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## **CIVIC AND PUBLIC RELATIONS BEST VALUE REVIEW**

### **1 SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report outlines the final conclusions of the Best Value Review into the Civic and Public Relations service and presents an action plan for improvement.

### **2 INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1 The Civic and Public Relations functions are carried out within the Corporate Policy Unit of the authority. The scope of the review was to examine the delivery of both functions, to consider relationships across council divisions and to seek to identify opportunities for a better level of service for the residents in the district.
- 2.2 The review team comprised 5 members of staff. Several meetings were held with the Civic and Public Relations Member Working Group, with the final meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2002 agreeing the action plan now being considered by this Committee.

### **3 CIVIC FUNCTION - BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 This element of the service deals primarily with the work of the Chairman, including civic events and charity fundraising. The Chairman is appointed on an annual basis to represent the Authority as a non-political figurehead and to promote the Council to residents and businesses. The role is largely ceremonial, but the Chairman does provide support to a range of activities and events. A Chairman's Guide is attached as [Appendix 2](#) to this report.
- 3.2 In summary, the Chairman of the Council fulfils the following roles:
- Chairs Council meetings and Annual Council
  - Helps to promote the Council as a 'caring organisation' through personal contact with residents
  - Helps to develop links with local groups and organisations, particularly smaller groups with a lower public profile
  - Charity fundraising in conjunction with a local Charity, which contributes to community well being.
- 3.2 The Chairman can be a point of contact for any resident in the District, although such contact is not intended to be a substitute for communication with individual service departments or Councillors. Generally though, the Chairman does not 'reach' most residents in the District; contact tends to be through specific groups or organisations.

#### **4 PUBLIC RELATIONS - BACKGROUND**

4.1 The public relations part of the service undertakes a number of activities:

- Promoting and publicising the Council's activities and services
- Providing residents, local, regional and national organisations, with knowledge of the Council's corporate objectives
- Ensuring that information can reach the media at all times through an appropriate Officer, dependent on particular circumstances
- Co-ordinating the publication of Rochford District Matters.

#### **5 METHODOLOGY FOR REVIEW**

5.1 The review followed the agreed methodology and sought to:

- Challenge the need for the services provided
- Critically examine the elements of each service
- Compare with other local authorities
- Develop an action plan of improvements

#### **6 CHALLENGE**

6.1 The review examined the need for each part of the service and concluded that both the Civic and the public relations functions were essential services that resulted in positive benefits for the district's residents.

6.2 As summarised above, the Chairman of the Council plays an important role in raising the profile of the authority with residents, helps to communicate the functions of the authority and makes a valuable contribution to assisting smaller organisations and charities. In accepting the role played by the Chairman, the review concluded that there were opportunities to develop the role and to achieve closer working relationships with organisations and residents.

6.3 The public relations function is not as highly developed in Rochford as it might be, but the review concluded that the service could most cost-effectively continue to be delivered in-house. Significant improvements could be made, particularly to Rochford District Matters (RDM), one of the key methods of communication with residents.

6.4 The Review has not been successful at identifying savings from the delivery of the Civic and Public Relations Service. However, the majority of the actions identified have minimal cost implications, but will have very positive customer benefits.

## **7 ACTION PLAN**

- 7.1 The action plan for improvements to the Civic and Public Relations function is outlined in Appendix One to this report. The resultant improvements arising from the action plan will have positive benefits for residents, ensuring they are better informed about the Council, have an opportunity to participate in Civic activities and that local organisations are provided with much needed support and encouragement.
- 7.2 The future of RDM was a key consideration for the review. The review team, both Members and Officers, were convinced of the value of a publication akin to RDM being delivered to every household in the district on a regular basis.
- 7.3 However, concerns were expressed about the format and frequency of publication. It was concluded that the arrangements for the new leisure contract provided an opportunity to make significant changes to the publication, with the aim being to improve quality and to broaden the scope of editorial to include more coverage of issues that directly influence the wellbeing of the district's residents.
- 7.4 The proposals for a citizenship award are included in the action plan, but detailed proposals for the award are included as [Appendix 3](#) to this report.
- 7.5 At its last meeting the Working Group asked for a report back on the financial implications of installing PCs in the reception areas to allow customers access to the Council's information systems. The cost of acquiring and installing one PC is estimated at £1,300 (including software licences), but there is an additional revenue cost associated with the addition of any new computer equipment on the network. In addition, there may be a requirement for additional network points to be installed in the reception areas.
- 7.6 The enabling of the requirements of E-Government means that local authorities must look to find ways to enhance electronic means of communication with their customers. It is suggested that the availability of PCs in reception areas should be considered further through the implementation of the IS/IT strategy in due course.

## **8 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1 The net cost to Rochford for the publication of each issue of RDM is about £4,900. Any improvement in the quality of the publication would add to the costs of publication. However, there is an opportunity to achieve improvements by producing RDM in partnership with the new

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leisure contractor and by examining the possibility of also incorporating the magazine for council tenants into the publication.

- 8.2 If Members were minded to support the option for running 3-4 trial Chairman's events for residents, it is estimated that a budget of £2,000 would need to be identified for that purpose.

## **9 RECOMMENDATION**

- 9.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

To agree the action plan outlined in Appendix One of this report.

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**APPENDIX ONE**

<b>Action</b>	<b>Assessment</b>	<b>Resources</b>	<b>Timetable</b>
<p>1. Provide a Chairman's page on the Council's website. Details provided to include a diary one-month ahead, a résumé of previous month's events, Chairman's charity details, biography, contact details, and explanation of role and functions.</p>	<p>Cost-effective way to provide information about Chairman's activities for the community and organisations operating in the district.</p>	<p>Minimal – information for updates to be provided by the Civic and Public Relations Officer (CPRO) as part of day-to-day responsibilities.</p>	<p>Implement when new Chairman chosen at next annual Council – CPRO to liaise with the IT Client Manager. CPRO to issue Press Release when in place.</p> <p>Note: the appearance of the website is due to be revised during 2002/03 and this will enable more prominent display of the Chairman's page.</p>
<p>2. Chairman's events for residents. Investigate potential for holding events in each Parish/Town Council area throughout the municipal year. Role of mobile exhibition unit.</p>	<p>An opportunity to raise the profile of the Council with the community and to provide local residents direct contact with the Chairman, and to provide information about important work being carried out by the authority. There is also an opportunity to involve the Parish Councils in events.</p>	<p>It is estimated that a budget of £2,000 would allow 3-4 trial events to be organised. This sum is not included in the draft estimates. Town/Parish Councils to be asked for a contribution of either approximately 50% of the costs of events or a contribution in kind.</p> <p>Some resource implications arising from intensive use of the mobile unit.</p>	<p>Investigations to be carried out by the CPRO. Organise 3-4 trial events in 2002/03 to gauge interest and value of events. Consideration to be given to using the mobile unit.</p>
<p>3. Civic Banquet – public relations. Options to consider include: a key note</p>	<p>The Civic Banquet can be used to gain positive publicity for the authority. Hiring a</p>	<p>Minimal for Chairman to address and press release.</p>	<p>CPRO to make arrangements for an address from Chairman to be</p>

<p>speaker, Chairman with specific details on the corporate plan, a press release in advance of the event and press briefings, professional after dinner speakers</p>	<p>professional speaker is not considered to be a cost-effective option.</p>	<p>Professional speaker would have a cost: for a good quality speaker this might be considerable.</p>	<p>introduced at next banquet, together with press release/briefings.</p>
<p>4. Chairman's Reception – involvement of the local community groups and organisations.</p>	<p>The reception, organised each year, provides a high profile opportunity to link the Council positively with key community organizations and groups</p>	<p>The cost of the reception is relatively modest, and it is not envisaged that significant additional resources would be required</p>	<p>CPRO to make arrangements to invite a number of small local organisations to the Civic Reception. In 2002/03 arrangements will be around the theme of the Queen's Golden Jubilee.</p>
<p>5. Rochford District Matters – review of format and method of publication.</p>	<p>RDM is a valuable way of communicating with all residents in the district. It is concluded that publication should continue but that ways must be found to improve the quality of the presentation. Combining RDM with the tenant housing magazine and involving the new leisure contractor has the potential to bring added value and to improve quality.</p>	<p>At this stage, the resource implications are not clear. However, the target would be to publish RDM at least as frequently as at present, and to improve quality and maintain costs to the authority at their current level or below.</p>	<p>Once leisure contract negotiations have been finalised, Corporate Policy Manager to develop with the successful leisure contractor.</p>
<p>6. Rochford District Matters – reporting of corporate objectives</p>	<p>RDM should be used more coherently for reporting on corporate objectives. These should be reported on at the beginning of each Municipal Year</p>	<p>No significant resource implications arising from this action</p>	<p>Corporate Policy Manager to make arrangements commencing with the first edition of RDM in 2002/03</p>

	and then regular updates provided to highlight achievements		
7. Press Briefings	Press briefings allow a valuable two-way dialogue between the Council and the media. Briefings should be organised with all media organisations. Lead officer for briefings should be the Corporate Policy Manager with the assistance of the Communications Officer.	No additional financial resources are envisaged to enable this to action to be implemented	Action to be implemented in 2002.
8. Update Communications and Media Strategy	The strategy is the key to arrangements for dealing with the media, producing press releases, promoting the activities of the Chairman and so on. As a result of this review, consequential changes will be required to the document	Minimal resource implications.	Corporate Policy Manager to publish updated Strategy document in 2002 once leisure contract arrangements have been concluded.
9. Citizenship awards	A positive way to publicly recognise valuable contributions from individuals and groups that have benefited the local community.	Minimal resource implications to arrange an award scheme.	First awards to be presented at the annual banquet in 2002/03. Detailed Proposals are outlined in Appendix 3.
10. Chairman's Guidebook	A comprehensive guide to protocols, etc. for incoming Chairman	Minimal resources required to prepare a guide which will be regularly updated.	CPRO to prepare a draft for committee approval – guide to be available for

			incoming Chairman in 2002/03The guide is appended to this report at Appendix 2.
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