

6B: REPORT OF THE CORPORATE PERFORMANCE SELECT COMMITTEE

1 SCRUTINY OF THE COUNTY COUNCIL'S SERVICE AND BUDGET-MAKING PROCESS

Introduction

- 1 Under the Constitution approved by the County Council on 23 November, the Corporate Performance Select Committee has the responsibility for scrutiny of the County Council's policy, strategy and budget frameworks. The Committee's first report, essentially on the draft strategic aims, was presented to the Cabinet at its meeting on 5 February. A copy of the full report is attached as an appendix to the Council papers and the Leader of the Council will summarise the Cabinet's response at the meeting. The Committee is pleased that the Cabinet found much common ground in the report. However Members were disappointed that there was no opportunity for a proper dialogue with the Cabinet even though this is provided for within the Constitution, albeit at the Leader's discretion. The Committee feels that this was a lost opportunity and is not how the Select Committee would wish to work with the Cabinet in future. Equally, the Committee feels that it will not be in the long-term interests of the Council if Select Committees are precluded from having some direct interaction with the Cabinet as a whole.

Budget Scrutiny

- 2 The Committee's report to Cabinet drew attention to the lack of detailed information on the preparation of the County Council's budget. Whilst the Committee has been able to examine more of the policy framework which will comprise the Council Plan, it has been very difficult indeed to identify what resources are being devoted to it. Whilst the Committee understands that we are in a transitional phase, Members agreed that more time will be needed to give adequate budget scrutiny next year. Another factor that has not aided the Committee's work has been the inconsistent way in which budget information has been prepared. The level of detail produced by the Director of Social

Services is a model that the Committee would like to see replicated both for its clarity of content and ease of access in its presentational style.

- 3 The report highlighted a number of issues that the Committee thinks the Cabinet need to address. Apart from these specific comments, there are a number of over-arching issues to which the Committee would like to draw the Council's attention and on which the Committee's subsequent recommendations are based.

Strategic Aims and Supporting Policies

- 4 The Committee has discussed in some detail the strategic aims and supporting policies with the Cabinet. However, as the Leader has acknowledged, these aims are deliberately aspirational. What will be just as significant will be the specific actions and priorities that are put in place to deliver them. Cabinet has accepted that these need to be accompanied by targets and measures so that performance can be monitored. This is something in which the Committee will be particularly interested since it is likely to form a major part of its work programme in the forthcoming year.

Information Communications Technology

- 5 One of the consistent themes arising out of the scrutiny of the strategic aims is the importance to the organisation of good information systems and the ability to communicate effectively with the community. In a number of cases operational effectiveness is very dependent on adequate IT systems. The Committee is given to understand that a considerable amount of work is already underway to review both the ICT strategy and the resource implications required to deliver it. The Committee thinks this is a matter in which the Council as a whole will be interested.

Publishing of the Policy Framework and Resource Strategies

- 6 Reference has already been made to the need for improved consistency and presentation in budgetary information. The Committee takes the view that there needs to be a clear linkage between the major policies of the Council and the

resources allocated to delivering them. Whilst the Local Performance Plan may well provide some of this information, the Committee would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of the public information setting out the Council's priorities and budgets. The Committee also thinks that these documents should be available for scrutiny so that the Committee can provide any comments on them both to the Cabinet and to the Council.

Medium-term Plan

- 7 In his report to Cabinet on 5 February the Leader set out proposals for the development of a medium-term plan. Cabinet decided to note the proposals, but without any discussion either on the policy implications or the impact of resource allocations. The Committee feels that this document will be an important step forward in the planning processes which will need to be much more widely understood by the Council as a whole. The scenarios set out within the Cabinet papers indicate that even on current predictions there will be some services that will benefit and others that are likely to have financial problems. The Committee think these problems could well be solved through some reconsideration of policy, which the Committee look forward to hearing about from the Cabinet. How this process will be developed is not known but the Committee is of the view that the Cabinet should produce, as soon as practically as possible, a timetable setting out how the medium-term plan will be produced and the opportunities within that timetable for it to be scrutinised by the Committee.

Funding of Priority Services

- 8 Several references are made within the Committee's report to the potential shortfall of funding in key service areas. There has been insufficient time for the Committee to fully understand the possible implications of some of these issues. The care initiatives being promoted by Mr Carey, the radical shift of emphasis being promoted by Mrs Aston in Services for Children and Young People and also by Mr Royston in terms of pressures, particularly on roads, in his portfolio are all extremely interesting. What is clear however is that, even with management action to control spending, those pressures are going to increase. The Select Committee has fully endorsed the initiative taken by the Leader to

open up a dialogue with Government specifically on the Standard Spending Assessment of Social Services. Whilst the Committee is not making a specific recommendation with regard to the budget on these issues, members would like to draw the attention of the Council to the fact that these issues will need to be subject to further scrutiny during the course of the year.

9 Following these detailed discussions, the Committee has formally agreed to recommend that the Council:

- 1 Agree that there should be further examination by the Select Committee of the strategic aims, their priorities and resources once these have been agreed and that the Corporate Performance Select Committee should be invited to scrutinise the action plans to ensure that they are measurable and that performance can be monitored;**
- 2 Having regard to the significance of information communications technology to the Council Plan and the business needs of the authority, recommend that the new ICT strategy, and the resources required to deliver it, are presented to the Council at the earliest opportunity;**
- 3 Agree that the Corporate Performance Select Committee should be consulted on the Council's revenue and capital budget book for the next financial year with sufficient time for a proper scrutiny;**
- 4 Recommend that the Cabinet publish, no later than 22 March, its timetable for the preparation of the medium-term plan so that the Select Committee can ensure that it allows sufficient time for adequate scrutiny of the plan and its financial implications.**

**MRS P M CRAWFORD
CHAIRMAN**

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Item 1

- Select Committee on Corporate Performance Papers for the meeting held on 8 February 2001