

Report to Labour Group

25 March 1996

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Council and Group Structures

Next year (which may well be the last year before the all-out shadow / unitary elections) will present us with an excellent opportunity for thinking and planning ahead. As well as policy planning, we will need to think about four interlocking areas of potential structural change:

- change in the workings of the Labour Group
- change in the workings of our existing committees
- change via the introduction of new ways of delivering democracy, such as area committees or localised development control meetings
- change caused by the new responsibilities will be coming under the remit of the Reading Unitary Authority

Starting with the Labour Group, we feel that the group itself is generally working well, although its agendas do get cluttered and meetings go on for too long. The Sub-Groups have worked better than ever this year, properly forwarding their recommendations to the full Group. Group Officers have also been busy and have met regularly. Partly as a result of all this activity and partly for other reasons, Chairs Group has been underemployed and has struggled to find a role.

Next year there will probably be 34 or 35 of us, and Labour Group meetings could become still more difficult to plan and to manage. We therefore recommend that, from May 1996:

- (1) The Labour Group should set up an Executive Committee, as allowed for in its constitution. The principal responsibilities of the Executive Committee would be the preparation of full Group agendas, monitoring the implementation of Group decisions, and preparing reports on structural change for full Group to consider.**
- (2) Chairs Group should meet ahead of each committee cycle, and should add the previewing of reports across the whole range of committees and sub-committees to its remit. The suggested date for the next Chairs Group meeting is therefore Friday 31 May 1996.**
- (3) Meetings of our Group Officers should be replaced by joint meetings of Group and Party Officers, to improve liaison between the Group and the Party. The suggested date for the first meeting of Group and Party Officers is Monday 13 May 1996, in advance of the Labour Group meeting which is likely to take place that night.**
- (4) Our Sub-Groups should continue the good work they have been doing this year, in the same form.**

At an informal meeting of Group Officers and other interested parties on 12 March, we reached the view that it was too late to make major changes in the committee structure for 1996-97. Perhaps we could have started on the present review earlier, but in any case it would be as well to have next year's position clear well in advance of the Group AGM. We therefore add the following recommendation:

(5) No change should be made to the Council's programme committee structure for the Council year 1996-97.

Following discussions with the Chief Executive, she has undertaken to draft a "first thoughts" report on possible committee structures for the future. We could bring this to the next Group meeting if comrades wish.

Just to give an idea of how wide a range of options could be considered, the example of Lewisham, reputedly one of the best-run London boroughs, is given as an Appendix. You will see that, for instance, Planning is dealt with as part of Economic Development, and Transport as part of Environmental Services. Apart from the requirement to have an Education Committee, we should be taking no part of our structure for granted.

As we plan the likely structures for the Reading Unitary Authority, we should be very clear that we are not going for the much-criticised "bolt on" approach - where much larger-scale County services are bolted on to existing District or Borough structures. However, if Group agrees that we will have the same six programme committees next year, which could be considered as the "pre-Shadow" year, it will be important to be aware that new responsibilities and interests (present County functions) will come under the purview of our Chairs and Vice-Chairs. This will be especially true in the case of Health and Environment, where there will be work to be done on coordinating our environmental objectives with the working of the MRF; on trading standards; and on public protection. Community Development will continue to plan for closer working with the Youth and Community services; and Arts and Leisure with Cultural Services. There should also be increasing amounts of County-related strategic work in the areas of Planning and Transport (not forgetting the matter of County land-holdings!). It may be that our programme committee chairs will wish to bring some of these items on to otherwise thin agendas next year - after the Law Lords' decision, of course.

Appendix: Example of a Council with many Committees and very few Sub-Committees

London Borough of Lewisham

Committees

Policy & Resources Committee

- Finance Sub-Committee
- Personnel Sub-Committee
- Property Sub-Committee
- Community Sector Sub-Committee
- Lesbians and Gay Men Working Party

Central Services Committee

Direct Labour Committee

Disabilities Committee

Economic Development Committee (*includes Planning*)

Education Committee

Environmental Services Committee (*includes Transport*)

Housing Committee

Leisure Services Committee

Pensioners Committee

Race Relations Committee

Social Services Committee

Women's Committee