

RECONCILING POLICY AND RESOURCES: COMMENTS BY THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

As in previous years, Lead Cabinet Members and Chief Officers have shared their more developed thinking and draft Reconciling Policy and Resources proformas with Scrutiny Committees in the recent cycle of meetings. This has provided an opportunity for the Committees to consider whether there are issues they wish the Cabinet to take into account in refining the financial guidelines for 2006/07.

ADULT SOCIAL CARE

It was agreed to inform the Cabinet of the Committee's comments as follows:

The Committee generally endorses, albeit with regret, the savings proposals for Adult Social Care services, but has specific recommendations and comments on some of the areas as set out below:

General

- the Committee is concerned that the review of eligibility criteria in the service areas of Older People, Learning Disabilities, Physical Disabilities and Mental Health is going to be difficult to manage and will need to be treated very sensitively;
- the business case is supported in principle, but the Director of Adult Social Care is requested to report back with the updated position to the Scrutiny Committee in March 2006; and
- papers for future Reconciling Policy and Resources exercises should include information on the grants received by the Department and how they are used to offset the savings required so that a total budget picture is available. The Director of Adult Social Care has undertaken to report to the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee with that information.

Learning Disabilities

- the proposed savings on the review of eligibility criteria should be reduced by £100,000 and recouped from the Physical Disabilities Service where there is scope for more savings.

AUDIT AND BEST VALUE

The Committee discussed the key issues of the report, in particular discussing the Council's priorities and management of risk; and the savings agenda on efficiencies.

The Committee agreed to:

- (1) request a written report analysing how much the Council spends on agency staff compared with salaries for directly employed staff; and
- (2) inform the Cabinet of the its comments as follows:

Corporate Resources Department

- The Committee expressed concern at the potentially high impact of savings in audit and requested that the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Resources consider alternative options.

Strategic Management and Economic Development

- The proposed savings are broadly supported.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES

It was agreed to inform the Cabinet of the Committee's comments as follows:

- information on trend analysis on use of services, and risk assessments are provided for the next round of reconciling policy and resources to aid consideration of proposed savings; and
- a list of abbreviations used in reports to be circulated with the agenda papers in future.

Learning and School Effectiveness

Playlink

- The Committee remained to be convinced regarding the proposed savings to Playlink and requested a further written briefing.

CfBT

- Expressed concern at the reduction of grant totalling £200,000 to CfBT for school improvement, as it is a high risk saving. It is suggested that the proposed reduction is mitigated by setting up a suspended fund of £50,000, which, if not utilised for school improvement, could then be re-allocated elsewhere.

Children and Families

Youth Development Service

- Expressed concern that the cuts proposed to the Youth Development Service were high in proportion to the overall budget.

Looked After Children Services

- Agreed the risk reward ratio is not substantial enough and it is too high a risk to assume success in reducing the number of 'in-house' fostering placements by 5. The Director of Children Services was requested to present alternatives to the Cabinet.

Management and Support

- The proposed savings are broadly supported.

COMMUNITY SERVICES

The meeting of the Community Services Scrutiny Committee is being held on 13 December. The comments of that Committee will therefore be tabled at the Cabinet meeting.

TRANSPORT AND ENVIRONMENT

The Committee discussed the report and proposed savings in detail. Members reiterated their strong concern that, as in previous years, the Transport and Environment Services were bearing a disproportionate percentage of budget cuts despite the fact that the services had impact directly on every resident and business in the County.

It was agreed to inform the Cabinet that the Committee:

(1) expresses its grave concern that, whilst the services provided by the Transport and Environment Department have an impact on every resident and business in the County, it is those services which consistently bear a disproportionate share of the cuts; and

(2) generally endorses, albeit with regret, the savings proposals for Transport and Environment services, but with specific exceptions, recommends and comments on the following areas:

Management and Support

- shortcomings identified in terms of word processing team and use of IT systems by managers should continue to be addressed urgently.

Roads Maintenance

- the proposed savings in respect of structural maintenance of pavements and preventative maintenance of road surfaces are a cause for serious concern because:
 - maintenance of pavements and roads is an established high public priority and a critical element of the Council's *visibly better roads* initiative
 - deterioration will cost more to repair if preventative maintenance is reduced; structural maintenance should therefore be seen as an "invest to save" activity
 - pavement deterioration in particular represents a major public safety issue and could lead to higher demands on health resources
 - failure to hit critical BVPIs may affect the Council's ability to hit LTP targets overall.
- further consideration should be given to gaining additional income from existing and new charges; the Committee endorsed the approach to building in year on year increases consistent with achieving desired outcomes and suggested seeking to bring forward charge increases to earlier in the year (e.g. January instead of April).
- charges and fees should not be waived by T&E on the grounds of promoting economic development; if subsidies are argued to be necessary then alternative money together with appropriate justifications should be identified.

Traffic and Safety

- there is scope to increase charges for pupil cycle training, subject to continued exemptions for children in straitened circumstances, and this should be investigated; a higher charge is considered reasonable given the duration of the training course (9 hours), its perceived value to parents and its value for money compared to many other extra curricular activities;
- the Committee noted that reducing the traffic management and cycling budget by 20% would mean that traffic calming would be focussed entirely on reducing casualties rather than environmental enhancements; and
- as education funds are “passported” whilst the Transport and Environment budget incurs cuts, would it be possible to transfer the responsibility for school crossing patrols to the Children’s Services Department or to individual schools? This would enable decisions about crossing patrols to be linked more effectively with “Safer routes to schools” strategies.

Environment

- early consideration should be given to reducing, or cutting completely, the support provided to WoodLots;
- the principle of cutting expenditure in the short term to functions currently planned for longer term phased spending reductions should be carried forward wherever possible;
- consideration should be given to reducing further the support currently given to the Sussex Biodiversity Centre, whilst ensuring that the data held by the Centre can still be accessed economically by the Council; and
- the Director of Transport and Environment is requested to look at how the reduction in maintenance budget for sites and routes can be managed differently.

Passenger Transport

- the take-up figures for the “Dial-a-Ride” Schemes by disabled people should be investigated and the proposed withdrawal of funding for the Schemes reconsidered because the service assists the most vulnerable people in the community.

Statutory Plans

- the Committee noted that some Planning Delivery Grant income will be received during the next financial year;
- the Committee noted that minimal resources from the T&E budget had been committed to the promotion of the reinstatement of the Lewes - Uckfield railway; progress reports were requested to future T&E scrutiny committees;
- whilst posts may be deleted to achieve the necessary savings, staff redundancies should be avoided wherever possible because of the short term additional costs involved and because of the inevitable negative impact on staff morale.