

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 7.00pm

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:

Councillor Margaret Simon	The Worshipful the Mayor, Cheshire East Council
Councillor Terry Beard	Crewe Charter Trustee
Councillor Derek Bebbington	Cheshire East Council
Councillor David Cannon	Cheshire East Council
Councillor Roy Cartlidge	Rep. Crewe West Community Group
Councillor Steve Conquest	Cheshire East Council
Councillor Dorothy Flude	Ward Councillor, Crewe South
Councillor John Jones	Cheshire East Council
Councillor Robert Parker	Cheshire East Council
Councillor Ray Westwood	Cheshire East Council
Mr P Kent	A Voice for Crewe Campaign
Mrs H Armonies	Resident
Mrs S Crum	Resident
Mr B Hughes	Resident
Mrs M Grant	Resident
Mr A Wood	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 evening 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. It was an affront that eighty one Councillors could take a view on what the residents of Crewe and, in particular those who signed the petition, wanted for the Town which was not to split it into four.
- A. The petition reflected the opinion of 10% of the electorate for the area which was why, in accordance with the legislation, all those affected by the proposal were now being asked for their views.
- Q. The amount of advertising for the public meetings had been poor; people did not understand the voting paper and there was a lack of awareness that there would be a second opportunity to comment on the proposals.
- A. The event had been advertised as widely as possible in the time allowed. Although the second consultation phase would not be as comprehensive as the first, draft proposals would be provided to all those attending the public meetings who had left contact details and would be circulated via the Council's website, notice boards and Ward Councillors.

- Q. Would there be any record as to who had voted for which option?
- A. Not individually but the responses received would be recorded to provide an audit trail showing the representations/evidence Council had taken into consideration in reaching its final decision.
- Q. The accompanying leaflet provided a list of precepts levied by Town Councils. This meant that the process was flawed as the examples selected were not local to Crewe.
- A. The examples selected were intended to be for comparison purposes only as a means of illustrating the wide variety of precepts which could be levied.
- Q. Irrespective of whether the final outcome was for one or four Parish Councils, would there be any difference in the responsibilities they would have? As the Council Tax was payable directly to Cheshire East Council, would any of that be transferred to the Parish Council(s) if it/they took over responsibility for some services?
- A. Parish Councils could exercise some powers but the level to which this was done was a matter of local choice. If the Parish Council(s) decided it/they wished to provide services over and above those provided by the Borough Council, then the cost would be raised via the levying of a precept.
- Q. What would happen if the Parish Council(s) wanted to take over a Borough function such as maintenance of pavements?
- A. The Borough Council would need to give its consent and would have to enter into an agreement with the Parish Council(s) to carry out the works on its behalf.
- Q. There was a lot of ambiguity associated with the voting paper which could be proved by the low turn out at the meeting and there was concern that this could be perceived as a lack of interest in the formation of a Town Council.
- A. Cheshire East would be cognisant of all the views expressed and a low response would not necessarily be considered to be a lack of public interest.
- 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 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. If the proposal for one Town Council was supported, would there then need to be a decision made as to whether the Councillors elected would represent the whole area or a single ward?
- A. That decision would be taken by Cheshire East Council. However the decision would take into account the size of the area and the number of Councillors required to adequately represent the electorate; the public being able to comment on the proposals as part of stage two of the process.
- 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

On the assumption that a Town Council for Crewe was set up, it needed to have a good relationship with Cheshire East Council. Therefore, the exercise had to be carried out in a spirit of mutual respect and co-operation to ensure that a culture of mistrust was not created. The phrase 'natural community' had been referred to in the presentation. There was no doubt in the speaker's mind that in this instance, the natural community which should form the Parish Council was the town of Crewe and this was in danger of becoming irrelevant to Cheshire East Council.

As the four parishes option had not been proposed by the 'One Voice for Crewe' campaign, questions continued to be raised by those present as to the origin of the proposal. In response, it was confirmed that the proposal had been put forward at a meeting of the Governance and Constitution Sub Committee. It had been supported as a valid alternative for inclusion on the voting paper as it reflected the four existing wards of Crewe South, Crewe North, Crewe East and Crewe West.

Notwithstanding the comments made at the meeting, some of those present considered that clarification had still not been provided to their satisfaction, regarding the rationale for the four parish option. The more arguments put forward in favour of this option, the more the situation became factious. It was the opinion of some that there should have just been a straight yes or no answer required to the question "Do you want a Town Council for Crewe?" as the introduction of this unsupported option had confused the issue. It should not have been included given that it seemed to be the opinion of one individual.

A resident, who was also an ex- Crewe and Nantwich Borough Councillor, spoke of her experiences during her time on the Council in developing community cohesion, the overarching aim of the review. In her opinion, because the Town had areas which were both affluent and disadvantaged, people worked together for their mutual benefit and this would be under threat if the Town was split into four.

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.