

EDUCATION AND HERITAGE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Education and Heritage Scrutiny Committee met on Wednesday 23rd January 2002. The following members of the Cabinet attended the meeting to respond to questions by the Committee:-

Mr I. D. Ould Cabinet Lead Member for Education
Mr E. F. White Cabinet Lead Member for Libraries
Mr R. Mason Cabinet Lead Member for Museums

REVISED ESTIMATE 2001/02

The Committee NOTED:-

- a) That the revised estimate for 2001/02 in respect of Education showed an overspend of £346,660.
- b) That the revised estimate for 2001/02 in respect of Museums and Arts showed an overspend of £144,600.
- c) That the revised estimate for 2001/02 in respect of Libraries and Information showed an underspend of £81,440.

REVENUE BUDGET 2002/03

Arising from the discussion and questions put to the respective Cabinet Lead members on the proposed revenue budget the following points were made:-

Libraries and Information

Library Service Review

The growth proposed in relation to the Bookfund, opening hours and ICT were responses to the Review. The element of the Review that had not been progressed was the issue of improving the fabric of the building stock. The Committee had previously been advised that the indications were that the proposed PFI route for improving library buildings would not be successful unless linked with other services aimed at improving access and information to local authority services.

Libraries Service for Education

The proposal to remove the subsidy would result in the reduction of the bookstock available to the service unless the service was able to generate additional revenue. The recent decision by Leicester City Council to give notice of its intention to withdraw from the current joint arrangement would make the task of the service to generate additional funds more challenging. The impact of the withdrawal would be monitored.

The service continues to receive part of its core funding from the Education budget. Given this and the fact that the service is geared primarily to schools and colleges some members of the Committee were of the view that the service should be transferred to the Education budget; the service might be less vulnerable to savings proposals if it were located within a larger budget.

Removal of cover for Mobile Library Driver Annual Leave

The effect of the proposed saving would mean that the service to outlying rural areas would be affected for a period of approximately four weeks in total at various times throughout the year. The impact on certain parts of the County would be that on two occasions each year the service would operate a four weekly service rather than a two weekly service.

Merge Small Library Groups with Large Neighbours

The efficiency savings related to reduced overheads and management cost. There would be no loss of public service and it was not expected that there would be any redundancies.

Museums and Arts

Snibston Discovery Park

In response to questions the Cabinet Lead Member indicated that whilst the Cabinet was looking closely at the operation of Snibston Discovery Park in the light of the costs of running the Museum to the County Council, there was no plan to privatise or externalise the Museum in the immediate future. The budget proposals included growth of £167,000 for loss of income, a significant proportion of which was for Snibston.

Haymarket Theatre

In response to questions, the Cabinet Lead Member confirmed that at the request of the Cabinet, the Haymarket Theatre Trust had agreed a service level agreement. The half-year review indicated that the Trust had met the targets set out therein. It was a matter of regret that the Cabinet had not been in a position to consult all those affected by the budget proposals, including the Haymarket Theatre Trust, prior to the release of the budget details to the press.

Donington le Heath Manor House

The Cabinet Lead member confirmed that the Cabinet had not considered the visitor information figures that had been tabled at the meeting. These figures indicated that weekday visitor numbers sometimes exceeded those at weekends, in particular during school and bank holidays.

Concern was expressed by some members that the proposals might result in redundancies and the loss of experienced curatorial staff thus jeopardising the long-term future of the Donington le Heath Manor House, that the proposals did not appear to be consistent with the County Council's stated policies to promote tourism and that the saving generated did not justify the action proposed.

Education

Teachers Pay

The cash increase for schools of £9.54million should be sufficient to fund a pay award to teachers of slightly in excess of 3.5%. Details of the pay award were awaited.

Delegation Targets

The proposed budget would, if no further delegation occurs, result in a delegation rate estimated to be 84.5%. Members were reminded of previous reports to the Committee, which indicated a reluctance on the part of schools for further delegation, in particular, the centrally held resources for statementing for SEN.

Specific Grants

The Committee noted the grant made available by the Government of £1.7million to offset the consequences to the County Council of the transfer of responsibility for sixth form funding to the Learning and Skills Council. The Cabinet Lead Member drew attention to the work undertaken by officers to that end and the Committee commended the prompt and effective response of officers to the change in funding arrangements.

Members of the Committee suggested that it might be helpful if a table of figures were provided showing specific grants received by the Authority and by schools over the last three years. Specific grants, whilst restricting the areas of expenditure to national rather than local priorities, were linked to pupil numbers. The effect of these grants would therefore go some way towards reducing the disparity in funding between authorities which the SSA process produced.

Presentation of Growth Proposals

A suggestion was made that it would be helpful if the growth proposals were grouped so as to identify:-

- i) those which were responding to legislative changes and were demanded;
- ii) those which were initiatives of the Cabinet linked to priorities in the County Council's Medium Term Strategy.

The Cabinet Lead Member was asked to provide further details of those items falling with category (ii), together with cross references, as appropriate, to the Medium Term Strategy, in time for the meeting of the Commission on 31st January.

Decision of the Committee

The Committee noted that comments made in relation to the proposed revenue budget for 2002/03 and asked for these to be drawn to the attention of the Scrutiny Commission.

Note:-

The following motions were moved at the meeting of the Education and Heritage Scrutiny Committee but were not carried:-

Haymarket Theatre Trust

That the Cabinet be asked to withdraw the proposed saving of £50,000 in 2002/03 (£101,000 full year) in relation to the Haymarket Theatre Trust on the basis that:

- i) the Trust has delivered, as required by the Cabinet, on the commitments and targets set out in the service level agreement and that reducing the grant could be damaging to the credibility of the County Council;*
- ii) a corresponding growth bid had not been put forward to enable the development of theatre services in the County through other means in accordance with the commitments given in the Medium Term Strategy;*
- iii) a countywide strategy for arts has yet to be put in place and that areas of the County not within easy reach of the current provision would be disadvantaged.*

continued

Donington le Heath Manor House

That the Cabinet be asked to withdraw the proposed saving of £20,000 in 2002/03 and subsequent years on the basis that:

- i) it has failed to take account of the visitor information figures that indicated that weekday visitor numbers sometimes exceeded those at weekends, in particular during school and bank holidays. {copy attached}*
- ii) it could result in the loss of committed curatorial staff thus jeopardising the long-term future of the Donington le Heath Manor House as a valuable facility;*
- iii) the proposed closure appears to be contrary to the stated policies of encouraging tourism..*