

REPORT TO FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SCRUTINY PANEL (8.11.05)

USER FOCUS AND PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Recommendations:

- (1) That the findings of the Audit Commission's 'User Focus' assessment of the Council's approach to public consultation and engagement be noted;**
- (2) That the Council's existing Consultation Strategy be reviewed in light of the Commission's findings, and that the revised strategy be submitted to a future meeting of the Scrutiny Panel for consideration; and**
- (3) That customer consultation exercises completed during 2005 be noted.**

User Focus

1. (Head of Human Resources and Performance Management) As the Scrutiny Panel will be aware, the Audit Commission has recently undertaken an assessment at all Essex local authorities, looking at User Focus and how effectively individual councils engage with their respective communities.
2. User Focus is an important element in draft the revised approach to Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) for upper-tier authorities and, although the new CPA methodology for second-tier authorities has not yet been published, it is an issue that is expected to also feature significantly in the next round of assessments and will also inform Direction of Travel statements for 2005/06.
3. The Audit Commission has judged that the Council's overall strengths outweigh weaknesses (the second highest score on a four point scale) in its approach to user focus. The Commission has also reported on areas of best practice across Essex at a 'Share and Learn' presentation made to officer representatives of each of the participating councils. A copy of this Council's completed self-assessment, incorporating the Commission's comments on each of the individual inspection themes is attached as Appendix 1 to this agenda. Also attached (Appendix 2) are details of issues raised at the presentation and areas of notable practice across the county. A report on how Essex councils could work together to improve user focus is to be made by the Audit Commission to the next meeting of the Essex Chief Executives Association.
4. In addition to highlighting the Council's main strengths in relation to service and issue led user focus and engagement, the Audit Commission has identified a number of weaknesses such as ensuring engagement in relation to corporate issues and with minority communities and other hard to reach groups. The Commission has recognised however that the authority was generally already aware of these particular issues and how they will be addressed. The findings

of the user focus assessment has therefore provided an impetus for the comprehensive review of the authority's existing Consultation Strategy, which was originally published six years ago in response to the introduction of best value legislation.

5. The review of the Consultation Strategy will provide an overall corporate approach to consultation and engagement to be embedded across the organisation, to complement the recognised success of service and issue specific participation initiatives. Although the Council already consults widely on a variety of issues, it is possible that minority groups and communities are not always fully engaged or represented. The authority has only a small ethnic and other minority population, and the issue of inclusion will therefore also be addressed through the review of the Consultation Strategy. As part of the review of the Consultation Strategy the opportunity will also be taken to produce a consultation toolkit, to standardise consultation approaches and methodologies wherever possible.
6. A draft version of the new Consultation Strategy will be considered by the Scrutiny Panel at a future meeting.

Consultation Register

7. The statutory duty of Best Value seeks to ensure that the Council provides the right services at standards that keep improving. In order to meet this duty, the authority consults a wide range of groups and individuals to inform its planning and decision making processes.
8. In view of the importance of ensuring that the Council can demonstrate that it is using consultation effectively and can show continuity of consultation to inform priorities, a central record of all significant consultation exercises notified by Heads of Service is kept by the Performance Management Unit. An annual report has previously been made to overview and scrutiny on consultation undertaken during each year, which now falls within the terms of reference of this Scrutiny Panel.
9. Details of all significant customer consultation exercises completed so far during 2005, together with brief information on the purpose of each exercise and an officer contact for information on the respective results, are therefore attached as Appendix 3 to this agenda.
10. The Audit Commission's user focus assessment of the council's approach to public consultation and engagement identified the consultation register as an example of good practice, but suggested that this process should also identify the service improvements and policy developments that have arisen from specific consultation exercises. This issue will be addressed when the register is prepared for 2005/06