involvement and commitment of other organisations;
- community engagement.

### **Councillors' Involvement**

3.10 The guidance envisages that whichever new political arrangement a local authority adopts as required by the Local Government Act 2000, there are clear and accountable responsibilities across both Member and officers in connection with the development of a Community Strategy and its implementation. Whichever structure a local authority adopts, the final adoption of a Community Strategy will rest with full Council.

3.11 Councillors will be involved:

- as representatives of their wards, leading and listening to formal and informal discussions and consultations, and representing these community views to the executive;
- as members of overview and scrutiny committees;
- as members of area and neighbourhood forums and committees where appropriate;
- as Council representatives on outside bodies, ensuring that their views receive full expression in drawing up the community strategy.

### **A Local Strategic Partnership**

3.12 The Government believes that the most effective way of ensuring the commitment of other organisations will be for the local authority to establish a local strategic partnership. This should comprise the key partners operating in the area that the strategy is to cover.

3.13 The partnership should provide a framework for local co-operation. While the onus will be on local authorities, in the first instance, to initiate the process and involve other appropriate bodies, they should recognise the operational autonomy of their partners.

### **Establishing a Vision**

- 3.14 Having set-up a broad local strategic partnership, the first stage in developing a community strategy will be to establish a long-term vision for the area, which will sit within the context of wider regional and national visions for better quality of life. If this is to command support, it is important that the widest possible number of local people and organisations are involved. The aim should be to arrive at a broad consensus about what the area should look like in 10 to 15 years time, and the sorts of communities in which people want to live.
- 3.15 A community strategy should not realistically attempt to cover every issue that may be relevant to a local community. Rather, authorities and their partners should seek to draw together the views of their communities to identify a number of broad priorities or themes. In doing so, they will also need to take account of what their community strategy might contribute to regional and national priorities.

### **The Implementation of Community Strategies**

- 3.16 The preparation of a community strategy should result in:
- the long-term vision for the area, focussing on achievable outcomes;
  - specific goals and priorities that will contribute to those outcomes;
  - an agreed action plan for meeting those goals and priorities.
- 3.17 The strategy should identify the key priorities for action in a Council's area. It follows that it should act as an overarching framework for other service or theme specific plans and together with other key strategic plans, such as Health Improvement Programmes, strategies should influence a wide range of activities. A community strategy will not specifically cover every local issue, but it should affect the delivery of a wide range of services, including housing, education, transport, crime-prevention, economic development, environmental health, culture and leisure, etc. A community strategy should provide a practical context for information and linking other service-specific or theme-specific plans including those already prepared with local partners. In reviewing or drawing up such plans, authorities should consider with their partners the extent to which the plans can and do contribute to the priorities in the community strategy. However, it is acknowledged that work on other plans should not be delayed until after a community strategy has been finalised. Instead, other plans should be revised later.

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- 3.18 The development of a comprehensive community strategy is seen as inextricably linked to the delivery of a local authority's duty of best value. The key local priorities identified through the community strategy should be reflected in the setting of the authority's corporate objectives, and in the establishment of authority-wide objectives and performance measures. These objectives should then help to provide the overall context and framework for an authority's approach to best value, and enable Best Value Performance Plans to give practical expression to them.
- 3.19 It is recognised that District Local Plans and community strategies need to be complementary. In preparing community strategies, local authorities will need to take into account the policies and proposals in any existing adopted local plan. Once a community strategy has been established, the local plan should provide the means of taking forward those elements of its vision and priorities that concern the physical development and use of land in the authority's area. Where local plans are themselves in need of updating, there may be scope for taking forward, in an integrated way, the alteration or replacement of the local plan alongside work on the community strategy. The consultation process and involvement of the local community required by the local plan preparation procedures can, for example, form part of the wider process of participation involved in developing a community strategy.
- 3.20 Local Strategic partnerships will need to establish systems for monitoring progress, ensuring that the activities identified in the action plan are carried out and assessing their success in addressing the priorities identified in the community strategy.
- 3.21 It will be important to establish key indicators of progress at an early stage and identify the most appropriate body to collect the data on each one. In this way, it will be possible to avoid duplication and minimise the data collection burden within the community planning partnership.
- 3.22 The guidance recognises the development of a community strategy will present particular challenges in areas with both county and district councils. It is considered that it is especially important for these different tiers of authority to work together to establish a joint approach to the preparation of community strategies. Unless county and districts work together, the process of preparing community strategies is likely to lead to considerable duplication and conflicting priorities. That might mean, for example, 'nesting' district level strategies within a broader vision and framework established at county level.

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**4 IMPLICATIONS FOR ROCHFORD DISTRICT**

- 4.1 There is no doubt that if it can be effectively delivered, community planning will provide a useful framework and direction for integrating the work of a number of local partner organisations. It will also offer the potential to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness in the use of public sector resources, through 'joined up thinking and action' at the local level. However, the development of a community strategy is likely to be a demanding task in shire areas, such as Rochford, where there are effectively three tiers of public authority – the County Council, the District, and the town and parish councils – plus numerous other partner agencies.
- 4.2 Subject to Members' views, it would appear that this Sub Committee, which brings together the three tiers of local government in the area, could provide a useful mechanism through which Members can take an overview of the Community Planning process at least in its initial stages; although it is acknowledged that other partner agencies would need to be brought on board as the process develops. In addition, it is likely that the Links Sub Committee itself may need to change, as both the County Council and the District Council develop their new political structures as required by the Local Government Act 2000. Nonetheless, the development of a Community Strategy for Rochford District would seem to be an ideal project for this Sub Committee, in whatever its eventual form, to take forward.
- 4.3 Depending on Members' views on this initiative, the partner agencies present this evening could take the matter back to their respective bodies, to secure their views prior to taking the matter forward. If it is agreed that the development of a Community Strategy or Strategies would be an appropriate focus for this Sub Committee, then a paper could be presented to the next meeting on how the matter could be progressed, the stages envisaged, and the timeframe involved. Any action needed between now and then can be taken through the separate structures, but taking care to ensure good co-ordination.

**5 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The development of a Community Strategy or Strategies will need to address local environmental issues.

**6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 The District Council has now agreed to a revised staffing structure within the Corporate Policy Unit to take into account the requirements of this area of work.

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**7      LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1      The preparation of Community Strategies by District and County Council is now a legal duty required by the Local Government Act 2000.

**8      PARISH IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1      All Parish Councils will need to be involved in the process.

**9      RECOMMENDATION**

- 9.1      It is proposed that this Sub-Committee **RECOMMENDS**

That, subject to the views of its constituent bodies, the Partnership Sub-Committee should initially be responsible for overseeing and progressing work in association with the development of a Community Strategy or Strategies for Rochford District. (CEX)

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