

# **Leader's Report to Labour Group**

**2 September 2002**

**David Sutton**

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## **CPA**

Several of us who were around the Council during August spent quite a lot of time taking part in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment of Reading Borough Council. The overall assessment was strong, I believe, and in line with the findings of the Peer Review survey back in April. There was a surprising focus by the assessors on the number of priorities which this Council has developed, and plenty of questions about whether the Council was trying to do too much. In response we tried to paint a picture of a very enthusiastic Council, certainly with many ideas and initiatives, but also with a clear set of objectives based in our City 2020 visioning. We scored very highly on partnership working and community leadership; the assessors felt that we were weak on resources, especially financial resources. I can only agree with them. I attach as an Appendix Zoë Hanim's Note of the Final Debrief. Note for Cabinet members: the lead assessor will be at Cabinet on Monday 9 September.

## **SSI**

A similarly positive (and clearly related) set of messages emerged from the SSI inspection. Again the issue of resources was raised against us, in this case linked to significant spending above our Social Services "Standard Spending Assessment" (SSA). In response, we felt able to say that we are indeed under-resourced in this area, but we are running a balanced and good quality service. Cllr Ruhemann was kept informed of progress as the review concluded during his holiday (which is usually appalling practice, but perhaps excusable in this case), and may wish to add a few words.

## **Best Value Review of Voids and Housing Repairs**

At the same time as the CPA review was in progress, we were also devoting a lot of time and energy to an external Best Value inspection of our Voids and Housing Repairs services. We all know that these have been services which have given the gravest concern in recent years, and that although there have been improvements recently there is still a very long way to go. It is therefore very pleasing to report that the inspection here in Reading passed off in a very positive mood; interviewees did well; and RFTRA were solidly supportive. There is still a huge amount to do, of course, but the outcome of the inspection was "one star and one star" (fair service, with promising prospects of improvement). This result would have been impossible a year ago, and congratulations are due to all concerned, especially Debbie Ward and Cindy Creasy on the officer side, and Mike and Graeme on ours.

### **Peer Review and Personnel functions**

The Peer Review which took place last April formed a very strong basis for the CPA inspection; but it also provided a number of important pointers to areas for future improvement, which we need to attend to – regardless of the CPA. Comrades will recall that the broad conclusion of the Peer Review was that this is a council which is very good on partnership working and the big picture, with a strong presence and reputation in the local community, but a council which needs to do more for its own staff, across a range of issues from internal communication to speeding up the “job evaluation” process. Many of these issues fall under the remit of Personnel / Human Relations, for which I have now taken direct responsibility, and we are committed to seeing through a package of improvements this Council year. With your August Council pay packet, you will have read the good news about the signing-off of the Harmonisation package, which is a really significant early win in the process. We are also coming towards the end of an internal Best Value review of Personnel, which will raise some important questions about centralised versus “directorated” personnel and equal opportunities functions. We are very well aware that the equal opportunities elements have been given a fairly low profile of late, and this will be addressed.

### **City 2020 and the new Chief Executive**

On Wednesday 18 September there will be an important meeting of our City 2020 Sub-Group, which will range over issues including the progress on the Chatham Street development, the applicability of the new regulations on Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) to Reading, and first thoughts on the replacement of the Civic Offices. The meeting will conclude with a site visit to Chatham Street. The new Chief Executive, Trish Haines, will be in attendance. Trish is spending about one day a week in Reading between now and her official start-day of Monday 28 October, and is hoping to meet and chat with as many individual councillors and officers as possible as soon as possible.

### **Licensing Committee**

The August Licensing Committee, in very unusual circumstances, found itself taking a very controversial and (with the benefit of hindsight) clearly mistaken decision in respect of the relicensing of the Matrix Club. I don't want to have a post mortem on the decision itself at the Group meeting, and there has been a helpful and constructive memo circulated by Christine Borgars, which should help us to move on. Clearly there are lessons to be learned, and we must make sure that we never get into this sort of position again. We shall probably need to review the membership and some of the terms of reference of the Licensing Committee, and it may be that Sue wishes to bring a report to a future Group meeting on this.

## **Boundaries**

I have set myself a fairly tight timetable to make progress on the issue of the expansion of Reading's boundaries. We plan to report back to Cabinet on Monday 4 November with proposals for a limited interim expansion – probably mostly towards the south and the west. I'll bring a map with me to the Group meeting. I'll also report verbally on my discussions during August with the Leaders of West Berkshire and Wokingham councils, and others.

## **Council meeting in October**

The second "state of Reading" open Council meeting will take place in the Old Town Hall on Tuesday 15 October. The Mayor will have to pick up the considerable challenge of chairing the meeting. It is anticipated that the meeting will be in three sections: Partnerships, Health, and Crime & Disorder. The keynote speakers will be: for Partnerships, the Leader of the Council; for Health, probably Janet Fitzgerald; and for Crime & Disorder, Commander Dave Murray (confirmed). I would expect that we would programme in short back-up statements to the second and third presentations from Catherine and Viki respectively; but we will have to be prepared, in general, to exercise the same discipline as in last year's meeting and to accept that there will be more contributions from partners and the public than from councillors. Helpfully, the meeting will take place during the national Local Democracy Week. I will update the Group verbally on progress with the setting up of the Local Strategic Partnership (my last set of initials – LSP).