

CITY COUNCIL – SPECIAL MEETING

TUESDAY 1 DECEMBER 2020 AT 6.45 PM

PRESENT: The Mayor (Councillor Mrs Bowman), Councillors Alcroft, Allison, Mrs Atkinson, Bainbridge, Betton (from 7.25 pm), Birks, Bomford, Brown, Christian, Collier, Dr Davison, Denholm, Ellis, Ms Ellis-Williams (until 8.20 pm), Mrs Finlayson, Mrs Glendinning, Glover, Higgs, Mrs McKerrell, McNulty, Mrs Mallinson, Mallinson (J), Meller, Mitchelson, Morton, Nedved, Paton, Patrick, Robson, Shepherd, Miss Sherriff, Southward, Tarbitt, Dr Tickner, Tinnion and Miss Whalen

ALSO

PRESENT: Town Clerk and Chief Executive
Corporate Director of Governance and Regulatory Services

C.128/20 ADVICE FROM THE MONITORING OFFICER

Speaking at the invitation of the Mayor, the Monitoring Officer informed Members that the purpose of the special meeting tonight was primarily to discuss the potential reorganisation of local government in Cumbria. Clearly that was an extremely important issue and it was important that all elected Members had the ability to participate and contribute.

To that end, in conjunction with the Chair of the Standards Committee and the Independent Person, he had signed a Dispensation for a period of four years so that all Members, irrespective of whether they had an interest under usual circumstances, were able to participate in discussions and vote. That Dispensation would run until 23:59 on 16 November 2024 for matters relating to local government reform and devolution.

The Monitoring Officer further advised that, if Members had an interest, then they should declare that when the Town Clerk and Chief Executive called the roll.

C.129/20 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

C.130/20 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

A roll call of persons in attendance was taken.

In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct the following declarations of interest were submitted in relation to Item 5 – Local Government Reorganisation for the reasons set out:

- Councillor Alcroft – her husband works for Cumbria County Council
- Councillor Allison - is also a County Councillor
- Councillor Mrs Atkinson – as a Teacher is employed by Cumbria County Council
- Councillor Christian – was formerly an employee of Cumbria County Council
- Councillor Ellis – as a serving Member of Cumbria County Council
- Councillor Mrs Mallinson – is a Member of Cumbria County Council
- Councillor Mallinson (J) – is a Member of Cumbria County Council
- Councillor McNulty – is employed by Cumbria County Council

- Councillor Shepherd – serves on Cumbria Health Scrutiny which is held jointly with Cumbria County Council
- Councillor Southward – brother serves on Cumbria County Council
- Councillor Tarbitt – is an elected Member of Cumbria County Council
- Councillor Dr Tickner – both of his sons work for Cumbria County Council
- Councillor Glover – his daughter works for Cumbria County Council
- Councillor Betton – is a Member of Cumbria County Council (declaration made when he joined the meeting)

C.131/20 PUBLIC AND PRESS

RESOLVED – That the Agenda be agreed.

C.132/20 ANNOUNCEMENTS

(i) The Mayor

The Mayor expressed thanks to all Carlisle City Council staff for their excellent and hard work over the past challenging months. She felt that all, including the Committee Services Team who ensured that virtual meetings could go ahead, had done extremely well in supporting the services provided to the public.

The Mayor also asked that, as people emerged from lockdown, they lend their support to local businesses after what had been a very difficult period.

(ii) The Leader of the Council

Other than to associate himself with The Mayor's comments, the Leader had no further announcements to make.

(iii) Members of the Executive

There were no announcements from Members of the Executive.

(iv) Town Clerk and Chief Executive

There were no announcements from the Town Clerk and Chief Executive.

C.133/20 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

There was submitted report of the Town Clerk and Chief Executive (CE.06/20) recording that, as Members would be aware, the City Council had been invited, along with other local authorities in Cumbria, to submit proposals for reorganisation of local government in Cumbria to create one or more unitary councils. An outline submission was submitted on 9 November 2020 indicating that a final submission would be made by the deadline of 9 December 2020 in support of two unitary authorities being created in the county.

The latest draft of the submission (Appendix 1) explained how two unitary councils struck the optimum balance between local government being close to the communities it served, whilst having the resources and influence to drive positive change. Importantly, two unitaries would also support the establishment of a mayoral combined authority that had a genuine strategic purpose and provided the basis for devolution to the area.

The submission of the proposal was a decision of the Executive, and the Members of the Executive sought the views of Council to inform (but not direct) their decision on the final submission.

Councillor Mallinson (J) (Leader) introduced the matter, emphasising that the golden opportunities afforded by Local Government Reorganisation were not about, or for the benefit of, the organisations that currently provided public services in Cumbria; rather they were for residents, businesses and for the young people of Cumbria. It was time for Cumbria to confidently take its place in the North with a directly elected mayor supported by a combined authority of unitary councils.

The focus of the discussion should not now be on whether or not there should be unitary local government in Cumbria, but what pattern that should take.

Councillor Mallinson (J) commented in detail upon the merits or otherwise of the various options, together with the implications for Cumbria should the process be deferred. He implored the Council not to let Carlisle or Cumbria down and urged all Members to enthusiastically support the North/South option.

Councillor Mallinson (J) moved and Councillor Ellis seconded the report and recommendation that the Council supports the submission of a full proposal for two unitary councils to be created in Cumbria based on the existing district boundaries of Allerdale, Carlisle and Eden in the North; and Barrow, Copeland and South Lakeland in the South.

Councillor Glover gave notice of the following amendment, a copy of which was displayed on screen:

“Add additional resolution:

The Council notes the outstanding contribution made by Local Government staff in response to the Coronavirus pandemic. This work to support residents and businesses will continue for the foreseeable future and it will be essential that Councils are able to give their undivided attention in providing that continuing support during the response and also during the recovery afterwards.

The Council therefore considers that given the pressures that Councils face this winter with the pandemic, it would not be right at this time for them to further progress or focus on ideas for reform. The Council therefore requests that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government pauses the process of Local Government reorganisation, until such time as it is possible for Councils to give the due attention, when it is safe to do so.

Additionally, at the point that Local Government reorganisation is able to proceed, the Council asks that the Secretary of State agrees to consult fully on all options received, so that members of the public, businesses and organisations are able to clearly demonstrate their views and ensure that any future structures have broad local support.

The Council instructs the Chief Executive to convey the text of this resolution to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.”

Councillor Glover moved the amendment, which was duly seconded by Councillor Brown.

Councillor Glover then elaborated in significant detail upon the reasons for submission of the amendment and requested that Members lend their support.

The Mayor moved that the meeting adjourn for ten minutes to allow Members the opportunity to consider the amendment, which course of action was agreed by silence.

The meeting adjourned at 7.15 pm and reconvened at 7.25 pm

Councillor Betton confirmed that he had now joined the meeting

For the benefit of Councillor Betton, the Monitoring Officer reiterated his advice provided at the start of the meeting regarding the Dispensation to enable Members to participate and vote on matters relating to local government reform and devolution; and concerning declarations of interest. He believed that Councillor Betton was also a Member of Cumbria County Council.

The Monitoring Officer further explained that, provided Councillor Betton was satisfied that he had sufficient information before him to make a reasonable decision, then he could participate and vote on this item of business.

Councillor Betton thanked the Monitoring Officer for his advice.

Substantial and lengthy discussion ensued, during which Members outlined their support for / opposition to the proposed amendment.

A number of observations were raised by Members during the debate, including:

- frustration at the lack of information / supporting data provided, such that Members could not properly scrutinize and come to an informed opinion on the options available and ultimately arrive at a decision which would stand the test of time
- Members were not necessarily opposed to local government reorganisation. However, the options were deserving of proper and full consideration/scrutiny in order that the matter may progress at the right time
- the City Council should focus its attention on helping people, including the vulnerable, through the current pandemic
- a wish to ultimately see a Council which provided the best services for local residents in their local environment
- a Member expressed disappointment that the option of the four District Councils in the north coming together was not on the table
- a process should be put in place whereby the options that go forward to public consultation are meaningful
- a clear message should be conveyed to the Executive that the Council did want local government reorganisation, but with unitary councils which delivered the right services in the right place for local people and a sense of place; it should not just be a cost cutting exercise
- devolution brought investment opportunities to Carlisle and Cumbria which were greatly needed

Concerns were further expressed in relation to:

- the lack of public consultation undertaken to date and the tight timescale for submission of the full proposal to Government

- that the COVID-19 pandemic was resulting in increased levels of deprivation, unemployment and a financial / economic crisis and there was also the issue of Brexit; consequently, this was not the right time to progress local government reform
- failure by the City Council and other Cumbrian Districts to put forward a submission to Government would result in a single submission i.e. a unitary Cumbria. The Council owed it to the community to show leadership and work to deliver an authority which would serve the area moving forward and build a better future. Failure so to do would result in an opportunity lost, perhaps for another generation
- the decision was ultimately one for the Executive, but it should really be a decision for the people
- the general public was supportive of unitary councils

Whilst speaking in support of unitary local government, certain Members were of the opinion that:

- two tier local government was confusing, wasteful and un-necessary, and had cost implications; there was a lack of clarity in terms of City / County Council responsibilities, service provision/delivery and accountability
- the opportunity for public consultation would arise following evaluation of viable submissions by Government
- there would never be 'a right time' and always reasons not to move to unitary local government

Councillor Mallinson (J) responded to certain comments raised in discussion.

Councillor Mallinson (J) concluded by summing up and urging Members to vote against the amendment.

Following voting, the amendment to the original Motion FELL.

Councillor Ms Ellis-Williams left the meeting prior to the above-mentioned vote

Discussion then took place on the original Motion, with input from a number of Members of the City Council.

Following further voting, the original Motion, as set out below was CARRIED:

That the Council supports the submission of a full proposal for two unitary councils to be created in Cumbria based on the existing district boundaries of Allerdale, Carlisle and Eden in the North; and Barrow, Copeland and South Lakeland in the South.

C.134/20 COMMUNICATIONS

There were no communications or items of business brought forward by the Mayor as a matter of urgency to be dealt with at the meeting.

[The meeting ended at 8.36 pm]