

High Wycombe Town Committee Minutes

Date: 24 April 2018

Time: 7.00 - 8.39 pm

PRESENT: Councillor A R Green
(in the Chair)

Councillors K Ahmed, Z Ahmed, M Asif, Ms A Baughan, H Bull, Mrs L M Clarke OBE, M Clarke, R Farmer, S Graham, M Hanif, M A Hashmi, A E Hill, M Hussain JP, A Hussain, M E Knight, B E Pearce, R Raja, S K Raja, N J B Teesdale and Ms J D Wassell.

Also present: Councillor Katrina Wood (Leader of the Council), Councillor Dominic Barnes (Deputy Leader of the Council), Councillor Alex Collingwood, Ian McEnnis and Paul Turner.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M P Davy and M Hussain.

36 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Matthew Davy and Councillor Maz Hussain.

37 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

38 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on the 23 January 2018 be agreed as a correct record.

39 ORDER OF BUSINESS

The Chairman explained that there was a change to the agenda as he had invited Councillor Martin Tett, Leader of Buckinghamshire County Council to attend the meeting to answer questions on the County Council's submission to the Government for a single unitary proposal. The Secretary of State had announced a 'minded to' decision to implement a single unitary in Buckinghamshire, abolishing the existing County Council and 4 District Councils. There was a deadline for

representations on the 'minded to' decision of 25 May 2018. It was noted that Councillor Tett would be first main item on the agenda.

40 URGENT ITEM - MODERNISING LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Martin Tett (Buckinghamshire County Council) to the meeting. Councillor Tett explained that he had brought two colleagues with him, Councillor Gareth Williams (Deputy Cabinet Member for Resources, BCC) and Richard Schmidt (Head of Strategic Finance, BCC).

The Chairman opened up the item for Members to ask questions of Councillor Tett.

The following points were noted:

- That the future of the unparished areas in High Wycombe would be a decision for the Executive Board of the new single unitary authority to make but it was felt there were three options:
 - Keep it as it is.
 - Institute a Town Council.
 - Or institute a series of Parish Councils.
- That the proposed unitary council would be an entirely new Council.
- That Councillor Tett doubted he would be the head of the proposed unitary Council as there were 236 Councillors across Bucks to select from, of which the vast majority (67%) were twin hatters.
- That Councillor Tett believed a unitary Council would be the most sensible option as it could drive better economic deals (e.g. waste) and the Council would be able to command a greater voice. He stated that if there were two Councils they would need duplicated roles such as two Chief Executives, two Finance Departments, two Legal Departments, two Heads of Children Services, two Heads of Social Services, etc which would be very costly.
- That the growth corridors (East to West and North to South) needed to be looked at in order for the Borough to be globally competitive.
- The current business case for a single unitary Council, based on similar Councils in similar areas, would be made up of 98 Councillors. Councillor Tett stated that advice had been taken from the Boundary Commission and for convenience existing boundaries for County Councillors could be used and the number being proposed in the County Council submission could be doubled up to result in the 98 Councillors required. Members were informed that the proposed new housing had been taken into account.
- Councillor Tett believed the workload for staff would remain the same with the need for fewer Chief Executives and Heads of Service. It was noted that there was an enormous amount of surplus assets which if sold off could result in a massive investment in Town Centres and roads across the County.
- Councillor Tett believed the earliest the changes would take place would be May 2020. It was noted that a boundary review would need to be undertaken by the Boundary Commission.
- Councillor Tett believed that whilst the decision about whether the full District Elections in all four districts scheduled for 2019 should take place as planned was a DCLG issue, although if the new single unitary was implemented, he envisaged the 2019 District Elections being cancelled and existing offices for

Members extended by a year until the 2020 implementation date for the new Council.

- That separate Planning and Licensing Committees could be created so that local people would be taking local decisions on local planning / licensing applications which had already been done in other Boroughs.
- Councillor Tett informed Members that, in response to a question about management of County Council reserves, the population in Bucks was approximately 530,000. Members were informed that Councillor Tett agreed that High Wycombe was the most strategic section of the Borough although Aylesbury had the biggest population growth areas. Councillor Tett went on to explain that High Wycombe was where the economic heart of the community was and that as such he would not want to see the vibrancy damaged.
- Councillor Tett explained that whilst making savings was important as it would result in money being able to be re-invested in projects the proposal to go unitary was not just about the money. It was noted that the biggest gain of going unitary was bringing together the strategic planning (housing, infrastructure, etc). Councillor Tett informed Members that fundamentally it was all about providing a better service to residents.
- Councillor Tett informed Members that as Leader of Bucks County Council he had spent some of their capital reserves on an incinerator. It was noted that the reserves had been built up over a number of years to cover this cost and that the incinerator benefitted the residents of High Wycombe.
- Councillor Tett explained that if the decision was made to have two Unitary Councils as opposed to one it would result in services such as Social Services being split over two Councils which was compared to being like a 'broken egg'.
- Members were informed that if the decision was made for a single unitary there would still be a need for some one-stop shops in the High Wycombe area.
- Councillor Tett informed Members that whilst he was always being told about the differences between the north and south areas of the Borough he felt there was no difference just a real perception that there was a difference. It was noted that Councillor Tett believed it would be very important to create a new unified culture amongst the Borough to remove any divisions created in the past.
- Councillor Tett believed that for the vast majority of staff it would be a case of simply slotting them into new posts. It was noted that the business case did not assume any frontline staff would be lost. However, the decision about more senior posts would be a decision for the newly elected Members of the new Council to make.
- Councillor Tett explained that with regard to the transfer of assets to Parish Councils he felt that whether it was one or two Councils the answer would be that the Council/s would be open to discussions with existing town and parish councils. It was noted that depending on the value of assets the Town or Parish Council would have to accept some of the cost / value of it.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Tett, Councillor Gareth Williams and Richard Schmidt for attending and answering Members questions.

41 UPDATE - FUTURE PLANS FOR THE COMMUNITY FACILITIES IN THE TOWN, TO INCLUDE THE OLD LIBRARY BUILDING

The Chairman welcomed the Head of Strategic Assets & Major Property Projects, Buckinghamshire County Council and invited him to explain the future plans for the community facilities in the town, including the old Library building.

The Head of Strategic Assets & Major Property Projects, Joe Nethercoat, explained that the old Library property had been vacated 10 years ago when the new Library had opened in the Eden Centre and had remained empty. It was noted that a restrictive covenant had prevented any change of use to the building but that this covenant had finally been removed approximately two years ago. Members were informed that work had been carried out on the building to prevent further deterioration and all asbestos had been removed. It was noted that planning permission had been granted in March 2018 for the change of use to offices and the decision had been made that BCC would occupy it in its entirety to provide a location for staff to be re-located from Easton Street. Members were informed that the internal layout had been agreed and a detailed design scheme sympathetic to the character of the building that retained and restored many original internal and external features was now being progressed. Members were informed that building work was planned to commence in summer 2018 and occupation was planned to take place in January 2019.

In discussion Members questioned whether the old Library building could in the future be an art gallery. The Head of Strategic Assets & Major Property Projects responded by saying 'never say never' but that for now it would be used for office accommodation. It was noted that parking permits had been built into the business case which would enable staff to park around the back of the Swan Theatre, at a cost. Members stated their delight at hearing that the old Library building would be brought back into use after it being vacant for such a long period of time. It was felt that the old Library building was a significant and attractive building for the town. One Member referred to it as a 'human library for the citizens of High Wycombe'.

The Head of Strategic Assets & Major Property Projects explained that it was very early days but BCC were looking into creating a hub on Green Street that local Councillors would be made aware of it and a consultation would be undertaken when the time came. Members asked the Head of Strategic Assets & Major Property Projects to ensure that whatever was created in Green Street included some sort of parking provision that residents could also use. The Head of Strategic Assets & Major Property Projects agreed to contact the Project Manager at BCC and inform him of the request.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Strategic Assets & Major Property Projects for attending and answering Members questions.

42 CONCRETE BURIAL CHAMBERS: WORKING GROUP FINDINGS

The Chairman welcomed the Leader of the Council, Councillor Katrina Wood, to the meeting and explained that she had been invited to attend for this item following the motion that was passed at the last Full Council meeting.

The Head of Community Services, Elaine Jewell, informed the Committee that the Working Group were still meeting hence this was an interim report due to the timescales involved.

The Head of Community Services explained that in 2011 the Committee resolved to fund the installation of concrete burial chambers, following requests from Muslim community representatives. The chambers were identified by them as more suitable for Islamic burial practices than the metal frames supplied by the Council up to that date. It was noted that the new vaults were deeper and would be installed as previously, i.e. grave spaces laid out head to foot with a 1m path along the foot of the grave and 450mm gaps between graves for access around as a minimum.

The Committee was informed that it had been a very severe winter and that there had been a significant flu outbreak which had resulted in a high demand for the burial chambers. The Head of Community Services explained that she believed the remaining vaults would be exhausted by the summer so was hoping to implement the deeper vaults, which incidentally were cheaper, that could provide about a year's supply.

Members were informed that there were two options.

- Option one – to install a new area of vaults. The capital cost of new vaults would need to come from Special Expenses and would be repaid by income received for vault burials.
- Option two – to cease to provide vault burials, in which case earth burials would be the only option.

Members made a number of points which included looking at a smaller number to last for one year, which was felt to be 40 burial chambers. It was noted that if less were provided the terrace would only be partially filled and would need to be re-excavated which could cause distress to the families of those buried nearby and disrupt the service. The Committee was informed that the Muslim community in High Wycombe was believed to be growing and that an aging population and varying death rates meant that the 52 vaults may be used at a quicker rate than predicted.

The Head of Community Services explained that there was still a bit more work to be done by the Task and Finish Group on specifications, testing and soft market testing local suppliers.

It was agreed that the Head of Community Services would confirm that the vaults would be bottomless, terms on which vaults could be reserved, the number of vaults currently available, and the fees to be charged and would provide the information as an addendum for the minutes.

Councillor Mahboob Hussain proposed the recommendation which was seconded by Councillor Zia Ahmed and supported by the Committee.

RECOMMENDATION TO CABINET

- (i) That £35,360 for 52 additional burial vaults from the Special Expenses Account be approved; and
- (ii) Delegated authority be given to the Head of Community, in consultation with the Chairman of the High Wycombe Town Committee, to make amendments to fees and charges relating to new concrete chambers for Muslim burials.

The Leader was present at the meeting and agreed the recommendation which meant it would be the subject of an individual Cabinet member decision and would not therefore need to go before Cabinet.

Information gathered after the meeting:

- As of 04/05/18 there were 8 vaults in the ground for burials.
- Cost for a current chamber was £756 (original cost of Frame) + Interment Charge £323 + Purchase Right of Burial £727 = £1806.
- Cost for new chamber was £680 (original cost of Frame reduced rate) + Interment Charge £323 + Purchase Right of Burial £727 = £1730.
- The Chamber was open at the bottom.
- The Link to the fees and information on reservations has been linked to the cemetery page.

43 INFORMATION SHEETS

RESOLVED: That Information Sheet 03/2018 Q3 Budgetary Control Report be noted.

44 HIGH WYCOMBE TOWN COMMITTEE - FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee's draft work programme looking ahead to March 2019 was presented for review.

RESOLVED: That the forward work programme be noted.

Chairman

The following officers were in attendance at the meeting:

Ian Hunt – Democratic Services

Tanya Brown – Democratic Services

Catherine Spalton – Communications

Julie Openshaw – Legal Services