
PROPOSED NEW POLITICAL DECISION MAKING STRUCTURE

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report outlines proposed changes to the Council's Political Decision Making Structure, in response to the implications of the Local Government White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities" and the emerging requirements of the Local Government Bill as it makes its way through the various Parliamentary stages. The proposals build on much of what is in place already but suggests changes in terms of the Policy/Executive Decision Making process. It also seeks to introduce an area/neighbourhood perspective through the introduction of Area Committees and proposes the further development of the role of Member "champions". Lastly, it seeks Members views on the establishment of a more formalised arrangement with Castle Point Borough Council and Southend Borough Council to pursue matters of common interest and respond to the emerging City Regions agenda.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The White Paper and the Local Government Bill place greater emphasis on developing a stronger role for local authorities engaging with their communities and promoting change to secure service improvement and empowered communities. There is much reference to stronger leadership and accountability at the local level; developing the role of local Ward Councillors and working at the neighbourhood level. Developing a sense of place and community are seen as key factors, as is the importance of city regions to securing economic prosperity. Clarity around decision making, the responsibilities of Ward Councillors and the ability to build and maintain strong and effective partnerships are also seen as important elements to the wellbeing of local government.
- 2.2 Whilst the Council could sit back and do nothing, no change is not regarded as a viable option given the context outlined above and the pressures that will be placed on the Authority in terms of service improvement, responding to rising customer expectations, the growing partnership agenda, plus the financial, inspection and audit challenges that will arise over the next two to three years. If these changes are not put in place in terms of the political decision making process, it is likely that the Council will be required to make changes reactively rather than pro-actively to determine what it wishes to do.

3 PROPOSED CHANGES

- 3.1 The proposals before Members attempt to address a number of issues and build upon the structure already in place. It retains as much of the existing system as possible and has been constructed to ensure Members have a range of choices to participate in and inform the

Council's decision making process. The powers of Full Council remain, the Review Committee remains and Committees such as the Development Control Committee remain.

- 3.2 However, the proposed structure does attempt to develop a clearer executive decision making forum, with better accountability and transparency as to Members' responsibilities. This is achieved through the replacement of the five Policy Committees that are currently in existence with an Executive Board comprising 9 Members.
- 3.3 At the same time, the proposed structure recognises the Government's growing interest around neighbourhoods, localities and the role of ward councillors through establishing a new more local arena for ward councillors to discuss and take decisions on local issues – the proposal is to establish 3 area committees; west, central and east.
- 3.4 In essence, the proposals for Members' consideration can be summarised as follows:-

Full Council – retain with existing powers

Policy Committees

Policy, Finance and Strategic Performance)
Community Services) Delete all of these and replace with a new
Environmental Services) Executive Board and 3 Area Committees
Leisure, Tourism and Heritage)
Planning, Policy and Transportation Committee)	

Regulatory and Probity Committees

Development Control	retain with existing powers
Appeals Committee	retain with existing powers
Licensing Committee	retain with existing powers
Audit Committee	retain with existing powers
Emergency Planning Committee	delete – responsibilities would be taken up by the Executive Board
Standards Committee	retain with existing powers
Review Committee	retain with existing powers

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- 3.5 The Executive Board would comprise 9 members including the Leader and Deputy Leader, plus the Chairmen of the three Area Committees. In effect, it would take over the role and responsibilities of the Policy Committees and, in an emergency situation, the role of the Emergency Planning Committee. Whilst specific matters could only be determined by Council as at present, the Executive Board would effectively be the engine for processing a majority of the Council's general workload around policy and service development. It would meet on a three weekly basis. Within the Executive Board there would be specific Member roles, with an individual Member responsible for:-
- Overall Strategy and Partnership
 - Resources and Service Development
 - Environment
 - Community
 - Planning, Policy and Transportation
 - Leisure, Tourism and Heritage
 - Plus the three Area Committee Chairmen
- 3.6 However, at least for the first year of operation, it is suggested that the Executive Board operates as a collective in its decision making rather than specific powers being delegated to each individual member. The Executive Board would have a published "Forward Plan" indicating the main areas to be looked at over the municipal year. The accompanying report outlining Key Policies and Actions for 2007/2008 gives a flavour as to many of the topics to be included in the Forward Plan.
- 3.7 As now, decisions would be published and subject to call-in by the Review Committee and referral to Council. The Executive Board members would be supported by "Task and Finish" Sub-Committees where appropriate, in the same way that Sub-Committees currently undertake work on behalf of a Policy Committee. These Sub-Committees, as now, would not be permanent bodies, but would be set up to aid the decision making process. It would be for the Executive Board to determine the appropriateness of establishing a Sub-Committee to cover work in a particular area.
- 3.8 The three area Committees would cover the west, central and east parts of the District. The areas suggested for each would be as follows:
- West – Rayleigh and Rawreth
 - Central – Hullbridge, Hockley and Hawkwell
 - East – Rochford, Ashingdon, Canewdon, Foulness, Stambridge, Paglesham, Barling, Sutton and Great Wakering

- 3.9 Each would meet in their area, rather than all meetings being held in Rayleigh at the Civic Suite. Meetings would be six weekly. All Ward Councillors in the area would be represented on the Committee. Each Councillor would have voting rights. It is suggested that one representative from each of the Parishes also be invited along to the relevant Area Committee. However, such Parish representatives would not have voting rights. The local police and the appropriate representatives from the County would be invited to attend and participate, but not vote. The agenda for the Area committees would revolve around specific local issues – community safety, local environment and community issues, local highway matters, etc, or matters specifically referred to the Area Committee by the Executive Board. The agenda would also include a specific slot for the public to raise matters relating to their locality.
- 3.10 It is not envisaged, however, that planning applications would be determined by the local area committee; these would remain within the remit of the Development Control Committee. Over time, it is envisaged that some of the budgets currently determined and spent centrally around community safety, the environment and community could be delegated to the Area committees for decision over issues within their locality. Again, the decisions of the Area Committee would be subject to call-in and referral as outlined above. Here though, Members would need to remember that if a decision was called in by the Review Committee, those Members sitting on the Review Committee from that Area Committee present when the decision was taken would not be able to participate.
- 3.11 Based on the above, the composition of the Area Committees in terms of membership would be as follows:-
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| West Area Committee | 16 District Ward Councillors (with voting rights) plus 2 Parish Representatives plus police and ECC Representatives to attend |
| Central Area Committee | 14 District Ward Councillors (with voting rights) plus 3 Parish Representatives plus police and ECC Representatives to attend |
| East Area Committee | 9 District Ward Councillors (with voting rights) plus 9 Parish Representatives plus police and ECC Representatives to attend |
- 3.12 There would be no member substitutes permitted for either the Executive Board or the Area Committees.
- 3.13 At the present time, the Council has officially 5 Member Champions covering Housing Benefits; E Government; Procurement; Historic Environment and Business. These Members have developed a degree of expertise in these areas and, through their knowledge and

experience, have been able to make valuable contributions to the work of the Council in these areas. However, it is clear from their operation to date that to be a champion there is a need for commitment and interest in the area in question and also to ensure that the area covered is not so wide ranging that it dilutes effectiveness or simply duplicates work carried on elsewhere.

- 3.14 Under the proposed new structure, it is considered that there would be benefit in having a range of Member Champions who could feed into the Executive Board, any Sub-Committees formed, and the Area Committees. They would specialise in topics that add to rather than duplicate work underway and assist the Council in areas that are felt to be key to the Council as a whole in meeting its aims and objectives. On the basis of the above, it is felt that the Council would benefit from champions covering the following areas – Benefits; Web Development and E Government applications; Historic Environment; Housing Issues; Young Persons; the Elderly; Recycling; and the Local Business Community. In any new political decision-making structure, it is proposed that these champion roles be formally recognised.
- 3.15 The last proposal put forward relates to approaching both Castle Point Borough Council and Southend Borough Council, as allowed for under the Constitution, to establish a formal structure between the three Councils which can consider and discuss matters of common interest in an open and transparent way. It is suggested that such a structure be termed a Joint Board, with three Member representatives from each authority. It would not have decision-making powers in its own right; that effectively would remain with the three constituent authorities. However, it would provide a vehicle for the three Authorities to consider matters of common interest around responding to the City Regions agenda, spatial planning, infrastructure, economic development, health and wellbeing and sharing services and information. Members might also like to consider whether the County Council should be formally invited to sit in such a structure or simply invited as a guest when appropriate.

THE WAY FORWARD

- 4.1 Depending on Members' views in connection with the above, the intention would now be to consult with potentially affected parties e.g. the Parishes, adjoining Authorities, the Police, other key partners, etc and place the appropriate notifications in the local press, seeking the views of local electors and other interested parties.
- 4.2 Officers would then feed back any views and comments received together with a finalised set of proposals, together with a revised constitution covering the changes, to the Council meeting in April. The aim would be to start the new arrangements from the new municipal year in May. It is suggested that the Review Committee might like to

keep the new arrangements under review during the first year so that further changes can be made if appropriate.

- 4.3 Whether the Joint Board arrangement takes off from May is very much dependent upon agreement to the proposal from both Castle Point Borough Council and Southend Borough Council and possibly Essex County Council, if Members feel they should also be represented in a formal capacity.
- 4.4 Between now and April, the Remuneration Panel would also be recalled to look specifically at Members remuneration in connection with the Executive Board and Members' Champions. Their recommendations will be reported in April along with the finalised proposals.

RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1 It is proposed that the Council **RESOLVES**
- (1) to agree to the proposed changes as outlined to the Council's Decision Making Process for formal consultation and to receive final proposals on a new political decision making structure for 2007/2008, together with the appropriate revisions to the constitution, at its next meeting in April.
 - (2) to determine whether to approach Castle Point Borough Council and Southend Borough Council with a view to establishing a Joint Board Structure as outlined in the report.
 - (3) Subject to (2) above, to determine whether to invite Essex County Council to formally participate in the Joint Board structure envisaged with Castle Point Borough Council and Southend Borough Council.
 - (4) to agree to the recall of the Independent Members Remuneration Panel to look at appropriate Member remuneration levels in the context of an Executive Board and also for the Member Champion roles.

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Background Papers:-

None

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