

## Review Committee of Rochford District Council



# MONITORING OF THE COMMITTEE SYSTEM

**FINAL REPORT OF THE PROJECT TEAM  
AS APPROVED BY THE REVIEW COMMITTEE**



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



**Rochford District  
Council**

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## 2 Glossary

ECC	Essex County Council
ODPM	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

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### **3 Introduction**

- 3.1 Since the team began the monitoring of the Committee System to evaluate how the Policy Committees were progressing their remit significant changes to the Committee system have been proposed.
- 3.2 These have been produced as a result of the Local Government White Paper “Strong and Prosperous Communities” and the emerging requirements of the Local Government Bill currently making its way through the various parliamentary stages. However, until the end of the formal consultation period and the final proposals are presented at the Council meeting scheduled for April 2007, the team have continued to consider the functioning of the present structure.

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## **4 Background**

- 4.1 At the beginning of the 2006/07 Municipal year Rochford District Council introduced a more streamlined Committee structure following a Review by the Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee during 2005. It was recognised that this system, whilst it improved the ability of the Council to conduct its business in a more efficient manner, might need to be adjusted after a period of operation when any teething problems could be assessed.
- 4.2 It was suggested that the Review Committee might like to monitor the operation of the Committee structure and this suggestion was taken up in June at the first meeting of the Review Committee, when the team were appointed to carry out this task.
- 4.3 During the course of the team's monitoring other areas of interest were identified in connection with this Review. These included the role of Member Champions, the provision of information available to Councillors in the Member's Library and the canvassing of Members views concerning the Review Committee and the Committee structure.

## **5 Terms of reference**

- 5.1 To monitor the operation of the 5 new Policy Committees, particularly in terms of their adherence to individual terms of reference. Specific consideration will be given to:-
- The implementation of the policy priorities contained in the published corporate plan;
  - The implementation of policy committee decisions;
  - Adherence to the “5 day rule” for publishing agendas and accompanying reports;
  - The format of the reports submitted to the committees.
  - The reasons for, terms of reference and timescales of any new sub committees that are formed;
- 5.2 To consider the role of Member Champions and assess whether they could add value to the operation of this Council, to include identifying areas that would be worthy of being championed.
- 5.3 To assess what information needed to be provided to Councillors via the Member’s Library and how this should be organised and overseen in the future.
- 5.4 To canvas Members for their opinions on the operation of the Committee structure and to assess Member’s views on the Review Committee.

## **6 Methodology**

- 6.1 The implementation of the policies contained in the Corporate Plan was monitored from the Quarterly Performance Report by way of individual bar charts for each area of the report.
- 6.2 The implementation of the policy committee decisions was monitored graphically. Each committee had its own chart showing the three monthly trends by way of a bar chart.
- 6.3 Any failure to meet the “5 day rule” by any contributors to the committee agendas or reports were monitored by the Overview and Scrutiny Officer and advised to the team on a monthly basis.
- 6.4 All new sub committees were identified by the Committee Section with details of terms of reference and timescales being supplied to the team.
- 6.5 A sample of the reports submitted to the committees was assessed for ease of reference on a monthly basis. This included internally produced reports as well as Essex County Council and other external organisations. The reports were sampled to identify whether best practice needed to be developed.

## **7 Findings**

### **7.1 Monthly Monitoring**

- 7.1.1 The team monitored the Policy Committees on a monthly basis to look for any trends and identify any areas that could be improved. These areas were highlighted at the monthly Review Committee meetings as and when they were identified rather than waiting for this report. They included the observation that Policy Committee Chairmen should meet with lead officers prior to the preparation of agendas and the fact that lengthy complicated/technical reports received from external organisations would benefit from an executive summary in plain English being attached (a point subsequently taken up and agreed by Council on 30 January 2007).
- 7.1.2 It was observed that the length of meetings did not correlate to the number of items on an agenda; topics that had a wider impact on the District and therefore attracted more opinions usually dictated the length of the meeting.
- 7.1.3 Whilst monitoring the Policy Committees it was noted that meetings were being cancelled when there was not a business need to hold them. This provided flexibility in the meeting schedule to allow for the arranging of additional meetings for those Committees that had a heavier workload.
- 7.1.4 A further observation that came from the monitoring was that not all agenda items that came to the Policy Committees resulted in a policy decision being made. Some agenda items updated Councillors on matters that effected the District and its residents and were only for noting.
- 7.1.5 Overall, once the Policy Committees made decisions they were progressed on a timely basis with only one decision failing to be progressed/ implemented which was due to restrictions being identified after the decision had been made.
- 7.1.6 The monitoring of the policy priorities from the Corporate Plan was reported to Members by way of the Members' Performance Report that was presented quarterly to the Policy, Finance & Strategic Performance Committee. The report that was introduced this municipal year (2006/07) was found to be clear and precise and gave Members a clear indication of how the Council was progressing its aims and what areas had been completed or needed remedial action.
- 7.1.7 During the year only one sub-committee was formed (the Planning Policy Sub-Committee) and, whilst this was established twice, each time it has been "task and finish" with agreed terms of reference and a set timescale to complete its task.

## **7.2 Member Champions**

- 7.2.1 During the course of the year the team was asked to investigate the role of Member Champions. The Council already had some Member Champions but it was felt that this area needed to be examined as to whether there was any benefit in expanding the number of Champions and defining their role within the Council's framework. This included looking at other Councils with different structures and identifying areas that could possibly benefit from the introduction of a Champion.
- 7.2.2 It is clear from the research that had already been undertaken that there is no definitive approach and the role is being developed in different directions by each authority.
- 7.2.3 A Committee based Council will have different aims for the role to a Council operating a cabinet system but it should be possible to take the best practice from each of these systems and mould them into a framework that will meet with this Council's requirements.
- 7.2.4 During the course of the investigation the team looked at various authorities, including Bath, Wolverhampton and Harlow, to obtain comparisons from differing areas and different council structures.
- 7.2.5 Whilst at the moment there is no definitive guidance for the role, this is partly due to its embryonic state and partly due to the differing nature of the operation of various councils.
- 7.2.6 The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (now the Department of Communities and Local Government) has provided funding to Bath and North East Somerset Council to run a capacity-building project in developing the role of Member Champions.
- 7.2.7 The project aims to:-
- Promote understanding of the role
  - Develop networked support for champions
  - Devise online, accredited learning opportunities
  - Commission an annual conference
  - Develop Bath and North East Somerset as a centre of excellence and good practice
- 7.2.8 The project itself is being funded over a 2 year period which started in 2005. Bath and North East Somerset Council operates a Cabinet based system and the Member Champions link with the Executive Members and provide input to Cabinet meetings as well as full Council when necessary.



7.2.9 Bath and North East Somerset has identified the following areas that need championing:-

- Heritage
- E Government
- Older People
- Human Rights
- Children
- Design/Public Realm
- Elected Members
- Procurement

7.2.10 Harlow Council operates a Committee System and has 5 Member Champions at the present time. These are:-

- Olympic
- Social Inclusion
- Historic Environment
- Design
- Efficiency

7.2.11 They are currently reviewing the issues around Member Champions. They appoint Members who have an interest in the subject but have identified that the cause being championed does not link well to the actual Committee Structure. The Members are not remunerated for this role.

7.2.12 Wolverhampton City Council (cabinet based) define an issue to be championed as:-

- an agreed sustainable and corporate priority; if not then time and resources will be focussed upon an issue that may lose impetus and drop off the local or national agenda
- an issue that cuts across a number of portfolios or service groups
- an issue that can be defined in terms of its remit. If left open ended, there is a danger that the remit will be too unwieldy to manage effectively and will, as a consequence, add little value to the organisation.

7.2.13 They have champions for the following subjects:-

- Sustainability/Agenda 21
- Quality of Design
- Social Inclusion
- Benefits
- Children and Young People
- Housing

- Employment
- European and International
- Older People
- Equalities
- E-Government

7.2.14 Those Councils that have a Cabinet structure appear to use the role to engage non-executive Members in the decision making process.

7.2.15 To make the role work within this Council's new framework of an Executive Board the following areas would need to be considered:-

- Select topics that need championing by Members. Cross cutting priority issues would appear best as it is unlikely that a member of the Executive Board will have the depth of knowledge that the Champion will develop.
- Select Members who have an interest in the area and have the time and availability to carry out the duties.
- Develop a role profile to contain details of what is expected from the Member Champion. A possible role profile has been attached as appendix 1 at the end of this report.
- Appoint Champions at Annual Council at the beginning of the municipal year with the term to run for the full year unless their remit finished earlier.

7.2.16 The following topics are considered worthy of being championed in the future if a Member with sufficient interest and knowledge in the subject can be identified:-

- Benefits
- Historic Environment
- Housing Issues
- Local Business Community
- Recycling
- The Elderly
- Web Development and E Government applications
- Young Persons

### **7.3 Member's Library**

7.3.1 Following the breach of the "5 day rule" with regard to the provision of documents to Members in August 2006 it was agreed that the team would look at some new procedures for making documents available for reference in the Member's library.

7.3.2 It was identified that documents were being deposited into the library by a number of divisions in the Council and that there did not seem to

be a standard practice adopted by all parties. It was also noticed that, whilst some documents would remain relevant and be a useful point of reference, others had a limited “shelf” life and would need to be removed or replaced on a regular basis.

- 7.3.3 Following an exercise to catalogue the existing documents and booklets, those that were not relevant were removed and the others were reorganised into more meaningful groupings. It was agreed that any further documentation would be channelled through the Committee Section where they could be added to an index and a removal date could be added if applicable.
- 7.3.4 In addition fortnightly checks were arranged to ensure that no documents are overlooked and the filing system was kept up to date.
- 7.3.5 Members were advised of the changes by way of the Member’s Bulletin and officers were advised of the change by way of an e-mail.
- 7.3.6 Since the introduction of the changes the system has worked smoothly and no further incidents regarding missing reference material have occurred.

#### **7.4 *Member Questionnaires***

- 7.4.1 During the year it was decided to canvas the Members and officers for their opinions with regard to the Review Committee and its operation and also on the Committee Structure for the 2006/07 municipal year.
- 7.4.2 A questionnaire containing 22 questions split into two sections was sent to all 39 Councillors, responses were received from 22 Members. The responses were anonymous to ensure that Members were able to express their true views.
- 7.4.3 The same questionnaire was sent to those officers that had attended a Committee this Municipal year. It was felt that this would raise the profile of the Review Committee among officers and from feedback this has had the desired effect.
- 7.4.4 The following observations have been drawn from the responses received:-
  - The majority of Members appear to be clear about the role of the Review Committee and the effectiveness of training, what projects are being undertaken and how to refer matters to the Committee.
  - Some Members did express a wish for further training in relation to Overview & Scrutiny.
  - Members and officers agreed that the Review Committee adds value and is an effective challenge to the decisions of the Policy Committees. It also has a wider role to play in the community and

allows the Council to work more closely with its partners and to review the decisions the Council's partners make.

- The Members mostly agree that the new Committee structure has resulted in a reduction in the number of meetings.
- Members and officers agreed that there has been more efficiency at Policy Committee meetings as the terms of reference have been clearer, issues brought forward for debate are more relevant and there has been coordination between the Committees.
- The Development Control Committee meetings have been improved by the introduction of public speaking.
- Agenda planning could be improved by advance planning between relevant officers and the Policy Committee Chairman.
- Members and officers would welcome the introduction of executive summaries for lengthy reports from our external partners (subsequently implemented).
- The provision of paperwork by electronic means did not attract much support from the Members.
- There was limited support from Members for changing the venue of meetings from the Council Chamber.

## **8 Conclusion**

- 8.1 Taking account of the new political decision making structure that is being developed it is felt that only recommendations that can be taken forward in the new structure should be made.
- 8.2 During the year the team made suggestions for improving the procedures around the committee structure and some of these items such as the executive summaries for reports from our partner organisations, have already been approved.
- 8.3 Overall, the business of the Council was progressed in a timely manner and the Progress on Decision updates at the Policy Committees were felt to be a useful tool for keeping Members appraised of decisions that had already been made.
- 8.4 A recommendation has already been made to the Review Committee for the operation of the new political decision making structure be monitored next year. It is recommended as part of this review that the new Forward Plan and also the Key Policies and Actions Report for 2007/08 submitted to Council on the 27 February are monitored to add a performance management element to the review.

## 9 Recommendations

- 9.1 The questionnaire that was completed by Members on the Review Committee highlighted one area concerning the Committee. That was that whilst Members received the introductory training to Overview & Scrutiny some Members felt that some more in depth training would be beneficial.

### Recommendation No 1

**It is recommended to the Standards Committee that arrangements are made for additional Member training in Overview & Scrutiny.**

### Recommendation No 2

- 9.2 Should the Review Committee decide to undertake a review of the Political Structure in the 2007/08 municipal year it was felt that other documents might prove useful monitoring tools.

**It is recommended that, as part of the operation of the political decision making structure review, the new Forward Plan and also the Key Policies and Actions Report for 2007/08 submitted to Council on the 27 February, be monitored to add a performance management element to the review.**

### Recommendation No 3

- 9.3 Following the Project Team's investigation into the role of Member Champions it is felt that they could add value to the proposed new structure.

**It is recommended that the role of Member Champion be formally recognised within the political decision-making structure and that the role profile attached as appendix 1 be used for this purpose.**

- 9.4 The following recommendations from the Project Team are for noting as they have already been agreed by other Committees or been implemented by a section of the Council.

#### **Recommendation No 4**

- 9.5 It was identified from both the monthly monitoring of the reports submitted to the Committees and from the canvassing of Members that the more technical reports from external organisations would benefit from an executive summary.

**It is recommended that an executive summary in plain English be provided for highly complicated/technical reports.**

- 9.6 This was agreed at the Extraordinary Council meeting of the 30 January 2007.

#### **Recommendation No 5**

- 9.7 During the course of the monitoring of the Agendas it was felt that Committee Chairmen should meet with the lead officer prior to the preparation of Agendas. This was borne out by the results of the questionnaire of Members.

**It is recommended that Committee Chairman should meet with the lead officer prior to the preparation of Agendas.**

#### **Recommendation No 6**

- 9.8 Following an examination of the way documents were being deposited into the Member's Library the Project Team identified a number of improvements.

**It is recommended that all documentation for the Member's Library be channelled through the Committee Section who will control the filing system and perform fortnightly checks.**

- 9.9 This was implemented at the end of August and has been working satisfactorily since this time.

## **10 Appendix 1**

### **Member Champion**

#### Key Activities

1. Monitor Executive Board forward work plan and seek information and offer views on relevant subjects
2. Monitor Review Committee work plans and seek information and offer views on relevant review subjects
3. Take advice from the lead officer as required / necessary
4. Arrange via lead officers for appropriate items to be placed on relevant agendas
5. Communicate on behalf of their interest group and the Council to gather information from outside bodies, Members and the Public - to bring that knowledge/information to the Council/Executive
6. Keep up to date with developments in the champion area and look at best practices and procedures within their area of interest
7. Report back to the Executive Board as appropriate