

WEST SOMERSET COUNCIL

Minutes of Special Council held on 7 September 2016 at 4.30 pm

in the Council Chamber, Williton

Present:

Councillor B Heywood Chairman
Councillor R Woods Vice-Chairman

Councillor I Aldridge	Councillor A Behan
Councillor M Chilcott	Councillor R Clifford
Councillor H J W Davies	Councillor M Dewdney
Councillor G S Dowding	Councillor S Goss
Councillor A Hadley	Councillor T Hall
Councillor B Leaker	Councillor R P Lillis
Councillor B Maitland-Walker	Councillor K M Mills
Councillor C Morgan	Councillor P H Murphy
Councillor J Parbrook	Councillor S J Pugsley
Councillor R Thomas	Councillor N Thwaites
Councillor A H Trollope-Bellew	Councillor K Turner
Councillor T Venner	Councillor D J Westcott

Officers in Attendance:

Director of Operations/Section 151 Officer (S Adam)
Assistant Chief Executive (B Lang)
Assistant Director Resources (P Fitzgerald)
Assistant Director Corporate Services (R Sealy)
Assistant Director Energy Infrastructure (A Goodchild)
Transformation Programme Manager (K Batchelor)
Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager (P Harding)
Principal Accountant – Transformation (E Collacott)
Democratic Service Co-ordinator (E McGuinness)
Democratic Services Officer (A Randell)
Legal Advisor (L Dolan)
Media and Communications Support Officer (R Howat)
Meeting Administrator (K Kowalewska)

C38 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D Archer and I Jones.

C39 Declarations of Interest

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Member of a County, Parish or Town Council:

Name	Minute No.	Member of	Action Taken
Cllr I Aldridge	All	Williton	Spoke and voted
Cllr H Davies	All	Williton and SCC	Spoke and voted
Cllr S Goss	All	Stogursey	Spoke and voted
Cllr B Maitland-Walker	All	Carhampton & Withycombe	Spoke and voted
Cllr C Morgan	All	Stogursey	Spoke and voted
Cllr P Murphy	All	Watchet	Spoke and voted
Cllr J Parbrook	All	Minehead	Spoke and voted
Cllr R Thomas	All	Minehead	Spoke and voted
Cllr N Thwaites	All	Dulverton	Spoke and voted
Cllr A H Trollope-Bellew	All	Crowcombe	Spoke and voted
Cllr K Turner	All	Brompton Ralph	Spoke and voted
Cllr T Venner	All	Minehead and SCC	Spoke and voted
Cllr D J Westcott	All	Watchet	Spoke and voted

C40 **Public Participation**

Item 4 High Level Transformation Business Case

Phil Gannon spoke to the effect that this was the most challenging decision WSC would make in its 42 year history. He was of the opinion that the high level transformation business plan was very similar to a transformational process already implemented by WSC a number of years ago and questioned the reasons behind its failure stating the lack of finance then and now was the common denominator. He went on to express that to implement this plan would result in considerable losses in efficiency, quality of service provision and resources, including staff demoralisation. He hoped Members fully understood the implications as their decision would influence the future viability of West Somerset.

Loretta Whetlor spoke as a resident of Watchet who was passionate about its unique heritage and special and thriving community. She hoped that the identity of Watchet and that of West Somerset would not be lost by merging with another authority. Mrs Whetlor further stated it was not clear what options were available due to there being no public meetings or debates; nothing presented to parish councils; no leaflet campaign or local news coverage. She concluded by requesting Members to delay making a decision until full and open discussions had been undertaken with all West Somerset residents and businesses as she felt it was vital to fully involve them in the decision making process.

Robert McDonald, local resident, spoke to the effect that public consultation was necessary to get a balanced opinion, as well as the need for clear leadership and clear management. He asked that the decision be delayed to await the outcome of talks with the Prime Minister and the local MP so that all options could be considered, and was of the view that WSC Members needed stability and clear thinking for future decisions.

C41 **High Level Transformation Business Case**

(Report No. WSC 97/16, circulated with the Agenda.)

The purpose of the report was to set out how the transformation vision could be delivered, and the key areas needing investment to enable change. The report set out the likely one-off costs of achieving this and the likely ongoing savings it could deliver the Council.

The Leader of Council presented the report and responded to comments raised during public participation. He confirmed that it was a requirement under the Act of Parliament to carry out full consultation with all concerned parties, and that the Secretary of State would require evidence of this. The Leader informed he had recently attended a frank and very helpful meeting with the Government Minister, where it had been confirmed that no additional government funding would be provided for transformation. However, if the situation changed, the Council's decision could be revisited.

The Leader personally stated this was a very sad day for WSC. The Council represented the voice and feelings of the people of West Somerset; the authority was unique and a special case. However, the primary role of a district council was to deliver services and being a voice was subsidiary to that role. A summary of the transformation which could be delivered within each of the options tested was given. The Leader agreed with the sound reasoning of the Leader of Taunton Deane Borough Council (TDBC), and recommended that in order to maintain services and to maintain control, option 2 should be progressed. Option 2 would create additional savings of £500,000 and did not close down further tri-partite working with other authorities.

The Leader went on to propose the recommendations of the report, with an amendment to be made to include 'in principle' so that the sentence in the second line of recommendation 2.1 a) read "...- High Level Transformation Business Case, the Council, in principle, support the...". The proposal was seconded by Councillor P Murphy.

Councillor P Murphy reiterated that this was an important decision for WSC. The decision to merge with TDBC would be for the greater good of the people of West Somerset, and Members should be doing the best for their constituents. The engagement of a wider debate with residents was essential so they could understand why it was the only choice. It was not in the best interests for the community to delay the decision. Whilst speaking on the three options in the business case, Councillor Murphy drew Members' attention to the Section 151 comments contained within the report. Independent advice supported the fact that WSC was not considered viable in the short or long term. With reference to working with other authorities, particularly Sedgemoor District Council (SDC), Councillor

Murphy requested that it be put on record he was fully in favour of a merger between WSC, TDBC and SDC and wished discussions between the councils to continue. However, he saw the value of a staged approach and the opportunity in the future to progress further joint working and shared services with other councils to achieve savings.

An amendment was proposed by Councillor H Davies and seconded by Councillor T Hall to defer the decision for two months, pending the outcome of a meeting being held on the matter between the Prime Minister and Ian Liddell-Grainger, Bridgwater and Somerset MP. In addition, a recorded vote on the amendment was proposed by Councillor T Venner and seconded by Councillor I Aldridge.

The amendment was debated and various issues regarding public consultation were raised, and differing views were expressed on the subject of delaying the decision.

The procedural motion was proposed and seconded that the question be now put to vote on the amendment. The Chairman agreed that the procedural motion should be put to the vote upon which it was declared CARRIED.

A recorded vote was taken on the amendment to defer consideration of the recommendations contained in the report for two months.

On being put to the vote, the amendment was LOST.

Councillor I Aldridge	For	Councillor A Behan	For
Councillor M Chilcott	Against	Councillor R Clifford	Abstain
Councillor H Davies	For	Councillor M Dewdney	Against
Councillor S Dowding	Against	Councillor S Goss	Against
Councillor A Hadley	Against	Councillor T Hall	For
Councillor B Heywood	Against	Councillor B Leaker	Abstain
Councillor R Lillis	Against	Councillor B Maitland-Walker	Against
Councillor K Mills	Against	Councillor C Morgan	Against
Councillor P Murphy	Against	Councillor J Parbrook	Against
Councillor S Pugsley	Against	Councillor R Thomas	Against
Councillor N Thwaites	Against	Councillor A Trollope-Bellew	Against
Councillor K Turner	Against	Councillor T Venner	For
Councillor D Westcott	Against	Councillor R Woods	For

Further discussion ensued concerning the original motion and the following main points were raised:

- Reference was made to the importance of being fully informed and having an understanding of the facts and figures concerning WSC's viability.
- Enthusiasm for the new council was expressed and was seen as the only way forward. By creating a new council the community would receive the services it needed.

- Progressing this matter under the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 meant the current West Somerset area would remain whole, it would not be broken up, and would be within the new larger council authority area, which was felt to be vitally important.
- Assurance was asked that before the new council was formed negotiations would be held to safeguard services so they would not be compromised in the West Somerset area.
- Concerns relating to West Somerset's financial contribution to the merger.
- Under Option 2 the existing two councils would be stood down and dissolved, and a brand new council would be formed with a new name and newly elected Members in 2019. The benefits were recognised of a new council being responsible for a single budget and making policy decisions for the geographical area of the two old councils.
- The new council would have a strong voice in Somerset.
- Members should look forward to a new future and be positive in order to support the community.
- The decision had been thought long and hard and was being made for the best reasons.
- WSC continued to face challenging financial issues and was unable to bridge the budget gap.
- To retain services for the future, councils had to work smarter, more efficiently and in partnership, and this could be achieved under Option 2.
- Councils could not subsidise one another and the only way to move forward was to stand down both councils and create a new one.
- With the savings being made, Members would strive to deliver services to achieve the best for all residents in the new combined authority.
- The reasons for losing the sovereignty of WSC were understood and it was now necessary to proceed and look for opportunities going forward.

On being put to the vote the original motion, as amended, was declared
CARRIED

RESOLVED (1) that, on the basis of the potential savings contained within the JMASS Phase 2 - High Level Transformation Business Case, the Council, in principle, support the implementation of Option 2 delivering a shared transformation vision for our communities and ongoing annual savings of £3.1m for the communities represented by the newly formed Council.

RESOLVED (2) that the Leader be authorised to commence discussions with the Secretary of State and Local Government Boundary Commission for England concerning the merger, and that Officers be authorised to implement the proposals in Option 2 in accordance with the financial targets and timeline as set out within the JMASS Phase 2 - High Level Transformation Business Case, with the financial targets to be included in the Councils budgets and Medium Term Financial Plans.

RESOLVED (3) that the necessary respective financial approvals are hereby agreed to fund the WSC share of Implementation Costs of Transformation totalling £1.175m (£1.121m + £0.054m) as set out in sections 9.5 -9.7 and 9.19 – 9.20 of the report.

For WSC to fund their share of the implementation costs (£1.175m) by:-

- a supplementary estimate from General Fund Reserves of £106k;
- by using Sustainability Reserve of £50k;
- by using JMASS Reserves £571k;
- using unallocated Capital Resources of £110k;
- by directing £75k of 16/17 in-year revenue savings towards this
- By directing the £46k 16/17 RCCO towards this
- By progressing “assets for sale” to the target sum of £217k. (underwritten by Business Rates Smoothing Reserve)

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Chairman read out the following quotations:

Firstly from George Bernard Shaw:-

“Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything”

Secondly, from the classical Greek philosopher, Socrates, who died 2415 years ago.

“The secret of change is to focus all your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new”

The Chairman concluded that the Councillors should embrace the wisdom of Socrates and go forth to build the new.

The meeting closed at 6.10 pm.