

MALDON DISTRICT COUNCIL

COMMITTEE STRUCTURE REVIEW

Report (February 2017)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BDO completed a review of both Maldon District Council's committee structure, and the cultures and behaviours which flow through that structure

Introduction

BDO were commissioned to deliver a review of Maldon District Council's (hereafter 'the Council') committee structure. The purpose of the project was to review the Council's governance and identify opportunities to improve the way the Council manages its committee business in a way which balances the needs of efficiency, a strategic focus, and political robustness. This report summarises the findings of that review. To complete the review BDO:

- Interviewed the Council's Corporate Leadership Team, Leader and Deputy Leader and the Chair and Vice Chairs of each of the Council's Programme Committees and Overview and Scrutiny
- Carried out a survey of all Members and senior Council officers (11 Members responded and 10 officers responded)
- Undertook desktop research of best practice in other committee systems
- Benchmarked the Council against similar local authorities which also operate a committee system

Key findings

There are a number of elements to the Council's committee structure and governance which represent good practice. For example, overall the Council can show a clear golden thread from its goals (e.g. focussing on key projects), high level outcomes which will show whether those goals are being achieved (e.g. mobile waste contract), Key Corporate Activities required to achieve those outcomes (e.g. mobilisation of the waste contract by December 2015). Progress against Key Corporate Activities is then reported regularly to Members on an exception reporting basis to facilitate scrutiny. In addition the Council has recently taken a series of incremental steps to improve its management of committee business. For example:

- Reviewing just recommendations (rather than all minutes) of committees at Full Council
- Agreeing a clear programme for Overview and Scrutiny Committee each year
- Setting a Forward Planning Meeting to manage allocation of cross-committee business
- Agreeing a new protocol for how Members and officers communicate
- Agreeing reforms to increase scope to delegate planning decisions to officers

This report makes some more far-reaching suggestions to build on these positive steps. However, overall there is a clear case for reforming how the Council handles its committee business.

The Council has a disproportionately large committee footprint (in terms of both the frequency and quantum of time spend in committee) - almost double that of its peers.

In turn this leads to higher than average costs for the Council - For example, the Council's committee services costs are £29,936 per 1000 of population, compared to a mean average for peer group of £27,664.

Duplication of business across committees and a greater focus on operational rather than strategic issues are the main cause of the Council's large committee footprint. The Council has a tendency to discuss the same business at multiple committees and/or exercise significant involvement in matters which are operational rather than strategic.

There are a range of options available to the Council to reduce its committee footprint without sacrificing political robustness. These include:

- Add 'Policy' to the remit of Finance and Corporate Services Committee to create a 'Policy, Finance and Corporate Services Committee' to manage strategic issues which cut across multiple committees
- Reducing the quantum of planning applications requiring a political decision, allowing the Council to review current planning committee footprint
- Build on Overview and Scrutiny's already strong focus on the Council's relationship with external organisations and reduce its focus on internal operations as the Council already has a range of forums (programme committees and Task and Finish Groups) to scrutinise its own business
- Use the Council's Forward Planning Meeting to ensure all committee meetings focus on strategic rather than operational issues
- Improve working relationship between Members and officers
- Reduce the number of reports sent to committees for noting

Ultimately these are political decisions. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to structure the Council's committees. This report has proposed a number of ways in which the Council could seek to move from a very politically robust (but operational rather than strategic and therefore less efficient) system to a system which strikes a more even balance between political robustness, strategic rather than operational and efficiency, and which, with fewer committee meetings, may also result in more consistent decision making. Clearly it is for Members to decide where the balance best sits.

REPORT STRUCTURE

This report is structured to highlight the case for change (a large committee footprint), then explore the reasons for that large footprint, then identify how the Council could reduce its current footprint if it chooses to do so

Structure

This report has four sections:

Section	Description
Case for change	This section draws on benchmarking to show that the Council has a relatively large committee footprint compared to similar councils and the consequences of this - greater cost to the Council.
Explaining the committee footprint I: Duplication	This section uses evidence to show that duplication of business is one cause of the Council's large committee footprint and therefore a focus area for reform.
Explaining the committee footprint: II: Operational focus	This section uses evidence to show that another cause of the Council's large committee footprint is its focus on operational rather than strategic matters at committee meetings. Again, if the Council is seeking to reduce the current footprint this should be an area of focus.
Reform options	Based on the previous two areas ripe for reform (Duplication and Operational Focus), this section sets out potential steps the Council could take if it wishes to reduce its committee footprint and improve its general operations, drawing on approaches adopted by other Councils running committee systems, and also responses to the survey carried out for this review.

CASE FOR CHANGE

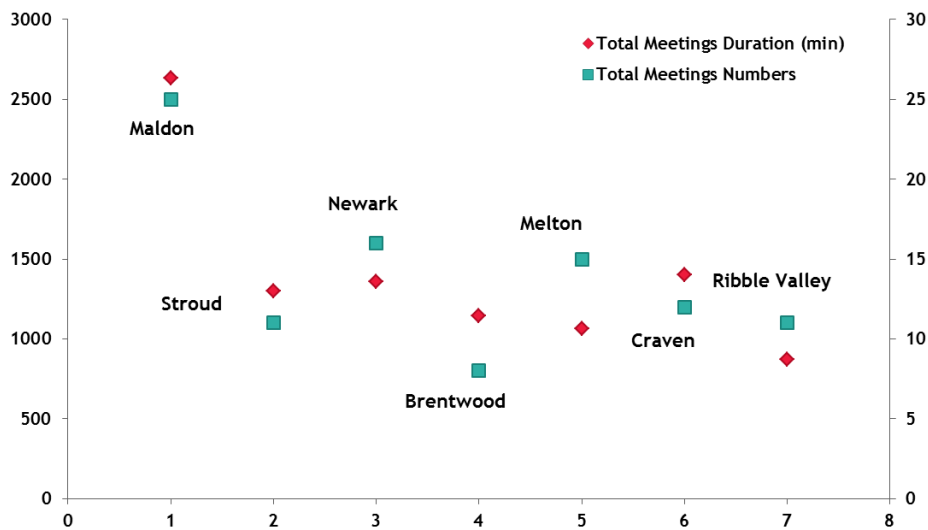
The Council spends considerably more time in committee meetings than similar councils which also operate a committee system. This manifests itself in higher costs to the Council

Footprint size

We compared the Council’s committee footprint (the number of committee meetings it holds and amount of time spent in committee meetings) against councils which fulfilled three criteria:

- They also operated a committee system
- They were a District Council
- They had a local authority characteristic score (a measure of similarity to Maldon) of lower than 0.15 according to the CIPFA near neighbours statistical model (to ensure we were comparing Maldon with areas which might face similar issues which drive committee business - such as types of planning applications)

We then analysed both the number and length of time spent in committee meetings across all of each peer group council’s committees across October, November and December 2015. Our finding - that the Council has a larger committee footprint than similar councils is set out in the chart below - which shows the Council spends approximately double the amount of time in meetings as the average peer group council.



Footprint costs

The Council incurs higher costs than similar councils as a result of its larger committee footprint.

Councils report annually to the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) on their expenditure on a wide range of service lines. One of these service lines is ‘Corporate and Democratic Core’ (CDC). These include policy-making and all other Member-based activities including corporate, programme and service policy making and more general activities relating to the governance and representation of local interests. It also includes costs associated with officer advice and support to members. Therefore expenditure on CDC is a useful proxy for the costs of a Council’s committee footprint. Maldon’s expenditure on CDC is £29,936 per 1000 of population, compared to a mean average of £27,664 for peer group. Furthermore, this does not include all costs - such as writing committee papers/reviewing committee papers which take place within service budgets and the alternative use that could be made of officer time.

In summary the Council spends more time than similar councils in committee meetings, and, consequently, this costs the Council more money. The next two sections highlight reasons why the Council’s committee footprint is larger than similar councils, so that these areas can be targeted for reform.

EXPLAINING THE COMMITTEE FOOTPRINT I: DUPLICATION

The Council frequently brings a report on the same issue to several different committees

Introduction

Having established the large size of the Council's committee footprint in the previous section (and the financial consequence of that size), the next two sections explore the main reasons for this size - duplication and operational focus.

This section focuses on the Council's tendency to duplicate business across a range of committees. This tendency manifests itself in two ways:

- The same item of business is discussed several times but at different committees
- The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee focuses on internal scrutiny (which could be achieved through other committees) as well as external scrutiny (where the Committee adds most value)

This section uses evidence to highlight each of these issues in turn

The same item of business is discussed several times but at different committees

Interviews carried out for this review and a review of the Council's business for the 2015/16 municipal year, indicate that the Council duplicates the same business across a number of different committees. The Table on the right highlights just some examples of where this happened in 2015/16. The survey carried out for this review shows consensus between members and officers on this point, with 'poor' the highest scoring category in both surveys.

Q. How would you describe the Council's handling of cross-committee business



Clearly there will be some items which will benefit from discussion at more than one committee. For example, it was good practice that whilst the waste contract was approved by Full Council on the 10th September 2015, it was kept under review extensively by the Community Services Committee (17/11/15, 19/1/16, 23/2/16, 12/4/16). However, the examples in the table (below) would arguably have been handled more efficiently through a specialist forum for cross-committee matters followed by ratification at Full Council.

Business	Community Services	Planning and Licensing	Finance & C/S	Council
Community Hospital	✓		✓	✓
Heybridge Flood Mitigation	✓	✓	✓	
Stronger Communities	✓	✓	✓	✓
Customer Strategy	✓	✓	✓	
Superfast Broadband	✓	✓	✓	
Coastal Communities Team	✓	✓		

Interviews and the survey carried out for this review particularly highlighted Tourism as an area where there is overlap in the current terms of reference between Planning and Licensing Committee and Community Services Committee. For example, the Community Services committee oversees "promotion of sports, arts, heritage, play and other related activities" whilst the Planning and Licensing Committee is responsible for Tourism. This is a potential opportunity to simplify the terms of reference across both committees by better aligning committee terms of reference with officer directorates.

Similarly, Overview and Scrutiny carry out a quarterly review of the Council's performance indicators, which is also done by each committee individually.

EXPLAINING THE COMMITTEE FOOTPRINT I: DUPLICATION

The Council frequently brings a report on the same issue to several different committees

Several councils in the peer group for this study have introduced a specialist forum within the bounds of a committee system. For example: Ribble Valley has a 'Policy and Resources Committee'; Craven has a 'Policy Committee'; Stroud has a 'Strategic Policy and Resources Committee'; Brentwood has a 'Policy, Finance and Resources Committee'. Brentwood's Policy, Finance and Administration Committee is handling the Council's restructure and oversight of 'key projects', reflecting the type of business discussed at these committees.

The Council has recently introduced a liaison meeting between Members and officers to better manage cross-committee business. This is a positive step to overcome this issue.

Role of Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Unlike the leader-cabinet model of local government, the committee system model does not necessarily rely on an overview and scrutiny committee. This is because many councils use their committee structure to perform the scrutiny role as the committee structure already gives more councillors a clearer role in running an authority.

The table below summarises which councils in the peer group for this study have an Overview and Scrutiny Committee and which do not.

Clearly some similar councils have an overview and scrutiny committee (even if by another name) within a committee system.

Council	Overview and Scrutiny Committee? (Y/N)
Maldon	Y
Stroud	N
Newark and Sherwood	N
Brentwood	Y
Melton	N
Craven	Y
Ribble Valley	N

Maldon's scrutiny has functioned well in the past - for example the Council has previously won awards for its scrutiny work and recommendations from previous reviews have been successfully implemented to positive effect - such as retaining consultants involved in procurements right through to contract mobilisation.

The Centre for Public Scrutiny argue that overview and scrutiny committees add most value in a committee system where it focusses on "wider investigations of partners" (which have been expanded under the Localism Act 2011). The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee already serves this purpose well. For example, during the 2015/16 municipal year it reviewed both the South Essex Parking Partnership, primary school education and the Stowe Maries Aerodrome (which the Council has funded through a loan). With the advent of devolution the importance of effective external partnerships is likely to grow, therefore scrutiny could have a key role in the future success of the District. External-facing scrutiny has proven effective elsewhere, such as Preston Council and Fylde Council's work on scrutinising potential fracking for shale gas in the local area.

Given that the Council already has a range of programme committees and task and finish groups to scrutinise the Council's internal business, arguably the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's terms of reference should be redefined to focus only on external partnerships - as well as discharging statutory responsibilities as a Crime and Disorder Committee. Taking the 2015/16 municipal year alone, the table below shows which other forums the Council could have considered internal-facing business in.

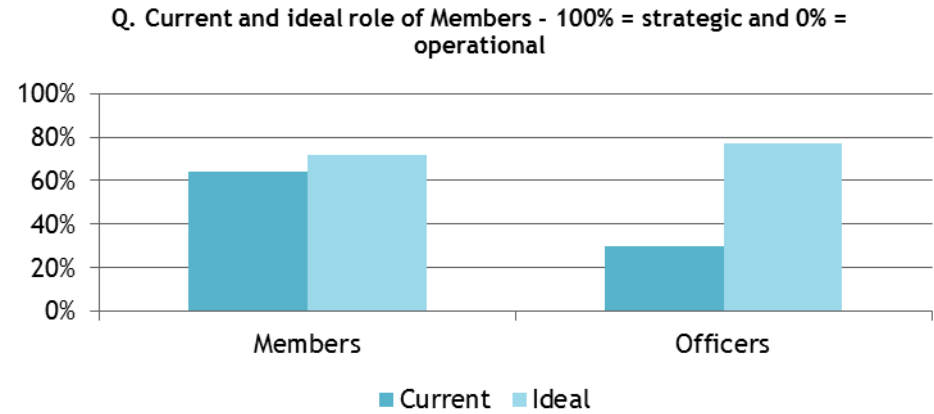
Business	Alternative Forum
Community Hospital	Community Services Committee
Empty Homes Performance	Community Services Committee
Planning Enforcement	Planning and Licensing Committee
Member-Officer Communications	Finance and Corporate Services Committee
Treasury Management	Finance and Corporate Services Committee

EXPLAINING THE COMMITTEE FOOTPRINT II: OPERATIONAL FOCUS

The content of the Council’s committees is more operational than strategic

Introduction

The second main reason for the Council’s larger committee footprint is its relative focus on operational rather than strategic matters. A potential pitfall of committee systems (although far from unique to committee systems) is the danger of Members focussing on operational matters rather than strategic matters - i.e. the routes the waste collection vehicles take or the pricing structure of a leisure centre rather than the outcomes sought from the waste service/leisure service respectively. In reality officers have the expertise, time and salary to do the former, to allow Members space to do the latter. Interviews and the survey carried out for this study indicate that the Council is weaker than it might be in this area. Both Members and officers ‘ideal world’ score (72% and 77% respectively) are higher than the current score (64% and 30% respectively), albeit this issue is seen as a greater issue amongst officers.



The Council’s operational focus manifests itself in two ways: items which are discussed at committee; and the lack of delegation of decisions on planning applications. This section uses evidence to highlight each point in turn.

Items which are discussed at committee

Committees are at their strongest when they are decision making bodies. In their terms of reference, committees have the power to take recommend that Full Council take a course of action. However, interviews for this review suggested that committees consider a large quantity of relatively operational reports for ‘noting’ only.

This was confirmed by analysis. In the 2015/16 municipal year, 33.8% of reports considered at Programme Committees were for ‘noting’. For example the committee noted reports on issues such as Smoke Free (Private Vehicles) Regulations 2015 and DogWatch Scheme. Whilst these matters may be of interest to Members, the opportunity-cost associated with production and presentation of a committee report mean that a verbal briefing, or a discussion outside committee, rather than formal committee might be the best approach to receiving updates on these issues.

The lack of delegation of decisions on planning applications

The way in which the Council manages planning applications is a useful case study of an operational rather than strategic focus. The table below sets out the quantity of planning decided by Members as opposed to officers under delegated powers during three months of the 2015/16 municipal year.

Council	No. committee-based planning decisions
Maldon	69
Stroud	9
Newark and Sherwood	21
Brentwood	14
Melton	21
Craven	20
Ribble Valley	17

The Council acknowledges the operational focus of members in regard to planning (and consequent lack of delegation to officers). In a report to Planning and Licensing Committee on 15 September 2016 it notes that during 2015 only c. 60% of planning applications were dealt with through delegated decision, rising to c. 75% currently but still well below the Government’s target of 90%. The high number of planning applications which receive a political decision carry a direct cost for the Council. A benchmarking exercise from the Planning Advisory Service and Chartered Institute for Public Finance Accountants estimates that a committee decision costs £513 per application compared to £64 per application where an officer delegated decision is taken (Source: Maldon District Council - Review of Delegation Arrangements - Report to Planning and Licensing Committee - 15th September 2016)

EXPLAINING THE COMMITTEE FOOTPRINT II: OPERATIONAL FOCUS

The content of the Council's committees is more operational than strategic

Also, where a committee votes against an officer recommendation, the Council's win percentage (i.e. the original decision is upheld) where a decision is appealed is worse when Councillors vote against officer recommendations than when Councillors vote for officer recommendations (see table to the right) (Source: Maldon District Council - Review of Delegation Arrangements - Report to Planning and Licensing Committee - 15th September 2016). This analysis is based on the decisions which went to appeal between January and June 2016. There are legislative risks if the Council does not reduce the number of overturns at appeal. In the Autumn Statement 2015 the Government announced that the threshold for decision overturned on appeal would be lowered from 20% to 10%. The Council is currently at 9.40% - very close to this threshold. Approaches can be taken to minimise this risk, such as cross-referencing to previous similar appeal decisions and member attendance at appeal decisions.

Regarding likelihood of cost award in the event of decision overturn, on the four occasions between January 2016 and June 2016 where the Council paid out costs they were all where Members overturned officer recommendations. Costs paid out totalled £15,912. However it should be noted that there were three rulings against the Council requiring costs to be paid out, which were made over this timeframe, but which the Council had not yet paid by the end of June 2016. The route for these decisions was more evenly split - one was a delegated decision and the other two were made by Members but in accordance with officer recommendation. (Source: Maldon District Council - Review of Delegation Arrangements - Report to Planning and Licensing Committee - 15th September 2016). As the planning reforms introduced by the Council take effect, which may result in more delegated decision making, the Council could monitor the numbers of cost awards by decision route to see if delegation has increased or reduced the costs paid out by the Council.

It should be noted that the Council is already taking steps to address this through reforms to (among other issues) the procedure which allows parish councils to place an item on the agenda of an Area Planning Committee ('parish trigger'). This would be a positive step as 'parish trigger' accounts for c. 46.5% of all applications presented to committee (source: Report to Planning and Licensing Committee, September 2016). However the Council may wish to keep under review whether other routes are used instead to get planning items on the council agenda. For example, Member call-ins which stand at a low level of c. 6% currently, may rise.

Committee (No. applications which went to appeal)	Committee vote against officer recommendations		Committee vote with officer recommendations	
	Council Lose	Council Win	Council Lose	Council Win
Central Area (3 applications)	100% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	100% (2)
South Eastern Area (13 applications)	33% (1)	66% (2)	30% (3)	70% (7)
North Western Area (10 applications)	50% (2)	50% (2)	33% (2)	66% (4)

REFORM OPTIONS

There are a range of options the Council could take to reduce the size of its committee footprint, should it choose to do so

This report has shown that the Council has a larger committee footprint than similar councils which also have a committee system. This larger footprint has direct (committee services and officer time writing reports) and indirect costs (increased likelihood of lost planning appeals). However there is nothing intrinsically wrong about the Council's current committee footprint. The recommendations in the table below are ways in which the Council could maintain the politically robust approach which is essential whilst lowering the actual and opportunity costs related to the committee structure and the behaviours which flow through it. It is for Members to decide, on each recommendation, whether they consider it appropriate for Maldon's particular context. The survey carried out for this review provided an opportunity to comment on the reform options. A summary of relevant survey responses is provided below in relation to each recommendation.

Recommendation	Summary
Add 'Policy' to the remit of Finance and Corporate Services Committee to create a 'Policy, Finance and Corporate Services Committee' to manage strategic issues which cut across multiple committees	Analysis of the Council's committee business in 2015/16 showed considerable duplication of business across committees (even before task and finish groups on re-occurring issues such as the community hospital are taken into account). The Council should consider following the example of other similar councils with committee systems and add 'Policy' to the remit of Finance and Corporate Services Committee to handle business which does not sensibly belong in one committee - either because there is a financial implication (and therefore the matter would currently go to Finance and Corporate Services Committee as well as at least one other) - or because it is a matter of longer-term strategic importance to the Council (such as the Community Hospital) which would benefit being discussed in one forum rather than three. Recommendations made by a Policy, Finance and Corporate Services Committee could still be put to Full Council for ratification (as all committee decisions are currently) to ensure member input was as wide as possible. In addition there are various opportunities to reduce duplication within the existing structure such as aligning terms of reference with officer directorates, allocating tourism to Community Services Committee or scaling back Overview and Scrutiny's focus on quarterly performance indicators, which is undertaken at other committees already. Survey response - This option was unpopular with Members (82% of Members said it was 'definitely not' or 'probably not' a good idea, whilst 18% said it was 'probably' a good idea). It was also not particularly popular with officers either (60% of officers said it was 'definitely not' or 'probably not' a good idea, whilst 40% said it was 'probably' a good idea). The view of officers may be because it was interpreted as an extra committee to support, rather than expansion of an existing committee. Members indicated concern that this could be a route to 'closed' decision making confined to committee chairs. There is also a feeling amongst Members that closer adherence to existing terms of reference or using existing planning - enforced through existing planning forums, setting a higher threshold for establishing a specialist working group, or re-aligning committees with directorates (such as bringing economic development and tourism under Community Service Committee) would be more appropriate solutions.

REFORM OPTIONS CONTINUED

Table continued

Reduce the quantum of planning applications requiring a political decision and, once recent reforms have taken effect, formally review whether the Council still requires its three Area Planning Committees

The Council has a significantly higher number of planning applications decided by Members than other similar councils with committee systems. This creates opportunity costs from report writing, reviewing, presenting. Greater delegation would reduce the operational nature of the three Area Planning Committees and potentially reduce business to a more manageable level. The Council has recently agreed steps to amend terms of reference of the Area Planning Committees and, with the aim of reducing the quantum of planning decisions determined by Members. The Council now needs to keep the volume of business discussed at planning committees under careful review to determine whether three Area Planning Committees are still required. Clearly were any steps taken to rationalise the Council's planning committee footprint, there would need to be appropriate provision for Members to input on planning decisions for their local area. Steps such as ensuring members of that committee represented all areas within the Council's boundary and allowing extensive time for representation at Committee from Members who themselves did not sit on the Committee could achieve this.

Survey response - Respondents were not asked to address this question directly. However, a general theme amongst officer responses was the need for greater delegation of decisions to officers.

Limit the role of Overview and Scrutiny Committee to focus on scrutiny of the Council's external relationships

Review of the programme for Overview and Scrutiny in 2015/16 shows it is already proactive at scrutinising the Council's relationship with external partners. This is very positive and in-line with best practice with those councils operating a committee system which do decide to maintain an Overview and Scrutiny Committee. However, those items discussed by Overview and Scrutiny in 2015/16 which were internal facing, could have been dealt with through another of the Council's programme committees. Whilst the composition of the Council is dominated by one party - and therefore Overview and Scrutiny, led by an Independent Member, can create a check and balance - the presence of a non-Conservative Member on each of the programme committees and the Audit Committee allow for continued scrutiny of the controlling Group. Furthermore, interviews for the review suggested that, despite the dominance of one party on the Council, challenge and scrutiny from within the Conservative Group does occur.

Survey response: The proposal to limit Overview and Scrutiny Committee (O/S) to scrutiny of the Council's external relationships was not generally popular with survey respondents. Amongst Members, 60% of respondents felt O/S should conduct internal and external scrutiny, whilst only 40% felt it should be limited to external scrutiny. No Members who responded to the survey felt O/S should be abolished. Amongst officers the response rate was slightly more varied. 50% of officer respondents felt O/S should scrutinise both internal and external matters, 30% felt it should be limited to external factors, and 20% felt the Council should not have an O/S Committee. Free text responses to the survey indicated a further option to improve O/S would be to avoid using it as an 'investigatory' committee to highlight and assign blame for past mistakes, but should be more forward looking about how the Council should tackle big issues facing it in future.

Use the Council's Forward Planning Meeting to limit the committee business to strategic matters requiring a decision (i.e. reduce reports for noting) and divert cross-committee matters to a new 'Policy Committee' (see above)

Feedback from interviews and analysis of the Council's committee business for 2015/16 indicated that the Council's committee business does not currently strike the right balance between strategic and operational (whereby committees are best utilised taking decisions on strategic issues, rather than getting 'stuck in the weeds' of operational issues). The Forward Planning Meeting recently introduced by the Council at the start of each committee cycle is a positive step which can help counter this. However, the Council should ensure that this group is focussed on filtering out inappropriate business to help the Council focus on strategic rather than operational matters, and not just act as a neutral allocator of the existing pipeline of committee business.

Survey response: No question in the survey directly addressed this point. However free text responses from both Members and officers highlighted the need to use existing forums (such as the Forward Planning Meeting and Leader and Chief Executive's Forum) to better plan committee business, and cross-reference committee papers to ensure that, where papers are going to more than one committee, the papers are clearly aligned with each committee's terms of reference.

REFORM OPTIONS CONTINUED

Table continued

Improve working relationship between members and officers

The interviews and data analysed for this review do not indicate that Maldon has a disproportionate issue with Member-officer relations. However, issues such as a clearer separation of roles (see earlier evidence on the operational rather than strategic focus of Members) do indicate that there is an opportunity for the Council to improve the current working relationship. Members and officers suggested the following practical steps:

- **MEMBERS:** Use officer induction programme to clarify member-officer roles; increased opportunity for informal interaction between members and officers; officers to understand that some operational role for members is inevitable as Members will need to raise issues which members of the public approach them with and some of these will inevitably be operational.
- **OFFICERS:** Members to raise questions prior to committee meetings to allow time to collate a more thorough response; introduce more day-time meetings to ensure appropriate officer technical expertise can be present at meetings; use of the member induction programme to clarify the member role is strategic and officer role as operational.

Reduce number of reports sent to committees for noting

The Council could consider minimising the number of reports sent to committee for noting. To reduce time on lengthy production of reports there could be a standard item on committee agendas where relevant officers could give a short verbal update on issues which might previously have produced a report for noting. This may be preferable to adding further content to the 'Members Bulletin' which members interviewed for this review indicated they did not tend to read.

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