

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

ITEM 6 (e)

Record of a public meeting for **Crewe Community Governance Review** held
in the Council Chamber, Municipal Buildings, Earle Street, Crewe
on 1st September 2009 at 2.30pm

Chairman:	Councillor Andrew Kolker
Legal Adviser:	Mr Chris Chapman, Borough Solicitor
Presenters:	Mr Mike Flynn, Review Team Officer Mrs Lindsey Parton, Elections and Registration Manager
Clerk to the Meeting:	Ms Diane Moulson, Democratic Services Officer

List of Those Present:

Honorary Alderman Ray Stafford

Councillor Terry Beard	Crewe Charter Trustee
Councillor David Cannon	Cheshire East Council
Councillor Roy Cartlidge	Rep. Crewe West Community Group
Councillor Dorothy Flude	Ward Councillor, Crewe South
Councillor Peggy Martin	Cheshire East Council
Councillor Robert Parker	Cheshire East Council
Councillor Ray Westwood	Cheshire East Council
Mr P Kent	A Voice for Crewe Campaign
Mr S Roberts	A Voice for Crewe Campaign
Mrs J Roberts	A Voice for Crewe Campaign
Mr S Hogben	Parish Councillor, Shavington-Cum-Gresty Parish Council
Mrs P Minshull	Crewe Historical Society/Valley CAP
Mr C White	Cheshire Association of Local Councils
Ms P Southgate	Resident

1. Introduction

The Chairman began by welcoming those present to the meeting and introducing the Officers in attendance. He briefly outlined the programme for the afternoon before inviting the Borough Solicitor, Mr Chapman to address the meeting.

2. Background

On 30 March 2009, Cheshire East Council had received a petition signed by over 3500 of the electorate of the urban area of Crewe asking that a Town

Council be set up, an action which had triggered the Community Governance Review.

Mr Chapman explained that previously, petitions of this type would have been determined by the Secretary of State in conjunction with the Electoral Commission but in accordance with new legislation, namely Section 87 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, responsibility for determining such petitions now fell to principal authorities; in this instance Cheshire East Borough Council.

The Community Governance Review, which would be the first of its kind conducted under the new legislation, would, due to the timing of the submission, be carried out in tandem with the Boundary Committee's review of ward boundaries within Cheshire East. Discussions had been on-going with the Boundary Committee to inform the work of both parties but the timeline within which the Community Governance Review had to be completed had been influenced by the deadlines set by the Boundary Committee, leaving little room for slippage.

3. Presentation

The Chairman then invited the Elections and Registration Manager and Review Team Officer to explain the procedure in more detail.

As the submission had been received on 30 March 2009, the review had to be concluded within a twelve month period i.e. 30 March 2010. However, as the outcome would have an impact on the work of the Boundary Committee, it would, in reality need to be completed by January 2010 for the findings to be submitted to the Boundary Committee during its public consultation period (February 2010).

A copy of the presentation had been made available to the public and it was to this that Mrs Parton & Mr Flynn spoke; expanding on a number of points as follows –

- The two public meetings being held today were intended to 'kick start' the process and provide an opportunity to answer any questions arising from the public following issue of the voting packs
- Information packs were to be sent to a range of stakeholders; to contain a slightly revised information leaflet form than that provided to electors and a questionnaire, in place of a voting form
- Whilst a number of alternatives had been put forward for governance arrangements in Crewe, the option selected would be a democratically elected voice for the town and would, therefore need to met the criteria set down by legislation i.e. the body would be expected to
 - promote community cohesion
 - be of adequate size for its purpose
 - possess a sense of place and identity
 - have the capability/capacity to deliver services

- Consultees were encouraged, where appropriate to provide evidence for their views to add weight to and strengthen the arguments put forward
- Responses received from the exercise would be submitted to the Governance and Constitution Sub Committee in October, the views expressed to form the initial recommendations submitted to Council in October. The public would be invited to comment on the decision emanating from the meeting as part of the second stage consultation process to be held in October/November 2009
- At this point in the process, consideration would be given to
 - whether a single or multiple Parish Councils should be constituted
 - what the electoral arrangements should be and the number of Councillors to be elected
 - how the mayoralty would operate
- Recommendations would be considered by the Governance and Constitution Sub Committee prior to the final report being taken to Council for decision in December 2009

Having completed their resume, the Chairman thanked the Officers for their presentation. He then invited questions and comments from the floor.

Questions

Q. Why had the voting papers been issued before the commencement of the consultation period (1 September) and before information was available for people to read?

A. Due to logistical demands (printing, posting etc) it was considered preferable for some households to receive their packs prior to 1 September rather than after the process had commenced. The need to respond to the Boundary Committee during its public consultation period had also driven the timeline for the exercise

Q. What form would the next phase of the consultation take?

A. The second phase of the consultation would not be as extensive as the first but details of the draft recommendations would be made available via different media formats, including the Council's website

Q. When would questionnaires be issued to stakeholder organisations?

A. A number of packs had already been despatched and it was anticipated that the reminder would be sent out by the end of the week.

Q. The questionnaires received by some stakeholder organisations had not made it clear to who it was addressed so it was difficult to know who should be responding on the organisation's behalf.

A. Officers had been made aware of this matter and steps had been taken to ensure that the remaining letters clearly stated to whom the questionnaire was being sent.

- Q. Although the public meetings had been arranged at the beginning of the consultation period, in view of the turnout, it could be argued that awareness of the meetings amongst residents was low. The timing was also questionable as many individuals would not yet have received their voting packs. Were there any plans to hold more meetings during September to enable people to ask questions?
- A. No plans at present but if there was sufficient demand, it would be considered.
- Q. What weight would be given to representations if respondents did not provide the evidence required? Would their opinions be disregarded by the Committee and would this requirement affect the weight given to the petition?
- A. Responses would have more credence if accompanied with a few lines of explanation. The number of signatories on the petition alone meant that it would carry significant weight but that decision would be for the Committee as the report prepared by the Officers would contain only details of the representations and evidence received.
- Q. Will the results of the vote be announced and would it be possible to break it down into wards?
- A. The information would be made publically available but as the voting paper did not identify the voter's ward, the latter would not be possible.
- Q. Did respondents have to complete both parts of the voting paper or was it possible to fill in just one part?
- A. As this was not a ballot, respondents' views would not be invalidated if both parts were not completed but it would reduce the amount of evidence upon which a reasoned conclusion could be drawn.

Comments

The four parish option on the voting paper had not been proposed by the 'One Voice for Crewe' campaign and questions were raised as to the origin of the proposal. In response, it was confirmed that the proposal had been raised and discussed at a meeting of the Governance and Constitution Sub Committee, and had been supported as a valid alternative for inclusion on the voting paper.

A view was expressed by some individuals that the wishes of the electorate seeking a single Town Council for the urban area of Crewe had been disregarded. No justification or evidence has been supplied with the papers to provide a rationale for the four parish proposal and because of this the subsequent wording of the voting paper was ambiguous and unclear. This, in the opinion of the member of the public concerned, had lead to confusion in answering the questions when, in his view, there should have been a straight yes or no answer required to the question "Do you want a Town Council for Crewe?"

There was concern about the timing of the voting paper despatch as it had occurred prior to the start of the consultation period and before any information had been released. Because the terms 'Town' and 'Parish' had been used in both sections of the form it had generated a great deal of confusion. A request was made for a press release to be issued to clarify the wording on the ballot paper in light of the comments made.

As the Community Governance Review was being conducted in accordance with new legislation, it was inevitable that the Council would be scrutinised over its handling of the matter. As there was no longer only one proposal under consideration a view could be taken that the process had become politically biased. The exercise needed to be carried out in a spirit of mutual respect and co-operation and if not handled correctly, could cause animosity between the Town Council(s) and Cheshire East for years to come.

A representative from a stakeholder organisation referred to the fact that many of the organisations which were being consulted did not meet on a regular basis and may not have received notification about the public meetings. It was possible that this, rather than a lack of interest, which could be attributed to the low turn.

The accompanying leaflet provided a list of precepts levied by Town Councils but was considered by many of those present to be flawed as the locations selected were not local to Crewe. It was stated that only examples from Crewe and Nantwich parishes should have been used.

An argument was put forward that, if the four parish model was adopted, the cost to the public would be four times greater but with reduced efficiencies. This view was not supported by others, as; potentially each parish could decide to levy no precept. However it was accepted that there would be four times the associated costs e.g. clerks, premises etc.

The four parish option suggested that the boundaries would match the existing ward areas but, following the conclusion of the Boundary Committee review, it was possible that this might change. Given the level of uncertainty, the validity of the proposal was questioned. If, however there was to be one Town Council for Crewe, it was not considered unreasonable to have four wards of Crewe North, Crewe South, Crewe East and Crewe West to reflect current arrangements.

The statement that the timeline had been affected by the Boundary Committee was challenged from the floor and the Council was criticised for not anticipating the time required to complete the exercise given that the petition had been received whilst the authority was still in shadow form.

4. Summing Up

The Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and their contribution to the meeting, stating that the record of the meeting would be made available in due course to all those who had left contact details with the Clerk.