

THE END OF TERM REPORT

To: Policy and Resources Committee

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Author: Chief Officer of the Council

A PURPOSE

- 1 To remind the Committee of the work which both of us have undertaken since 1997 and to provide a handover statement for the new Leader and Cabinet and the new Chief Officer.

B RECOMMENDED

- 2 That this report be passed to the Council's Leader and the Cabinet and the Chief Officer Designate.

C FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3 No financial implications arise from this report.

D SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 4 The current Committee was established in the immediate aftermath of local government reorganisation, which took effect on 1 April 1997 with the transfer of approximately £120 million of resources and 6,000 staff to Milton Keynes. The Committee itself had revised terms of reference and was operating a new system of managing the Council at member level with similar changes brought about by the creation of the 4 Directorates.

- 5 The Council in 1997 was committed to the implementation of its strategic document "The Challenge of Change". This policy had 5 themes and influenced the process of preparing for the reorganised Council in 1997. Those themes involved:

- i. Improved services for people;
- ii. Obtaining value for money;
- iii. Communicating and consulting more effectively;
- iv. Being a good employer;
- v. Enhancing the quality of life in the county.

- 6 These themes related to values which the Council wanted to implement and it seemed to me that there were two elements required in order to make progress on "The Challenge of Change" objectives. They were, firstly, the improvement of the capacity of the Council, and secondly, the delivery of specific activities. I would like to develop in this report some of the activities that were undertaken during the past 3½ years under these headings.

Capacity Building

- 7 One of the features that was immediately obvious in the build up to the current Council was the enormous level of change which would be faced. Firstly, there was the new Council with new people and new objectives. Secondly, there was the impact of a general election and the policies that a new Government would pursue. Challenge for local authorities over the past decade is nothing new but it was clear that the new Council would need to look at specific areas of work to improve its capacity.

These were:

a) **Managing Performance**

This required the Council to develop some clear aims, to have a system of service and business planning to translate aims into action and to make sure that regular reviews of service, through Policy, Performance and Finance Panels, operated effectively.

b) **Managing Resources**

The aim was to align the main resources of the Council; people, money, property and information, so that they were deployed to reflect the Council's aims and resources and were deployed more effectively to deliver County Council aims, eg through the use of information technology.

c) **Developing People**

The bulk of County Council services are delivered through individual members of staff. The enhancement of the Member role in policy direction and formulation, the improvement of Member/staff working and the improvement of training and development for all Members and staff across the Council were priorities.

d) **Improved Communication**

Methods of communication particularly listening to the needs of people enable the Council's aims to be delivered and enhance the provision of service by recognition that the exchange of ideas and thoughts improves decisions.

- 8 Members will recognise that the Policy and Resources Committee has taken a lead in many of these areas. The role of the Strategy Panel, the PPFs and working panels has placed Members in a position to manage and influence more effectively. Performance management systems have brought about better data with staff appraisals focused on outcomes. The budget making process has improved by becoming more open and measured based on service plans and there has been a strong drive both in Member and staff development. Systems throughout the County have dramatically changed through the information technology revolution and there is an increasing capacity to work across boundaries by virtue of better communication through people who are better informed.

- 9 However there is a big BUT. The I&DeA in its report stated that the Council still had a good deal to do to be clear about its aims, become more business like and focus on more effective customer services. Have we yet seized the opportunity of anticipating and tackling poor performance? Is our budget driven by our policy aims yet? Has our investment in IT systems really shown the return it is capable of achieving? My

perception is that we have a good deal more work to do on really understanding how, by setting a clear direction (instead of 67 different planning documents) and by really following up performance information effectively, we can improve our services. The I&DeA confirms this and the views of staff on developing clearer values and culture endorses it. The mechanisms are in place; we might reflect on how well they are used and whether we are more efficient and effective as a result.

But for a Purpose

10 All this effort is to no avail if it is not designed for a particular purpose. This was “The Council Plan” approved in autumn 1997 which was designed to outline how the values and aims set out in “The Challenge of Change” would be translated into specific policies and activities. It set the political direction which gave the Council a lead in responding to what emerged as the Best Value regime. The establishment of clear objectives and specific aims lies at the heart of any well run organisation and it is worth reflecting on those objectives:

a) Providing a well managed and efficient Council

- A major Root and Review programme with over 20 reviews.
- A significant number of services market tested and now provided by the private sector.
- Performance Indicators and targets established for services.

b) Being open, accessible, informative and accountable

- Improved external communication and profile.
- A significant increase in the amount of consultations undertaken.
- The perception of the Council being amongst the highest performing nationally.

c) Representation at regional, national and European level

- Playing an important role at the regional level both in the Thames Valley and in the South East.
- Taking a lead in partnerships across the county designed to integrate public services, eg in skills improvement, crime reduction and community planning.

d) Promoting Economic Wellbeing

- Developing enhanced links with the business community including a new Economic Partnership.
- Leading on partnerships which improve the skills of the workforce of Buckinghamshire.
- Active involvement in regional structures designed to support business, eg the TECs, BusinessLink and the Small Business Service.

e) The effective use of resources

- Creation of new strategies and organisational arrangements for Human Resources, Property Management and Information Technology including out-sourcing key functions.
- The review and reorganisation of the Property Portfolio in order to generate capital receipts.
- The creation of earlier service planning policy steers and budgets aimed at a 3 year horizon.

f) Raising standards in the Education service

- Successful completion of the Age of Transfer programme.
- Major reviews of key policy and resource areas, eg the Local Management Scheme, Home to School Transport and Special Education Needs.
- Responding to Government aims for schools through the Education Development Plan and associated policy documents.

g) Improving the Quality of Life in Buckinghamshire

- A review and refocusing of highways maintenance spending to concentrate on public concerns.
- Enhancing local partnership working with parish, district councils and voluntary organisations.
- A major review and reorganisation of country parks and the agricultural estate.
- Specific actions on policies enhancing the Buckinghamshire environment, eg in local transport planning.

h) Regulating quality Social Services for those in Need

- Major reviews of key services focusing on provision, eg the learning disabled.
- The enhancement and improvement of inspection and regulation activities following criticism.
- Responding to Government initiatives for the improvement of facilities for children and for the care of the elderly.

11 All the above need to be seen in the light of a programme of Government direction and targeted resources which have significantly impacted upon the Council's ability to pursue its own agenda. The County Council's process of planning for its services through its service plans has been designed to acknowledge Government aims but equally to give a local flavour to them.

What we have learnt

- 12 However, there are significant challenges which remain in both capacity building and policy implementation. All the features which we highlighted as enabling better capacity building are now incorporated in the Best Value Performance Plan. The Plan still needs to gain greater acceptance around the County Council. The process of Best Value Reviews which has emerged from the root and branch review process requires continual support and encouragement to achieve the degree of success that the root and branch review programme achieved. A great deal more effort needs to be put into the use of the performance data to improve services and the aim of achieving a 3 year service and resource planning time frame has still to be achieved.
- 13 The staff of the County Council are under enormous pressure and whilst a great deal of support is given to them, the need to develop clear objectives and priorities and to reallocate resources as necessary, is vital. From this derives the importance of continuing to improve the internal communication systems within the Council in much the same way as external communications have been improved.
- 14 On the policy implementation front there is a good deal more to do. The challenge for our Education Service is to translate some of the good policies and planning documents into action and to build on and retain the confidence of our schools. Using the additional resources available to us to raise achievement has still be demonstrated. The OFSTED report recognises the progress which has been made but there is a great deal more to do. The financial pressures on Social Services are well known but the ability to retain staff and maintain quality provision is a significant challenge at present. Joint arrangements with health organisations arising from the NHS Plan will be a severe and critical test of the County Council's partnership building capacity. The result of these pressures frequently is that environmental issues, which are of increasing concern to the people of Buckinghamshire, do not always receive the attention they deserve. The capacity to fund and support pressures on the road system and the pressures on our environment becomes limited.
- 15 Perhaps the most significant achievement of the past 3½ years has been the ability to recognise the importance of clear aims (preferably in one simple document) and to learn that they will not all be achieved in quite the way anticipated but progress will still be made. The extent to which our plans take into account as many factors as possible and then are updated to reflect the reality of the situation has been an important learning point.

So what of the Future

- 16 In many ways the same sort of issues will affect the Council in the future. They are to be found in the recent I&DeA report of the Council. I will highlight what I think those features are:

i. Vision for the Future

We undoubtedly have a complex number of plans and policies which are confusing to the staff and to the people of Buckinghamshire. The modernisation agenda is designed to enable the Cabinet to focus on that policy framework and to incorporate it into the Best Value Performance Plan. It is a huge opportunity to simplify, clarify and strengthen the Council's policy goals. Clarity about those aims and objectives and more particularly a sense of what priorities can be afforded will be vital. In addition, the Government's community leadership agenda which requires

the Council to give strategic direction to the community as a whole in relation to economic, social and environmental issues gives enormous scope for the Council to develop its role as a champion and defender of the county. It is not just about plans. It is about leadership and communication across the Council so that all parts of the organisation pull together with a unified understanding of how they fit together.

ii. Business-like Processes

Policies are words on a piece of paper and only become effective when delivered. Our aim to achieve a 3 year budget planning process, linking resources to aims, will be vital. The financial complexity of local government funding is increasing and the capacity of managers to take time to think about what they are seeking to achieve and then measuring that performance will be essential. The essential feature highlighted by the I&DeA in our business processes was not just the need to do things right, which Buckinghamshire invariably does, but to do the right things. That is what the business-like process is about; the secret is to link what we do with people's needs.

iii. The Customer Focus

One of the great advantages that any local authority has is that we operate at local level and can provide for choice, need and diversity. We have someone working in or providing services to every community in the county and to a vast number of people, across all ages and sectors of society. Our ability to engage with these users and to reflect their aspirations in the way we deliver our services lies, for me, at the heart of our activity. Improved market research and consultation, the use of customer data to vary our services and the application of new methods, eg information technology, could revolutionise our service delivery. Increasingly this will be done in partnership with others. So, at the same time as becoming clearer about our policy aims, we need to be more fluid and flexible about how they are achieved.

17 I have tried to highlight for the Cabinet the main issues which will require to be addressed. I have set out in Appendix 1 some specific issues which are likely to arise but in addition I will give you a flavour of the main issues. I have always said that one of my jobs is to be aware of the broader agenda or more particularly horizon scanning, ie the task of trying to spot what is likely to happen 12 months in advance and planning for it. Clearly the modernising structures and the way in which Members organise through Cabinet and Select Committees, the way in which the Best Value Performance Plan drives the Council's services and the manner in which the community leadership role is worked out, will be critical issues. Equally there is a major challenge to the Council as an education authority about how education services are delivered and how the relationship with schools will change. The management of special needs budgets and the home to school transport budget will need to be monitored. The work with the Learning and Skills Council and Connexions will be important partnership arrangements which Members will wish to influence. The future of the system of selective education in Buckinghamshire is likely to come under the spotlight.

18 The relationship between Health and Care Services has already been highlighted in the National Health Service Plan. The reorganisation of both sets of services to provide a seamless provision is very likely. More of our resources are likely to come through the Health Service and via direct grants. The pressures on the children's budget and the old people's budget will be significant.

- 19 The recent Partnership Conference has demonstrated the increasing concern of Buckinghamshire people about the environment we live in. The Regional Planning Guidance is expected by December and the Structure Plan is likely to be the key document which will set the shape of Buckinghamshire for the next 15 years. The result of our Local Transport Plan submission will influence how traffic is managed in the county.
- 20 Finally, it is of critical importance that capacity building continues to be addressed. It will only be possible to make these changes if the work force is developed and skilled for the future. The financial strategies in the light of the Green Paper will require more careful understanding of where resources will come from, for example, public service agreements. The information technology strategy requiring e-governance by 2005 will require a great deal of investment in re-engineering organisational processes. Both our internal and external communications will need revitalising. It is therefore a particular pleasure to read the Chief Officer Designate's view of how he would develop these aims and take up the challenges which are posed in this report. I know he will wish to build on this report in his presentation to Members.

Conclusion

- 21 It is difficult to encapsulate all the events of nearly 4 years in a short report. However, it is important to look back on what has been achieved, not just for the pleasure of having done so, but also to learn for the future. This report is designed to maintain the continuum into the pilot period for modernising and into the new Council. I hope this report will enable both the Cabinet and the Select Committees to start formulating their agendas for the future and for the new Council to be able to build on the successful foundations of capacity building and policy implementation which I, with the support of this Committee have sought to establish.

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