

Leader's Report to Labour Group

23 February 1998

David Sutton

(1) Emerging blinking into the light

Following our extended meetings and discussions about County budget disaggregation; County property and other assets; joint arrangements; and the setting of our own budget, I feel that we have now put a quite enormous load of work behind us. I also sense that the Group is now ready and keen to engage with all the new ideas on local government which are buzzing around - including Best Value, Welfare to Work, community governance, structural reform and financial reform - as well as the big ideas about Reading's future which will follow from the Chief Executive's "City 2020" report; and also to resume progress on some of the areas which have tended to be on a back-burner while Transition dominated everything else (Local Agenda 21, Low Pay policy, Investors in People etc.). The Scarborough Labour Local Government Conference, for many of us, came at just the right time in this emergence. But we must be careful to find ways to ensure that the Group does not run ahead of the Party on these major issues, and it may be that we shall soon need something like a shared Away-Day or Day-School or Special GC, in order to discuss together the future of local government in Reading.

(2) Budget debate at Council meeting

The Budget part of the Council meeting takes on a fairly ritualised format, with speeches from the Leader of the Council and the Leader of the Opposition which are not time-limited, followed by either alternative budgets or amendments to our proposed budget by the opposition parties, followed by a series of debates on the amendments. Could I suggest that after the interminable ramblings of Sutton and Fenwick, we do not have further general contributions on the budget but that individual chairs speak or respond on those parts of the budget debate which are within their remit, and that Lawrence deals with any matters to do with County budget disaggregation - if the opposition are bright enough to raise them.

(3) Flashpoints

A recent meeting of MPs, councillors and Party representatives agreed that the restoration of a regular programme of issues of Flashpoints would be a good thing. Chairs and others should note that the Whips have been given the responsibility for pulling Flashpoints back together. The idea is that we should try to confine ourselves to bullet-point presentations which might be useful for ward-newsletters, rather than the "what the Chair did on their holidays" approach

into which Flashpoints degenerated three or four years ago. Copy to Liz or Rhodri, please; it would be good to get a relaunch issue out in time for 1st April.