

CPA SELF ASSESSMENT:

INSPECTION COPY

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FOREWORD

Welcome to Rochford District Council's Self-Assessment. The process of compiling this report has proved a valuable learning exercise for the Authority. In a transparent way it has helped us critically examine both our strengths and weaknesses, and the high level action plan produced as a result provides the Council with a framework to secure continuous improvement over the next three years.

As an Authority, we believe that overall our strengths outweigh our weaknesses. As our external Auditors, PKF, remarked in their Annual Audit letter dated November 2003:

"Overall, the Authority has performed well during the year, dealing well with both the local and national priorities".

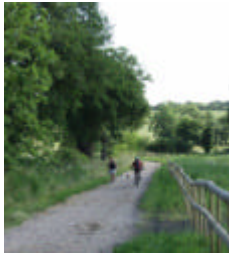
We accept there are areas we need to continue to develop, for example around the area of Risk Management, but nonetheless progress is being made. Our Peer Review has complimented the Authority on punching above its weight in its dealings with Partners and says the Authority has a dedicated, enthusiastic and forward looking workforce. It also remarks that the Authority is at a crossroads. It is therefore important that we use the CPA process and the high level action plan to move forward in a positive fashion.



Cllr Peter Webster
Leader of the Council



Paul Warren
Chief Executive



INTRODUCTION

About the District

With a population of around 78,500 within an area of 65 square miles, Rochford District is bounded by the River Crouch to the north and the urban areas of Southend and Castle Point to the south. Much of the District is designated as green belt, with miles of attractive coastline, salt marshes and unspoilt countryside complimenting the market towns of Rayleigh and Rochford.

The District contains three principal centres of population. The largest is Rayleigh, located in the west of the District. The town contains the site of an ancient castle and landmark 18th century windmill. In the centre is Hockley, with its once famous spa and then Rochford, a medieval market town that retains much of the original street plan.

Each of the three towns has a railway station on the Liverpool Street line with a fast and frequent rail service to London. Road links are provided by the A127 trunk road to the South of the District and the A130 to the West. Whilst the access to London Southend Airport is in Southend, the majority of the airport site, including the runway, lies in Rochford District. The airport and its environs are included within the Thames Gateway, a national priority for regeneration.

86% of the District's 32,000 households are owner occupied, the fourth highest percentage in the country. Of the remaining, 8% 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 average price of all types of housing is higher than that across England and Wales generally. The District is relatively affluent, 289th out of 354 on the overall deprivation index. Nonetheless, there are some local pockets of deprivation.

Approximately 1.7% of the resident population is from a mixed or minority background.

As at 1st of December 2003, the Council's housing stock was 1,778 units, comprising 665 OAP and sheltered units and 1,113 general needs housing units.

The population is ageing; people are living longer and there is a declining birth rate. This trend is higher than the national average. For example, an increase of 30% is forecast in those over 85 years by 2011, compared with 3.4% for England and Wales and 8% for Essex.

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 a resident population of 80,300 by 2011.

There is low unemployment in the District: 2.4%. 39,000 residents are in employment. There are 21,000 jobs in the District with the retail/wholesale and the service sectors predominating, mainly within small businesses. 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.

There are few large businesses – only 5 employ more than 250 staff. The majority of these are engineering firms. Many of the bigger employers have businesses related to London Southend Airport where there are some 1,500 jobs mainly in the engineering sector.

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).

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

Public perception is that crime is on the increase but, 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. Recent survey data arising from the Community Strategy consultation reveals that 96% of residents feel safe during the daytime. However, that decreases to 66% after dark.

About the Council

Rochford District Council's motto is "Our Heritage, Our Future". We feel it is apt in that it reflects our approach to much that we do.

With its roots going back to the ancient administrative area of the Rochford Hundred, the present Council was formed in 1974 from the merger of Rayleigh Urban and Rochford Rural District Councils. The formers' Council Chamber provides the civic base of the authority in Rayleigh while services are managed from offices in Rochford. This dichotomy has been the subject of an accommodation review, with an action plan now in place.

There are 14 Town/Parish Councils covering the whole District and a number of District Council Members also serve as Parish Councillors.

Following a review of its ward boundaries in 2001, the size of the Council was reduced from 40 to 39 members. All out elections took place in May 2002, and the Conservative Party gained control. For a number of years before then a series of minority administrations involving the Liberal Democrat Party, Labour Party and Independents ran the Authority. Nevertheless, during that time, there was a significant degree of consensus and ownership across the Parties on a large number of issues. Examples 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.

Following the May 2002 elections, the Council returned to the system of election by one third with elections in 2003, 2004 and 2006. The current Member composition is as follows:

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

As required by the Local Government Act 2000, the Council examined its decision-making processes and, following extensive consultation, unanimously decided to retain the Committee system and operate under "alternative arrangements". This was felt to represent the most appropriate structure for a district as diverse as Rochford, with its mix of urban and rural communities (RDCSA 1). The system was trialed in early 2002 and became fully operational from May 2002. The new structure is included as RDCSA 2. A new constitution was agreed at that time and a copy is included as RDCSA 3.

The Council employs 220 staff (FTE). The organisation is headed by a Chief Executive with the support of two Corporate Directors who form the Corporate Management Board (CMB) 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 (OMT) with scheduled meetings once a month for operational issues and regular meetings at other times to discuss more strategic matters. A copy of the organisational structure is included as RDCSA 4. The atmosphere in the authority is friendly with a good mix of long serving, more experienced staff and new recruits.

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 1998/99. The next major management/organisational review is planned for completion by 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.

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 Committees. 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 the Council is that communication lines are short.

The Council has no highway powers. These rest with Essex County Council, which is responsible for such matters in the District. Through negotiations around Partnership working, some limited decisions are taken by the District Council (around the Locally Determined Highway budget) although implementation remains with the County.

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, all 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. The approaches adopted by the Council in the renewal process has enabled the Authority to enhance service provision, make financial savings or achieve both, as well as enter into a beneficial profit share arrangement in the case of the leisure contract.

We have no blue collar staff as such and hence all our repair and maintenance work, in relation to our housing stock, our office accommodation and other built assets e.g. car parks, play areas is also undertaken on an external contracting basis.



WHAT IS THE COUNCIL TRYING TO ACHIEVE?

Ambition

The Council is a multi-functional organisation whose main ambition is to deliver a range of services as effectively and efficiently as possible and at the same time, satisfy wider aspirations in terms of the environment, quality of life and economic wellbeing.

For a number of years, the Council has set out its ambitions in an annually updated Corporate Plan. The format and content of this was changed in 1999/2000, when following stakeholder consultation, a new Corporate Plan was produced, in which six objectives for the Council were made explicit:

- 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

The Corporate Plan has never been simply a “plan to plan” but is very much a “plan to delivery”. Linked to a three-year budget strategy, it outlines the Council’s key actions and priorities under the six objectives over a three-year period (RDCSA 5).

Under the six key objectives, the Council has worked towards/continues to work towards the deliver of the agenda opposite.

The Peer Review endorsed the Council’s working in relation to quality of life in particular and has highlighted the Authority’s strong leadership.

The major external contracts, which run from seven years to twenty years, have also been shaped by the Council’s objectives and seek to deliver over the longer term in a number of key areas.

Quality, Cost Effective Services

Ensuring that the Council’s services continue to develop and improve with more and more ranked in the top quartile. Also, much work has focussed on improving access to information and services through delivery of the “e” government agenda. The workforce is key to this agenda.

Safer, More Caring Community

The focus has been on Community Safety, along with Partnership working. Housing has also dominated the agenda and this work continues to grow.



Celebrations at the Lavers sheltered housing after refurbishments are completed

Green and Sustainable Environment

The emphasis has moved from improving our recycling rate to meet Government targets to focus on land use planning and the preparation of a new replacement Local Plan.

Thriving Local Economy

Town centre enhancement, coupled with car parking management and charging has been a key area of work. Through the production of the Economic Development Strategy, the Council is looking to further clarify and develop its role. A major and growing area of work relates to the Thames Gateway South Essex.

Quality of Life

The delivery of the Leisure Contract and through this the improvement of facilities, along with the development of sports and arts initiatives, is a key area of work. Working with Health Partners on the provision of services and facilities for the community has and remains an important and growing area of work. The management of our woodlands and the development of Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park are also important activities.

Local Heritage and Culture

Work has concentrated on tackling individual buildings and structures, introducing an awards scheme for good design, developing the arts and cultural agendas, and developing issues around tourism.

Since their adoption, the corporate objectives have received considerable exposure in the public arena both through the Council's regular newspaper and other publications/projects where consultation has been carried out. They also appear as a preamble to every Committee agenda.

An annual Best Value Performance Plan was introduced in 2000 and in 2002 the Council took the decision to merge this with the Corporate Plan so that each year the Authority produces one single reference document relating to its work programme and performance.

The Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan remains very much a working document, outlining the Council's priorities for the forthcoming year and following two years, linked into the Council's three year rolling budget strategy (5 years from 2004/05 – see page 8). The Council has developed its approach so that its work programme in respect of the forthcoming year is endorsed at the same time that the budget is set in February, further reinforcing the linkage between the budget and the work programme. At that Council meeting in February, the Leader of the Council sets out his/her vision for the forthcoming year and beyond (RDCSA 6).

The Council's very long term ambitions (10 plus years) as an area for leisure, recreation and tourism are most clearly articulated in the emerging new replacement 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 helped the Authority play an extremely active role at both Member and officer level in shaping the strategic framework document for Thames Gateway South Essex.

"Delivering the Future", published in July 2003, confirms ambitions for the long-term future of Rochford in the context of Thames Gateway South Essex (RDCSA 7). The document was praised by the Minister, Mr Keith Hill, for the contribution it makes towards meeting the Government's own objectives for the Thames Gateway.

Nonetheless, the Peer Review has identified that there might be some confused messages emanating from the Authority around its key ambitions. Consequently, the Council will use the budgetary process, the emerging Community Strategy and the developing

replacement Local Plan in particular to further clarify and reinforce its ambitions both in the medium and longer term.

The Council is actively engaged with its partners in the Local Strategic Partnership for Rochford on the development of a Community Strategy for the District. The draft has recently been the subject of extensive consultation and work is now underway on the preparation of a finalised strategy for approval by the Partnership in March 2004. This Strategy will impact on and complement both the Local Plan and proposals for the District coming forward within the context of the Thames Gateway (see RDCSA 8).

The developing Community Strategy will feed into the Council's Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan and will help shape 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. As the Peer Review has remarked, it is important that the Council translates its emerging strategies into action.

How realistic and robust the Council's ambitions are can be tested by an assessment of achievements against ambitions over the past three years through a comparison of BVPPs since 2000 (RDCSA 9).

Feedback received from Partners, and Community representatives, (RDCSA 10) has been positive. The Peer Review has praised the Authority for its commitment to partnership working. 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.



Consultation for Community Strategy using the council's Mobile Exhibition Unit

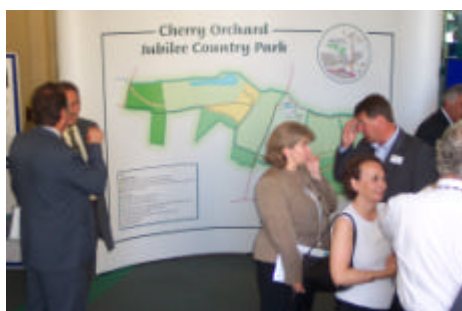
The role of the District Council within the context of Thames Gateway – South Essex, the Local Strategic Partnership, and the Crime and Disorder Partnership are all good examples of the Council working with partners and providing support and leadership as appropriate. On a smaller scale, the support 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 in line with the Council's ambitions in that area. As the Peer Review team has remarked, it is important for the Council to continue to develop and assess future partnership opportunities.

Priorities

The Council's priorities for improvement are contained in the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan. 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, 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.

In terms of what are non-priorities or lesser priorities for improvement, these 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, such as Dial-A-Ride, for example.

Particular examples of non-priority in terms of resourcing would be an "out of hours" noise



RDC display at Thames Gateway launch

abatement service, recycling above the current level of provision (unless additional Central Government support is forthcoming), the building of a multi-storey car park at Websters Way in Rayleigh, the development of 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 seen as such.

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 objectives. Similarly, in terms of grant provision, the Council has chosen to support those which match with the Council's own objectives, rather than other criteria.

Nonetheless, as the Peer Review team has stated, it is important for the Council to continue to understand the implications of identifying certain activities as low priorities.

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 to be made.

From the 2004/05 budget, the Council is rolling out its budget over a 5 year rather than 3 year timeframe. This will be reflected in the 2004/05 Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan. Such an approach will enable the Council to consider and make budgetary decisions over a longer timeframe.

New/revised budgetary items are agreed at a single budget Council meeting so that competing priorities can be determined. 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 also involved to ensure that the budget produced accurately represents the needs of current and future service delivery. From this year a joint member/management awayday is being held to consider budgetary issues for 2004/2005 and the 5 year budgetary strategy.

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 (PDR) Process, more on which is outlined later. 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. RDCSA 11 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.

Externally, all the Council's key partners are sent copies of the Council's 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 a year, and are flagged up on the Council's website, the public usage of which is increasing dramatically (see page 16).

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
Recycling – Government targets	New allocation in revenue and capital budget following consideration of priorities at Council in January 2001. The choice was between a lower tax increase and the start of recycling.
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 as a priority to increase economic activity to the Town Centres. Choice of a lower tax increase.
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. Assisted by savings delivered through the new leisure contract tendering process. This has been managed through our long standing three year rolling budget programme

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 following disposal of land in Hockley and the re allocation of funds previously held for swimming pool development.
Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park – local priority for environment	Use of capital receipts from disposal of non-strategic assets has resulted in the levering in of significant levels of grants from funding partners.
Sports Centre at former Park School – major new facility in Rayleigh to replace previous joint facility with ECC	Specific reserves created as a result of refund of NNDR overpayment. Planned use of prudential borrowing powers plus new allocation in budget. Broad Tax options agreed to include revenue impact of this item.
Mill Hall works – priority improvement to leisure buildings and adjoining car park	Capital receipts from disposal of non-strategic assets used to fund the first stage of regenerating main leisure buildings within the new leisure contract, together with reallocation of funds held for the new swimming pool proposals. New contract will deliver remaining improvements.

Other operational examples of the Council shifting resources to meet priorities include the reallocation of staff within the Document Production Unit and staffing resourcing in connection with our work around health and safety enforcement (see page 11).

Focus

RDCSA 9 illustrates that the Council does stay focussed and is capable of sustainable action over a period. 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. The Peer Review has flagged up our well established external contracting and reorganised senior management structure as key elements of retaining our focus.

The existing strategic framework, the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan and the budgetary process all help the Council to stay on track. This is complemented by the performance management system, 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 these ensure that focus is maintained. The improvements outlined later in this document (see Future Plans) should reinforce this.

Sometimes staying focussed can be a challenge when faced with unplanned issues that can have a major impact on the community. For example, emergency planning issues such as foot and mouth (we had the second case in the country), localised flooding, etc, can make demands on resources and impact on work programmes at particular periods. Similarly, changes like the Housing Benefits Verification Framework and Performance Standards can come in at very short notice. Through rising to such challenges, we have demonstrated the capacity and ability to deal with such matters as quickly as possible and at the same time, still continue to progress our main agenda.

Nonetheless as the Peer Review team pointed out, we need to build in the need to re-visit Government priorities and ensure appropriate linkages to the Council's objectives.



Rochford District Matters, the Council's quarterly newspaper



The newly created Cherry orchard country park

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

Capacity

Due in part to the high number of externalised services, the District has one of the lowest staffing ratios per head of population in Essex. 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, as the Peer Review has pointed out, the Council has a loyal, committed and enthusiastic workforce and 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. training and development.

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 staff including newly qualified or partially qualified. Planning and Environmental Health are good examples of this.

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.

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 a continuing need to improve the skills of our staff in respect of IT.

We have been extremely successful in securing funding and support from outside agencies to help with our staff training and development. We have been working closely with Castle Point and Rochford Adult Community College in a number of training and development areas. We have recently 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 receive training to achieve a National Vocational Qualification in customer service and team leading. We’ve also received support under the Housing Benefit Performance Standards fund to improve the skills of our staff in that service area.

We also look at capacity in terms of job relevance and the skills required. For example, the review of the Document Production Unit in 2002/03 was carried out as a result of the apparent diminishing work for word-processor operators. Priority areas of work identified in the Corporate Plan were the need to support the development of the website and intranet, and to work towards the corporate electronic management of information and the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act. As a result,



Staff receiving outstanding effort awards from the Chairman of the Council

staffing and resource has been redirected from word processing into these two areas of priority. Similarly, staff resources were moved to health and safety enforcement activities which were identified as a priority following an external audit. This was achieved by externalising a large part of the food premises inspection programme.

The Peer Review has pointed to the need to monitor the consequences of multi-tasking.

In July 2002 we introduced measures to reward staff on an annual basis in connection with outstanding work, service commitment,

and lack of absences from the office (to address staff sickness). In this way, we are taking positive steps to ensure our corporate health indicators improve.

We are now working with Essex Business Link on securing Investors in People (IIP) recognition by August 2004. With Maldon District Council, and with support from the Regional Employers Association, we are preparing a Workforce Development Plan for the Council which can become a model for districts. This should be well advanced by the time of the CPA Inspection.

There are three periods of member 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 Member Training process is well supported by Members and is 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.

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. The Peer Review identified Members as strong, caring and ward based with good linkages to their community.

An area we need to continue to develop is 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, Rayleigh Town Centre traffic issues and animal welfare. In recent Member consultation feedback, Members themselves recognised shortcomings in the operation of the Overview and Scrutiny process. In response to this, further Member training is taking place on this

topic, with other variations in terms of venue and reporting formats.

The Peer Review raised the issue of all Councillors being members of the Authority's Planning Services Committee and have questioned whether this is the best use of member time. The size and functions around this Committee were considered at the time of the development of the new constitution but given the Review team's observations, will be reviewed again at the start of the next municipal year.

The Council's 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 PDR process reinforces this on the officer side along with the various information/communication processes in place e.g. Intranet.

For Members, the terms of reference of each Committee and sub-Committee are set and agreed each municipal year. A Code of Corporate Governance is in place, reviewed on an annual basis (RDCSA 12) and both the Asset Management and IEG statements provide clarity on the Member and Officer roles and responsibilities in these key areas.

The Council is involved in a number of partnerships from the strategic to the local level (RDCSA 13). 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 for Voluntary Service).



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, drugs and alcohol, 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.

We have protocols in place with our Town Council/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, once signed, they will deliver a more cohesive service.

We are an active member of the Essex Online Partnership and regard partnership working in this area as particularly important, given our size and capacity. We have entered into an e procurement initiative with five other Essex Authorities to establish an "Essex Marketplace" using the IDeA Marketplace solution.

The Peer Review has acknowledged that in partnership terms, we are punching above our weight. Nonetheless, we recognise the need to continue to explore partnership opportunities and systematically review existing partnership groupings.

By managing its financial budget as a three year rolling programme, the Council has achieved and is now maintaining a balanced budgetary position in line with External Auditor's recommendations

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

The Council starts from a very low base in terms of the general level of grant funding support from Central Government.

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 the 2003/2004 grant settlement. The Authority saw its position improve from ninth lowest grant settlement nationally to fourteenth lowest. Nonetheless, the Council still receives the lowest grant in Essex by approximately £5.50 plus per head of resident population (the next lowest is Uttlesford). 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.

In 2002/03 we led a national campaign endorsed by 135 other Local Authorities to get a fairer rating assessment for Local Authority Leisure Contracts. This successful campaign resulted in a rate refund of £950,000 which has largely been set aside for the new Leisure Centre scheme on the former Park School Site.

Performance Management

The Council's Performance Management Framework is outlined in RDCSA 11. Members agree the forthcoming years work programme at the time the budget is agreed in February. The work programme is 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 November/December (RDCSA 14).

Members receive the digest of Quarterly Performance Reports, complete with managers and Chief Executive's summary (RDCSA 15). Members can query the information contained in these reports, which provide both volume and qualitative information.

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

bins with ServiceTeam, usage of facilities with Holmes Place.

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 e.g. homelessness performance or where they relate to more than one division, collectively via OMT e.g. letter response. Twice yearly, Service Action Plans are reported into CMB (RDCSA 16) 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.

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. The performance culture is reinforced by the PDR process and Divisional meetings, section meetings and communication mechanisms such as the Intranet help to reinforce the message.

The Peer Review acknowledged a good understanding by staff of their roles and the monitoring arrangements with external contractors in particular. As with all performance monitoring and management systems, they recognise, as we do, that further improvements can be made to develop and refine the processes in place.

In the past year, we've adopted a much more systematic approach to risk. A risk management framework has been agreed, Members, CMB and OMT have received training in respect of risk management and a programme of training has been 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.

Our original programme for completing this work proved overly ambitious given the competing work pressures upon the Authority. 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.

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.

WHAT HAS THE COUNCIL ACHIEVED/NOT ACHIEVED TO DATE?

Achievement in the Quality of Services

Despite having a limited resource base, the Council has a track record of getting things done and uses partnerships, both with public agencies, the voluntary sector and the private sector to deliver its agenda. In the External Auditor's last two Annual Audit letter to the Council, PKF's conclusion has been that:

"The Authority continues to make good progress in dealing with the initiatives required of local Government as well as its own local challenges" (PKF Audit letter, 2002)

The Council receives the lowest level of grant support of all the Essex Districts, spends the lowest per head of resident population, but at the same time receives the highest satisfaction ratings of the Essex Authorities. When the statutory general satisfaction survey was carried out in 2001, 75% of our residents stated they were very satisfied or fairly satisfied with our services. Satisfaction with services was also high relative to other Authorities in respect of Council housing, benefits, cleanliness, waste collection and recycling. Our level of complaints has fallen from 593 in 2000/01 to 244 in 2002/03, ombudsman queries remain low, at around 10 to 12 per year, and adverse coverage, including articles on the residents' letters page, are a rarity in the local press, compared to our neighbouring Authorities.

With one of our key objectives being to provide quality, cost effective services, we are particularly strong in some of the main processing services areas, such as planning, Council tax and payments. When comparing performance with that of the rest of the country, almost 54% of our measurable best value performance indicators are in the top two quartiles.

Areas where we perform less well are:

- Decision time on homeless applications (old BV 67 – new local 9.3). 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 by 100% between 2000/01 and 2002/03. We are seeking further improvement over the next two years.

- Re-let times for Council Houses (old BV68 – new local 6.5). Since 2001/02, we have taken steps to change procedures which has resulted in an improvement from 6.2 weeks to 3 weeks. This already exceeds our target for 2005/06. We will now see whether we can make further improvements and revise our targets accordingly.

We have won a crystal mark for our Housing Benefits Applications Form (April 2002) and an Association of Publishing Agencies award for "Your Home" (our Tenants newsletter) in the Best New Community Information Section (June 2000). With other Essex Authorities, we submitted an application for Beacon status around Community Safety, although this has proved unsuccessful. We have been acknowledged by ODPM as a reference site in relation to Leisure contracting and have been approached by other Councils as a result of this.



Crime & Disorder Reduction Partnership to promote road safety

The Peer Review team commented on our continuing strong focus on contracted services. Our contractors on the leisure side, Holmes Place, have accreditations in QUEST (quality assurance scheme specifically for the sport and leisure contract). ServiceTeam, who deal with our refuse, street cleansing and grounds maintenance contracts have IIP recognition and accreditations in ISO 9002 and British Association of Landscape Industries (BALI).

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 from the Quarterly Performance Reports, tangible progress is being made across these areas.

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 accelerate to the point where capacity across the whole organisation becomes an issue.

The Peer Review team has commented on the need to progress our Housing Strategy and policies in respect of affordability and key worker housing. This is one of our key areas of focus.

Achievement of Improvement

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 RDCSA 16. The examples listed below also outline where improvement of performance has still be to be achieved.

Quality, Cost Effective Services

- Website – since its establishment in March 2000, the website has been continually improved. The Peer Review team commented positively on its quality. In 2002/03 services such as paying bills on line for Council Tax, NNDR, rents and car parking fines, viewing account details for Benefits, and links to the NLIS (National Land Information Service) hub to enable electronic land charge searches were introduced. In 2003/04, the link established with the Planning Portal means that planning applications can be made on-line, and further improvements are scheduled including public access to planning application information and previous planning decisions. Committee agendas, minutes and reports are shortly to be available on-line.
- Evidence of the public recognising this service improvement is as follows: in 2001/02 there were 4,805 hits on the website; in 2002/03 this had risen to 25,503 hits; and from April-September 2003 there are already 20,000 hits.
- Since On Line payments were launched in February 2003, £121,000 has been received from over 800 collections (mainly council tax followed by rents and car parking penalty notices) up until September 2003.
- A successful bid by the Council to the Department for Works and Pensions is providing a network of drop-in centres for local residents at 12 sheltered accommodation schemes and the Civic Suite. Each centre is being equipped with PC access to the benefits computer system, which will provide a better and more consistent customer service for those residents unable to reach the Council's offices at Rochford or Rayleigh. It will also assist the Authority to meet performance standards by improving benefit claims processing time and overpayments management. Implementation will be completed by March 2004.
- 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.
- The process of removing abandoned vehicles in the District has been refined over the last two years in terms of both speed of removal and cost to the Authority. To avoid undue delay, the Council has adopted the new powers whereby vehicles can be removed as quickly as 24 hours after notification and also by working in partnership with the local police to supply the registered keeper details rather than using the DVLA. The cost to the Authority has been significantly reduced by entering into agreement with the County Council whereby they pay for the "disposal" element of the cost in addition to a contribution towards administration on a per vehicle basis.

- One of the areas where we still have concerns is the collection of housing benefit overpayments. In 2001/02 we only collected 63% of overpayments. The Council has responded to this by providing a higher level of resource to address this issue and has set challenging targets for the next three years to bring us up to national performance standards.

Safer and More Caring Community

- The Council launched a Citizenship Award Scheme in October 2002. The first winners received their awards in January 2003.
- The District Council, through supporting the STAR partnership in Rochford, has seen the creation of a number of community based initiatives in the more deprived parts of the District e.g. toy library, parenting support, etc, as well as the continued success of the Rochford Farmers Market which was initiated by the Council and is now managed by the STAR partnership (RDCSA 18).



Farmers market in Rochford

- Through working in partnership with a Housing Association and Rochford Parish Council, the District Council secured the provision of a new community hall in one of the more deprived parts of the District in Rochford. The Community Hall is now operating at close to capacity.
- 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 established at 57 South Street, Rochford.
- Through working with our contractors, our performance on Housing Urgent repairs

(BV72) has improved considerably. In 2001/2002 we were in the third quartile. From the latest quarterly monitoring report information we are now at 100% on time.

- 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). Improvements in the level of service provision in this area are being considered as part of a current Best Value Review looking at Public Regulation, Protection and Enforcement.

Green and Sustainable Environment

- By working in partnership with the Forestry Commission, Thames Gateway South Essex and Essex County Council, we are delivering a 100 acre Country Park at Cherry Orchard, with plans to expand the park still further.
- The new refuse collection contract in 2000 included recycling provision. Now we have over 6,000 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. The contractor is examining his operational procedures to address the problem.

Thriving Local Economy

- Car Parking charges have been reviewed taking into account views of residents and traders, with free parking being retained on Saturday afternoons
- Through partnership with Essex County Council, the relevant Parishes, EDF Energy, 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 significant funding commitments to the District. The Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park received £50,000 grant provision. A further bid submission has now been made for a further £50,000. The Cherry Orchard Business Park has been earmarked £1.5m for infrastructure improvements to secure its speedy development, subject to a detailed submission being made by the developer in association with the Council. This has now been done. A further £60,000 has been set aside by the East of England Development Agency to undertake feasibility work in association with the London Southend airport and its future.

Improve the Quality of Life

- A new Community Transport scheme was launched in October 2003 providing a low cost "social car" scheme and either group or individual access to a 16 seater wheelchair friendly minibus.
- Our new Taxi Voucher Scheme has been introduced to replace the previous South East Essex Dial-a-Ride scheme. It has proved extremely popular attracting over 380 regular users and delivering 9,000 journeys, as opposed to an original target of 100 users and 4,000 journeys.



350th Taxi Voucher user

- Our new Leisure contract will provide over £7m of capital investment from Holmes Place in our Leisure buildings over the next 20 years. Already the Mill has been refurbished and a £2m upgrade of our

main Sports facility, Clements Hall, is well underway. In the first year of the contract (from April 2002) usage of all the facilities increased by 5.4%



Recently enhanced Rochford Town Centre

- The area around the Mill and Rayleigh Windmill has been significantly upgraded, with new car parking, landscaping and CCTV provided.
- 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 progressing that agenda, and already a number of actions have been carried out.

To Maintain our Local Heritage and Culture

- Three derelict buildings in the heart of Rochford conservation area have been compulsorily purchased and passed on to Southend Building Preservation Trust to be 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 has been refurbished and launched as a new arts and entertainment venue.

A large number of these examples are extremely visible and tangible e.g. the shopping centre enhancements, the Mill refurbishment. They have contributed to the general well being of the community and impacted upon the environmental quality of the area as recognised by the Peer Review team.

Investment

For the District Council, partnership working is essential. We have a good record of working in partnership through mechanisms such as the Local Strategic Partnership, Thames Gateway South Essex, the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership and the Joint Health Board. All help us to deliver our objectives.

For example, involvement in the Essex Online Partnership has helped secure funds to support the introduction of e-procurement in the Authority, as well as the establishment of a secure electronic link between the partners which will enable the efficient and secure transfer of data between the partnership organisations to form the basis of more joint working. In addition, the partnership is working on a “customer relationship management” integration project to enhance joint telephone arrangements and provide a level of uniformity for citizen interaction across Essex.

Similarly, the Essex Environmental Protection group of local authorities has produced a countywide database of potentially contaminated sites and a contaminated land strategy framework for adoption by individual authorities to help ensure a consistent approach for Essex residents and businesses. It is also drafting a planning advice note on contaminated land to assist applicants. Certainly, work in this area could not be progressed without partnership working.

Nonetheless, we recognise as highlighted in the Peer Review the opportunities that partnership represents and the need for regular review of their effectiveness.

The Council's key resources are its staff, assets, IT and cash. 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. We have regularly reviewed our

asset base, with the last systematic review taking place in 2000/01. We now have a set of Asset Management Performance Indicators in place to assess against the National Framework.

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 progressing our workforce development plan in association with the neighbouring authority of Maldon and the Regional Employers. A key area of focus over the next two years will be succession planning and further management development.

The Performance Management systems we have in place help us to monitor progress. 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, Planning. We have a procurement strategy in place, although that now needs to be updated in the light of our work to deliver the “e” government agenda and further recent Government guidance. We have also effectively used the tendering process in recent years to secure more for less. Our leisure, IT and refuse collection, street cleansing and grounds maintenance contracts are particular examples of this.

The recent Peer Review remarked on the friendliness and openness of the Authority and its willingness to embrace external challenge. In the 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 the Council. When reports have been produced following external inspection, these have been positively received by the Council and actioned accordingly. The work around Benefits is an example of this.

The Council has employed consultants interested/affected parties, or asked other Authorities to examine the Council's services and operations and provide a challenge to the way those services are delivered. For example, with Brentwood and Maldon, we've

recently participated in a challenge process on financial services across all three Authorities. Already lessons learnt from that exercise are being implemented, such as the need for increased information around the roles and responsibilities of the section 151 Finance and Legal monitoring officers.

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

Learning

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

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

Our strategic framework is quite well developed but needs more explicit integration and clarity across the various strategies. We are strong in terms of the Thames Gateway South Essex Strategy and our emerging Local Plan. 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 will be rolled out to a five year time frame from next year.

Specifically, we need to progress our Housing Strategy and our affordable and key worker housing policies and initiatives, as highlighted in the Peer Review. We recognise too that the emerging strategies need to be underpinned by robust action plans.

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. We’ve managed these changes with a minimum of problems.

Overview and Scrutiny is continuing to develop. Our Member training structure is well established and we’ve proved more than capable of handling large numbers of new Members in one go, as happened with “all out”

elections in May 2002. However, our member training programme continues to endure and develop.

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. 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.

We 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 implementation from 2005.

The District has completed and implemented many positive outcomes from the Best Value Review process and 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 former was crucial to the delivery of the new leisure contract whilst the latter has helped us to develop and sustain our performance in planning services. The Housing Best Value Review was valuable as a process in terms of systematic review but the outcomes are still being implemented. 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 disability friendly vehicles.

As outlined, 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 often carry out the additional task of administering and facilitating the partnership grouping as part of our Community Leadership role until the capacity exists within the Partnership for us to step aside e.g. Crime and Disorder, LSP. We need to regularly review the many partnership arrangements we now 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 (RDSCSA 17).

As the Peer Review highlighted, we also need to continue to look for partnership opportunities to help us continue to realise our ambitions.

We continue to work on our mechanics for securing Community engagement/involvement. The appointment of a dedicated Tenant Participation Officer has already trebled attendance by our tenants at meetings. 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. At the same time, the District Council is reviewing its own policies and service delivery in relation to young people within its area.

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 (RDSCSA 20) and the current pilot regarding the scheme managers in our sheltered housing accommodation (RDSCSA 21). In our IT applications, we view software systems elsewhere and then run test systems before putting them into operation e.g Council Tax payments on-line and the introduction of e-procurement.

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 adjoining the Mill 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.



Rayleigh Windmill

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 and Rochford District Matters.

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.



Your Home
Tenants Magazine

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. We are now looking at

Wokingham's Enforcement Policy which received positive comments from the Food Standards Agency, amongst others, to see whether it provides a model which we could adapt for this Council's purposes.

The Council has also adopted an open approach in terms of other Authorities coming to the Council to discuss various aspects of its services. Again, recent examples include "Your 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.

Coupled with the benchmarking arrangements in place and through the member, professional and operational networks across Essex and the wider area, the Council is able to learn and contribute at various levels, to ensure that the services operated in the District continue to improve.

We've also tried, where possible, to harness individual's personal learning to the benefit of the organisation, beyond simply developing skills and expertise in a particular area. For example, our Corporate Policy Manager, in undertaking her MBA, did her thesis around Local Strategic Partnerships and Community Strategies. That proved a launch-pad for our work in this area. More recently several staff we have sponsored on a Certificate of Management Course have done a joint project on Examining Organisational Culture. That will be used within the IIP process in particular.

Our Peer Review remarked that staff are empowered to use their initiative. 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 and the Peer Review, 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 and so, a corporate staff communications group has been put in place to progress this agenda.

Future Plans

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 and links into the budget framework, to ensure that we plan to deliver, rather than plan to plan.

We recognise the need to develop a longer term perspective, and a more transparent, linked approach to our strategic framework. Our vision needs to be more clearly articulated. Thus from this year we are moving 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.

The main gap in the Council's 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 influence 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. Work around the Local Strategic Partnership will shift to monitoring, delivery and review.

The work on the Community Strategy will enable us to sharpen our focus in terms of the identification of priorities and especially non-priorities. We are identifying non-priorities much more explicitly in this year's budgetary process and in next year's Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan. We propose to make further changes to our performance management/monitoring system to highlight more explicitly the priorities identified within the Member arena and to ensure that where problems occur, follow up and remedial action is taken where appropriate.

By enhancing the emphasis given to priorities, more explicitly identifying non-priorities, and developing our performance management/monitoring systems in this respect, the Council will be cementing its arrangements to ensure that achievements are met. Already over a period the Council has

developed more SMART targets and work on this will continue.

The Peer Review identified the Housing Strategy and affordable and key worker housing as areas for further work. Consequently, we are intending to finalise this work over the next three months.

Behind all our strategies, it is important that robust action plans are put in place to ensure plans continue to deliver rather than simply plan to plan.

We will continue to address service 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 issues identified by the Best Value inspectors in their assessment of our Review on Housing strategy and Housing Management. This will certainly be a key area of attention over the next three years, as we progress the option appraisal process and implement the chosen outcome.

Our work in connection with securing IIP recognition and our Workforce Development Plan will ensure that appropriate mechanisms are in place for both management and staff to help us deliver our agenda for the future including any issues arising from succession planning.

Our commitment to partnerships and the mechanisms which underpin these will enable us to maintain and develop our engagement with partners in the future, with the work around the Local Strategic Partnership and Thames Gateway South Essex in particular continuing to grow. The recent establishment of the Rochford Delivery Vehicle Working Party under the auspices of the Thames Gateway South Essex offers the prospect of further funding streams.

Our relationship with the County and other Authorities across Essex will continue to grow, especially with regard to IT/IS applications. In addition, new mechanisms such as the Local Service Agreement initiative with the County offer the potential to unlock resources and deliver service improvement locally through joint working and clarification of roles and responsibilities.

We recognise we need to regularly review the value of partnerships and develop/capitalise on further opportunities for partnership working, where appropriate.

We already engage with our Community in a number of ways: through our Members; through Rochford District Matters; through "Your Home" (our tenants magazine); 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 through specific public meetings demonstrate further our commitment in this area. Our move to establish a Citizens Panel in association with the Castle Point and Rochford Primary Care Trust and Castle Point Borough Council now provides us with a useful mechanism to engage further with our Community on a regular basis.

Whilst the processes around budget making and Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan help us focus on future delivery, it is apparent from this assessment and the attached action plan that more could be done to ensure that the processes we operate are as systematic, effective and efficient as possible to ensure that continuous improvement and change remain on the agenda.

SELF ASSESSMENT SCORED

Theme	Score	Key Strengths	Key Weaknesses
Ambition	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of key strategic documents in place. Well established linkages to the budget process Good partnerships in operation to deliver on future agendas Good evidence of community leadership role Long term contracts with external partners to ensure delivery of ambitions over the medium to long term (7-20 years) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work needs to be completed on the Community Strategy and linked through to the Council's Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan and other strategic documentation, to provide a more transparent medium-term (5 years plus) strategic framework
Prioritisation	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Council's objectives have been identified, along with Member priority projects The Community Strategy consultation is based on a clear analysis of the rationale for priorities (including research) and proposed priorities are being identified within the Community Strategy consultation process There is evidence of consultation on a range of services and a joint consultation forum with Castle Point Borough Council and the Castle Point and Rochford PCT has now been established to help build capacity for consultation The Council's objectives are published both internally and externally and are contained within the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan which has been distributed to partners and is available on the intranet. The District Council's newspaper, distributed to all households, includes regular articles on the Council's priorities. There are communications and media strategies and consultation strategies in place. "Your Home" magazine distributed to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Priorities for improvement and non-priorities need to be more clearly identified in the Corporate Plan and budget making process. The budget process needs to develop a more transparent and systematic review of resource allocation linked to priorities

		<p>all housing tenant households informs and advises all Council tenants on relevant housing issues and Council's priorities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is evidence that resources have been shifted to match priorities 	
Focus	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council has good mechanisms and tools in place to allow it to remain focussed. A work programme for 2003/2004 was agreed at the time the Council tax was set. • Peer Review has enclosed "can do" approach • All Member agenda repeat the Terms of Reference of each Committee and reiterate the Corporate objectives, which reinforces clarity of purpose. The agenda also includes progress on decision schedules to avoid drift. There are good arrangements in place for monitoring performance targets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further work to be done to aid partner understanding around roles/responsibilities relative to agreed priorities.
Capacity	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Previous low level of Council balances has been addressed through the budget strategy • Lean, committed, motivated and enthusiastic workforce • Work Force Development Plan is being developed • Good Member training system in place overseen by the Standards Committee • Good partnership mechanisms in place delivering resources in line with the Council's main objectives. Council punching above its weight! • Major services have been contracted out ensuring long term service delivery • Strong, caring ward based Councillors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are some long term, hard to fill posts e.g. Environmental Health. • Little surplus for contingency • Need to develop over time a more systematic process to review partnership effectiveness and evaluate opportunities for further partnership development.
Performance Management	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance management system in place with key tools being the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need further development around SMART targets linked to priorities,

		<p>Quarterly Monitoring Reports, Service Action Plans and progress on outstanding items reports to Members.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Performance Development Review process helps managers measure and manage performance of staff • Complaints procedure published including standards and process and monitored on a regular basis • Race equality scheme and standards in place • Overarching risk management strategy in place with agreed action plan. Risk now referred to in Committee Reports and included with the budget framework process • The Council has received an unqualified statement of accounts and the external auditors report that "conduct arrangements are strong" • Under the Council's corporate property strategy, there has been systematic review of unused and under used assets during 2001/2002 with an ongoing review of all assets to agreed criteria 	<p>and improve follow up actions arriving from any variations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to continue to develop and reinforce the PDR process in terms of consistent deployment and how far it helps staff understand what is expected of them in relation to the Council's priorities • Overarching contingency plan in relation to risk yet to be developed.
Achievement in Quality of Service	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council performs well relative to others in a number of key areas of service, e.g. Council tax, Planning • High satisfaction rates across a range of services • Given the Council's capacity, evidence of realistic level of quality delivered – lowest grant and lowest spend per head of population in Essex 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further work is needed in developing key indicators for the Council's priorities at the local level
Achievement of Improvement	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good evidence of improvement in services and in cross cutting areas impacting on the local quality of life • Several very visual/tangible projects e.g. town centre enhancement, Cherry Orchard Jubilee Country Park, the Mill • Services performing less well are being addressed e.g. homelessness, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to address the housing strategy/housing management key areas for improvement • Need to further improve communication with public on what has improved/not improved and the reason why

		<p>urgent Council repairs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New innovative services introduced e.g. on-line payments, taxi voucher scheme, etc. 	
Investment	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of external private sector contractors delivering major investment over a period e.g. leisure, refuse, etc. • Recent partnerships delivering additional capacity e.g. Thames Gateway South Essex, Crime and Disorder, Essex On-Line • The Council is pursuing Investors in People status and producing a new Workforce Development Plan • The Council has managed its finances using a three year rolling budget for several years. From 2004/2005, this will rolled out to five years. • Good track record of bringing in third parties where appropriate to address known skill gaps. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The size of the Authority means that capacity will always be an issue, with limited opportunity for expansion without third party assistance • The Overview and Scrutiny process needs further development.
Learning	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good evidence of learning and change as a result of Best Value Review process and recommendations from Audit and Inspection • Good examples of the Council piloting initiatives and learning from others through a variety of mechanisms • Good examples of collaborative working arrangements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to progress a more systematic approach to sharing learning experiences across the Authority
Future Plans	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing strategic framework in place which will be further reinforced by the work around the Community Strategy and the emerging Local Plan • Good partnership arrangements in place to ensure a sustained focus on achieving the Council's ambitions • The Joint consultation panel established with Castle Point 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to more systematically assess future plans and capacity in line with changing national and community priorities and ensure appropriate linkages are maintained • Need to deliver the housing strategy agenda

		<p>Borough Council and the Castle Point and Rochford Primary Care Trust will ensure a systematic approach to future consultation exercises</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Past track record of innovation and service improvement • Development of E-Government agenda and web-based applications will ensure greater access and flexibility to assist service delivery 	
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HIGH LEVEL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

<u>THEME</u>	<u>ACTIONS</u>
Ambition	<p>Complete work on preparation of Community Strategy for approval by LSP in March 2004 (CPM)</p> <p>Ensure linkages from Community Strategy picked up in next year's Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan (June 2004) and other emerging strategy documents e.g. District Local Plan, Housing Strategy, Crime and Disorder Strategy (2005-2008) (CE/CPM)</p> <p>Roll out budget process/Corporate Plan process to five year timeframe (from 2004/05 budget) (CD(F&ES))</p> <p>Further develop communication processes with Members, staff and partners to ensure ownership and understanding around policies and actions (CMB)</p>
Priorities	<p>Greater transparency of priorities/non-priorities in budget making process and resource allocations around these (from 2004/05 budget) (HFS)</p> <p>Carry through transparency around priorities/non-priorities into 2004/2005 Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan (CE/CPM)</p>
Focus	<p>Develop the monitoring mechanisms within the LSP to ensure delivery of the agreed Community Strategy (from March 2004) (CE/CPM)</p>
Capacity	<p>Produce draft Workforce Development Plan by February 2004 and through this systematically address recruitment, retention, training and development and succession issues (HRM)</p> <p>Use Overview and Scrutiny process to systematically review partnership effectiveness and further opportunities for partnership – develop further from 2004/05 work programme (HAMS)</p>
Performance Management	<p>In light of Peer Review recommendation, review size and composition of Planning Services Committee early in new municipal year (June/July 2004). (HPS)</p> <p>Continue to develop a culture of producing SMART targets emanating from the Corporate Plan/Best Value Performance Plan process – (ongoing) (OMT)</p> <p>Refine the performance management framework to more clearly focus on the Council's priorities. Develop the performance management framework to secure a more consistent approach to follow up actions to address variations in performance – from April 2004. (APRM)</p> <p>Complete overarching (business contingency) plan in relation to risk management by July 2004. (EPHSO)</p>
Achievement in the Quality of Service	<p>Continue to systematically develop a range of key indicators for the Council's priorities at the local level (ongoing) (OMT)</p>
Achievement of	<p>Implement the agreed Action Plans in relation to Housing</p>

Improvement	<p>Strategy/Housing Management over the next two years to ensure the Council carries out its responsibilities in terms of option appraisal and subsequent actions (HHHCC/HRHM)</p> <p>Develop the use of the consultation panel now established in terms of reviewing Council's achievements/effectiveness (ongoing) (CPM)</p>
Investment	<p>Continue to invest in building capacity through IT applications, partnerships and contracting arrangements (ongoing) (CMB)</p> <p>At the same time develop the Overview and Scrutiny process to monitor the effectiveness of this and the Council's performance overall (see Capacity above) (HAMS)</p>
Learning	<p>Utilise the IIP and Workforce Development Plan to reinforce learning opportunities across the organisation, both internally and externally (ongoing) (HRM)</p>
Future Plans	<p>See developing role of Overview and Scrutiny process above. (HAMS)</p> <p>Further develop systems around the budget making and Corporate Plan Best Value Performance Plan processes to ensure that future plans and capacity are regularly reviewed in line with changing national and community priorities (from 2005/06 budget making process) (CD(F&ES))</p> <p>Deliver the Housing Strategy in line with Central Government requirements (by March 2004). (HHHCC).</p>

Key to Abbreviations

APRM	Audit & Process Review Manager
CE	Chief Executive
CD(F&ES)	Corporate Director (Finance & External Services)
CMB	Corporate Management Board
CPM	Corporate Policy Manager
HAMS	Head of Administrative and Member Services
HFS	Head of Financial Services
HHHCC	Head of Housing, Health and Community Care
HPS	Head of Planning Services
H&HM	Head of Revenue & Housing Management
HRM	Human Resources Manager
OMT	Operational Management Team