

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
9 SEPTEMBER 2014

Minutes of the meeting of the Flintshire County Council of Flintshire County Council held at Council Chamber, County Hall, Mold CH7 6NA on Tuesday, 9 September 2014

PRESENT: Councillor Ray Hughes (Vice-Chair in the Chair)

Councillors: Bernie Attridge, Glyn Banks, Marion Bateman, Chris Bithell, Amanda Bragg, Helen Brown, Derek Butler, Clive Carver, Paul Cunningham, Ron Davies, Adele Davies-Cooke, Chris Dolphin, Ian Dunbar, Andy Dunbobbin, Carol Ellis, David Evans, Jim Falshaw, Veronica Gay, Robin Guest, Ron Hampson, George Hardcastle, Dennis Hutchinson, Hilary Isherwood, Joe Johnson, Rita Johnson, Christine Jones, Kevin Jones, Richard Jones, Stella Jones, Phil Lightfoot, Brian Lloyd, Richard Lloyd, Mike Lowe, Dave Mackie, Nancy Matthews, Hilary McGuill, Ann Minshull, Billy Mullin, Tim Newhouse, Mike Peers, Vicky Perfect, Neville Phillips, Mike Reece, Gareth Roberts, Ian Roberts, David Roney, Tony Sharps, Aaron Shotton, Paul Shotton, Ian Smith, Nigel Steele-Mortimer, Carolyn Thomas, Owen Thomas, David Wisinger and Arnold Woolley

APOLOGIES:

Councillors: Alex Aldridge, Haydn Bateman, Peter Curtis, Alan Diskin, Glenys Diskin, Rosetta Dolphin, Brian Dunn, Alison Halford, Colin Legg, David Williams and Sharon Williams

IN ATTENDANCE:

Chief Executive, Chief Officer (Governance), Chief Officer (Organisational Change) and Head of ICT

Prior to the presentations, the Chief Executive introduced Ian Bancroft, Chief Officer (Organisational Change) to the Members.

25. PRESENTATIONS

The Chief Executive welcomed representatives from Flintshire Trading Standards, Jack Yates, Gareth Jones and Lise Mitchell, and explained that the service had been highly commended for its innovative approach to hallmarking covering three important areas: enforcement, education and information. They had gained national recognition by receiving the British Hallmarking Council Touchstone Award 2014. Councillor Kevin Jones, Cabinet Member for Public Protection, Waste & Recycling commended the work undertaken by the team, the majority of which went unseen.

The second presentation was for the significant improvements to Welsh Language Services for older people at Llys Jasmine Extra Care Scheme in Mold. The Chief Executive welcomed employees Christy Jones and Chris Morris and also Bronwen Ramsey, who was a resident at Llys Jasmine. He said that the Special Recognition Award at the Health, Social Services and Social Care Welsh Language Awards 2014 had been made by Gwenda Thomas with Mark Drakeford, the Minister for Health commending the colleagues and residents.

Councillor Christine Jones, Cabinet Member for Social Services, thanked the recipients for their hard work on a service that was a benefit to the residents.

The Chief Executive welcomed Steve Featherstone and Anne Trevor to the meeting. He explained that Steve had been awarded, by Coleg Cambria, the Flintshire County Council Learner of the Year award for his achievements in the Level 5 Management Development Programme where he had gained ILM Level 5 and NVQ level 5 in Management. Anne had been awarded the CIM Learner of the Year and Coleg Cambria Professional Learner of the Year for the CIM Marketing Course she had undertaken which she had funded herself for which the Chief Executive praised her drive and determination. Councillor Aaron Shotton, the Leader of the Council, welcomed the achievements and said that he took pleasure in being in attendance when the awards were presented. It was a privilege to see successful entrants in the partnership with Coleg Cambria and the evening was made more special when Anne and Steve were presented with their awards. He congratulated them on their successes.

26. COUNCIL MINUTES

The draft minutes of the meeting held on 24 June 2014 had been circulated to Members with the agenda.

Councillor Tony Sharps indicated that he had been in attendance but this had not been recorded in the minutes.

RESOLVED:

That subject to the amendment, the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

27. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

28. CHAIR'S COMMUNICATIONS

A copy of the Chair's communications had been circulated to all Members before the meeting.

Councillor Carolyn Thomas praised the Chair, Councillor Glenys Diskin, for undertaking her recent zipwire challenge for which she had raised £1400. She said that it was wonderful to see her at events, despite her ill health, and thanked the Vice-Chair, Councillor Ray Hughes for his flexibility to step in as Chair when needed.

Councillor Aaron Shotton added his congratulations to Councillor Diskin. He also noted that the Vice-Chair had recently attended the funeral of the wife of Councillor Matt Wright and expressed the heartfelt thoughts of Members for Councillor Wright.

29. PETITIONS

Councillor Mike Reece, on behalf of Councillor Joe Johnson, submitted a petition from residents which requested a proposal to have a 'walk around' area in the new Holywell High School plans.

30. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

The Chief Officer (Governance) confirmed that none had been received.

31. QUESTIONS

The Chief Officer (Governance) confirmed that none had been received.

32. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS ON COMMITTEE MINUTES

The Chief Officer (Governance) confirmed that none had been received.

33. NOTICE OF MOTION

The Chief Officer (Governance) confirmed that none had been received.

34. REVIEW OF POLITICAL BALANCE

The Chief Officer (Governance) introduced a report to review the Council's Political Balance calculations following the by-election resulting in the election of Councillor David Roney.

He detailed which Political Groups needed to lose places on which Committees and explained that there were various options to achieve this and three were detailed in the appendices to the report.

Councillor Aaron Shotton proposed option 1, which was duly seconded by Councillor Bernie Attridge.

Councillor Clive Carver queried the threshold for rounding up or down to achieve the total number of Committee places each group was entitled. He queried why the Conservative Group needed to lose a place from the Planning Committee, which he felt was unfair, as the overall number in the Group had not changed since the election in 2012. He proposed that option 2 be accepted, which was duly seconded by Councillor Nigel Steele-Mortimer. The Chief Officer (Governance) provided a detailed response on the calculation of committee places which ensured fairness, in particular that the figures were not rounded up or down.

Councillor Robin Guest said that option 2 would mean that the Political Group representation would be different on the Constitution Committee and Democratic Services Committee, which he disagreed with. Councillor Nigel Steele-Mortimer explained that there were already different Members on the Constitution Committee and Democratic Services Committee.

Councillor Mike Peers commented that, on option 1, the New Independents would gain a third place on the Planning Committee however they had previously been unable to allocate Members to two seats.

Councillor Aaron Shotton commented on the question by Councillor Carver and said that political balance calculations were not subject to political interference.

On being put to the vote, the amendment to support option 2 was lost.

The Chief Officer (Governance) advised that Members could now either speak on the original motion from Councillor Aaron Shotton or vote. A closure motion was then proposed and on being put to the vote, option 1 was approved.

RESOLVED:

That the County Council approve option 1 to reflect the change in the Council's political balance.

35. REFORM OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE PUBLIC SERVICES

The Chief Executive introduced the report to review the current consultation papers of Welsh Government on the reform of local government and the public services and to agree a formal Council response.

He provided a detailed presentation on the Reform of Local Government and the Public Services, the main features of which were:-

- Background
- Current Situation
- Welsh Government Proposals
- Specific Challenges
- The Benefits
- Risks of Transition
- What happens next

The Chief Executive gave a critique of the three papers and specifically the White Paper *Reforming Local Government*. The White Paper built on the recommendation of the Public Services Commission which, in itself, had not presented a compelling and reassuring vision for the future role and value of local government and local governance. The White Paper did not answer the fundamental questions on the benefits of a local government reorganisation, the funding of transitional costs, the aspirations for localism, or a sustainable funding plan for local government for the future. He commented on previous local government reorganisations which had not been well managed and had not always achieved their assumed benefits. Restrictions on mergers included not being able to break up existing councils and new councils not crossing health board boundaries. The draft legislation proposed two routes for merger – voluntary and enforced. The uncertainty caused by the White Paper was holding back ambition across councils for cost-saving collaborations.

The Government's emphasis was on councils choosing to merge and to manage the transition themselves. The legislative process was complex and the timescales, including that for a boundary review, were ambitious and possibly unachievable. Benefits might include the opportunity to make services more resilient and to save costs, and the possibility of negotiating a longer-term and more stable funding settlement with Welsh Government (WG) instead of the current annualised funding. However, there were also risks of transition which included the costs, risks to service continuity and performance and distraction from service management. A particular concern for Flintshire County Council would be how to plan to protect the services for local communities away from the major urban conurbations.

The consultation period on the White Paper would end on 1 October 2014 and it was expected that the prospectus to guide potential 'early adopters' would be issued by Welsh Government in the next two weeks. Expressions of interest would be invited by November with the full business case submitted by January 2015.

The report also covered the Welsh Local Government Association's (WLGA) parallel consultation paper on Combined Authorities with a commentary on its limitations. .

A motion by Councillor Aaron Shotton was then circulated to Members and was formally seconded by Councillor Bernie Attridge. The motion read as follows:-

"In the interests of the provision of local government services within our County, this Council seeks an urgent meeting with both the Welsh Government Minister for Local Government and the Minister for Finance to discuss the availability of transitional finance, support and a long term funding strategy in order to assist the Council in its quest to protect Local Government services for our residents now and into the future in return for an early adoption merger of Flintshire County Council and Wrexham County Borough Council."

Councillor Shotton recognised that informal discussions across Political Groups had taken place but said that this was the first opportunity for Members to discuss the White Paper. He said that one view may be a stand-alone Flintshire County Council but reminded Members of the potential 4.5% funding cut for 2015/16 and said that on that basis, the continuation of some services may not be sustainable. As transitional and longer-term costs for a reorganisation had not been forthcoming from Welsh Government, it was becoming increasingly clear that options needed to include sharing services and merging with other authorities to save money. Councillor Shotton felt that a debate with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and the Ministers was required to discuss transitional finance, support and a long term funding strategy. He commented on potential savings in central/back office areas and in speaking on costs and benefits, added that it was important that any merger proposals alleviated the issue, not exacerbated it. He also said that meaningful talks needed to include the issue of leadership at Wrexham County Borough Council and the consequences if a reorganisation did not take place.

Councillor Chris Bithell spoke of his experiences in two local government re-organisations and said that it took approximately seven years for a new council to settle down following a reorganisation. WLGA had indicated transition costs of £200-400m but these figures had been disputed by Welsh Government, even though they had not provided an alternative total. Councillor Bithell raised concern that it was reported that Carmarthenshire, Powys and Swansea were not being encouraged to merge with another council to reduce the number of authorities overall from 22 to 12 and said that bigger councils would not necessarily be better. He added that any reorganisation would reduce localism and disagreed with the comment in the report that it would ensure local democratic responsiveness, in terms of being more connected with, and representative of, their communities.

In referring to the White Paper, Councillor Robin Guest said that it did not provide a strong case for local government reform and said that the resultant councils from the 1996 reorganisation were too small to enjoy the financial benefits of size and too large to be truly local. He spoke of the creation and then withdrawal of 22 parallel local health boards and said that costs of previous reorganisations had been underestimated and the benefits overestimated. He proposed an amendment, which was duly seconded by Councillor Hilary McGuill, that the words 'in return for an early adoption merger of Flintshire County Council and Wrexham County Borough Council' be removed from the motion.

Councillor Richard Jones agreed with Councillor Guest and commented on the use of shared services to protect front line services. In referring to page 58 which highlighted the unacceptable variations and worrying trends in performance across Wales, he said that it was difficult to compare with other authorities. He proposed a further amendment, which was duly seconded by Councillor Owen Thomas, "that the issue of identifying costs to be saved by sharing of services be explored in order to understand the budget position going forward".

Following the comments made, the Chief Executive spoke on the issue of performance indicating that there was much good evidence that the current local government model could be built upon. He commented on shared services and said that reductions in corporate services was already underway, a shift which would limit the financial savings from any future shared services models.

Councillor Guest indicated that he was content to include the amendment proposed by Councillor Jones within his own.

Councillor Mike Peers said the report contained little substance and that detail on the issue of localism was lacking. He indicated that the proposals submitted could be achieved through collaboration of services rather than through re-organisation and that the document did not contain any alternative models to the suggestion to reduce the number of local authorities in Wales. He referred to page 107 and the introduction of new wards and asked whether Councils should merge voluntarily before they were forced to do so.

Councillor Carolyn Thomas spoke of comments from residents on why the Council did not collaborate with Wrexham and Denbighshire Councils rather than merge. She felt that the re-organisation proposed was too hurried.

The Chief Executive explained that collaboration had already taken place with Wrexham County Borough Council on some services such as Occupational Health Services and Legal Services.

Councillor Shotton appreciated the amendments put forward and reminded Members that he would be raising the issues at any meetings with Welsh Government and asked Members to bear in mind the unknown costs associated with the proposals. The issue of larger councils was a concern and he said that money to fund the reorganisations had not been forthcoming, neither had any alternative suggestions. He spoke of developments in Conwy and Denbighshire Councils on the issue of merging and, in recognising that savings could be made, said that it was important to firstly identify what the funding would be for the transition and in the longer-term.

Councillor Guest said that following the comments from Councillor Shotton, he would withdraw his amendment; which was agreed by the seconder.

Councillor Derek Butler referred to the issue of localism discussed in the report and said that it was important that Flintshire County Council did not accept the proposal for early adoption without knowing the full details on funding. Councillor Nigel Steele-Mortimer felt that the only choice available to Councils was whether to amalgamate willingly or be forced into doing so. He felt that the welfare of constituents had to be considered and that it was best to opt for early adoption despite the timescale being short. Councillor Gareth Roberts said that there had not been any attempt by Welsh Government to look at the reality of the situation and spoke of his experiences of past reorganisations.

Councillor Tony Sharps supported Councillor Shotton's motion but raised concern about the future of the services to the residents of Flintshire. Councillor Hilary Isherwood welcomed the comments of Councillor Butler on the issue of localism and supported Councillor Shotton on his motion for a meeting to raise the Council's concerns.

In response to a question from Councillor Neville Phillips, Councillor Shotton said that attendees to the meeting with Ministers would be decided once a date had been confirmed.

Councillor Mike Peers supported the motion by Councillor Shotton but proposed an amendment, which was duly seconded by Councillor Richard Lloyd, that the word 'possible' should be included before the words 'early adoption'. Councillor Glyn Banks spoke against the amendment and suggested that immediate talks should take place for a merger with Wrexham County Borough Council to create a significant powerhouse in North East Wales. Councillor Shotton welcomed the personal view of Councillor Banks but indicated that caution should be taken because details of funding for the transitional period and future years were not yet known. He opposed the inclusion of the word 'possible' in his proposal.

The Chief Executive emphasised that it was important that the wording should not be misinterpreted and that it was made clear that the motion was not proposing a merger.

Following the comments made, Councillor Peers withdrew his amendment which was agreed by the seconder.

On being put to the vote, the motion proposed by Councillor Shotton was carried.

RESOLVED:

In the interests of the provision of local government services within our County, this Council seeks an urgent meeting with both the Welsh Government Minister for Local Government and the Minister for Finance to discuss the availability of transitional finance, support and a long term funding strategy in order to assist the Council in its quest to protect Local Government services for our residents now and into the future in return for an early adoption merger of Flintshire County Council and Wrexham County Borough Council.

36. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

There was 1 member of the public and 2 members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 2.25 pm and ended at 4.23 pm)

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Chair