

Cabinet

Thursday, 27 August 2020

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Izzi Seccombe (Chair)
Councillor Peter Butlin
Councillor Les Caborn
Councillor Colin Hayfield
Councillor Kam Kaur
Councillor Jeff Morgan
Councillor Jeff Clarke
Councillor Andy Crump
Councillor Heather Timms

Others Present

Councillors

Councillors Helen Adkins, Jo Barker, Margaret Bell, Parminder Singh Birdi, Sarah Boad, Mark Cargill, Jonathan Chilvers, Alan Cockburn, John Cooke, Corinne Davies, Nicola Davies, Neil Dirveiks, Judy Falp, Jenny Fradgley, Bill Gifford, Peter Gilbert, Clare Golby, John Holland, Keith Kondakor, Bhagwant Singh Pandher, Dave Parsons, Caroline Phillips, Wallace Redford, Jerry Roodhouse, Andy Sargeant, Jill Simpson-Vince, Dominic Skinner, Alan Webb, Chris Williams, Pam Williams.

Speakers

Councillor Andrew Day – Leader of Warwick District Council
Councillor Julie Jackson – Leader of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council
Councillor Adam Farrell – Leader of the Labour Group, North Warwickshire Borough Council

1. General

Councillor Izzi Seccombe (Leader of Council and Chair of Cabinet) opened the meeting. In doing so she explained that the Dispensations Sub-Committee of the Council had met on 26 August to agree dispensations for those members of the County Council who sat on district and borough councils or whose partners sat on district and borough councils. Without the dispensations, which were granted, a significant number of members would not have been able to participate fully in the debate on devolution.

Cabinet was also informed that although the Council's Constitution excludes elected representatives from district and borough councils from speaking on matters pertaining to their councils, the Chair was prepared to make an exception in this instance.

(1) Apologies

None

(2) Members' disclosure of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

The following members declared a pecuniary interest.

Councillor Barker – Member of Stratford District Council and Stratford Town Council as well as Chair of an academy trust

Councillor Singh Birdi – Member of Warwick Town Council

Councillor Boad – Member of Warwick District Council as is her husband

Councillor Butlin – Member of Rugby Borough Council

Councillor Cargill – Member of Stratford District Council

Councillor Crump – Member of Stratford District Council

Councillor Falp – Member of Whitnash Town Council and Warwick District Council

Councillor Gifford – Member of Warwick District Council. His wife is a member of Leamington Town Council

Councillor Golby – Member of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council

Councillor Phillips – Husband is member of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council

Councillor Roodhouse – Member of Rugby Borough Council

Councillor Sargeant – Member of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council as is his wife.

Councillor Simpson Vince – Member of Rugby Borough Council

Councillor Timms – Member of Rugby Borough Council

(3) Public Speaking

Councillor Izzi Seccombe welcomed the three public speakers.

1. Councillor Andrew Day – Leader of Warwick District Council

Referring to the report appended to the published paper Councillor Day questioned whose it was. Was it a report by PWC or the County Council? Referring to page 38 of the appendix Councillor Day observed that although there was reference to consultation on proposals with partners, there was no reference to consultation with district and borough councils. In terms of the forecast savings given in the report, Councillor Day asked to see the detail behind the figures. He suggested that slowing down the process would allow all six principal authorities to work together to present a joint case.

2. Councillor Adam Farrell – Leader of the Labour Group on North Warwickshire Borough Council

Councillor Farrell opened by suggesting that any understanding that business cases for devolution submitted in September 2020 would be included in tranche 1 was incorrect. He suggested that the PWC report before Cabinet lacked balance adding that a unitary structure

would not necessarily result in the levelling up of residents' life chances across the county. The solution, he suggested was to retain district and borough councils allowing local knowledge to inform decisions.

The need to review local government was acknowledged but before any decisions are made there needs to be comprehensive consultation with communities and the district and borough councils.

3. Councillor Julie Jackson – Leader of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council

Councillor Jackson challenged why the County Council appeared to be rushing into devolution adding that it was unlikely that Warwickshire would be in tranche 1. The need to consult fully was emphasised. The levelling up of life chances had never been achieved by the County Council and there was little chance that a unitary council would fare better. Councillor Jackson asked that the County Council not assume what residents want.

2. Devolution and Local Government Reform

Councillor Izzi Seccombe opened the item stating that on 24 June 2020 Warwick District Council and Stratford District Council had issued a press release stating that they were jointly looking to merge and share services. This impacts on all councils in Warwickshire. This triggered a letter from Councillor Seccombe to all the Leaders of the five district and borough councils proposing a joint Warwickshire local government reform project. The County Council commissioned PWC to prepare the report before Cabinet with a view to it being the start of the conversation. Councillor Seccombe emphasised that the Senior civil servant overseeing has stated that a submission made by one council will not diminish submissions made by other councils. All councils in Warwickshire need to engage in the process with a view to finding the best solution for all councillors and residents.

Cabinet was reminded that the present government had made an election pledge to reform local government. The Covid-19 pandemic had illustrated how well councils could work together but it had also highlighted the shortcomings and frustrations of the present system. If it is decided that a unitary approach is the best then, to ensure that local interests are also secure, a form of double-devolution would need to be considered.

Councillor Jeff Clarke (Portfolio Holder for Transport and Planning) recognised the need for local government reform and emphasised that local democracy would need to be maintained. The timing of the review had advantages and disadvantages. The need for local authorities to take the lead was emphasised. With specific reference to his portfolio, Councillor Clarke observed that a single system would help in terms of spatial planning, transport planning and highway maintenance. The splitting in two of those functions currently carried out by the County Council would see costs increase significantly. Councillor Clarke agreed that double-devolution would assist in maintaining a local dimension to democracy.

Councillor Keith Kondakor raised a series of points. 1) What would be the implication of unitarisation of local planning and development targets? 2) What would be the impact on efforts to address climate change? 3) Benefits could be brought through unitarisation for public transport provision and air quality. At present responsibilities are split between district/borough councils and

the County Council. 4) The PWC report makes no reference to housing. 5) Democracy must be protected. People should be given a say in what is being proposed and at the same time civic functions should be protected.

Councillor Kondakor added that new structures are required particularly with regards public transport and waste management. he reminded Cabinet that Covid-19, climate change and the need for economic recovery are critical and closed by suggesting that if a unitary authority was to be created it should have its headquarters in Nuneaton or Bedworth.

Councillor Helen Adkins (Leader of the Labour Group) stated that she agreed with many of the comments made earlier by speakers. She considered that the report had been rushed and that it lacked balance. There had been no consultation with the district and borough councils. When she had met with PWC they appeared to know little about the district and borough councils including who the Leaders of those Councils were. Councillor Adkins added that the report said little regarding levelling up or climate change and closed by acknowledging that there will be areas of agreement and disagreement, stressing the need for cooperation from all sides.

Councillor Jeff Morgan (Portfolio Holder for Children's Services) observed that a single unitary authority would exist for the benefit of residents and not for itself. Unitarisation would bring benefits for children's services with regards early intervention as well as corporate parenting. Regarding care leavers, Councillor Morgan cited cases where young people leave care at 18 but have to become homeless before being considered for local authority housing. A unitary council should be able to facilitate a seamless transition. Council Tax relief for care leavers would be easier to arrange with a unitary council as would leisure provision and apprenticeships. A two unitary council model would result in children's services being run by a trust. This would, in turn, result in a reduction of accountability and budgetary control. Finally, Councillor Morgan observed that urban areas that currently have no town or parish councils would benefit if they did.

Councillor Jonathan Chilvers (Leader of the Green Group) suggested that the PWC report failed to make the strategic case for change. It appeared to dismiss different models and was not neutral in its approach. This is particularly the case with the financial claims contained in it. Shropshire had become a unitary council ten years previously. Over the ensuing years budgets intended to support localism had been eroded and placed based committees had ceased to meet. The PWC report, Councillor Chilvers added, should make more reference to town and parish councils.

Councillor Izzi Seccombe, responding to Councillor Chilvers, noted that Durham has operated a very effective unitary structure for some time. Shropshire was a small unitary council that had never been adequately resourced.

Councillor Mark Cargill suggested that it is important that all political groups engage in the debate. He informed Cabinet that Stratford District Council and Warwick District Council had sought to work together more closely. Any debate regarding local government reform should be based on accurate and independent information. All options should be explored with residents. Councillor Cargill added that he had attended eight parish council meetings in recent weeks and there appeared no appetite for a single unitary council. It will be important to see reports from the district and borough councils to gauge their positions he concluded.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse (Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group) reminded Cabinet that urban areas such as Nuneaton do not have parish councils. He questioned how double devolution would

work. The key with any reform will be robust discussion between parties and transparency by all councils.

Councillor Colin Hayfield (Portfolio Holder for Education and Learning) stated that his aim was to find the best solution for his local community and for the people of Warwickshire as a whole. He had initially been a supporter of maintaining the status quo. However, recognising the financial position of the district and borough councils it was becoming increasingly clear that this could not be sustained. He suggested that comparing a single unitary authority model and one for two unitary authorities was not possible. A split unitary approach would result in two administrative areas that were too small to be viable. Education and Fire and Rescue would be required to be governed by an unelected trust. Education would be at risk. Attainment levels have already been compromised by Covid-19 and special education provision could not be provided by two unitary authorities.

Councillor Jo Barker informed Cabinet that when Stratford District Council and Warwick District Council had proposed the creation of a merged “super district” there had been no intention of triggering a debate on unitarisation. Like Councillor Cargill, in discussions at parish council meetings there had been no support for unitarisation. She noted that the CCGs are merging to provide a single body and considered that highways would be better served by a single body. People, Councillor Barker noted, will always feel that other areas receive better services or more resources.

In response to Councillor Barker, Councillor Seccombe stated that everybody has a right to good services. People in Warwickshire are supported equally and the savings that could be made through unitarisation could be used for the benefit of all.

Councillor Judy Falp stated that she always welcomed change. However, she challenged the reliability of the PWC report adding that a joint submission with the district and borough councils would be more effective. The need to engage with town and parish councils was emphasised.

Councillor Caroline Phillips considered that the PWC report lacked balance and detail and suggested that it should be withdrawn and not considered by Council. In addition, Councillor Phillips considered that the process should have been started with discussions with the district and borough councils.

Councillor Heather Timms (Portfolio Holder for Environment and Heritage & Culture) reminded Cabinet that she was Chair of the Warwickshire Waste Partnership. This body made up of representatives from county and district and borough councils had achieved much. However, its capacity to deliver more was restricted by the division of responsibilities between the two tiers. As Climate Change Champion she also suggested that more could be done at a quicker pace if there was only one authority. In terms of heritage and culture, tourism would benefit if the whole of Warwickshire was equally promoted as a desirable destination.

Councillor Les Caborn (Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and Health) reminded members of the integrated care debate that had been held previously. In that instance support had been unanimous. Health partnerships already operate well across the region. The JSNA provides an indication of people’s needs at the local level and the County Council is widely recognised as a good provider of social care and Public Health has delivered an excellent response to Covid-19. This does, however, rely on efficiencies of scale. Councillor Caborn emphasised that under a new

unitary structure the staff who worked for the County Council and district and borough councils would still be there; working under a different banner. The key, Councillor Caborn suggested, is to be smart and proactive with decisions based on accurate and comprehensive information.

Councillor Andy Crump (Portfolio Holder for Fire and Rescue and Community Safety) explained that he had become a councillor to obtain the best outcome for the people of Warwickshire. Individuals only see one council. They do not distinguish between county and district/borough. Regarding the Fire and Rescue Service, Councillor Crump congratulated it on its response to Covid-19. The service he added was agile but being county-wide is large enough to remain viable. HS2 is presenting it with challenges but these are being addressed. He expressed concern at the potential for splitting up of the Warwickshire Fire Service.

Councillor Peter Butlin (Deputy Leader – Finance and Property) opened by saying that any decision regarding reform should not be based on finances alone. Anyone who has any experience of two-tier structures will be aware of the barriers these can present. The status quo cannot be maintained so the basis for any discussion needs to be around single or twin unitary councils. Regarding the financial figures given in the PWC report, Councillor Butlin stated that these will be provided to members prior to the County Council meeting on 22 September 2020. Reports to date have focused on the costs of disaggregating services. That is the cost of splitting services that are currently run on a county-wide basis. The Coventry and Warwickshire LEP is operating well and has been identified as amongst the highest performing LEPs in the Country. If the final structure is not a single unitary council then risk management and resilience, performance, place shaping and covid-19 recovery would all be compromised.

Councillor Kam Kaur (Portfolio Holder for Customer and Transformation) reported that over the last two years the County Council has successfully overseen a transformation programme that has resulted in the realisation of significant savings. The digital approach resulted in a resilient technology platform that enabled 4500 staff to move to home working when the Covid-19 outbreak began.

In connection with Covid-19 much work has been undertaken with district and borough councils. This has included the local delivery hubs and shielding hubs.

Using the example of her father who had travelled from India in the 1960s Councillor Kaur explained that for change to happen, courage and leadership are required.

Councillor Izzi Seccombe thanked all members who had spoken, for their contribution. She agreed that climate change and air quality are issues that continue to need to be prioritised and added that to date the County Council has had little opportunity to input into discussions around housing. The exception is in extra care housing where the County Council has a good track record.

Over the last twenty years the level of partnership working has increased significantly. However, going forward, the extent to which partners will be able to continue to contribute is unclear.

Finally, Councillor Seccombe emphasised that any suggestion that the County Council was looking to take over district and borough councils was wrong. A single Unitary would see the establishment of a new council replacing all six existing councils. The important thing is to find a solution that best serves the people of Warwickshire.

A vote was held. The recommendation as read out by Councillor Seccombe was agreed unanimously.

Resolved:

That Cabinet approves the submission to Government of the Strategic Case for Change for a single unitary Council for Warwickshire so as to preserve the opportunity for Warwickshire to be considered in an early tranche of local government reform and that the Chief Executive is authorised in consultation with the Leader to make any amendments considered necessary in advance of submission.

The meeting rose at 15.52

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Chair

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