

The national agenda

The Government wishes to see a strong, vibrant, innovative and responsive local government delivering the quality of local leadership and public services that their communities need.

Consequently, since 1997, the Government has introduced a range of measures aimed at developing better local leadership and focussing on service delivery. The concept of best value, in other words continuous improvement, has been introduced and enacted through legislation.

New political arrangements and new constitutions have been brought in via the Local Government Act 2000. That legislation also saw the introduction of statutory community strategies and a broad new enabling power to promote 'community wellbeing'.

At the end of 2001 a new system of comprehensive performance assessment, together with the concept of scoring and league tables, was introduced for local authorities. Counties and single tier authorities were assessed in 2002, with district councils following. All the Essex Districts were inspected in February 2004. A summary of Rochford's CPA assessment is given in section 6.

Legislation has been passed which reforms the planning system, introducing a Local Development Framework (LDF), designed to link together the many plans needed for the development of a piece of land. This will replace the existing Local Plan. The timeframe for implementation at Rochford will be approximately 3 years.

In subject terms, much of the Government's focus to date has been on education, health and social care and crime and disorder reduction. Many of the services in these areas are delivered by county councils or single tier authorities, although districts play an important role in respect of health and social care provision and crime and disorder reduction.

Key national priorities that impact on district councils are:

- Improving the quality of life
 - of children, young people and families at risk by tackling child poverty, maximising the life chances of children in care or in need, and strengthening protection for children at risk of abuse
 - of older people, by enabling them to live as independently as possible and avoid unnecessary periods in hospital
- Promoting healthier communities and narrowing health inequalities by targeting key local services - such as health, education, housing, crime and accident prevention - to match need; and an increasing focus on the encouragement of healthy lifestyles
- Creating safer and stronger communities by working with the police and other local agencies to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour, strengthen community cohesion and tackle drug abuse

- Transforming the local environment by improving the quality, cleanliness and safety of public space and developing more sustainable communities
- Promoting the economic vitality of localities by supporting business improvement, providing positive conditions for growth and employment, improving adult skills, helping the hardest-to-reach into work, and extending quality and choice in the housing market

Earlier this year the Government launched a debate around its 10 year vision for local government. Amongst the issues highlighted were the need for vibrant local leadership, with an emphasis on community leadership, the role of councillors, partnerships and local governance. Neighbourhoods are seen as key building blocks in the drive to improve local services, create safer communities and improve local accountability. Better performance is also seen as key, with improved performance management and a better balance between national and local priorities with more joint working between councils and partner organisations.

Responding to the Government's agenda

Local Government change and reform have been high on this Government's agenda, with the pace and volume showing no sign of diminishing. Local Authorities therefore have to continue to rise to the challenges set for them by Government.

As far as Rochford is concerned, we believe we have progressed in addressing the national agenda, given the resource constraints within which the authority operates. To date the Council's achievements include the following:

- **Formation of a joint board with the local Health Authority and Castle Point Borough Council**

We operate a joint board with the Rochford and Castle Point Primary Care Trust and Castle Point Borough Council.

The board was established to help ensure that the local authorities, health, social care and voluntary agencies had a better understanding of how their work impacts on one another and to assist in joint planning, for example, in health improvement and the provision of facilities.

- **Participation in the County Council's first Public Service Agreement (PSA) with Government**

Essex County Council and Central Government signed a Public Service Agreement in February 2002 that focused on improvement in several areas including:

- maintaining the independence of older people
- recycling and composting waste
- keeping strategic routes free of abandoned cars and litter
- developing woodland and hedgerows
- improving the condition of local roads
- reducing the number of young offenders
- protecting our heritage
- maintaining bio-diversity

Within that agreement, there was scope for District Councils to become involved and participate. We therefore signed up to contribute in a number of areas. Our progress to date is detailed in section 8.

We are now in discussion with the County about a second round of Agreements with Government, including the possibility of participating in a pilot on what the Government calls Local Area Agreements.

- **Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy**

In March 2005, the Council, together with a number of partners, agreed a new strategy and targets for the period 2005-2008.

The partner agencies are now working together on the production of the detailed action plans which underpin the Strategy.

- **Community Planning and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs)**

The Local Government Act 2000 requires councils to lead in the development of Community Strategies through local partnership arrangements. Our Community Strategy was approved last year. It provides a framework to help the statutory agencies, local businesses, the community, and voluntary sector deliver both the local and Government agendas over the next 20 years. The strategy is accompanied by a five year Action Plan which is regularly reviewed and rolled forward by the Rochford LSP.

- **Reform of the planning system**

The authority's Local Plan is being replaced by a Local Development Framework, designed to link all the strategies and plans for those delivering services in relation to the development of land. The Local Development Scheme, setting out the key requirements and timetable for production of the Framework has now been approved by Government.

The challenge for Rochford

Local government needs to both promote and respond to the environment in which it finds itself. It is important that whatever problems and opportunities present themselves, the district council continues to aspire to improving its service provision.

The challenges that Rochford faces are considerable. They range from meeting rising expectations from the public against a background of continuing tight financial controls on public expenditure, to working with other organisations in areas which, not that long ago, were seen as outside a local authority's remit, e.g. crime and disorder, and health.

Fortunately, Rochford is well used to both responding to and promoting change, and having to reconcile a variety of competing demands and issues. Within our comprehensive performance assessment, inspectors acknowledged our skills around partnership working and we will continue to build upon these skills and our growing relationships to deliver our agenda.