

**FIRST
DRAFT**

SELF ASSESSMENT

INTRODUCTION

About the District

1.1 With a population of around 78,500, the District is contained within an area of 65 square miles. It is situated in South East Essex and is bounded by the River Crouch to the north and the more urbanised areas of Southend and Castle Point to the south. The District is a mixture of town and country. The western and southern parts are more urbanised, with the northern and eastern sections more rural in character, with miles of unspoilt coast line and attractive countryside. Much of the District is designated as green belt.

1.2 The District contains three main centres of population. The largest is Rayleigh, which is located towards the west of the District. The town contains the site of an ancient castle and the visual landmark of Rayleigh Windmill built in the late 18th Century. Towards the centre of the District is Hockley which was famous at one time for its spa. Lastly, there is Rochford which is an old medieval market town and still retains some of the original street plan. The town boasts the fourth largest number of listed buildings in Essex, including Rochford Hall, one time home of the Boleyn Family.

1.3 The District is accessed via the A127 trunk road to the South and the A130 to the West, the latter linking to the A12 to the North. There are three railway stations: at Rayleigh, Hockley and Rochford. These connect to London Liverpool Street with a fast and frequent rail service. The District contains London Southend airport. Whilst the access to this airport is via Southend, the majority of the airport site, including the runways, lies in Rochford District. The airport and its environs have been included within the Thames Gateway, a national priority for regeneration.

1.4 The District is relatively affluent and is ranked 290 out of 354 on the overall deprivation index. Nonetheless, there are some local pockets of deprivation. Approximately 1.7% of the resident population are from a mixed or minority background. There are approximately 32,000 households, 86% of

which live in owner occupied accommodation, the fourth highest percentage of owner occupied in the country. The average price of all types of housing is higher than that across England and Wales generally.

1.5 8% of the remaining 14% of households, live in social rented housing (either renting from the Council, a housing association or a registered social landlord) and 6% rent privately or live rent-free. The Council has a very small housing stock and this is being further depleted by right to buy sales. As at 1st of April 2003, the total Council housing stock was 1,827 units comprising 714 OAP and sheltered units and 1,113 general needs housing units.

1.6 The population is ageing; people are living longer and there is a declining birth rate. However, this trend is higher than the national average. Up to 2011, there is a likely increase of 11.4% in the 45 years to retirement group, and 26.5% in the post-retirement group. The number of people over 75 years is forecast to rise to 7,700 by 2011, an increase by 17% on 2001 levels. An increase of 20% is forecast in those over 85 years in the period 1999-2005, compared with 3.4% for England and Wales and 8% for Essex.

1.7 The proportion of one person households is 25% compared to the England and Wales average of 30% and the proportion of lone parent households with dependent children is 4% compared to an average of 6%. The population forecast projects that the annual rate of population increase is to continue steadily at an average rate of about 0.08% up to 2011, representing some 1,200 people overall.

1.8 There is low unemployment in the District. There are 25,000 people employed accounting for 22% of the jobs in South Essex, with most employment being in utilities, construction and communications. These are mainly in a large number of small businesses. There are only a small number of large businesses – only 5 employ more than 250 staff. The majority of larger employers are engineering firms. Many of the larger employers have businesses related to London Southend Airport, which is considered a major

asset to the local economy. There are some 1,500 jobs related to the airport site mainly in the engineering sector.

1.9 A high proportion of the Rochford workforce commutes out of the District. 30% travel to work in Southend, 14% to London, 9% to Basildon and about 15% travel elsewhere outside the District (Rochford Economic Profile). In the past five years there has been a steady increase of out commuting from the District. Statistics provided by First Great Eastern show that using 1998 as the base year, out commuting by train from Rayleigh has increased by 10%, Rochford 24% and Hockley 7% (1998-2002).

1.10 The District's unemployment rate (2002) stands at 2.4%, lower than its neighbouring authorities of Castle Point, Southend and Basildon and below that for Essex. Statistics provided by Rayleigh Job Centre (2002) shows Rochford to have significantly more unfilled job vacancies relative to population than other areas locally in Essex.

1.11 84% of households have access to one or more cars, with 42% of these owning two or more cars. Nonetheless, given the rural nature of much of the District, transport remains a concern to many residents, particularly the young and the elderly.

1.12 Whilst public perception is that crime is on the increase, in recent years Rochford has consistently been one of the safest areas in the country in which to live, with recorded crime being significantly lower than both the Essex and national averages.

About the Council

1.13 Rochford District Council was formed in 1974 from the merger of Rayleigh Urban and Rochford Rural District Councils. The Council's administrative base is in Rochford whilst its civic base is at Rayleigh. However, this is now under review.

1.14 The District is fully parished and there are 14 Town/Parish Councils. A number of the Members who sit on the Council are also Parish Councillors. The Council's motto is "Our Heritage, Our Future" and much of the work we do can be seen to reflect this.

1.15 Following a review of the District's ward boundaries in 2001, the number of Councillors on the Council was reduced from 40 to 39. Following all out elections in May 2002, the Conservative Party took control of the Council. Prior to that time, the Council had been hung for a number of years, when minority administrations involving the Liberal Democrat Party and the Independents, and the Labour Party and the Independents, ran the Authority. During that time, in the vast majority of instances there was, remarkably, a considerable degree of consensus and ownership across the Parties and a number of initiatives implemented. Examples of such work include the renewal of the leisure contract, the work concerning the refuse collection, street cleansing and grounds maintenance contracts, and the town centre enhancement schemes.

1.16 Following the May 2002 elections, the Council has reverted to the system of election by thirds with elections in 2003, 2004 and 2006. The current Member composition is as follows:

Conservative – 30
Liberal Democrats – 4
Labour – 3
Independents – 1
Hawkwell Residents - 1

1.17 In line with the requirements of the Local Government Act 2000, the Council examined its decision-making processes and following extensive consultation opted for the alternative arrangements system. This was felt to represent the most appropriate structure for a district as diverse as Rochford, with its mix of urban and rural communities (Appendix 1). The system was trialled in early 2002 and became fully operational from May 2002. The new

structure is included as Appendix 2. A new constitution was agreed at that time and a copy is included as Appendix 3.

1.18 The Council employs approximately 220 staff (FTE). The organisation is headed by a Chief Executive supported by two Corporate Directors who form the Corporate Management Board with scheduled meetings on a fortnightly basis. Heads of Service have responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the various divisions. These form the Operational Management Team which meets once a month. It also meets regularly to discuss more strategic issues. A copy of the organisational structure is shown as Appendix 4. The atmosphere is friendly with a good mix of long serving, more experienced staff and new recruits,

1.19 The organisation is used to change, with regular reviews of the structure every five years or so. The last major organisational review was undertaken in 1998/1999, when the upper management and operational management levels were rationalised; a small corporate core unit and a specialist personnel unit were established and resources re-distributed to front line services such as Planning. Subsequently, there have been further minor changes to the structure both in anticipation of and in response to change e.g. the amalgamation of Council Tax and Housing Benefits. The next major management/organisational review is planned for 2005, when a number of factors will coincide i.e. retirement and succession planning and the option appraisal process of the Council housing stock will be completed.

1.20 A good working relationship exists between Members and officers. Strong leadership is demonstrated by the Leader of the Council who meets regularly with the Chief Executive and other members of the Council's Management Team as appropriate. Committee Chairmen meet with respective Heads of Service to discuss the operation and agendas for their meetings. The Chief Executive also regularly meets with the Group Leaders of the two minority parties to ensure good communication links are maintained. The majority group meets on a weekly basis to discuss the

forthcoming agenda. One of the benefits of being a small Council is that communication lines are short.

1.21 The Council has no highway powers. These rest with the County Council, who are responsible for highway matters in the District. Through negotiations around Partnership working, some decisions now rest with the District Council (around the Locally Determined Highway budget) and further negotiations are ongoing between the District Council and the County Council through the Local Service Agreement initiative to provide a more locally accountable and responsive highway service to residents.

1.22 A number of the Council's major services are provided by external contractors. These include refuse collection, street cleansing and grounds maintenance (ServiceTeam); leisure facilities management (Holmes Place); IT Service Support (Vivista). These services have been outsourced for over a decade. However, in all cases they have been subject to competitive tendering exercises in the past three years, which has enabled the Council to effectively review the level and quality of service provision in these areas, test public perception and amend its service requirements accordingly. This approach has enabled the Authority to enhance its service provision, make financial savings and in some instances achieve both.

1.23 Over a period, the Authority can show that:

- it receives the lowest amount per head of population of Government funding of all the Essex District Councils
- it spends the lowest amount per head of population of all the Essex Districts

And yet:

- Residents' satisfaction rates remain high. In the last General Satisfaction Survey (2000), the Council topped the poll in terms of overall satisfaction of the Essex Authorities (Appendix 5).

WHAT IS THE COUNCIL TRYING TO ACHIEVE?

Ambition

Does the Council have specific longer-term ambitions for the area?

2.1 The Council's longer term ambitions (10 plus years) are currently set out in the emerging Local Plan, which sets out the Council's longer term priorities and policies as planning authority to 2016. The work involved in that document has also been instrumental in helping the Authority play an extremely active role at both Member and officer level in shaping the strategic framework document for Thames Gateway South Essex.

2.2 In "Delivering the Future", which was launched in July 2003, the long term future of Rochford, in the context of Thames Gateway South Essex, is seen as an area for leisure, recreation and tourism (Appendix 6). The document recognises the District's high social-economic profile, its higher value housing and quality environment which balances the other communities in South Essex. The document was praised by the Minister for the contribution it makes towards meeting the Government's own objectives for the Thames Gateway:

"I congratulate the Partnership for its broad vision and endorse the strategic direction this framework sets in train"

2.3 The document goes on to articulate the following long term priorities for the District:

- With Southend Borough Council, resolving the future of London Southend Airport and its environs
- Developing and extending the green grid concept across the District and, in particular, the development and expansion of Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park

- Promoting the leisure and tourism potential of the District and securing new hotel provision in the area
- Promoting the enhancement of Rochford Town as a centre for “Arts and Crafts”
- Conserving and enhancing the District’s heritage, particularly in the centres of Rochford and Rayleigh
- Enhancing rail/bus interchange facilities across the District
- Securing high value-added employment

2.4 These priorities have been developed in association with other key stakeholders within the Gateway, with ODPM, EEDA and the Government Regional Office.

2.5 The Council is actively engaged with partners in the Local Strategic Partnership for Rochford on the development of a Community Strategy for the District. The intention is for this strategy to complement the work coming forward within the Thames Gateway context and the Local Plan context and to impact upon those longer term strategic documents as appropriate. As of September 2003, an extensive consultation exercise is being carried out on the draft Community Strategy (see Appendix 7).

2.6 The developing Community Strategy will feed into the Council’s Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan (more on which below) and play a part in shaping the other planning and strategic documents which fall to the District to produce e.g. Crime and Disorder Strategy, Housing Strategy, Local Transport Plan, etc.

2.7 For a number of years, the Council has set out its priorities in an annually updated Corporate Plan. Following the introduction of the Annual Best Value Performance Plan in 2000, Council took the decision to merge the two documents from 2002/2003 so that each year the Authority produces one single reference document relating to its work programme and performance.

2.8 The Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan is seen very much as a working document, outlining the Council's priorities for the forthcoming year and the next three years, so that it links in with the Council's three year rolling budget strategy. The Council has developed an approach whereby its work programme in respect of the forthcoming year is endorsed at the same time that the budget is set in February, so that the linkage between the budget and the work programme is further reinforced.

2.9 The main drivers within the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan are the Council's six Corporate aims:

- to provide quality cost effective services
- 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 and culture

2.10 These have remained unchanged over a number of years and have been universally accepted by Members when the Authority was hung and now that is a Conservative Administration. Whilst not specifically the subject of a public consultation exercise in their own right, these Corporate aims have received considerable exposure in the public arena through both the Council's regular newspaper and other publications/projects where consultation has been carried out. They are also included as a preamble to every agenda. Within the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan, they are taken beyond the aspirational stage by having a series of actions associated with each of them. These actions are as specific as possible (Appendix 8).

How realistic and robust are the Council's ambitions?

2.11 A measure of how successful the Authority has been can be gauged from the funding secured via Thames Gateway – South Essex Partnership, the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership and the various partnerships

which have aided town centre regeneration. The ambitions contained in the Capital, Asset Management and IEG strategies, have all obtained funding to aid their delivery. Investment has also been realised via the contracting out process. All these have helped and continue to help the Council to secure its ambitions (Appendix 9 for more details).

2.12 Another test of how realistic and robust the Council's ambitions are can be seen from an assessment of achievements verses ambitions over the past three years through a comparison of BVPPs since 2000 (Appendix 10).

How effective is the Council at offering leadership to the Local Community and its own services?

2.13 In part, this will be determined by feedback received from Partners, Community representatives, Members and staff during the Peer Review and Inspection process. The Council's decision to opt for the alternative political arrangements was seen as key to ensuring that the aims and aspirations of Rochford's wider community could be reflected in the political process, with active member involvement and ownership of the Council's agenda.

2.14 High public satisfaction, the lack of adverse press coverage, the low levels of complaints and a high level of community identity (as evidenced by opinion polling at the time of local Government reorganisation) all suggest a Council which is in harmony with its local communities. The role of the District Council within the context of Thames Gateway – South Essex, the Local Strategic Partnership, and the Crime and Disorder Partnership are all good examples of the Council working with partners and providing support and leadership as appropriate. On a smaller scale, the support given by the Council to the StAR partnership has helped that organisation to develop its role in terms of building a sustainable and cohesive community in the vicinity of Rochford town.

Priorities

Has the Council made clear what its priorities for improvement are, and what are not its priorities for improvement?

2.15 The Council has made clear what its priorities for improvement are for the forthcoming year and the next three years, and these are contained in the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan (Appendix ??). Longer term priorities are contained in the emerging Local Plan and Thames Gateway – South Essex Strategic Framework. The developing Community Strategy and the rationale behind the consultation draft, in terms of identifying priorities for improvement, will provide a further useful tool in this process. Improvement in this context is given the widest interpretation, relating to quality of life and the built/enhanced environment, as well as improvement to services and facilities.

2.16 In terms of what are non-priorities or lesser priorities for improvement, these are not highlighted explicitly within the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan. They are identified primarily through the budget making process, although they have also emerged through the contract renewal process, the various Best Value Reviews of Services, or through planned reviews of the level of support the Council offers in particular areas.

2.17 Particular examples of non-priority in terms of resourcing would be an “out of hours” noise abatement service, recycling above the current level of provision (unless additional Central Government support is forthcoming), our decision not to join the Essex Procurement Agency, a new swimming pool for Rayleigh and “pay on exit” car parking. The latter two started life as political priorities, but following careful evaluation, including an examination of the costs involved, are no longer priorities for the Authority.

2.18 In terms of prioritisation/non-prioritisation in areas of support, the Council has recently reviewed its membership/representation of various partnership organisations, to ensure attendance only at those which align with the Council’s own aims. Similarly, in terms of grant provision, the Council has

chosen to support those which match with the Council's own aims, rather than other criteria.

Is there a clear basis for these priorities?

2.19 The Council's priorities emerge through the Authority's corporate process and statutory requirements. The response to priorities is made within the corporate framework for resource allocation and work planning.

2.20 The main sources of the Council's priorities are as follows:

- Political ambitions expressed through the election process or raised through the Council
- Government and statutory requirements
- Feedback from public consultation
- The major contract renewal process
- Best Value reviews
- Agreements with partner organisations
- The development and adoption of specific strategies

Examples of each are listed below:

Political Ambitions

- The development of Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park
- The upgrade of the Council's sheltered accommodation

Government and statutory requirements:

- Recycling targets
- Benefits verification framework

Feedback from public consultation:

- Car parking charging and enhancement
- Changes to Revenues and Benefits administration

Major contract renewal process:

- New direction for leisure premises
- Delivery of IS/IT

Best Value reviews:

- Changes to the Planning process
- Changes in Housing Management

Agreements with partner organisations:

- Public Service Agreement with Essex County Council
- Social housing providers

Adoption of strategies:

- Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy
- Contaminated land strategy

2.21 The Council is not able to respond to all the potential demands and therefore has to decide on its priorities. Where the Council has a choice it is guided by its six corporate aims. Later in this document we show the achievement of the Council under these corporate aims.

2.22 A main driver for much of what the Council agrees to implement are Government and statutory requirements. Over a period, Council has had to focus on the delivery of these requirements relative to more local objectives,

as the budget position of the Council has restricted the choice the Council has had to make.

2.23 It is at the consideration of new resource allocations that many hard decisions need to be made on what is a priority for implementation and what is deemed a low priority and not resourced. The Council's corporate and budgetary processes facilitate this.

2.24 For a number of years the Council has agreed its finance within a budgetary process linked to the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan looking over a three year timeframe, although from the 2004/2005 budget this will roll out to five years.

2.25 New/revised items are all agreed at a single budget Council meeting so that competing priorities can be determined. Within the process, separate meetings are held with political groups to ensure that all Members understand the issues relating to the budget and any new political proposals are built into the process for consideration. CMB and Heads of Service are involved in the process to ensure that the budget produced accurately represents the needs of current and future service delivery.

2.26 The current three year budget framework includes all known aspects that affect the budget and projects future increases in Council Tax. Within budget projections the maintenance of core services is covered and depending on the acceptance of priority items additional increases in Council tax may be agreed to finance items that either have to be included or are deemed a local priority.

How effectively have priorities been communicated internally and externally?

2.27 Internally, priorities are communicated via a number of mechanisms. At one level, they are picked up directly through the Service Action Plan and Personal Development Review Process, more on which is contained in

paragraphs ?? and ?????. There are also the Quarterly Performance Reports, with their summary sheets, and the half yearly review to members on the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan. Appendix ?? gives details of the monitoring process in diagrammatic form. The intranet and staff notice boards, together with divisional and sectional meetings, are used to reinforce the messages around the Council's key priorities.

2.28 Externally, all the Council's key partners are sent copies of the Council Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan. The Council's key priorities are also highlighted in the Council's newspaper, Rochford District Matters, which is distributed to all households in the District four times per year, and are flagged up on the Council's website, the public usage of which is increasing dramatically.

2.29 In terms of building up the community's capacity for engagement, a Citizens Forum in partnership with Castle Point Borough Council and the Castle Point and Rochford Primary Care Trust has now been established and initially this is giving its view on the draft Community Strategy.

Has the Council shifted resources to match priorities?

2.30 Examples from the Council's revenue and capital budgets below provide details on the funding of the Council's priorities.

Revenue Budget

Service Area	Broadly How Funded
Contaminated Land Investigations – Government requirement	New allocation in revenue budget
Recycling – Government targets	New allocation in revenue budget plus use of capital receipts
Benefits verification framework – Government requirement	Part Government funded part new allocation in revenue budget

Homelessness – statutory responsibilities	New allocation in revenue budget
Government Concessionary fares scheme – Government requirement	New allocation in revenue budget strategy plus government funding through Revenue Support Grant
Best Value and CPA – Government requirement	New allocation in revenue budget
Crime and Disorder – Initially Local priority	Initially new allocation in revenue budget which has led onto Government funding for initiatives
Free car parking – local priority to assist in Town Centre regeneration	New allocation in revenue budget
IS/IT strategy – local determination of strategy and IEG strategy of the Government	New allocation in budget, use of capital receipts and IEG specific capital funding
Change from use of reserves to a balanced budget – essential for the financial health of the Council	Key part of the budget strategy to move to a balanced budget and to build financial capacity

Capital Programme

Service Area	Broadly How Funded
Town Centre improvements – major partnership schemes to improve environment of town centre and to add to commercial attraction	Use of capital receipts
Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park – local priority for environment	New allocation of capital receipts, grants from funding partners and new allocation in revenue budget
Public conveniences – local priority to ensure facilities are clean, modern and available	Use of capital receipts plus new allocation in budget

Service Area	Broadly How Funded
Sports Centre at former Park School – major new facility in Rayleigh to replace previous joint facility with ECC	Specific reserves created and planned use of prudential borrowing powers plus new allocation in budget
Rayleigh Windmill – Essential repairs and improvements of access to historic windmill which is the focal point of Rayleigh	Use of capital receipts to provide part funding for a potential lottery bid
Football pitch drainage – responding to customer complaints regarding playing surfaces	Use of capital receipts to provide part funding for grant support
Mill Hall works – priority improvement to leisure buildings	Use of capital receipts to fund the first stage of regenerating main leisure buildings. Our appointed Leisure contractor, Holmes Place, will undertake works to Clements Hall
West Street List Buildings – priority scheme to facilitate bringing back into use derelict buildings in the heart of Rochford village	Use of capital receipts to acquire property and then work with building trust to bring back into use
Disability Discrimination Act Works – statutory responsibilities. Main programme of works to bring main access points to the public up to standard	Use of capital receipts
Sheltered Housing upgrades – local priority for the residents of sheltered housing to remove bedsit accommodation from existing Council sheltered accommodation	Use of Major Repairs Allowance (MRA)

Focus

Does the Council stay focussed on what matters?

2.31 Analysis of the content of the Council's Best Value Performance Plans over the past three years illustrates that the Council does stay focussed and is capable of sustainable action over a period (Appendix ??). Even when a project faces difficulties, the Council has the stamina and determination to continue to progress the matter. Examples illustrating this are the Council's work around Town Centre enhancement, the work around Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park and the work in connection with the former Park School site.

2.32 The performance management system which is in place, the PDR process, the system of reporting of outstanding decisions at Committee and the Chief Executive's appraisal by the Leader of the Council and other group leaders all ensure that momentum is maintained.

2.33 Sometimes maintaining focus can be a challenge when faced with issues that have a major impact on our community. We have to deal with things outside of the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan context. For example, the issues around foot and mouth, localised flooding, etc. Nonetheless, we have demonstrated the capacity to deal with these as quickly as possible and yet at the same time, still continue to progress our main agenda.

HOW DOES THE COUNCIL SET ABOUT DELIVERING ITS PRIORITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT?

Capacity

Does the Council have the capacity and skills it needs to achieve change?

Officer Capacity

3.1 The District has one of the lowest staffing ratios per head of population in Essex, due in part to the high number of externalised services. Such a low staffing base does present challenges in terms of capacity on occasions, particularly in connection with some of the larger scale projects or major strategic commitments. Nonetheless, the Council demonstrates a “can do” mentality. Where necessary and appropriate, external consultancy advice and support have been hired e.g. re-tendering of the leisure contract, IT contract, or additional temporary and/or specialist staff have been recruited to progress change e.g. Food Safety Inspection.

3.2 As with most small Authorities, the Council is dependent upon a core group of staff within the Authority who are highly motivated and adaptable and can deliver on a range of areas. These complement those staff within the Corporate Policy Section.

3.3 We are conscious too of capacity issues around the delivery of services, particularly in areas of known skills shortage, and have responded to the challenge through appointing temporary staff, outside contractors, or restructuring divisions to facilitate training and development opportunities to attract newly qualified or partially qualified staff. Planning and Environmental Health are good examples of this.

3.4 The District has a relatively flat management structure with Heads of Service responsible for the day-to-day management of their divisions. The Corporate Directors provide a corporate overview and have a capacity to work

strategically. The Chief Executive and the Corporate Policy Section take the corporate lead on a number of issues e.g. Thames Gateway, Community Strategy, Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy, etc.

3.5 Staff need to have the right skills to deliver their work programme and within the personal development process, training and development needs are identified with staff encouraged to take up training opportunities. Approximately £87,000 is allocated for staff training, which equates to £395 per head of staff. Corporately, we have identified the need to build up our managerial/supervisory capacity and to this end, are sponsoring a number of middle ranking managers/supervisors on the Certificate of Management course. We have also identified a continuing need to skill up our staff in respect of IT and therefore have a rolling programme of staff training around the European Computer Driving License Course.

3.6 We have been extremely successful in securing funding and support from outside agencies to help with our staff training and development programmes and have been working closely with Castle Point and Rochford Adult Community College in a number of training and development areas (Appendix ..). We also recognise, given our small size, that partnership working in this area is critical and to this end have developed joint training initiatives with Maldon and Castle Point District Councils in particular (Appendix)

3.7 More recently, we have also been successful in securing funding via the Learning and Skills Council “Profit from Learning” scheme. Under this, a selection of our reception and administrative staff will receive training to achieve NVQ status in customer service and team leading.

3.8 We recognise the importance of our staff as a key resource and in July 2002 introduced measures to reward staff on an annual basis in connection with outstanding work, longevity of service, and lack of absences from the office. In this way, we are making positive steps to ensure our corporate health indicators begin to improve (Appendix).

3.9 A further demonstration of our commitment to continuing to improve our management of staff resources is our work with Essex Business Link on securing IIP recognition by August 2004. Furthermore, with Maldon District Council, we are now working with the Regional Employers Association on a Work force Development Plan for the Council which can become a model for small districts.

Members Capacity

3.10 Over a number of years we have sought to improve our Members' capacity through the development of an annual programme of Members training. This has now developed to the stage whereby there are three periods of training per year: one around induction and the other two dealing with Members competencies. Training is provided both internally by officers (around particular subjects) and by external agencies. The Regional Employers Association, for example, is used on a regular basis.

3.11 Following the review of the political management structure, the whole process of Member Training is now overseen by the Council's Standards Committee, who monitor progress, attendance and suggest amendments/additions to the programme. Each training session provided is the subject of its own evaluation and annually Members are asked for their views on the programme, the areas covered, venues used and suggestions for the future.

3.12 By adopting the alternative arrangements political management structure, attendance and Members' involvement in the decision-making process is high. There is no feeling of exclusion which might arise if an Executive Cabinet or Mayoral structure was adopted. Also, there is no feeling of a "meetings culture" with meetings simply for meetings sake.

3.13 The one area where we still need to develop is in connection with Overview and Scrutiny. The three Overview and Scrutiny Committees or their

sub-committees, where set up to look at a specific issue, can show examples of good practice in terms of policy/project development, topic investigation or scrutiny e.g. Outside Body Review, Rayleigh Market, Magnolia Road options, ECC Highways function. However, the full potential of the Overview and Scrutiny process has yet to be realised, along with a consistency of approach.

3.14 In recent Member feedback around a review of the operation of the new political management arrangements, Members themselves recognised shortcomings in the operation of the Overview and Scrutiny process, and in response to this, further Member training is planned this year on this topic, with other variations in terms of venue and reporting formats. We shall continue to work on the development of Overview and Scrutiny to ensure that its effectiveness continues to improve, in both a policy development and scrutiny context.

Are Officers And Members Clear About What They Are Responsible And Accountable For?

3.15 The constitution sets out the scheme of delegations and the roles/responsibilities of Members and officers. Job descriptions are in place for all staff. The twice yearly appraisal of the Chief Executive by the Leader, the other Group leaders and Chairman of Finance and Procedures Overview and Scrutiny Committee is used to discuss work priorities, responsibilities, performance and feedback. The Staff Personal Development Review process reinforces that on the officer side and the various information/communication processes in place e.g. Intranet, consolidate that position.

3.16 There are also clear terms of reference for the Corporate Management Board (CMB) and the Operational Management Team (OMT). The Minutes of both are placed on the Intranet for staff to access. Feedback also takes place via division and section meetings.

3.17 For Members, the terms of reference of each Committee and sub-Committee are set and agreed each municipal year, so that Members have

clarity as to their purpose. New Members (and returning Members) are also encouraged to attend the induction and training sessions when the role of the Council, the functions and responsibilities of Members, etc are clearly set out.

3.18 Whilst there are no job descriptions or formal appraisal system in place for Members, the Standards Committee, through monitoring and developing the Member training programme, regards the development of Member competencies as an essential part of its role. The Standards Committee also identifies whether each member training course is recommended or optional for attendance.

3.19 A Code of Corporate Governance is in place, reviewed on an annual basis (Appendix) and both the Asset Management and IEG statements provide clarity on the Member and Officer roles and responsibilities in these key areas.

Does the Council use partnerships to deliver complex priorities?

3.20 The Council is involved in a number of partnerships from the strategic to the local level. Examples of the former would be the work undertaken through the auspices of the Essex Local Government Association (formerly the Association of Essex Authorities) and the Thames Gateway South Essex Partnership. Examples of the latter would be the StAR partnership and the work undertaken around community transport involving the County Council and RAVS (Rayleigh, Rochford and District Association of Voluntary Services).

3.21 We have strong partnership links with the County Council, the Primary Care Trust and the local police division, as well as the neighbouring authority of Castle Point in particular, in a number of areas e.g. housing, supporting people, health improvement, crime and disorder and emergency planning. Our Local Strategic Partnership, involving a variety of agencies and overseeing the development of a Community Strategy for the District, is working well.

3.22 A full list of our key partnerships is attached (Appendix ...). We have protocols in place with our Parishes and the business community. We have signed into the County Council's Public Service Agreement with Central Government, and have responsibility for delivering a number of targets under that. We are also working with the County Council on producing a number of local service agreements in areas such as the elderly, youth services and highways. Whilst progress on these has been slower than anticipated, it is envisaged that once signed, they will help to deliver more "joined up" working on the ground.

3.23 We have a long history of using external contractors to provide a range of major services to improve service provision and secure value for money. We feel we have been extremely successful in this area, particularly in relation to leisure services.

3.24 We are an active member of the Essex Online Partnership forum and regard partnership working in this area as particularly important, given our relatively small size and capacity. Whilst we decided that it was not in our interests to sign up to the Essex Procurement Agency, given our heavy external contractor profile and the budgetary sums involved, we have recently entered into an e procurement initiative with five other Essex Authorities to establish an "Essex Marketplace" using IDeA Marketplace solution (Appendix).

Performance Management

Do Members and managers have the right mechanisms and information to enable them to both measure and manage performance effectively?

3.25 Members agree the forthcoming years work programme at the time the budget is agreed in February. The work programme is then further developed, updated and reported to members in June when the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan is agreed. Members then receive a report

on reviewing progress on the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan at the half yearly stage in October/November.

3.26 All Members also receive the digest of Quarterly Performance Reports, complete with managers and Chief Executive's summary. All Members can ask questions in respect of the information contained in these reports, which provide both volume and qualitative information.

3.27 Individual Council Committees also receive (at every other meeting) progress reports in respect of past decisions made by that Committee. The Overview and Scrutiny Committees receive reports from the Council's external contractors – ServiceTeam, Holmes Place and Vivista – twice yearly and use those meetings to review performance from our contractors.

3.28 Thus, the structure and information mechanisms are in place to ensure that Members have a clear understanding on the performance of the Authority.

3.29 At management level, individual managers are responsible for preparing their division's part of the Quarterly Performance Reports and the management summaries. These are looked at by CMB prior to distribution to all Members. Issues are taken up with individual managers where appropriate or where they relate to more than one division, collectively via OMT. Twice yearly, Service Action Plans are reported into CMB and again where particular issues emerge, these are taken up with the individual manager or via OMT where there are wider repercussions. CMB also monitors progress via the Progress reports to each individual Policy Committee.

3.30 Complaints to the Council are logged within the QPRs and are monitored by OMT every month. Each Division logs and monitors its own complaints with Heads of Service responding to issues as appropriate.

3.31 The performance culture is reinforced at management level and throughout the organisation by the PDR process commencing with the Chief

Executive's appraisal by leading Members. Divisional meetings, section meetings and communication mechanisms such as the Intranet help to reinforce the message.

Do staff know what is expected of them and do managers know if they are achieving it?

3.32 The performance mechanisms in place plus the PDR process assist us to achieve this. Nonetheless, strong management, effective communication e.g. intranet, posters, and team meetings are also important and our work around securing IIP will help us to further develop our internal communication links in particular. In addition, our work around Workforce Development will make a contribution.

Has the Council assessed the risks inherent in its plans?

3.33 In the past, the District Council has not operated a formal risk management process as such. However, in the past year, we've adopted a much more systematic approach to risk. A risk management framework has been agreed, CMB and OMT have received training in respect of risk management and a programme of training is now being rolled out across the Divisions for each Division to prepare its own Divisional Risk register. These will contribute to the development of the Corporate Risk Register.

3.34 Our original programme for completing this work proved overly optimistic given the competing work pressures upon the Authority and a more realistic implementation programme is now in place. An officer has been given specific responsibilities in respect of risk and a corporate risk management officer group has been established.

3.35 Risk Management is now incorporated where relevant as one of the key headings in our Committee reporting format to increase both officer and Member awareness in this area and is being introduced into the budget making process.

3.36 We have had in place a risk based approach to the work planning of our Internal Audit section for a couple of years and Internal Audit will be supporting and reviewing the work that we undertake in respect of risk management.

How does the Council ensure that it is making its resources work in the best way to deliver value for money?

3.37 The Council's key resources are its staff, assets, IT and cash. The trick is to line them up in such a way that over time they deliver the Council's priorities.

3.38 In three of these areas – assets, IT and cash - we already have strategic frameworks in place. Our Asset Management Plan has been assessed as good by the Government Office over the past two years and we have regularly reviewed our asset base, with the last systematic review taking place in 2000/2001. We now have a set of Asset Management Performance Indicators in place to assess against the National Framework.

3.39 We have a long term IS/IT strategy and our annual IEG strategy has received full funding of £200k per annum from the Government Office over the past two years. Our Capital Strategy has been assessed as satisfactory and over a period we've moved to stabilise our financial position. We are working on the fourth element – staff – and are preparing a workforce development plan in association with the neighbouring authority of Maldon and the Regional Employers.

3.40 The Performance Management systems we have in place help us to monitor progress and to determine whether the service we provide does represent value for money. We also use information we collect to compare ourselves with other Councils. Whilst we are not a member of an overarching benchmarking club, we do receive information on key service areas from other Authorities, e.g. Revenues, Audit. We have also effectively used the

tendering process in recent years to secure more for less. Our leisure and refuse collection, street cleansing and grounds maintenance contracts are particular examples of this.

3.41 We receive the lowest grant from Central Government of all the Authorities in Essex and our expenditure per head of population is also the lowest in the County. At the same time, residents' satisfaction levels remains high, as evidenced by the Best Value General Satisfaction Service, our relatively low complaint levels, relatively few ombudsman complaints and little adverse newspaper coverage.

WHAT HAS THE COUNCIL ACHIEVED/NOT ACHIEVED TO DATE?

Achievement in Quality of Service

What level of quality in the Council is currently achieving in its service delivery?

4.1 When comparing our performance with that of the rest of the country, almost 70% our best value performance indicators are in the top quartile. We do particularly well in respect of :

Payment of invoices (BV8)

Collection of Council Tax (BV9)

Rent Collection (BV66)

Non-urgent Housing repairs (BV73)

Planning Applications (BV109)

Crime and Disorder (BVs 126,127,173-176)

4.2 Areas where we perform less well are:

- Decision time on homeless applications (BV 67). The Council has taken steps to address this issue. It is included as part of our Public Service Agreement with Essex County Council and highlighted in our Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan. By reviewing procedures we have improved our performance. Between 2000/1 and 2002/3, we improved our performance by 100%. We are seeking further improvement over the next two years.
- Re-let times for Council Houses (BV68). Since 2000/1 we have taken steps to change procedures which has resulted in an improvement from 6.2 weeks to ? weeks. We will be seeking further improvements this year.

4.3 The Audit Commission have inspected four of the Council's services. These are:

- Asset Management – 1 star unlikely to improve. Notwithstanding this assessment our Asset Management Plan has now been assessed as good by the Government Office of the Eastern Region two years in a row and has provided a model for other Authorities to consider.
- Leisure Services – 1 star with promising prospects for improvement. This review provided the background for our Leisure Contract renewal process.
- Development Control and Building Control – 2 star with promising prospects of improvement.
- Housing Strategy and Management – 1 star with poor prospects for improvement. Notwithstanding this assessment, in the statutory customer survey carried out in 2001, 85% of tenants were either very satisfied or fairly satisfied with the services provided. In addition, an action plan has been prepared to address the issues raised and secure improvements in this area. Noticeable achievements have already been made.

4.4 The Audit Commission have also carried out an inspection of Community Safety in Essex and Rochford was assessed as good. The Inspection rated the service as two star with promising prospects of improvement.

4.5 In the External Auditor's last Annual Audit letter to the Council, PKF's conclusion was that

“The Authority continues to make good progress in dealing with the initiatives required of local Government as well as its own local challenges”.

Is the level of service delivery in line with the Council's priorities?

4.6 One of the Council's overarching aims is to provide Quality, Cost Effective services, thus in that sense the general progress made by the Authority continues to be towards that goal, as evidenced by the analysis contained in Appendix

4.7 More specifically, and in line with the External Auditor's advice, the Council has from this year picked out some key priority indicators around the customer interface, the Public Service Agreement with Essex County Council, and "missed" bins. From the feedback received on the quarterly monitoring of these indicators to date, tangible progress is being made across these areas.

Is the level of quality realistic in relation to local context and constraints?

4.8 If anything, the Authority would submit that given its low level of grant support from Central Government and low level of expenditure per head of population, the Council's performance across a range of indicators is extremely high. This level of achievement is only possible through continued member and staff commitment and focus.

4.9 A consensus view is that the level of quality is realistic providing the level of external pressures and pace of change does not continue to further accelerate to the point where capacity across the whole organisation becomes an issue.

How satisfied are communities and users with the quality of service they receive?

4.10 When the statutory general satisfaction survey was carried out in 2001, 75% of our residents stated that they were very satisfied or fairly

satisfied with our services. This was the highest in Essex and is in the top quartile in the country.

4.11 Satisfaction with services was also high relative to other authorities in respect of:

Council Housing (BV74)

Benefits service (BV 80)

Cleanliness of District (BV89)

Waste collection and recycling (BV90)

4.12 In addition, the level of complaints, ombudsman issues and adverse press coverage remains low, indicating that the Council is in harmony with its community.

Achievement of Improvement

What is improving/not improving in services and in cross cutting areas which impacts on the local quality of life? Are these improvements in line with priorities?

4.13 The Council continually strives to improve both its services and its performance in cross cutting areas. To demonstrate what has been achieved under each of the Council's six corporate aims, a number of examples are listed below, with further examples of how well the Council has done in addressing its key aims outlined in Appendix The examples listed below also outline where improvement of performance has still to be achieved.

To provide Quality, Cost Effective Services

- By managing its financial budgetary process as a three year rolling programme, the Council has managed to achieve a balanced budget.

“Reserves have been stabilised and the general financial standing at 31 March 2001 has improved” (Annual Audit letter, December 2002)

- The Council has developed web site facilities for on-line use for council tax, benefit, revenues and planning together with the introduction of e-procurement . This has improved customer contact and improved our performance on BV157.
- One of the areas where we still have concerns is the collection of housing benefit overpayments. In 2001/2 we only collected ?% of overpayments . The Council has responded to this by providing a higher level of resource. We are still seeking further improvements , but in 2003/3 we had improved our performance to ?%

To Work Towards a Safer and More Caring Community

- The District Council, through supporting the StaR partnership in Rochford, has developed a number of partnership initiatives in some of the most deprived parts of the district e.g. toy library, parenting support, StaR babies, etc.
- Through working in partnership with a Housing Association and the local Parish Council, the District Council secured the provision of a community hall in Rochford.
- By working in partnership with Essex County Council, Rochford Parish Council and Basildon Womens Refuge, a youth information and domestic violence advice facility has been provided at 57 South Street, Rochford.
- CCTV has been introduced into the local shopping areas of Hockley, Hullbridge and Rochford, following on from its introduction in Rayleigh.
- Whilst we feel we are responding well on most aspects of this corporate objective, one area of concern is BV166 (the checklist of enforcement best practice for environmental health/trading standards). Additional resources have been directed to this activity. We are confident that improvements in this service will be achieved.

To promote a Green and Sustainable Environment

- By working in partnership with the Forestry Commission, Thames Gateway South Essex and Essex County Council, we have delivered the provision of a 100 acre Country park, with plans to expand the park still further.
- The new refuse collection contract in 2000 included recycling provision. Now we have over 7000 properties on kerbside recycling and achieved the 10% recycling target ahead of the Government's deadline. The new

cleansing contract that we entered into at the same time has given greater emphasis to complying with the Environmental Protection Act.

- This corporate objective is extremely important to local residents and high standards are demanded, particularly on refuse collection. Our performance in respect of missed bins has been highlighted as an area we need to tackle. Discussions are ongoing with the contractor. They are amending their procedures to address the problem.

To Encourage a Thriving Local Economy

- Car Parking charges have been reviewed taking into account views of residents and traders.
- An Economic Development Strategy will be agreed by Council in October 2003. The aim is to develop business in the area and through working together, enable businesses, amongst other things, to contribute to a quality environment and community safety in our district.
- Through partnership with Essex County Council, the relevant Parishes, Twentyfour Seven, Government and local businesses as appropriate, we have progressed major shopping enhancement schemes in Hockley, Hullbridge and Rochford. This follows on from our successful regeneration of Rayleigh Town Centre in conjunction with Essex County Council and Rayleigh Town Council.
- Membership of the Thames Gateway South Essex partnership has already attracted funding commitments to the District in excess of £1.5m.

To Improve the Quality of Life for People in our District

- Our new Taxi Voucher Scheme has been introduced to replace the previous Dial-a-Ride scheme. It has proved extremely popular attracting users.
- Our new Leisure contract will provide over £7m of capital investment from Holmes Place in our Leisure buildings over the next 20 years.
- We have successfully completed the refurbishment of the Lavers Sheltered Housing Scheme on time and on budget.
- Our major disappointment this year was the report of our Housing Best Value inspection. We are now focussing on progressing that agenda.

To Maintain our Local Heritage and Culture

- Derelict buildings in the heart of Rochford conservation area have now been compulsory purchased and passed on to Southend Building Preservation Trust. They are now being brought back into use.
- In the past three years, we have started our Annual Heritage / Design Award initiative. This aims to encourage better design across the District.
- As part of our new Leisure contract, the Mill Hall has been refurbished and launched as a new arts and entertainment venue.

Would communities and users recognise these improvements?

4.14 A large number of the examples outlined above are extremely visible and tangible e.g. the shopping centre enhancements, the Mill Hall refurbishment. They have contributed to the general well being of the community and impacted on the environmental quality of the area.

4.15 The impact of other service specific or cross-cutting “softer” improvements e.g. web applications, domestic violence, support, community support have probably yet to be recognised by the wider community, although through specific user surveys and measures of usage e.g. volumes of transactions through the website; the Council can provide examples of where these are already making a positive contribution.

How much progress has the Council made?

4.16 From the information outlined above and contained in the supporting Appendices, the Council would submit that significant progress has been made across a range of areas.

Investment

Is the Council putting the right building blocks in place which will enable future improvements in services and cross cutting issues?

4.17 With the District Council having a relatively small budget and limited capital resource, partnership working is essential. We have a good record of working in partnership and through mechanisms such as the Local Strategic Partnership, Thames Gateway South Essex, the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership and the Joint Health Board, we will continue to maintain and develop our capacity through working with partners in key areas.

4.18 Partnerships such as “Essex on Line” with the County Council, other Districts and County agencies are also seen as key. The Local Service Agreement with Essex County Council also promises to improve local service delivery and capacity. Through contracting out all of our major services, we have ensured continuing capital investment in what are perceived as key services areas.

4.19 The Council fully recognises the need for quality, well motivated staff. There is an established Performance Development Review system that is directly linked through to the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan. The Council is producing a Workforce Development Plan for the organisation and is aiming to achieve Investors in People status across the whole authority by August 2004.

4.20 The Council also recognises that all Members need to be fully equipped to carry out their tasks. A comprehensive Member training package has now been introduced and is being continually developed.

Is the Council securing the necessary resources for investment?

4.21 The Council would point to its track record in terms of securing funding streams from Central Government, despite the District’s relative affluence e.g.

Crime and Disorder funding support, IEG Funding Support, Thames Gateway Funding Support, Revenues and Benefits Funding Support; and other partner organisations, such as the County Council and Health, as a demonstration that it can obtain the necessary resources for investment.

4.22 That said, the Council starts from a very low base in terms of the general level of grant funding support from Central Government and in recognition of this, the Council has been an active member of TACFIG, the Town and Country Financial Issues Group of Town/Country District Councils. As a result of the work of TACFIG, there has been some recognition of the problems faced by districts which are neither particularly urban nor rural by Government, in terms of changes in respect of last year's grant settlement. As a result, the Authority saw its position improve from fourth lowest grant settlement nationally to ninth lowest. Nonetheless, a further improvement in grant funding would have a noticeable effect on the ability of the Council to deliver even more service and cross cutting improvements to its residents.

Does the Council have a track record of opening itself up and responding to internal and external challenge?

4.23 Whilst the Council has not undertaken a Peer Review through the IDeA in the recent past, the Council has adopted an open and transparent approach in respect of all the Best Value Reviews carried out and also in connection with the BFI Inspection process. All inspections have remarked on the openness and friendliness of staff. When reports have been produced following external inspection, these have been positively received by the Council and actioned accordingly. The Council has on occasions employed consultants to examine the Council's services and operations and provide a challenge to the way those services are delivered.

4.24 Internally, staff are invited to contribute to the way their services are delivered and the mix of staff between old and new helps secure this. Managers are encouraged to look at their areas of service operation and

within existing budget parameters, make changes as appropriate, in an attempt to secure improved service delivery.

IN THE LIGHT OF WHAT THE COUNCIL HAS LEARNT, WHAT DOES IT PLAN TO DO NEXT?

Learning

How self-aware is the Council about what it has done well and the problems it still faces?

5.1 Despite our relatively small resource base and low grant settlement from Government, we have managed to innovate and continue to deliver our agenda.

5.2 Nonetheless, whilst demonstrating a “can do” mentality, we are at times “over optimistic” in terms of what we can achieve within a specific timeframe given our resource base. As we develop more SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timely) targets and measure ourselves against these, we are becoming more realistic in this respect.

5.3 Our strategic framework is quite well developed but needs more explicit integration. We are strong in terms of the Thames Gateway South Essex Strategy and our emerging Local Plan, but we still have some more work to do on the Community Plan and to ensure that it links in with our own Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan, which we recognise we need to roll out to a five year time frame.

5.4 We believe we are particularly strong in a number of the “process” areas e.g. Finance, Council Tax, Planning, Benefits and have made significant strides in moving to a more web-based environment, with more opportunities for customer access via the web e.g. Council Tax ‘On Line’, NNDR ‘On Line’, Payments ‘On Line’, Planning ‘On Line’. We’ve managed these changes with a minimum of problems.

5.5 Whilst not moving to an executive/non-executive political decision making structure, we think we implemented the alternative arrangements structure smoothly and managed the transition well. We still need to do some work around the Overview and Scrutiny process but that is continuing to

develop. Our Member training structure is well established and we've proved more that capable of handling large numbers of new Members in one go, as happened with "all out" elections in May 2002.

5.6 We consider we've achieved a good balance between running services ourselves and contracting out. Whilst a number of our services are externalised, we believe we've kept enough core staff to be able to deliver quality services and respond effectively to new challenges. In February 2003 the Revenue and Benefit team was restructured to provide a combined service. In this reorganisation resources were released in order to implement part of the Council's e-Government initiative to give citizens on-line access to their Council Tax and Business Rate accounts and for them to pay these accounts using direct contact facilities. However, we do recognise we need to do more in terms of systematically reviewing our capacity to achieve all that we wish to achieve, and review our work programme accordingly.

5.7 We do have some issues of succession planning in the next two years and need to build up our management/supervisory capacity over a period. Our workforce development plan will help us to do this. The next major organisational change is planned for 2005.

5.8 The District has completed and implemented many positive outcomes from not just the Best Value Review process but also from other reviews of its service areas, with high levels of Member ownership. We have learnt that the Best Value Review process can be lengthy with significant inputs. Examples of where the Best Value process has worked well include Leisure and Planning. The Housing Best Value Review was valuable as a process in terms of systematic review but the outcomes have yet to be fully realised. Good examples of our service operation review process include our withdrawal from Dial-a-Ride and its replacement with taxi vouchers, including the promotion of disabled friendly vehicles.

5.9 Whilst recognising we still have to progress in terms of Housing Strategy and Housing Management, we were particularly disappointed with

the outcome of the Inspection around that Best Value Review. We think we have made solid progress on the housing agenda since that inspection took place.

5.10 The more cross-cutting and wide ranging reviews present us with particular problems in terms of capacity and work programming. We are looking to the CPA to provide us with more focus as to where we particularly need to commit our resources in terms of improvement.

5.11 Maintaining momentum for improvements in what is a marathon rather than a sprint is a challenge, particularly when the course changes or new obstacles are placed en route! Life is never dull but at times a period of stability to allow for consolidation would be welcome.

5.12 Partnership working has been an area of continuous growth and one which we've embraced across a range of areas. Often the District Council's role is pivotal in partnerships and we carry the additional burden in administrating and facilitating the partnership grouping. It is important that we avoid entering into partnerships for partnerships sake, and ensure we are clear in terms of responsibilities and the outcomes required. Also, not to forget that these partnerships should be there for the benefit of the customer/user, whoever that might be. At times, the relationships in which we find ourselves can lack clarity, a level of trust, suffer from communication issues and varying commitment/participation levels. We need to regularly review the many partnership arrangements we have in place to ensure that they continue to deliver effectively to our community. Our recent member review of outside bodies and our involvement/representation on them is a good example of the Council's emerging work in this area.

5.13 We continue to work on our mechanics for securing Community engagement/involvement. Engaging our tenants remains an issue, although we have taken steps to redress this by the appointment of a dedicated Tenant Participation Officer who has already trebled attendance at meetings. Voting statistics appears to suggest that people appear not to be that interested in

local government, unless there is strong dissatisfaction with the Council or particular local issues affect them directly. We are actively involved with the other Councils in Essex in promoting Young Peoples' interest in local democracy. It will be interesting to see if the formation of a Youth Assembly in Essex helps encourage more young people to subsequently take an interest in the District and County elections. Some of the Parishes in the District are considering establishing their own Youth Forums and the District Council is currently reviewing its own policies and services in relation to young people.

5.14 Responding to new legislation and other new Government initiatives is a problem where extra resources are not provided, particularly given Members' wishes to restrict Council Tax rises to as low a figure as possible. Responding to rising residents expectations can present pressures too, particularly as the means of access to the Council's services continues to grow.

Has the Council learnt from its own experiences and made changes in the light of this?

5.15 The Council has a good track record of piloting new initiatives, where appropriate, before rolling them out across a further part or the whole of a service area. In this way, we can learn and adapt/change our practices and procedures as we go along, or before we extend the service. Good examples include the piloting project around kerbside recycling (Appendix) and the current pilot regarding the scheme managers in our sheltered housing accommodation (Appendix). In our IT applications, we view software systems elsewhere and then run test systems before putting them into operation e.g Council Tax Payment On-Line, 'E-procurement'.

5.16 Where things do go wrong, we are not afraid to look at the reasons why and change things as a result. The contract overrun around the demolition of the Rayleigh Sports and Social Club and its laying out as a car parking area led to us reviewing our contract systems and procedures and making changes

to the way that we do things in this area. In renewing our major contracts, we reflected on our experiences and ensured that the new arrangements meet our changing needs and aspirations, as well as addressing past problems.

5.17 We have learnt, for example, not to put out extra communication with our Council tax bills. In March 2003, we put details of our revised refuse collection dates for the statutory holiday periods out with our Council tax bills. This resulted in a significant increase in public callers querying the date of collection around the Easter Bank Holiday period, indicating that the information we sent out was not read. We have now reverted to more tried and trusted methods including the use of our website.

Does the Council actively learn from others and make changes as a result?

5.18 The Council has always employed a “never re-invent the wheel” approach and has a history of looking at good practice elsewhere, and where appropriate, applying it to this Authority. A wide range of examples include our recent bank tendering exercise (where we learnt from Brentwood); using our ‘On Line’ forms package for ‘e’ citizens change of address (where we learnt from North Norfolk); our ‘e’ procurement learning with the County and other Districts; and our internal audit work with Castle Point.

5.19 The Council has also adopted an open approach in terms of other Authorities coming to the Council to discuss various aspects of its approach to services. Again, recent examples include “Our Home” Housing publication (Wealden), our Planning Systems (East Cambs) and our ‘e citizen’ module (Breckland). Through both approaches, the Council can learn from and share its own knowledge/expertise with others.

5.20 The Council is also a member of benchmarking clubs for some of its services e.g. Revenues, Audit, and through the member, professional and operational networks across Essex and the wider area, is able to learn and

contribute at various levels, to ensure that the services operated at Rochford continue to improve (Appendix)

Is learning shared throughout the Council?

5.21 Whilst learning is shared within sections and divisions, the learning experiences tend to be vertical rather than horizontal. This assessment along with the work around Investors in People, has identified a need for the Authority to put in place better mechanisms to ensure that learning is shared across the Council. Whilst there are examples of good practice, more could be done to improve communications and access in this area.

Future Plans

Does the Council have robust future plans and strategies, which set out a sustained focus to achieve the Council's ambitions?

5.22 In recent years, the Council has developed a number of plans and strategies, which together provide a focus for the Authority's activities. The Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan brings these together in a three year action plan which links in with our three year budget framework.

5.23 We recognise the need to develop a longer term perspective, and a more transparent, linked approach to our strategic framework. Thus from this year we are aiming to move towards a five year budget timeframe, which in turn will be reflected in next year's Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan being rolled out to cover a five year period.

5.24 The main gap in the Council strategic framework is the absence of an approved Community Strategy. However, work is well advanced on the preparation of this. Adoption by the Local Strategic Partnership is anticipated by March 2004. Once agreed, those elements specifically relating to the District Council will be fed into both the Council's planning and budget making processes. In effect, the Community Strategy will shape the future budget, the Council's overarching aims and specific content of the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan. In addition, it will impact on relevant aspects of other parts of the Council's strategic agenda.

5.25 The work on the Community Strategy will enable us to sharpen our focus in terms of the identification of priorities and especially non-priorities. The plan is to identify non-priorities much more explicitly in this year's budgetary process and in next year's Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan. We also propose to make further changes to our performance management/monitoring system to highlight more explicitly the priorities identified within the Member arena.

Is the Council addressing areas where it has not achieved what it wanted to?

5.26 By enhancing the emphasis given to priorities, more explicitly identifying non-priorities, and changing our performance management monitoring systems as outlined above, the Council will be putting in place robust arrangements to ensure that achievements are met. Already over a period the Council has developed more SMART targets and work in this respect will continue. Within our Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan and our Quarterly Performance Reporting system, we have started to highlight key performance indicators e.g. customer interface, County PSA targets, “missed bins”, to maintain focus on improvements in these areas. We aim to further reinforce our performance management culture.

5.27 In addition, we will continue to address areas requiring improvement. Over the past five years, for example, we have made significant improvements in the delivery of our planning service, reflected in our high level of Planning Delivery Grant, and our Planning Performance indicators over the period. More recently, evidence of improvement can be seen from the progress already made in addressing those issues identified by the Best Value inspectors in their assessment of our Best Value Review on Housing strategy and Housing Management.

Are staff, partners and communities effectively engaged in planning for the future?

5.28 Our work in connection with securing Investors in People recognition and preparing our workforce development plan will help to ensure that our staff are engaged in planning for the future.

5.29 Our commitment to partnerships and the mechanisms which underpin these, will enable us to maintain and development our engagement with

partners for the future. Examples include the work that we do with partners on the LSP, the Crime and Disorder strategy, the Health agenda and Thames Gateway.

5.30 We already engage with our Community in a number of ways: through our Members; through Rochford District Matters; through the press; through local radio; through individual consultation exercises; and customer feedback mechanisms. Our recent work around some “sensitive” special needs housing sites and our engagement with the local community in that process demonstrate further our commitment in this area. Our move to establish a Citizens Panel in association with the Castle Point Primary Care Trust and Castle Point Borough Council will provide us with yet another mechanism to engage with our Community on a regular basis.

How will the Council ensure that it has the capacity for further improvement?

5.31 The regular and systematic review processes around budget making and the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan will help us focus on this issue. In addition, the work around the Workforce Development Plan and Member training will help us ensure that two of the key components of local government – staff and Members – continue to receive training and development support required.

5.32 Our work with other Partners will also help us to secure the capacity required to enable further improvement across the District. New mechanisms such as Local Service Agreement initiative with the County offer the potential to unblock resources and deliver service improvement through joint working and clarification of roles and responsibilities whilst the recent establishment of the Rochford Delivery Vehicle Working Party under the auspices of the Thames Gateway South Essex offer the prospect of further funding streams.

Does the Council regularly reassess its future plans and capacity in line with changing national and community priorities?

5.33 The Council already has mechanisms in place as outlined above around the budget making process and Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan to regularly reassess its future plans, resources, capacity, etc in line with changing national and community priorities. However, it is apparent from this assessment and the attached action plan that more could be done to ensure the process is as systematic, effective and efficient as possible to ensure that improvement and change remain on the agenda.