

Council Minutes

Date: 16 January 2017

Time: 6.30 - 7.44 pm

PRESENT: Councillor M Hussain JP (in the Chair)

Councillors Mrs J A Adey, K Ahmed, Z Ahmed, M Asif, D H G Barnes, Ms A Baughan, S Broadbent, Miss S Brown, H Bull, D J Carroll, M Clarke, Mrs L M Clarke OBE, A D Collingwood, C Etholen, R Farmer, R Gaffney, S Graham, A R Green, M Hanif, M Harris, A Hussain, M Hussain, D A Johncock, M E Knight, D Knights, A Lee, Mrs W J Mallen, N B Marshall, H L McCarthy, I L McEnnis, R Newman, Ms C J Oliver, B E Pearce, G Peart, S K Raja, R Raja, S Saddique, J A Savage, R J Scott, D A C Shakespeare OBE, N J B Teesdale, Mrs J E Teesdale, P R Turner, Ms J D Wassell, R Wilson, L Wood and Ms K S Wood

Also Present: Honorary Aldermen: M Blanksby, P Cartwright, E Collins, Mrs P Priestley and R Pushman.

59 WELCOME

The Chairman warmly welcomed everyone to the meeting, thanked them for their attendance and wished all those present a very Happy New Year.

60 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Honorary Aldermen: M B Oram and Mrs K M Peatey MBE. Councillors: Mrs S Adoh, M Davy, C B Harriss, G Hall, M Hashmi, A Hill, Mrs G A Jones, Mrs J Langlely, A Turner and D Watson.

61 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

62 MINUTE SILENCE

A 1 minute silence was observed in memory of Honorary Aldermen David Cox, Tony Hurst and former Councillor Derek Done, who had all sadly recently passed away.

63 MODERNISING LOCAL GOVERNMENT

A report was submitted which sought Members` approval to make a submission to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government regarding the modernisation of Local Government in Buckinghamshire, under the Local

Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the s15 Cities and Devolution Act 2016.

The report stated that in September 2016, the County Council in Bucks had submitted a bid (attached at appendix 4 to the report) which had proposed the abolition of all five County and District Councils, and the creation of a single unitary council to cover the whole of the existing administrative area for Bucks.

Wycombe District Council however had jointly worked up a proposal with the Leaders of the other District Councils to establish a different model in which two new unitary councils were to be established. One would be established in the north of the existing Bucks County Council administrative area alongside the existing unitary of Milton Keynes, and another in the south to cover the area of the three southern District Councils. Also attached to the report was the jointly commissioned Strategic Options Case report which had been published in October 2016, (appendix 2 to the report) and the stakeholder engagement conducted by the District Councils (appendix 5 to the report).

The report requested endorsement of one of the two options for the future of Local Government, supporting either the previously submitted County bid or the submission jointly prepared by the District Councils.

The Leader of the Council rose to introduce the report, stating that the issue of modernisation of Local Government in Buckinghamshire had been reignited last year following Bucks County Council's announcement regarding its unitary proposal to seek to establish a single unitary for Bucks. She summarised the main reasons as to why this Council had considered it appropriate to provide an alternative solution to the need for change. The Leader stated that Buckinghamshire was one of the country's best places to live and work but that we could make it even better for our residents by being radical with changing Local Government. She stated that the Districts had taken a different approach to the County Council starting with the view that the answer was not clear and as such worked towards a strategic options case which they then consulted on.

She emphasised the engagement which had been carried out with stakeholders, including Town and Parish Councils, local businesses, voluntary groups, and other public sector organisations which revealed that a total of 71% of those who responded preferred a multi unitary option.

The Leader went on to say that the Districts had always demonstrated a strong track record of innovation in the face of financial challenges whilst maintaining a high quality of service provision to local communities. She specified that the 4 District Leaders and the officers had worked together unfailingly, to put together a compelling case which would secure the best outcomes for our individual communities and in doing so also saved taxpayers almost £58 million over a 5 year period.

The Leader stated that the Districts vision was for a new Local Government that would have one direction, be even more local, and become increasingly more efficient and effective.

It was added that the difference between the north and south in Bucks in terms of the economy, jobs and housing markets, demographics and even the topographical geography was significant, with the Chiltern Hills as the natural barrier. Whilst the north of the county was centred around Aylesbury and Milton Keynes, the south looked towards London as part of the commuter zone.

The Leader further stated that the Districts` case asserted that two councils could engage better and benefit more from those very different economic opportunities than one single unitary council could. She advised that even the National Infrastructure Commission recognised this in a recent report. She emphasised that two new unitaries would provide greater accountability where elected councillors could work with partner organisations and communities to help make the important decisions that affected the lives of residents. They would also be more able to focus upon their local communities and the specific services required and be able to pursue their own economic goals.

Other Members rose to express their views on the report.

Councillor R Farmer stated that he had always felt that unitary governance was the correct way forward, and he was pleased that the report had been brought for consideration. However he expressed concern over the absence of a Town Council for the unparished areas of High Wycombe. Although he was of the opinion that High Wycombe Town Committee and its Members worked well he felt that in the light of the proposed changes, Cabinet Members from many different wards further afield would be involved in decision making with regards to High Wycombe, thereby further necessitating the establishment of a Town Council for the unparished town of High Wycombe.

Councillor M Knight stated that this submission appeared to be hastily put together, having been caught out by the County`s bid. He highlighted that there had been little opportunity for any great debate in the light of major changes within the proposal. He emphasised that previously the ruling group had maintained that there had been no plans to move towards a unitary citing reasons of the complexity and cost of such a development. He questioned the sudden change of heart.

Similar sentiments were voiced by Councillor R Raja, who agreed that there should have been a proper and full debate on the motion at the December Council meeting. He felt that the bid did not demonstrate how it could bring about the increased levels of localism, democracy and pro-activeness of approach that it claimed it could achieve. He too agreed that the unitary discussion should have taken place long ago rather than now having it forced upon the Council.

Councillor Ms J Wassell, expressed deep concern regarding services for the safeguarding of vulnerable adults and children. She felt wholeheartedly that although this should remain a top priority for the leaders, it had not been sufficiently taken on board, and that the Leaders had not grasped the significance of the need for the recruitment and retention of social workers. She emphasised that the situation would only be worsened by the model proposed, fearing the possibility of the outsourcing of social services.

Councillor T Lee stated that he admired the exceptional way in which the report had been produced, and wished to place on record his sincere thanks to all those involved in preparing this outstanding report. He urged all Members to approve the District Councils` model prior to having an alternative model hoisted upon the Council.

Councillor A Green thanked the earlier speaker with regards to his supporting comments on the High Wycombe Town Committee, but he emphasised that the Charter Trustees and Town Members would continue to have a say under the new system. Furthermore he argued that as an elected member he was far better able to represent his constituents than were Town or Parish Councillors who were unelected. Moreover the setup costs for a Town Council was likely to be extremely high and he commented that the precept would rise considerably. Councillor Green did however acknowledge that perhaps more could be done to increase the powers and responsibilities of the High Wycombe Town Committee and that as its serving Chairman he would be supportive of such a move forward.

A number of other Members reinforced the view of the Leader, stating that discussions based around the establishment of a unitary had in fact been ongoing over a long period of time, and that currently this was the most beneficial way forward for the constituents. As such the model prepared by the District Councils should be supported.

In summing up the Leader answered further questions that had arisen and been posed during the debate. She emphasised that this was a very high level report, and some of the detail had not yet been decided upon. She stated that she strongly believed that the Districts had in their proposal the right vision and ambition for Bucks. The new unitaries would allow for each new Council to pursue its own economic goals, focussed in one direction, creating new opportunities for more local involvement in decision making and true local accountability. In addition she stressed that it would increase effectiveness due to the design and delivery of local services, which would be sensitive to the needs of different communities.

As such the Leader proposed that Members agree to support the submission prepared by the District Councils, and called for a recorded vote to take place. This was seconded by Councillor D Barnes.

In accordance with subsection (7) of the Council's Standing Order 16 (voting) the voting of the Members in respect of the motion was recorded as follows:

In Favour

Councillors: Mrs J Adey, Z Ahmed, D Barnes, S Broadbent, Miss S Brown, H Bull, D Carroll, Mrs L Clarke, M Clarke, A Collingwood, C Etholen, R Farmer, R Gaffney, S Graham, A Green, M Hanif, M Harris, A Hussain, Maz Hussain, D Johncock, D Knights, T Lee, N Marshall, H McCarthy, I McEnnis, R Newman, Mrs C Oliver, B Pearce, G Peart, S Raja, S Saddique, J Savage, D Shakespeare, Mrs J Teesdale, N Teesdale, P Turner, R Wilson, Miss K Wood, L Wood.

Against

Ms A Baughan, M Knight, Ms J Wassell,

Abstentions

K Ahmed, M Asif, M Hussain, R Raja.

In Favour - 39

Against - 3

Abstentions - 4

The decision in favour was therefore carried.

(Councillors Mrs W Mallen and R Scott had left the meeting before the vote was taken).

RESOLVED: That

- (i) The Strategic Options Case at appendix 2 to the report be endorsed
- (ii) The submission prepared by the District Councils (appendix 3 to the report) be agreed
- (iii) The Leader of the Council be given delegated authority to make minor amendments and to make the submission on behalf of the Council to the Secretary of State.

Chairman

The following officers were in attendance at the meeting:

- Ian Hunt - Democratic Services Manager
- Iram Malik - Democratic Services Officer
- Karen Satterford - Chief Executive
- Paul Shackley - Corporate Director