

MODERNISING LOCAL GOVERNMENT – REVIEW OF THE DISTRICT COUNCIL’S DECISION MAKING STRUCTURE

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the District Council’s review of its political decision making structure.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 As the Sub-Committee will be aware, the Government requires all local authorities to adopt new decision making structures. For Council’s such as Rochford with less than 85,000 population, there are four options available, namely:

- Streamlined committee structure
- Leader and Cabinet
- Mayor and Cabinet
- Mayor and Council Manager

- 2.2 The Council must inform the Secretary of State for the Environment by June of its preferred option but that option must take account of local public opinion.

3 PUBLIC CONSULTATION

- 3.1 Earlier this year, the District Council held a focus group with local residents to discuss the options available and to prepare a consultation questionnaire. As a result of that focus group, the attached leaflet was prepared.

- 3.2 The leaflet was made available to the public as part of a formal market research exercise undertaken on the Council’s behalf by ORC International. The District Council in a separate exercise has also issued copies to key partners, including all Parish Councils, and to the general public from its reception desks and libraries, as a supplement within Rochford District Matters and as part of a mobile exhibition.

- 3.3 The ORC survey has been completed and with a 33% response rate found the response to the question “which is your preferred option” to be:

Streamlined committee structure	71.4%
Mayor and cabinet	8.9%
Council leader and cabinet	9.9%
Mayor and council manager	5.9%

4 THE WAY FORWARD

- 4.1 As Members will note from the leaflet, subject to the results of the survey of public opinion, the District Council's initial preferred option is for the introduction of a streamlined committee structure.
- 4.2 The Council considers that the present committee system has served the public of Rochford well in the past and represents a tried and tested solution. Whilst acknowledging that there is always room for improvement, the Council does not believe that the other untried options will result in more cost effective or better decision making for the District. In the event that Rochford residents share this view, the Council will prepare a submission to the Secretary of State based on a streamlined committee structure.
- 4.3 Whilst the best of the current committee structure would be included in the streamlined structure, the Council will still need to introduce overview and scrutiny committees to assist with the formulation of policy and to review decisions and the outcome of previous decisions. The Council also intends to make arrangements to ensure that there is an opportunity for Parish Councils to be involved in the process as they have in the past through this Sub-Committee.
- 4.4 Once the preferred option for Rochford is clear, the Council will also need to prepare a new constitution that will set out clearly how it will operate in future. This document will include the Council's proposals for the involvement of partners in the decision making process and will itself be the subject of consultation. Indeed, the Council anticipates being in a position to bring a draft constitution for discussion at this Sub-Committee later in the year.
- 4.5 The Council recognises that even with a streamlined committee structure, there will still be significant changes in the way that it operates. The Council is therefore considering introducing a trial of the new structure from January 2002 with a view to formal implementation taking place in May 2002.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The cost of undertaking public consultation on the alternative decision making structures has been met from within the Council's existing consultation budgets. A full assessment of the costs of introducing a new structure will be made once the preferred option is selected.

6 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Council is required to introduce a new decision making structure by the Local Government Act 2000 and subsidiary regulations.

7 PARISH IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The future of this Sub-Committee will need to be reviewed as part of the introduction of a new decision making structure. However, the Council remains committed to working as close as possible with its Parishes.

8 CONCLUSION

- 8.1 The Sub-Committee is asked to note the contents of this report and invited to discuss the introduction of new decision making structures for the District Council.

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Background Papers:

Local Government Act 2000 and subsidiary regulations and guidance
ORC consultation leaflet attached.

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