

WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

SPECIAL COUNCIL

COUNCIL CHAMBER, WYRE FOREST HOUSE, FINEPOINT WAY, KIDDERMINSTER

24TH JULY 2013 (6.00PM)

Present:

Councillors: F M Oborski (Chairman), D C H McCann (Vice-Chairman), J Aston, G W Ballinger, R Bishop, C Brewer, J-P Champion, S J M Clee, E Davies, N J Desmond, H E Dyke, P Dyke, N Gale, B T Glass, D R Godwin, J Greener, I Hardiman, P B Harrison, J A Hart, M J Hart, P V Hayward, V Higgs, A T Hingley, T Ingham, M B Kelly, N Knowles, H J Martin, B McFarland, C D Nicholls, J W Parish, J Phillips, M Price, M Rayner, C Rogers, M A Salter, J A Shaw, D R Sheppard, N J Thomas, S J Williams and G C Yarranton.

C.24 Prayers

Prayers were said by Rose Lawley of Kidderminster Parish Church Team Ministry and Industrial and Workplace Chaplain for Kidderminster and Wyre Forest.

C.25 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors T L Onslow and A M Sewell.

Condolences were passed on to Councillor Jim Parish on the loss of his wife and Members were pleased to see him at the meeting.

C.26 Declarations of Interests by Members

There were no declarations of interests.

C.27 Electoral Arrangements for Wyre Forest District Council

Council considered a report from the Chief Executive which asked whether or not to change the cycle of elections for Wyre Forest District Council.

The Leader of the Council introduced the report and informed Members that the Boundary Commission review was ongoing and the number of councillors would be reduced to 33 with all out elections in 2015. The Council now had to decide whether to continue with elections by thirds or to hold elections every four years after 2015. A consultation had been held and although not a huge response, there were 75.1% of respondents that wished the current system to be changed. The Kidderminster Shuttle had also run an online poll where 200 people had cast their vote and this had resulted in 49% wishing to move to four yearly elections.

There were significant financial savings to be made if the Council were to move to four yearly elections and it was felt that by doing so, front line services could be protected. The reasons for both options were detailed in the report.

Members were informed that the decision to hold four yearly elections required a 2/3rd majority of Members to vote for it.

Councillor Shaw, the Leader of the Labour Group referred to his amendment that asked "Council resolves to defer a decision on the Electoral Arrangements for Wyre Forest District Council until 27th November 2013". He explained that the purpose of the motion was to block any further work until six months had passed from the original decision when Members could relook at the issue. He went on to say that the number of people who had replied to the consultation had been miniscule and did not reflect a real consultation. The Council did not need to rush into a decision particularly bearing in mind that the Kidderminster Community Governance Review would be considered at the Council meeting following this Special Council meeting. He also stated that he believed discussions were being held across North Worcestershire.

Councillor Knowles seconded the amendment and believed that good enough reasons had been put forward for the decision to be deferred. There were a lot of decisions to be made in the near future, i.e. number of councillors to be reduced, the elections cycle and the future of the Kidderminster Town Council. He felt that there had not been sufficient methods of consultation used which had resulted in a poor response.

The Director of Community Assets and Localism confirmed to Members that the amendment was for consideration but as the Boundary Commission review into the reduction of the number of Councillors had commenced, the Council could not stop that review.

Councillor Ballinger spoke to the amendment and stated that the Independent Community & Health Concern Group fully supported the Labour amendment and felt there were other ways the Council could save money. He referred to the Independent Remuneration Panel's (IRP) recommendations that were presented to Council in February 2013 but these had not been approved. The Kidderminster Shuttle poll had showed that 200 people had voted and there was a 49% majority voting for four yearly elections. He also felt that the Council were heading towards a unitary council. He felt that there was no need to confuse the electorate in changing a system that currently worked well.

In response to a Members' question, the Director of Community Assets and Localism stated that with regard to any consultation carried out, it did not matter the level of response it had received but the decision had to have due regard to it.

The Leader of the Council stated that he was against the amendment in that a decision needed to be made in the Chamber this evening and urged Members to vote against the amendment. He replied that the possible amount of savings the Council could make if the decision was to have four yearly elections could

Agenda Item No. 4

protect front line services. By reducing the number of councillors to 33, it would mean that the remaining Members would gain an approximate 400 electors to their ward. He also stated that during the current Parliament, the Council would not go unitary.

Councillor H Dyke stated that even though not many had responded to the consultation, how could Members disregard those responses and totally ignore the public.

Councillor Davies stated that the response to the consultation was not valid in that not enough replies had been received.

Councillor Martin spoke for the amendment and stated that the delay would help to get all the facts and figures in place. He added that to wait for the Boundary Commission review decision would make more sense and urged Members to vote for the amendment.

Councillor McFarland felt that the Council should not make a decision until they were in possession of more facts. There had only been 233 respondents to the consultation and it was not significant enough for a decision to be made. Further information needed to be gathered as to why the public had not responded.

Councillor M Hart stated that he would not support the Labour amendment and added that it had been described as a wrecking motion. The potential savings that the Council could make if it went to four yearly elections were significant especially in light of staff numbers being reduced and staff being asked to work harder. Even though the response to the consultation was low, it could not be ignored.

Councillor Rayner was in support of the Labour amendment and felt that she could not make a decision until additional information was available.

Councillor Kelly felt that Councillors workloads were increasing. He also thought that the IRP recommendations should have been agreed by Members.

Councillor Nicholls thanked the 233 people that had responded to the consultation, but like some other Councillors felt he had to question the validity of the 0.3% response. He added that he also felt the Council could go unitary.

The Chairman reminded Members that the subject currently being discussed was the amendment by the Labour Group.

Councillor Desmond felt that a decision should be made this evening and no delay should be approved as all the information was to hand.

Councillor Williams stated that Parish Councils had voted on the consultation and even though they had only voted once, this vote represented the whole parish and this should be taken into consideration.

Councillor Phillips stated that although numbers of voters had declined in recent years, the public still had the option to cast their vote.

Councillor Gale felt that if the delay went ahead, then who could say whether the vote would be the same. She also took exception to the point about not all Members took on casework, she worked extremely hard.

In his summing up, Councillor Shaw stated there was no justification in the reduction to 33 Members and did not understand the rationale of the Boundary Commission. He also stressed that he was disappointed in the legal advice he had received with regard to the consultation. Following a request from the Chairman, he withdrew his comment made about a Council Officer but said he would take the matter further.

A named vote was held on the amendment:

For the Amendment (17)

Councillors: J Aston, G W Ballinger, C Brewer, E Davies, B T Glass, V Higgs, M B Kelly, N Knowles, H J Martin, B McFarland, C D Nicholls, J Parish, M Price, M Rayner, J A Shaw, D Sheppard and N J Thomas.

Against the Amendment (23)

Councillors: R Bishop, J-P Campion, S J M Clee, N J Desmond, H E Dyke, P Dyke, N Gale, D R Godwin, J Greener, I Hardiman, P B Harrison, J Hart, M J Hart, P V Hayward, A T Hingley, T Ingham, D McCann, F M Oborski, J Phillips, C Rogers, M A Salter, S J Williams and G C Yarranton.

Upon a vote the amendment was lost.

Councillor Knowles felt that if the recommendations in the report were only to save the Council money, it was not a good enough reason. He also stated that if the Council could not get the public to respond to consultations in good numbers then the Council had failed.

Councillor Davies reiterated that as per point 4.10 of the report to Council, the Council should consider and have regard to the results of the public consultation and part of that was the validity of the process that took place.

Councillor Price felt that he could not vote for the recommendation as he did not agree with four yearly elections. He added he thought Members got lazy as they were nearing the end of their term and it would be more consistent for the electorate to have elections by thirds.

Councillor Desmond felt there was no right or wrong answer for the cycle of elections but did think that voting every year was confusing for the electorate. He did not think that Councillors got lazy as their term came to an end. He added it would be irresponsible to ignore the potential savings of £245K projected over a six year period.

Councillor Martin stated that all other bodies had all out elections for fixed terms e.g, Parliamentary/European Parliament/County Council, so it did make sense to have four yearly elections for the district, when other elections happened during the other years.

Agenda Item No. 4

Councillor M Hart reiterated that point 4.10 of the report said the Council should have due regard to the consultation, and agreed that although the figures were disappointing, that was only one part of the issue. The Council needed to make financial savings.

Councillor McFarland could not support the four yearly elections as there was not enough evidence.

Councillor Campion summed up and stated that he was in his 10th year as a Councillor and he had never been to a Council meeting where an officer had been attacked in such a way and hoped that an apology would happen. There was a significant amount of money to be saved by going to four yearly elections. He also added that with regard to the IRP's recommendations, all Members took their basic Councillor allowance. Members were reminded that a 2/3rd majority was required for the recommendation for four yearly elections to happen and he asked Members to vote with their conscience. He felt that the named vote on the amendment was pointless but felt on the substantive vote it was important.

A named vote was held on the recommendation to hold elections every four years:

For the Recommendation to hold elections every four years (22)

Councillors: R Bishop, J-P Campion, S J M Clee, N J Desmond, H E Dyke, P Dyke, N Gale, D R Godwin, J Greener, I Hardiman, P B Harrison, J Hart, M J Hart, P V Hayward, A T Hingley, H J Martin, D McCann, J Phillips, C Rogers, M A Salter, S J Williams and G C Yarranton.

Against the Recommendation to hold elections every four years (18)

Councillors: J Aston, G W Ballinger, C Brewer, E Davies, B T Glass, V Higgs, T Ingham, M B Kelly, N Knowles, B McFarland, C D Nicholls, F M Oborski, J Parish, M Price, M Rayner, J A Shaw, D Sheppard and N J Thomas.

Upon a vote, as there was not a 2/3rds majority, the recommendation to hold elections every four years was lost.

Decision: The current arrangements of elections by thirds to be retained.

The meeting ended at 7.30 pm.