

Item 1: Executive Interview – Executive Member for Resources

Regeneration and Resources Scrutiny Sub-Committee, 2 February 2006

Questions to Executive Member for Resources:

1. How can disposal of capital assets such as surplus property be used to reduce the requirement for revenue funding for (a) the General Fund and (b) the Housing Revenue Account?
2. Please provide a table setting out by department the material grants (in addition to the Revenue Support Grant) which are relied on for funding, showing the current expected amount for 2006/7 compared to that for 2005/6 and commenting very briefly on the status of negotiations over the 2006/7 amount - i.e. "Agreed" / "Still under negotiation".
3. The following questions arise from the document headed Annual Efficiency Statement - Forward Look, which appears to be dated 15 April 2005:
 - (a) What is the methodology for assessing whether the aim of making the Customer Service Centre (CSC) self-financing by 2008/09 is achieved?
 - (b) Are we on track to achieve that aim?
 - (c) For each of 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2007/08 what are the actual or estimated net costs of the CSC to the Council's revenue budget?
 - (d) Has the Member Steering Group associated with the Corporate Efficiency Programme been established? Who is on it? How often has it met?
 - (e) The document sets out annual efficiency gains, by department, totalling £7,893,000 (of which £5,937,000 is cashable):
 - (i) with respect to 2005/06 how much of the cashable gains have been achieved? Are the savings accruing to general balances or have they been vired elsewhere? If so, where?
 - (ii) with respect to 2006/07 how much of the cashable gains are proposed to be used to reduce departmental base budgets? What is the situation with regard to the rest of the cashable gains?
 - (iii) With respect to both years how is the benefit of the uncashable annual gains of £1,937,000 being assessed?

With regard to (e) above please could the answers be provided by department, as in the Annual Efficiency Statement document?
4. Would the Executive member please up-date us on member oversight of the capital programme; e.g. has Executive membership of the Capital Working Group been established? If so, who are the members and how often has it met?

5. Is the medium-term financial strategy part of the Constitution's "budgetary and policy framework"? If so, should Council Assembly approval be required for any proposed action to reduce general balances below £10m?
6. Is the Executive member satisfied that there are no significant control weaknesses in respect of responsive housing repairs?
7. What is the Executive member's opinion of the work by Leaseholders Council which seemingly exposes weaknesses in allocating service charges? If there are weaknesses, does the Executive member fear that recovery of legitimate charges to leaseholders may be at risk? If so, what remedial action is being taken?
8. With regard to budget-making for 2006/07 what is the Executive member's policy on achieving above-inflation increases in income items where the Council has discretion? If it is her view that some such increases would reduce income, would she set out by department the activities where that might happen, with an indication of the background work by officers to justify such a view?
9. What representations have been or are proposed to be made to the Government about the residual role of LEA's in respect of allocation of educational resources, with particular regard to accountability through the elected members and their overall fiduciary duties?
10. Does the Executive member have any views about the appropriate timing of meetings of the Schools Forum and of the budget-making meeting of Council Assembly?
11. What contribution from revenue will be required for the Pension Fund in 2006/07 and in 2007/08? How do pension fund assets and liabilities compare with the position a year ago? Has the position improved or worsened?
12. What progress is being made with plans for building a new town hall? What time-table is the Council working to?
13. The District Auditor advises the Council to strengthen aspects of the management of the housing benefits system and the production of the government grant claim. Under the heading Other Savings it is proposed to cut £150k (Housing General Fund) from the operation of the Revenues and Benefits services.

Is the Executive Member confident that management of the housing benefits system can be strengthened with this level of cut?