

LISKEARD TOWN COUNCIL

AT A SPECIAL MEETING of the **TOWN COUNCIL** held in the Council Chamber at 7.30 pm on Tuesday 29 May 2007 there were present:

The Deputy Mayor – Councillor Chris Ferguson – in the Chair

Councillors Steve Barrett, Michael George, Bruce Hawken, Anna Kennedy, Nick Mallard, Martyn Miller, Sandra Preston, Lori Reid and Christina Whitty.

Town Clerk - Mrs B N Furse

Minute Clerk - Mrs D Andrews

48/07 APOLOGIES & ABSENTEES

Apologies were received from The Mayor, Councillor Anne Purdon and Councillor Tony Powell. Councillors Roger Holmes and Anne Kennedy Truscott were absent.

49/07 LOCAL GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER

The Deputy Mayor stated that the Council had been asked to respond to a questionnaire from CALC concerning the future delivery of local services in the event that the structure of local government was to change in 2009. Members were extremely concerned that this presented a considerable dilemma; whilst the Town Council would wish to take on a considerably enhanced role in such an event, members were concerned about the effect that this might have on Council Tax. They were acutely aware that Town and Parish precepts are uncapped and that there would be pressure on the Council to make a financial contribution to the delivery of any service that the Council might take over. Councillor Hawken stated that should the Council be asked to take over the delivery of other services, full funding must first be in place as the current level of staff and office space would be inadequate. Members were also concerned that budgetary pressures on the principal authorities were such that it was unlikely that taxpayers would see a commensurate reduction in the precept made by them. The likely net result would thus be an increase in Council Tax without any change in the service delivered – another “stealth tax”.

The Council agreed that if it was to take over or to join a partnership for the delivery of any services then its costs, including management and administration, would have to be met in full by the principal authority.

Subject to the above caveat, the Council agreed that it would wish to be involved in the delivery of Planning in the town, Tree Preservation Orders, Planning Enforcement, S106 agreements, footpath maintenance, verges, signage, street cleaning and in youth and community projects. Members also agreed that Car Parks, Public Toilets, Parks, Gardens, Playing Fields, Sports Pitches, Playgrounds and Open Spaces should belong to the town; most of these were the property of the Borough of Liskeard before the reform of local government. Members also wished to see increased consultation with regard to Traffic calming, Road maintenance and improvements, Road safety, Licensing, both Premises and Entertainment, Taxis, waste collection, re-cycling, fixed penalty notices for dog fouling/litter/graffiti and drains.

The Council also agreed that it did not wish to become involved with Street lighting, Sports Halls or Leisure centres as it felt that these were best done at a higher level where economies of scale could be achieved and the appropriate expertise was more readily available. It was **RESOLVED** that a detailed response would be submitted along the above lines.

The Council then went on to discuss the draft response from the Cornwall Association of Local Councils to the County Council unitary bid. This was generally welcomed although members felt that whilst the points raised were all valid, the letter avoided their obvious conclusion and did not actually bite the bullet and express opposition to the bid.

Following further discussion, it was **RESOLVED** to write to CALC stating that it believed that the response should include a statement opposing the County Council bid and to instruct its representative on CALC to convey only the Council's resolved opinion at the Association's meeting on the 4 June 2007.

Members then discussed the Council's response to the bid by Cornwall County Council for Unitary Status with the Deputy Mayor firstly summarising the background to the subject for the benefit of new members and outlining the Council's deliberations and resolutions to date.

Councillor Mallard stated that whilst he normally set little score by the commissioned reports of consultants, he felt that the standing of Emeritus Professor Michael Chisholm at Cambridge University was such that his critique of the County Council bid made the document more worthy of consideration than would have been the case if it had been prepared by many other people or organisations. He considered that the points raised by Professor Chisholm were of sufficient consequence that they cast considerable doubt on the proposals put forward by the County Council.

The Deputy Mayor then suggested that the Council should consider the bid against the five national targets.

Councillor Hawken expressed considerable doubts on the affordability of the bid. He broadly agreed with the critique in that he believed that the estimated costs of the bid were significantly understated whilst the suggested savings were, at best, optimistic. He doubted whether the proposals would actually yield any saving to the Council Tax payers of Cornwall and believed that there was a distinct possibility that the eventual outcome would be higher taxes. Agreeing with this, Councillor Miller cited the Millennium Dome and the 2012 Olympic Games in observing that he had yet to see a public sector project of any sort in which the initial cost estimates proved to be realistic.

In considering public support for the bid, Councillor George drew attention to the fact that 91% of the respondents to the County Council consultation on the bid had expressed the view that they needed to know more before making a qualified decision and was unaware of this information being provided. He also stated that he would like to see a County wide referendum carried out.

The Council felt that whilst the Unitary Bid set considerable stall by its desire that a wide range of powers and responsibilities be drawn down to County level from regional bodies and central government so that "decisions about Cornwall are made in Cornwall", it gives no indication of how this will be achieved; members were of the opinion that this was an unattainable pipe-dream and could recall no occasion when any central body had truly devolved significant powers, responsibilities or, most importantly, the associated funding on a voluntary basis.

Members were worried about leadership within the county and that the proposed 82 members of a unitary council would be unable to effectively handle the wide range of issues and tasks currently undertaken by the 331 current County and District Councillors let alone take on responsibility for Health, Learning and Skills, transport and the other items on the list. Councillor Hawken observed that it would certainly require councillors with a far higher degree of competence than we currently have. Councillor Kennedy was adamant that Health should not be administered at a County level.

The Council was particularly concerned about how the bid would meet the fourth national target of neighbourhood flexibility and empowerment. The bid emphasised the establishment of 16 community networks to respond to local needs but the Council noted that:

- a. the areas covered by these proposed networks varied enormously from 2 towns plus 2 parishes to 23 towns/parishes,
- b. Planning (Development Management) would only have four committees covering the county,
- c. network meetings (8 each year), whilst open to the public, would not permit public participation
- d. network forum meetings (quarterly) would include the chairmen/mayors of town and parish councils together with an array of non-elected stakeholders,
- e. the funding for these community networks, about 0.2% (1/500) of the overall budget, would be totally inadequate and would be primarily taken up with administrative costs, leaving little for actual service delivery.

Councillor Reid expressed concern about the difficulty that other organisations would have in dealing separately with all of these 16 networks.

In addressing the achievement of Value for Money, the Council recognised its lack of expertise to assess the validity of the different methodologies used. Members felt that the crux of this lay in the effective delivery of quality services to meet local needs and aspirations and that the bid was so thin on this detail that it was impossible to form a judgement.

Members then **RESOLVED** to write to the Department of Communities and Local Government to express its strong opposition to the County Council proposals for unitary local government with copies to the County Council, the Cornwall Association of Local Councils and Caradon District Council. A Press Release would also be published expressing the Council's views with a recommendation to the public to say "No" to the County Council's proposals.

50/07 STANDING ORDERS

It was **RESOLVED** that Standing Orders be suspended.

PART II

1. Office Staffing

51/07 STANDING ORDERS

It was **RESOLVED** that Standing Orders be reinstated and that the discussions of the Meeting in Committee (Part II) be adopted.

There being no further business, the Deputy Mayor declared the meeting closed.
.3.

26/07