



CORPORATE PERFORMANCE SELECT COMMITTEE

***REVIEW OF SERVICE AND BUDGET STRATEGY
FOR THE YEAR 2001/02***

**SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT ON
SERVICE AND BUDGET STRATEGY
2001/2002**

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF THE REPORT

1. This is the first major report of the Select Committee on any of the studies currently being undertaken. Following the reference to the Select Committee by the Cabinet on 18 December the Committee has met on three occasions, to consider the Cabinet's emerging strategy.
2. The terms of reference agreed by the County Council for this Committee give it the responsibility for reviewing the Council's budget, strategy and policy frameworks. In a period of transition the Committee understand why the "normal" budget and service planning process has changed. However this has meant that there has not been any meaningful scrutiny or discussion of a proposed budget. This is a matter of concern to us. We are also concerned that there has been no public discussion in Cabinet either. Whilst we agree that policy should drive budgets, the proper financial underpinning of those policies is vital and with many competing needs in a restricted budget, open debate is essential.
3. The timing of the transition meant that the work previously done in the Policy, Performance and Finance Panels became a matter for the Cabinet's consideration and has not yet re-emerged for public debate. The Committee expect that this is something which the Cabinet will want to change in future years, especially in the light of the proposed introduction of the medium-term plan which will support a process of continuous policy development.
4. Nonetheless there has been an extremely useful opportunity to take an overview of the emerging strategic aims and supporting policies which will form an important part of the future Council's policy framework.
5. It has been apparent from our discussions that this work is continuing and evolving. The Select Committee will therefore take the opportunity to review the outcome of the public consultation on these aims and the budget strategy when it is considered by Cabinet on 5 February to decide whether any additional comments need to be made on the proposals developed and against which performance can be measured.
6. Any additional commentary will be reported to the Cabinet on 19 February and to the Council on 22 February. The Committee has been working on the basis that the new aims and policies, together with the statutory plans prescribed by the Government in the Local Government Act 2000, which form the Council's policy framework and as such will be the documents which drive the work of the Cabinet and consequently the Select Committees.
7. Our aim therefore has been to open a dialogue with the Cabinet as a basis on which this and other Select Committees can build a good working relationship for the future. The Committee has appreciated the time and preparation that Cabinet Members and Officers have made to support the process and also the openness and honesty within which the discussions have taken place.
8. This has not been an in-depth study, more an overview of the policy direction. However, the Committee hope that the comments contained in this report will be seen as a positive contribution to provide additional clarity and widen understanding of what the Cabinet will recommend to the Council.
9. Several Cabinet Members have identified ways in which specific Select Committees might be able to collaborate. Whilst it will be a matter for those Committees to decide

how to engage with the Cabinet on these issues, the Committee is confident that as a principle the Select Committees will want to work as closely as they can with the Cabinet in order to cultivate the new relationships in the modernised structures.

Strategic Aims – General Comments

10. Whilst it was not generally well publicised, the previous Council Plan has served the Authority well. It provides a tool against which detailed planning processes can be developed and performance can be measured. The fact that the Cabinet have taken the opportunity so early in its existence to set out the new policy framework is one which the Committee wholeheartedly support.
11. Discussions which the Committee has had with individual Cabinet Members have therefore provided an excellent opportunity to understand the way in which Cabinet policy is evolving. Cabinet Members have quite openly identified that further thinking is needed. Many of the supporting statements are not yet expressed in policy terms. Nor indeed are they supported by definition of the measurable outcomes that Cabinet are seeking to achieve. Only by doing this does the Committee think it will be possible to get a precise assessment of the Council's performance. The Committee look forward to receiving the individual portfolio plans which it is understood will be the documents that will contain the more specific action plans.
12. At this stage of their development many of the aims are aspirational, indeed in his discussion with the Committee, the Leader described them as his vision for the Authority. However what we have not been able to achieve during this review is any assessment of how the available resources have been allocated to achieve these objectives and what the impact might be of any proposed changes. This is a piece of work to which the Committee will want to devote further attention at a later date.
13. In general the Committee supports the overall aim of Buckinghamshire County Council being a top-performing council. However achieving this ambition carries with it significant commitments beyond low service costs and good budget management. Over the coming months the Committee will look to see what are the specific priorities that the Cabinet identify and the strategy for achieving them. For example, achieving greater efficiency often requires significant investment at an early stage in order to reap benefits at a later date. Significant investment in systems and information management is something the Committee feel will need higher priority if the Council is to achieve the stature of a leading authority in the country.
14. Additionally the Authority is building a positive reputation in its community leadership role particularly in terms of communication with the electorate. However, to be really successful the Committee feel that the Authority does not always get the best out of its consultation processes. They are helpful in terms of providing indicators but not in terms of getting genuine engagement with the community in the work of the Council. Select Committees may provide a useful test-bed for evolving thinking in this area and this is one of the opportunities the Cabinet might like to develop in terms of closer working relationships.

Leader of the Council David Shakespeare

15. The discussion with the Leader provided a useful opportunity for the Committee to understand more of the detail of the first five strategic aims. The County Council has traditionally prided itself on good financial management. An independent validation of the Council's success was noted in the District Auditor's recent management letter. The Committee was interested to hear about the eventual replacement of the Council's

financial systems which while representing a significant investment will certainly equip the Authority with the tools to enhance and refine its financial management. It was not possible in the discussion to consider the full detail of this transitional process and this is something to which the Committee will return at a later date.

16. The Committee understands that the outcome of the Revenue Support Grant has been helpful and that the overall corporate gap is relatively small. However, in discussions with subsequent Cabinet Members it was noted that there are some significant problems to be addressed and the Committee will be interested to see how resources have been targeted to them once the Cabinet papers are available.
17. The Committee was informed that the County Council's balances are likely to be some £1.3 - £1.4 million above the guide figure of 3% and whilst it is understood this may not be a recurring situation, it will presumably provide some flexibility to relieve some of the spending pressures which services are currently facing. A more detailed breakdown of the overall position on resources was promised and the Committee looks forward to receiving this information in due course.
18. The Leader explained in some detail his policy on Council Tax and whilst the Committee was unanimous in its support for keeping Council Tax down, it was felt that the overall aim contained two distinctly different elements. Whilst it is right that Buckinghamshire should benchmark itself against other authorities in terms of service unit costs, this is quite a different issue from the level of Council Tax though some degree of benchmarking on this may be useful.
19. The Committee understands that the Leader's strategy is to achieve a balance between these factors and the ability to pay by the Council Tax payers. Although it is prudent to take account of Government guidelines, care should be taken in using artificial benchmarks.
20. In considering the overall strategy the Committee had a number of specific questions about the efficiency savings which have been agreed. It was noted that in the Leader's view because they have been already considered by the County Council it would be inappropriate for them to be re-examined by the Select Committee. Since the Select Committee is acting on behalf of the County Council, this is not a view which Members necessarily share. However, the overarching comment that the Committee would make is that many of the efficiency savings appear to be straightforward service cuts. In the time available it was possible to examine only a limited number of the specific issues but in some cases it was quite clear that the policy implications of proposed reductions merit further examination. Some examples of this will be referred to later in the report.
21. Whilst these are the Committee's main comments at this stage, there are one or two other specific points which stood out:
 - The Committee appreciated the offer by the Leader to share with it the regular budget and performance management monitoring information which he receives. It was noted that the expected financial out-turn for the current year is expected to be broadly neutral. Bearing in mind the level of efficiency savings to be achieved next year, it might be expected that a neutral out-turn would not be appropriate. A more detailed analysis of the individual variations might be required.
 - It was not clear from the Committee's discussion at what level budgets will be held in the new financial year. The Leader referred to the need for flexibility in the overall process but equally would presumably support the objective of achieving clear

financial accountability, and the Committee support the subsequent discussions with Cabinet which suggested this should be aligned to portfolios.

- The Council's overall aim to move away from a departmental structure to a matrix model will require a good deal of sophistication in its service and policy planning next year. The introduction of portfolio plans as a layer in between the Council Plan, Service Plans and Business Plans will need very careful thought if confusion is to be avoided. Service plans have become a very valuable tool in the planning process and the Committee will be interested to see how this work evolves over the coming months.
- The Committee noted with considerable interest the information provided by the Leader on the capital programme. The fact that there has been significant slippage on the current year's programme is to be regretted but the assertion that this has no overall effect on the future year's programmes is reassuring in financial terms. However, the Committee will be interested at a later date to consider in further detail the capital programme management processes to see how they can be improve and help to control the accuracy and timeliness of capital expenditure.

Corporate Resources – Mark Taylor

22. Although the Committee had a wide-ranging discussion on this portfolio, the overriding theme which came from a number of questions was that relating to information communications technology. Not only was this seen as being critical to the success of this portfolio, but it is clearly an issue of strategic importance for the Authority as a whole. The Committee noted that whilst more resources and investment would always be beneficial, the major blockage to the Authority as a whole was its ability to harness the potential of IT. This will have significant training implications for the Authority as a whole.
23. A new ICT strategy is also critical for the Authority in terms of achieving its strategic objectives. The Committee fully supports the shift in the strategic aims to place more emphasis on engagement and communication with the community as a whole, both in terms of involvement in service planning and in service delivery.
24. The Committee did not get a clear impression of how the ICT strategy will be developed and this is something which the Members' IT Group will be particularly interested and which the Cabinet might wish to consider in more detail.
25. As mentioned earlier, the Committee is aware of a number of information needs to support Cabinet portfolios and in some cases were informed about how they are being met, eg LAFIS replacement. What was not so clear is what is the long term investment strategy for the replacement of other major information systems or indeed how they will produce more integrated solutions for the future, eg the link between SSID replacement and the need for an integrated solution for children's services information. The Committee was made aware of one example of best practice in Hampshire where a significant investment in new information systems for Social Services has enabled it to become one of the most efficient authorities in the country. Equally, other authorities have developed significant long-term partnerships with a range of providers to meet their business needs. The County Council has an enviable record in terms of the investment in its IT hardware but the Committee does not feel that we have always been as adept at quantifying the long term benefits. A notable exception however is the efficiency saving being made from the IT Root and Branch Review which the Committee noted with great interest. In general therefore the Committee feels that we still have some considerable way to go in this area and support the Cabinet Member in wanting to drive forward the new ICT strategy.

26. The second important issue covered in our discussion was that relating to HR policies. The Committee is well aware of a number of areas where service effectiveness is being hampered by a lack of appropriate staff. The Committee understands that this is being examined in terms of providing a number of short-term solutions. Whilst reference to work force planning was made, the Committee is yet to see what action is being taken to plan the work force requirements of the new authority. Many of the problems which are to be faced are not new, nor indeed are they local in nature. However, the shift towards community trusts in Social Services, the redefining of the Local Education Authority role and other major changes will fundamentally alter the work force requirements of the Authority. The Committee feel sure that the Cabinet will want to give this a high priority to see how future needs are being assessed and planned.

27. In addition to these overarching comments two other specific issues arose.

- The Committee were concerned to hear that no additional resources have been identified to support the implementation of the modernised structure next year in terms of a budget for the select committee member support, development and training. The Committee was told that there is a small, but unquantified, budget for Member training this year but as yet no assessment has been made of future requirements. The Committee believes this is an urgent need for the Council as a whole not least if the needs of the newly elected Members are to be met and the commitment to the IDeA Member development concordat is to be achieved.
- The Committee noted that the asset management plan is still in the process of being developed and, whilst it is understood that this is a national requirement, will be interested to see in due course what benefits it actually brings to the County Council as a whole.

Adult Care Services – Hugh Carey

28. The discussions around Mr Carey's portfolio were of considerable interest to the Committee, not least because of the potential scale of change which is being addressed but also because of the exciting policy agenda it embraces. The introduction of Care Trusts, whether voluntary or statutory, will fundamentally change the role of the Social Services department and consequently its role within the community.

29. The initiatives being developed were fully supported in principle. However what Mr Carey acknowledged was that the full implications of the change had not yet been worked out in detail, consulted on and costed and this will be a significant area of work in which the Committee will be interested to carry forward that dialogue.

30. How this change process will be delivered within the context of an extremely tight overall financial framework is yet to be explored. The so-called "glass ceiling" is quite clearly a major challenge for the service, not helped by other additional factors such as the winter pressures, discharging patients from hospital and other related issues. The Select Committee on Partnership is currently examining the whole area of activity around winter pressures and has already identified that, whilst the Government provides short-term financial safeguards, there is a potential for long-term financial commitment to the County Council, which will need to be explored further.

31. Nonetheless experience from the past has shown that setting up and resourcing major change projects often requires considerable initial investment – the creation of Freemantle Trust is but one example. What the implications for this investment strategy might be are yet to be fully understood, but the Committee as a whole supports the

suggestion that these need to be seen as major corporate projects and should therefore be treated accordingly.

32. Time did not permit detailed discussion of the efficiency savings which are being proposed to keep within the overall financial framework. However, there are two specific points that the Committee would like to make:
- Part of the funding difficulties relate to the contribution the Authority is required to make to the funding of the National Health Care Plan. The Committee are not sure why this contribution is required and how as a consequence the Health Authority helps the County Council to deliver its strategic objectives. This is an issue on which the Partnership Select Committee might like to review.
 - Reference has been made earlier to the need to replace important information systems. The Committee fully supports Mr Carey in his desire to bring this about and will look with interest to receive a copy of the business case at a future date

Schools – Mike Appleyard

33. The Local Government Act 2000 has a statutory requirement that co-opted Members representing parent governors and the Roman Catholic Church and Church of England are Members of the Lifelong Learning Select Committee. Those Members, and indeed others of the Lifelong Learning Select Committee felt that they are excluded from the budget scrutiny process because of the way that the County Council's constitution has been written. This is an issue which will need to be considered further as part of the pilot evaluation but for the purposes of this scrutiny process an invitation was extended by the Chairman of the Committee for the co-opted Members of the Lifelong Learning Select Committee to join this discussion which they were pleased to accept.
34. A considerable part of the discussion centred on the raising of educational achievement and how this is being measured. The Education Development Plan is the key document which embodies the targets for raising standards. However what it does not do is provide a framework within which an overall assessment can be made of how the plan and the resources devoted to it, actually raise educational standards. Mr Appleyard acknowledged that whilst there is some early evidence of standards being raised, there is still some way to go in the area. In terms of targeting additional resources the Committee feels it is important to link increases in performance to additional resources. The Committee appreciated the invitation from Mr Appleyard for the Lifelong Learning Select Committee to contribute towards the thinking of how this might be achieved. That will clearly be a matter for the Select Committee to consider but the offer was much appreciated as a genuine attempt to broaden the thinking on what is an immensely complex issue.
35. Considerable discussion also took place on the allocation of resources to Special Educational Needs. Whilst it was noted that a consultation process is underway on the options for resource allocation, the Committee were concerned about the proxies which are being used for this purpose. This was particularly so in relation to school meals which, while being taken as a proxy of relative levels of deprivation, is not always a measure of poor performance. The Committee also noted that, as currently framed, the proxy using Key Stage 3 test results could be construed as a perverse incentive for poor performing schools not to raise their levels of achievement since they would be financially rewarded for their lower performance. This may be a quirk in the way the document has been framed but Mr Appleyard undertook to consider this further.

36. A similar discussion also took place on the targeting of resources to Key Stage 3. It was freely acknowledged that the methodology for achieving this is in the course of development and the Committee noted that while the use of value added tables may be beneficial in the longer term, their development is not sufficiently advanced to contribute at this stage. This is an area in which the Lifelong Learning Select Committee may wish to take a continuing interest bearing in mind its importance to the County Council's strategic aims.
37. In relation to other supporting policies, the Committee was very interested to hear about some of the initiatives to support good school management and the recruitment of qualified teaching staff. However, a number of views were shared about the limited amount of time that senior staff in the Education Department actually spend in schools listening to what professional staff have to say and communicating what is happening in terms of policy development. The support provided by Mr Appleyard and his commitment to visiting establishments is clearly appreciated but schools obviously feel this should be supplemented by a more intensive and regular dialogue with senior managers. This will have resource implications which will need to be evaluated against other priorities but in terms of the Local Authority fulfilling its leadership role was felt to be key to future success.
38. The Committee also discussed issues related to what evidence can be produced to demonstrate how additional resources have resulted in improved levels of achievement. For example, the Committee discussed at some length the contribution which the Standards Fund has made to the objectives. The Committee feels that the Authority has not always been sufficiently clear about what it hopes to achieve from Standards Funds or indeed in measuring whether these objectives have been achieved.
39. As far as the future is concerned, the Committee was particularly interested in how the role of the LEA will evolve. This led to a discussion on support services and the current Root and Branch Best Value Review. The further delegation of resources will inevitably rely on the degree of buy-back by schools. Mr Appleyard felt that the most recent survey of schools confirmed that generally satisfaction levels were fairly good. However, this was based only on a limited response. On the other hand, anecdotal evidence was discussed about schools not always being clear about what is on offer and how the services might support them. This might simply be a communication gap or it might be symptomatic of a deeper misunderstanding about the role of support services. In any event it clearly merits further attention. As far as efficiency savings were concerned, the Committee has not received any detail of how the target of £900,000 will be achieved. However the Committee was informed that this will in the main be funded by staff vacancies. It was not clear what proportion of this will be from central staff or indeed what the impact of that decision might have on direct contact with schools. Bearing in mind the current budget predictions of a neutral out-turn on this year's budget, the Committee are not convinced that this is a true efficiency saving or its achievability. The Committee thinks the Cabinet should consider this most carefully.

Community Services – Margaret Dewar

40. The Committee was very interested to hear about some of the developments that Mrs Dewar is putting in place to provide a more integrated approach to Community Services. Members fully supported her desire to create a more integrated management team and support her wish to move away from seeing services in isolation, to a more integrated community focused approach. This will be no easy task, especially in the light of some of the significant challenges and external influences to which the portfolio will be subjected. However, there are significant opportunities and it was very encouraging to hear about how these are being exploited.

41. Of particular interest to the Committee are the services for young people and the link to Connexions. Cabinet have now agreed the Connexions business plan and whilst this has not been considered in detail by the Committee, Members noted that this is likely to have significant impact for the Council as a whole. For example, the re-branding of part of the youth service under the Connexions label might need to be more fully understood. Equally, it would appear from the business plan that Connexions works through the targeting of resources. Time did not allow for a close examination of how this fits with the more universal approach resulting from the Root and Branch Review but this should be investigated. The Lifelong Learning Committee has already indicated an interest in looking at the impact of both the Learning and Skills Council and the Connexions Services. The Committee will no doubt be following up this dialogue with Mrs Dewar as part of its future work programme. However, overall this Committee would like to see a greater clarity on the policy direction within the service plan and information on performance gained through clear outcomes and targets being set.
42. The other significant part of the Committee's discussion related to the future strategy on waste management. It is recognised that this is an issue which has significant financial impact on the Local Authority but which is in large measure outside its direct control. The strategic aims and supporting policies are fully endorsed by the Committee, but what was not clear is how the competing priorities of the major partners in waste management will be reconciled. Bearing in mind that there are financial disincentives for the County Council through increased recycling and major challenges ahead for the environment in terms of a growing economy and housing development, there is clearly a lot of further work to be done in this area.
43. Although the waste strategy will be available in the early summer and will be subject to consultation, the Committee will be particularly interested to see how that work is undertaken in a way which helps to change attitudes rather than just seek comments.
44. The Committee was told that the performance of Buckinghamshire County Council in terms of managing its own waste is generally good and that of the District Councils is above average evaluated against national criteria. However, it was readily accepted that more needs to be done, particularly in relation with the District Councils and the Committee looks forward to seeing what specific outcomes and targets are set in the portfolio plan.
45. Another area in which the Committee found much common interest with Mrs Dewar was that relating to working with Thames Valley Police. Relationships with the Police affect many different issues, not just Community Safety, and good working relationships are critical for the Authority as a whole. At operational level relationships have improved considerably over recent years but this is not always true at higher levels. The Committee fully supports Mrs Dewar in wanting to develop a dialogue with the Chief Constable and hope that one or more of the Select Committee Chairmen who have an interest in this area may be invited to participate in those discussions.

Planning and Transportation – Rodney Royston

46. The Local Transport Plan is clearly critical to the County Council, not only in terms of setting out transportation policies but also as a source of funding. Whilst it was noted that much of the additional funding is by way of increased borrowing, it was also made clear that a considerable proportion of the costs of securing that funding are provided through the "SSA". In general terms the significance of the LTP is not necessarily widely understood and could be improved.

47. Nevertheless the Committee remain concerned at the poor overall assessment of the road network and its deterioration, albeit perhaps at a slower pace than before.
48. The Committee support Mr Royston's initiative to carry out a detailed analysis of the strategic highway infrastructure but noted his concern that there is likely to be insufficient funding to reverse the continued deterioration in structural maintenance. Nonetheless the additional capital resources obtained for next year are to be welcomed. However the Environment of Buckinghamshire Select Committee may well be interested in examining the long term implications of this as a funding strategy for the Authority. The LTP, as a strategic document of the Authority, might well benefit from closer scrutiny, if nothing else to develop a broader understanding of its importance and how best it can be maximised to meet the policy objectives of the Authority rather than those of the Government.
49. Considerable discussion took place on how public transport might be made more available, reliable and affordable. Improving the performance of public transport has been a policy objective of the Authority for some time and whilst the initiatives to improve dialogue with service providers are very much welcomed, the Committee would like to see in what ways the involvement of transport users to monitor performance can be developed. The County Council can fulfil a major community leadership role in this area which will be to the long term benefit of the service users. Mr Royston invited the appropriate Select Committee to help him think through some of the implications of this and the committee are sure that is something which a Select Committee will follow up in due course.
50. A major policy for this portfolio will be the management of traffic growth in the County over the coming years. A very useful discussion took place on a number of initiatives which Mr Royston is putting in place. However time did not allow discussion on the traffic growth resulting from increased housing targets from the Regional Planning Guidance. As a major corporate issue for the Authority, this Select Committee will want to take a continuing interest in this area of activity to see how the implications of RPG are being absorbed and what will be the impact for the County Council's policies as a whole.
51. What was abundantly clear from the discussion was that whilst everybody regards this portfolio as one of the most critical for the County Council as a whole, it is regarded as something of a "Cinderella" in terms of financial resources. No doubt the creative use of capital resources might alleviate some of that difficulty but the Committee will be extremely interested to see how the budget strategy as a whole deals with the overall dilemma and the priority which the Cabinet attach to this portfolio.

Children's Services – Margaret Aston

52. As a new major cross-cutting portfolio for the Cabinet, the Select Committee fully support the strategic aims and policies Mrs Aston has set out. However, this is not to say that Members do not have some reservations about the difficulties that will have to be faced and how they might be overcome. The whole issue of the relationship of Special Educational Needs in this and the Schools Portfolio, is one that will need to be handled sensitively. The communication between the relevant services and special schools is clearly being thought about carefully but will need to be more widely understood if it is to receive the level of support it deserves. The separation of political direction and operational management is not widely understood but a clear articulation of the desired outcomes and how they might affect the lives of young people will go a long way to achieving this. The separation of the purchaser – the Cabinet Member – and the provider through the Schools Portfolio may be a practical solution to achieving the overall aims but it will be the way in which the overall policy is set and how it achieves service integration that will be critical.

53. Apart from discussions around policy direction, the Committee were particularly interested to explore the implications of resources and the current overspend on Children's Services. Whilst the Committee were reassured that management action is being taken to reduce the level of overspend, Members were still concerned about the achievability of the targets set bearing in mind the uncontrollable nature of some of the Children's Services expenditure.
54. Whilst the budget is not uncontrolled, the Committee do have reservations about the long-term position, exacerbated by current staffing difficulties. The Committee heard about a number of actions being taken to remedy, or at least improve the situation but did not have time to consider these in any great detail.
55. For example, the very high vacancy factor was reported to the Committee with levels as high as 44% in one area of the County. This will undoubtedly have significant impact on the caseloads of social workers and therefore the quality of their work. These issues are complex and may not necessarily be widely understood by the Council as a whole. The Select Committee on Personal Care is already examining issues related to the corporate parent role and will be reporting to Council in due course. It might be appropriate at that time for County Council to set aside time to have a more wide-ranging debate on child care issues.
56. Against a background of Social Services being under-funded nationally, the Committee heard that, in child care terms, some London boroughs are funded at a rate of between five and six times more per head than Buckinghamshire. Though not so extreme there are similar difficulties for Adult Services in terms of the low SSA for Bucks and the Committee fully supports the initiative to be taken by the Leader in raising this issue at national level and will do all it can to be of help.
57. In taking forward the development of Children's Services, the Committee were pleased to hear about the progress being made with the Chesham Project which came out of the work undertaken in the Children's Services Root and Branch Review. However, the success of this project is not widely understood and the benefits of rolling out this programme of new "joined up" working across the County as a whole, not fully appreciated. The Committee were pleased to note that the roll out is happening, but are unsure as to how this can be funded without additional resources and would be interested to hear further about it.
58. Copies of the new joint assessment documentation were circulated to the Committee and Members were glad to know that this will not only reduce bureaucracy but hopefully improve the quality of the overall assessment process. However, this is only part of the story. If full integration of Children's Services is to be achieved then the links with the statementing process need to be explored. Statementing involves the same range of statutory partners and is another feature of the overall assessment process. As yet the joint assessment documentation is not integrated with the statementing process and the Committee suggests that further progress might be made if they were.
59. Finally, as mentioned in several parts of this report, the whole issue of information management to support service delivery was considered. Doubt was expressed as to whether true integration could ever be achieved because of the separate systems that schools operate. This may be true but should not be accepted as a *fait accompli*. Once schools, particularly special schools, understand the benefits which might be achieved, it may well be that they can be convinced to participate more closely in the gathering, sharing and analysis of common data. In any event, this should not prevent the sharing of relevant information across services directly administered by the County Council and

the Committee looks forward to hearing what strategy is being put in place to achieve this.

Conclusion

60. This report provides an overview of the key issues the Committee has wanted to bring to the Cabinet's attention. Individually Members will be aware of them, but that may not be true for the Cabinet as a whole or indeed for the Council to whom this report is in part addressed. Several references have been made to issues that need to be further understood or in which this Committee and others will be interested. In a sense this has begun to map out a work programme for the Select Committees beyond the election of the next Council. This Committee would appreciate knowing the Cabinet's views on its conclusions and also whether the emerging agenda is one which the Cabinet would support.
61. At this stage the Committee have avoided making specific recommendations because its discussions have been largely exploratory. However, in order to support the Committee in carrying out its responsibilities, it is hoped that the medium-term plan and the portfolio plans which will be part of the Local Performance Plan, will be made available to it at an early date and in any event before they are agreed by the County Council.