

**ANSWERS BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL TO QUESTIONS ASKED AT THE  
SCRUTINY COMMISSION – THURSDAY, 13<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2006**

**1. GENERAL**

**a) What have been the highlights/successes of the County Council last year?**

- (a) There have been highlights and successes in all areas of the Council's activities. I will not list them all here but I would certainly mention the achievement of 4 Star status under CPA; achieving a reasonably low Council Tax against the background of a very difficult Government financial settlement; the rebuilding and refurbishment of schools and libraries; the awards for Leicestershire Care Online; and, only last week, we learned that our very effective lobbying has paid off in terms of a number of Leicestershire highways and transport schemes being funded through the new Regional Funding Allocations, including the Earl Shilton By-pass.

The County Council is increasingly recognised as a corporate organisation. One indication of our success has been the introduction of the Change Management Programme, with substantial support from senior managers in all Departments. It is very much to the credit of the County Council that we have introduced such a programme to take forward the drive for continuous service improvement. In contrast to many councils, we are doing so from a high starting base.

The County Council has continued the development of some notably successful partnerships, including Leicestershire Together and the Community Safety Programme Board. Our partnership working with the NHS will be greatly facilitated by the new County-wide PCT. Leicestershire Together has, of course, been instrumental in agreeing and implementing the Local Area Agreement.

I would also record that the County Council's reputation has been enhanced locally, regionally and nationally. We are viewed as an authority which offers much good practice and we are increasingly involved in the national improvement agenda for local government.

**b) What has not gone so well and how do you intend to improve this?**

- (b) I am not sure if there is a specific issue behind the question but the very nature of running a large local authority is that it is the role of the controlling Administration to ensure that the Council is seen as a responsible authority and that hard decisions and difficult choices are not shirked. Equally, if experience suggests there are lessons to be learned from processes and decision-making, we will do so.

**2. FACTORS FOR CHANGE**

**a) What do you think are going to be the external pressures and challenges on the County Council this coming year and what are you doing to meet these?**

**b) Likewise for internal challenges.**

- (a)&  
(b) I find it difficult to separate the external pressures from the internal challenges because often one leads to the other. Amongst the major challenges facing the County Council are the very difficult budget outlook, which was made clear to the Council at the budget meeting in February; the particular challenge of Waste Management, reinforced by the prospect of severe financial penalties if the amount of biodegradable waste now going to landfill cannot be significantly reduced; the need to respond to the promised Local Government White Paper, whatever that might contain; and the ongoing organisational change consequences of legislation in Children's and Adults' Services.

### **3. THE CABINET**

#### **a) Cabinet members do not have executive responsibility. How is this working in practice?**

(a) I presume the question is noting that individual Lead Members do not have executive responsibility. I believe strongly that collective responsibility is the appropriate way for the Cabinet to operate and it is working well in practice.

#### **b) Do the cabinet members have outcomes/targets? If so where are these to be found? Who sets/monitors and reviews these targets?**

#### **c) Do the cabinet support members have areas of responsibility or are they given specific tasks? Where are these to be found? Are they available to appear before scrutiny to review this work?**

(b) & (c) All Cabinet Members and Cabinet Support Members have job descriptions, which are agreed jointly between me and the individual member. Similarly, we keep individual performance under review jointly. I am not sure if a similar discipline exists for the scrutiny side but I would be happy to compare notes with the Chairman of the Scrutiny Commission before any further consideration is given to the review of performance of individual members.

### **4. OFFICERS AND MANAGEMENT**

#### **a) There have been several new appointments at senior level within the Council – any issues/problems? What further appointments are envisaged?**

(a) In the last eighteen months the County Council has appointed three new chief officers following retirements. They have already shown in their performance that they are of the highest quality. A Panel is meeting today to appoint a Director of Adult Social Care and Health.

#### **b) There have been a significant number of management consultants and interim (external) managers appointed recently. How many were engaged last year, which departments, is this likely to increase or decrease over the next year?**

(b) The tradition in the County Council has been not to employ management consultants in anything like the same numbers as in other local authorities. I think it fair to say that the particular issue which arose last year related to Education/Children's Services. I also think that it has been very well explained that the restructuring of the Service and the pressures on the Director required the appointment of a number of interim managers, who were perhaps erroneously referred to as consultants. In total, 10 interim managers were engaged by the Director of Children's Services between July 2005 and April 2006. It should be noted that many of those interim managers were engaged to fill on a temporary basis senior management positions which have now been filled permanently.

Elsewhere in the Council the practice remains that consultants are employed to undertake one-off pieces of work. Typical recent examples are the engagement of a consultant to assist in the preparation of the Youth Justice Plan and the engagement of a consultant to assist in the preparation of the Local Transport Plan. Similarly, in Children's Services, a consultant was employed to assist in drafting the Children and Young People's Plan. An exception in the last year was the engagement of Deloitte to manage the introduction of the Change Programme. That contract has come to an end although Deloitte have recently been awarded a 'call-off' contract so that their experience is available to the Council in taking forward the Programme.

Looking ahead and as already explained, there will be an obvious decline in the number of interim managers employed in Children's Services. Elsewhere I would expect the position to remain much the same.

**c) There is concern over the latter's role, what steps have been taken to ensure full accountability?**

(c) This matter was addressed, following consideration by the Scrutiny Commission last December, by the Corporate Governance Committee and new advice has been issued which makes clear the extent of the authority of interim managers. Within the guidance that has been issued, how these arrangements are managed is a matter for chief officers.

**d) How is the change management programme progressing?**

(d) I have already referred to the importance of the Change Management Programme. The Change Management Board, including Scrutiny Members, met earlier this week and I understand that a number of members are following the Programme's progress through the County Council's intranet.

**5. FINANCE AND BUDGET**

**a) How do you see the financial position of the Council over the next year, what pressures are there likely to be on the finances of the Council? What areas are you considering in terms of reviewing service priorities and opportunities for savings?**

(a) Initial indications are that there are no major areas of concern in terms of managing the 2006/07 budget. The budget monitoring report on the agenda for this meeting of the Commission gives the details.

On the other hand, the likely position for 2007/08 and beyond is a matter of serious concern, as indicated earlier. The critical spending pressures continue to be Waste and Adult Social Care and our experience locally reflects the national position. The current projection for Waste indicates a 13% increase in spending for 2007/08. Contrast this with the notified Government grant settlement for next year. The cash increase of approximately £600,000 (0.8%) will merely meet the increase in the landfill tax for next year. On top of this, the costs of disposal continue to increase and we have to invest in recycling and other treatment to avoid higher landfill costs and penalties in the future.

As the report to the Council budget meeting made clear, even with continuing efficiency savings (driven by the Corporate Change Management Programme) and levying the maximum Council Tax increase of 5%, significant service reductions will be required. Some of the areas Cabinet members are considering were listed in the County Council budget report but we are reviewing all budgets to determine the best way forward.

The earlier notification of Government grant facilitates planning, which is essential when managing a problem of this magnitude. Therefore, it is my intention to inform scrutiny in the autumn of the Cabinet's consideration of possible service reductions. As I suggested earlier, hard choices cannot be shirked, particularly when the options open to the Council are so constrained by the Government's financial settlement.

**b) BABS I has been a priority for the Council and still has a budget attached to it. What are the prospects for this programme?**

(b) Customer Access and Customer Service have been and remain a priority for this Council. The Better Access to Better Services Initiative (BABS I) has been incorporated into the Corporate Change Programme as the Customer First Programme. All uncommitted budgets previously attached to BABS I have been transferred into that Programme.

The Members of the all party Change Management Board received a progress report on the Customer First Programme at its meeting earlier this week (referred to earlier) and I

think it fair to say that all members of the Board were very satisfied with the progress, direction and priority being given to the Programme.

**c) You recently had a meeting with Gordon Brown – what came out of the meeting?**

- (c) This was a meeting to which I was invited as Chairman of the Regional Assembly, although Treasury civil servants were aware of my role as Leader of the County Council. It was a consultation meeting as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007 and the outcome will not be known until the Chancellor reports to Parliament and the detail of the Review can be digested.

**6. EXTERNAL RELATIONS**

**a) What do you feel are the state of relations with the district councils and the County Council?**

- (a) There are areas where we are making good progress together, for example in developing proposals to engage with neighbourhoods and communities and the introduction in 2007 of decriminalised parking. The position on concessionary travel has been difficult and was referred to in the County Council yesterday. The issue which has, in my view, the greatest potential impact on Leicestershire in terms of both the environment and financial cost is the future of Waste Management. Again, this was discussed in the County Council yesterday. Clearly both tiers of local government have an important role to play and I hope that we are now close to a position where we can have a joint strategy formally agreed.

**b) What can be done/is being done to improve this?**

- (b) The County and District Council Leaders' regular meetings are important to good relations between the two tiers. The most recent meeting got off to a difficult start when an offer of County Council assistance was effectively rejected in a prepared statement from a chief executive. I hope that some lessons can be learned from that for future occasions.

**c) What progress is being made on engaging communities? When will proposals be published?**

- (c) At the County Council yesterday and earlier in these answers, I referred to good progress, particularly in the form of a paper agreed jointly between the County and District Councils which has now been endorsed by Leicestershire Together. The proposals have now been published in the name of Leicestershire Together and a working group involving the County and District Councils, the Police, the NHS, the Voluntary Sector and the Parish Councils' representative organisation has been set up to develop the thinking in the paper and to consider areas for pilot working.

**d) What work has been done in anticipation of Lyons or the Local Government Reform White Paper?**

- (d) A number of members attended the seminar held to enable the County Council to respond to the last but one report of the Lyons Inquiry, following which a cross-party submission was made. I have had the opportunity to meet Sir Michael Lyons and I respect the open-minded way in which he is conducting his review. His over-riding aim is to strengthen the role and credibility of local government and I hope the Government responds positively. No work has been undertaken in respect of the promised Local Government White Paper apart from the work previously referred to in respect of neighbourhoods and communities.

7. **PRESS**

a) **Given that part of scrutiny's role is to help improve service delivery, do you think that press releases from the Scrutiny Commission and Scrutiny Committees on their work enhances the standing of the County Council in the community?**

(a) Inevitably it will depend on the quality of the work undertaken by scrutiny and the interest generated. There is undoubtedly an opportunity for scrutiny to demonstrate its effectiveness through the press and I am sure that there are particular opportunities in respect of the scrutiny of NHS bodies, for example.

b) **If so would you support a Scrutiny Commission/Committees protocol to improve the publicity of issues that have been scrutinised by the County Council?**

(b) I suggest that external interest in the issue being publicised will be of more importance than a protocol. However, if a protocol is to be developed, I suggest that it should cover the response of the Cabinet to the particular piece of work of the scrutiny body.

8. **CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

a) **How to you feel the work and structure of the new Children's Services Directorate is progressing?**

I suggest that this is much more a matter for the relevant scrutiny committee but I believe that good progress has been made.

9. **SCRUTINY**

**Has the work of Scrutiny been of help to the Cabinet? If so, how? How can Scrutiny help in the work of Cabinet this coming year?**

I welcomed the Annual Report of the Scrutiny Commission to the County Council yesterday. However, I have made my view clear on previous occasions that the restructuring of scrutiny could have been more radical. I hope that an emphasis will remain on the five member panels since it is their work which I believe is most valuable, not just to the Cabinet but to the scrutiny process itself. Panel reports which the Cabinet has particularly appreciated have been in respect of community safety, the Council's capital programme, library visitor numbers and the management of transportation capital schemes. The Cabinet was grateful for the advice offered by scrutiny on the recent review of the Medium Term Corporate Strategy and during the last budget process. As I have indicated earlier, the forthcoming budget process will be much more difficult and I will be encouraging scrutiny to take an early interest.