



Communities
Overview Committee

4 September 2017

2.00 pm

Item

Public

**MINUTES OF THE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON
4 SEPTEMBER 2017
2.00 PM – 4.00 PM**

Responsible Officer: Amanda Holyoak
Email: amanda.holyoak@shropshire.gov.uk Tel: 01743 257714

Present

Councillors Ted Clarke, Rob Gittins, Nick Hignett (Vice Chair), Cecilia Motley (Chair), Vivienne Parry, Keith Roberts and Tina Woodward

1 Election of Chairman

Councillor Cecilia Motley was elected Chairman for the remainder of the municipal year 2017 – 2018.

2 Apologies for absence and substitutions

Apologies were received from Councillors Andy Boddington and Les Winwood. Councillor Nigel Hartin substituted for Councillor Boddington.

3 Appointment of Vice-Chairman

Councillor Nick Hignett was appointed Vice-Chairman for the remainder of the municipal year 2017 – 2018.

4 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

Councillors Nigel Hartin and Keith Roberts reported that as they both sat on the Shropshire Fire and Rescue Authority, they would participate in discussion regarding agenda item 8 – Consultation on Fire and Rescue Governance, but not vote.

5 Minutes of the Environment and Services Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 17 July 2017

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 July 2017 were confirmed as a correct record.

6 Public Question Time

There were no questions from Members of the Public.

7 Member Question Time

There were no questions from Members of the Council.

8 Consultation on Fire and Rescue Governance

The Chair welcomed John Champion, Police and Crime Commissioner to the meeting. He referred to the Consultation Document on Fire and Rescue Governance (copy attached to signed minutes) and summarised its content for Members. Mr Champion stated :

The driving force behind the consultation was efficiency, effectiveness and public safety and not a 'power grab' as some had stated; the two Fire Authorities in the West Mercia Police area were doing a good job, the proposal looked to joining up in the future to save money; a single organisation would ensure resources raised in Shropshire would be used in Shropshire; the proposals would save a significant amount of money but would not impact on front line services; the change would need to take place over the medium term, to allow alignment of fire and rescue service and police culture; the document included an initial business case – a more detailed business case would be produced in future; joining up in this way would reap the same sort of benefits that had occurred when the Unitary Authority of Shropshire Council had been formed.

The Chairman then welcomed Councillor Eric Carter, Chair of Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority to the meeting. Councillor Carter stated the following:

The Fire Authority was not averse to change and had been looking at collaboration opportunities in recent years; this collaboration included sharing buildings and incorporating police and fire fighter training facilities; it was not clear in the document what the projected savings of £4m - £4.5m would entail; £3.5m worth of savings had already been made in Shropshire since 2012; of the £4m worth of savings set out in the Consultation Document, £2m of these had already been planned; the costs of any amalgamation were not identified in the Consultation Document; it was understood that change was needed but there were opportunities for savings to be made through less radical changes in governance structures; members of the Fire Authorities were close to people on the ground covering a vast area. One Police Commissioner would not be able to take on the work of two Fire and Rescue Authorities; the Police Commissioner had stated that the savings would not affect front line services, but many back office staff also took on front line roles when needed; Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority was one of the top five performing Authorities in the country; a poll conducted by the Shropshire Star had indicated that 78% of over 1000 people who had taken part did not support the consultation.

Mr David Beechey, Chair of Shropshire Association of Town and Parish Councils (SALC) , was welcomed to the meeting. Mr Beechey stated:

Concerns had been expressed by members of SALC regarding the proposal for the merger; it had not been included in any manifesto prior to the Police and Crime Commissioner election; the existing Fire and Rescue Service was already making sufficient efficiency savings; the £4m savings anticipated in the consultation document would involve a reduction in staff of 154 yet there was no explanation as to how this very specific figure had been arrived at; SALC felt it would be undemocratic to merge in this way, and that the Fire and Rescue Authorities were more familiar with the needs of local communities than the Police and Crime Commissioner ever could be.

The Chair thanked Mr Campion, Councillor Carter and Mr Beechey for their submissions. She invited questions from the Committee. Comments and questions put to them covering the following areas:

Shropshire Fire and Rescue was regarded as a well-managed and efficient fire authority and was secure financially up to 2020. Was change really needed?

- How exactly would the £4m - £4.5m saving be made?
- Would reducing posts damage services?
- Would any fire stations or police stations have to close?
- Were there any concerns about potential union strike action if the merger were to take place?
- The very large rural areas in Shropshire already challenged services – would the merger add to that problem?
- Would communities still have a voice if local authority representatives no longer served on a Fire Authority?
- Removing staff who supported front line staff would surely have a negative impact
- What would happen to the savings made – would they be used to reduce the precept, or go towards reducing a deficit.
- The transition costs, redundancy costs and timescales were not clearly articulated in the consultation document, when would these be made available?
- Had any alternative models or synergies, eg sharing of joint posts been explored?

In response to these questions and comments Mr Campion stated that nothing in the proposal suggested that there would be any closure of fire or police stations. The proposal was designed to cut administration costs, share overheads and use buildings as effectively as possible. Making services as efficient as possible would make it easier to deliver expensive rural provision and reduce the need for difficult decisions. More detailed figures on savings and staff numbers would become available at the detailed business case stage. Savings would be made in the medium term as there would be costs at the initial stages. There would also be some redundancy costs, and an element of savings made would be used to cover these. He did not anticipate any problems with the Fire Brigade Union, the aim was to be as efficient as possible, doing the right thing with the right number of people

He also emphasised that the existing fire network would not be impacted on by his proposal. His duty was to make the services as efficient as possible which would make it easier to deliver expensive rural provision. Councillor Carter said he accepted that rural fire stations were not threatened through the proposal but was concerned that a future Police Commissioner could have a different approach.

Councillor Hartin, Member of Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority, reported on a long history of the Authority working successfully with others. He referred to a report commissioned by the Fire and Rescue Service by Amnio Consulting (copy attached to signed minutes) This identified gaps and omissions within the Consultation Business Case, including the likelihood of double counting of savings. It also emphasised that 63 staff also acted on the front line when necessary.

Mr Campion said he did not deny that partnership work already took place, but he wanted to develop collaboration as far as possible. He repeated again that front line staff and fire

stations would not be affected and that the system would be as efficient as it could be, he would not allow the system to become unsafe,

Councillor Carter suggested that an alternative would be for the Police and Crime Commissioner could become a member of the Fire Authority.

In terms of representation, Mr Campion said he would hold ultimate accountability and had already engaged on this matter at a large range of events with the community. He would make himself available and be accountable, ensure he obtained people's views and represented them.

He reiterated that the proposal was not about a 'takeover' but about getting the best in the system. He felt that the health service was also a key area which could benefit from closer working with the police. Councillor Carter drew attention to work of the Fire Service and local authorities in ensuring people were safe in their homes.

The Chair expressed thanks to Mr Campion, Councillor Carter and Mr Beechey for attending the meeting.

The Committee went on to discuss what they had heard. Concern was expressed that:

- There appeared to be holes in the initial business case which made it difficult to make a judgement and figures did not appear to stack up.
- It was not clear how much of the savings would be spent on transition
- It did not appear reasonable to have to wait for a full business case for clarity around figures.
- There were alternative courses of action that the Fire Authorities were exploring, regarding current form and number of members it has.
- It was felt more could have been done to probe potential deeper collaboration between the different Fire Authorities and possible joint committee structures.
- The Consultation had not provided any evidence of improved efficiencies
- Better co-operation between forces was being driven in any event by austerity
- Shropshire Fire and Rescue Services was one of the top five in the country. The intention to reduce staff by 154 was worrying, particularly as many officers were front line for only part of the time.
- There was already a high level of co-operation with others, for example, the Council's Emergency Planning Team had been co-located with the fire service for some time. There was also proposal for a new multi-agency back up control centre in Telford & Wrekin.
- The PCC's proposal would result in centralisation of accountability in Worcester. West Mercia local resilience forum had expressed concern about what this would mean for residents in Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin and Herefordshire.
- Members reported that their constituents were generally not in favour of the proposal.

In conclusion, the Committee felt that there was not sufficient evidence available to support the proposals. They were particularly concerned that there would not be any more consultation on a more detailed business case until after a decision had been made. It was agreed that the Committee recommend to the Leader of the Council that the proposals be rejected and the consultation feedback also be accompanied by a letter setting out concerns identified at the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee recommend to the Leader of the Council that the Governance Arrangements proposed in the Consultation document on Fire and Rescue Governance by the Police and Crime Commissioner be rejected.

That in addition to completion of the response form, that a letter also be sent to the Police and Crime Commissioner and Minister to emphasise that as a Principal Authority, Shropshire Council rejected the proposals.

9 Environmental Maintenance Grant - Proposed Task and Finish Group and Terms of Reference

The Committee agreed proposed terms of reference for a Task and Finish Group of the Environmental Maintenance Grant Programme. Rather than meet on several occasions over a period of time it was agreed that a workshop style event be held to take evidence and develop recommendations. This would enable any recommendations to be made to Cabinet on 6 December 2017.

RESOLVED

That a Task and Finish Group on Environmental Maintenance be established and that proposed terms of reference be agreed.

<TRAILER_SECTION>

Signed (Chairman)

Date: