

Review Committee – 15 January 2008

Minutes of the meeting of the **Review Committee** held on **15 January 2008** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr Mrs J R Lumley
Vice-Chairman: Cllr Mrs S A Harper

Cllr Mrs H L A Glynn
Cllr T Livings

Cllr Mrs C A Weston

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Mrs L M Cox, J R F Mason and P R Robinson.

OFFICERS

P Warren - Chief Executive
S Fowler - Head of Information and Customer Services
M Power - Committee Administrator

19 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 6 November 2007 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

20 OPERATION OF THE NEW POLITICAL DECISION MAKING STRUCTURE

The Committee heard addresses from Cllrs J M Pullen and D G Stansby, in their capacity as Chairmen of the West and Central Area Committees respectively and Cllrs T G Cutmore and K H Hudson as Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Executive Board regarding the operation of the new political decision making structure that had been adopted by Rochford District Council in May 2007. An apology was received from Cllr C G Seagers, Chairman of the East Area Committee.

It had been decided that the Committee would hear first from the Area Committee Chairmen and later from the Executive Board Members. The Review Committee Chairman advised that responses from the initial survey, which had been sent to lead officers, Members, the Council's partners and members of the public who attended the meetings, were being analysed and would be compared against the results of a second survey that was due to be sent out in the next two weeks.

The following questions, which had been sent out to Members prior to the meeting, were asked of the Area Committee Chairmen and the responses recorded as follows:-

With regard to Area Committees, do you feel they are fulfilling the role of engagement with the public and other agencies?

- Community engagement has been strengthened by the establishment of the Area Committees. Members of the public were able to put forward their views on issues that concerned them; these views could then be taken into account when decisions were made. The meetings were generally well received and members of the public were pleased to have the opportunity to have their say.
- The Area Committees also allowed for members of the public to have an increased contact with elected Members. Both Chairmen endeavoured to speak to the public, before and after the meetings, in order to establish whether there was anything further that could be done to improve the meetings from the public's point of view.
- Examples of issues that had engaged public interest via the Area Committees were highways and traffic items, policing and youth issues, dog control, the environment and the provision of footpaths and bridleways in the District.
- Generally there had been a good public presence at the meetings and, as awareness that the meetings were taking place increased, so too would public attendance.
- It was accepted that the concentration of people was likely to be from the location where the meeting was held or in respect of a particular issue on the agenda. It was considered fair that the meetings were held in venues across the District, although some venues were proving better than others.

In relation to the Community Forum, what are your views on the suggestion that there should be a limit on the number of questions a member of the public can raise at a meeting? Do you have any views on the Forum?

- The number of questions allowed should remain at the Chairman's discretion. Generally, supplementary questions unrelated to the original question were not permitted, although the Chairman could exercise a degree of flexibility. This applied similarly to questions that had not been submitted in writing.
- Now that better sound systems had been introduced, forums were easier to control, especially with the use of roving microphones. The Community Forum item gave members of the public a feeling of being involved. The 20 minutes allocated for the Community Forum item, however, was considered insufficient and both Chairmen often allowed more time to fully involve residents.
- The meeting room layout, with a horseshoe design of tables for District and Parish Councillors and officers, worked well. It was important that public seating was in close proximity to this horseshoe to make the public feel more involved.

- Participation by the public during the Spotlight items on the agenda was accepted as it gave the public the opportunity to ask questions directly of speakers (primarily the Police or County Highways). However, much was down to the Chairman's discretion. The order of the Community Forum and Spotlight items should remain as it was.

There have been indications that some more localised issues would have been better dealt with away from the meeting, can we have your thoughts on this?

- With District Council officers and representatives from County Highways, Police and other bodies in attendance, members of the public were able to ask direct questions and often obtain immediate answers. The public obviously retained the option of contacting the Council or other body by telephone, email, or in person.
- If a Ward Member was already dealing with an issue, the Member should have the opportunity at the Area Committee to advise the public of this.

What are your thoughts on Spotlight Issues?

- The spotlight issues on the agenda gave the opportunity to elected Members and members of the public to ask questions following presentations given by District Council officers, representatives of County Highways, the Police and other bodies. Matters of concern could then be 'fleshed out' by questioners asking for more detailed information. There was a good deal of public interest in policing and highways issues, and also regarding the environment.
- The local Primary Care Trusts (PCT) would attend Area Committee meetings when local 'health' issues were on the agenda as a spotlight item.
- Requests could be made to presenters to include items in their presentations, that would be of particular concern to the public.
- The current trend of having three spotlight items worked well. This number could, however, be reduced to two, or even one, if necessary.

Do you have any views on referrals to the Executive Board?

- The Area Committee could pass a resolution for a matter to be referred to the Executive Board for consideration and for a decision to be made. An example given was the referral to Executive Board of the issue of a teen shelter at Clements Hall, the result of which was that land was allocated for the shelter. Other recent referrals were on the issues of graffiti in play spaces and pollution.

What is the mechanism for determining appropriate agenda items?

- Consultation to build the agenda took place with officers two weeks prior to the Area Committee meeting and a Chairman's briefing meeting was held a few days before the meeting. The Chairman could add items to the agenda following approaches made by elected Members, members of the public and press reports.

Are Area Committee Members suggesting to you issues for inclusion on the agendas?

- Both Chairmen had received some suggestions from Members but would welcome greater input. Members could approach Area Committee Chairmen informally in this respect. It was suggested that Members might not be aware of the mechanism for asking questions at or putting issues on the agenda for area committees.

What are your views about Area Committees having a budget?

- It would depend on the size of the budget, what it would be used for, how it would be controlled and how it would benefit the community in general.
- One suggestion was that Area Committees be given a contingency budget that could be used, say, to 'top up' Parish-run projects. If a budget were to be allocated, the Committee would meet to discuss any application made by a Parish for contribution to a project.
- Other options for allocation of potential Area Committee budgets were discussed.

Cllrs J M Pullen and D G Stansby were thanked for their contribution and left the meeting.

Cllr T G Cutmore (Chairman of Executive Board) and Cllr K H Hudson (Vice-Chairman of Executive Board) were invited into the meeting to respond to the following questions (a copy of which had been sent to each of them in advance of the meeting) and the responses recorded as follows:-

The Forward Plan is produced on a monthly basis and covers a four-month period. What are your thoughts on the information contained in the plan?

- It was perceived as a useful tool that enabled Members to focus on what the Council is aiming to achieve and illustrated how items contained within the Plan were progressing.

- Four months was considered an optimum time-frame for production of the Forward Plan. Decision-making was viewed as more informed than it had been previously and there had been no criticisms of the Forward Plan from Executive Board Members. It was noted that the format of the Plan might need modifying if the political structure of the Council were to change.
- The Plan could be developed to include an indication of the risks associated with each item, which would be of added benefit to the Review Committee in identifying potential problems or in adding value to a situation. The mechanisms were in place for the Review Committee to investigate issues arising from decisions made.
- The potential content of the Forward Plan was discussed by the Leader with the Chief Executive; it was then presented to the Executive Board.
- The Forward Plan could swiftly be amended to accommodate unforeseen events. Greater use of Sub-Committees would be beneficial in an investigatory and advisory role.
- The Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Executive Board would welcome more input from Members on decisions made by the Executive Board, particularly where they had concerns relating to their own wards. Members should also be encouraged to be more proactive in resolving issues outside the Committee arena. It was felt that some Members needed more experience of how the new structure operated before they would fully utilise it.

The Chairman of the Review Committee asked that all Members be supplied with updated versions of the Forward Plan as they are produced, to enable them to keep abreast of how the Council is meeting its deadlines.

How do you feel the Executive Board has performed in relation to the decisions scheduled on the Forward Plan?

- The Executive Board had performed well to date. Using the 'traffic light' system, there was nothing in the Plan that had been designated as 'red'; items were either 'amber' or 'green'.

How do you feel the Executive Board has performed in relation to the Key Policies and Actions report for 2007/08 (submitted to Full Council on 27 February 2007)?

- Apart from certain unavoidable delays, the report had been carried forward very successfully and most items were generally on target. It was regarded as a useful document that enabled Members to check progress against projected dates. Quicker decisions were now possible under the Executive structure than would previously been the case.

- No Members to date had questioned any decisions made by the Executive Board and the Review Committee had called in no decisions.

Area Committees

The Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Executive Board were asked their views on the operation of the Area Committees.

- The Area Committee meetings could be viewed as an arena in which to 'showcase' the Council and were a way of bringing local government to the people. As well as concentrating on Council policies in general, focus should be on issues relating to the local area covered by the Area Committee.
- Area Committee Chairmen may benefit from specific training in the chairing of public meetings.
- The meetings had benefited from the introduction of a sound system.
- Although it was very useful to have County Highways and the Police in attendance, consideration should be given to limiting public participation to the Community Forum item.
- The Area Committees were a learning experience for both Members and officers. Where possible, responses to public questions should be given at the meeting rather than taken away and deferred to the following meeting.
- An increased representation from Essex County Council at the Area Committees would be beneficial. This would enable the public to have access to the County Council as well as to the District and Parish Councils and give an opportunity for the County Council to report back to County on issues raised in Rochford District.
- Lead officers had been allocated to specific Area Committees in order to provide continuity during operation of the first year of the newly established Committees. After this initial year, the rotation of officers among areas could be considered.

Cllrs T G Cutmore and K H Hudson were thanked for their contribution.

It was agreed that it would be appropriate for the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Review Committee to meet on a separate occasion with Cllr C G Seagers to conduct an interview with him in his capacity of Chairman of the East Area Committee.

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The meeting closed at 10.15 pm.

Chairman

Date

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