

Cabinet

Excerpt of the Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 23 September 2021 in the Town Hall, Royal Leamington Spa at 6.00 pm.

Present: Councillors Day (Leader), Bartlett, Cooke, Falp, Grainger, Matecki and Rhead.

Also Present: Councillors: Boad (Liberal Democrat Group Observer), Kennedy, (Green Group Observer), Milton (Chair of Overview & Scrutiny Committee) and Nicholls (Chair of Finance & Audit Scrutiny Committee and Labour Group Observer)

42. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made

Part 1

(Items upon which a decision by the Council was required)

45. **Service Integration and Joint Accommodation Work between Warwick District Council and Stratford-on-Avon District Council**

The Cabinet considered a report from the Chief Executive, which sought the continuation of the process of service integration and of joint accommodation, irrespective of the decision on a political merger by the two Councils or by the Government. It sought further approval of the timetable for proposed service integration between the two Councils over the period until March 2024.

Attached at Appendix 1 to the report was a report considered and agreed by the Joint Advisory Steering Group (JASG) in July. The report addressed the central fact that to progress joint work, a decision to proceed needed to be made regarding the service integration process. This was independent of the decision to proceed to a political merger.

A similar decision needed to be made in respect of the two Councils seeking joint accommodation. The report at Appendix 1 to the report set out the reasons for the recommendation. This was also independent of the decision to proceed to a political merger.

Appendix 2 to the report contained a report considered by JASG at its meeting in September and set out a programme at Table 1 for the proposed service integration process over the period to 2024. It was proposed that this timetable should be agreed, subject to Recommendation 1 being approved by Council. The report at Appendix 2 to the report set out the reasons for the recommendation.

In terms of alternative options, the Cabinet could decide not to agree recommendation 1 and wait until after a decision was made in December on the proposition of a political merger or after the Government has decided if it agreed to a merger. However, the service integration process needed time to be completed properly. If it was to be done by March 2024, delaying the start until a decision was made in December would reduce the amount of time available by two months. If there was a delay until the

Government decided, that would mean a delay of over a year. Service integration could happen separately from the political merger and so would not be tied to a decision on the political merger.

In addition, as Members had seen from another report on the agenda for the 23 September Cabinet meeting (Minute Number 48) on Shared Legal Service for Stratford-on-Avon District Council and Warwick District Council, given that amongst the first services proposed for integration was the Legal Service, a delay would create a significant problem as notice was served by WDC to WCC, who were currently providing that service. The notice period expired at the end of March 2022. Starting the service integration process in January 2022 was not sufficient time to meet the notice period and delaying until a Government decision would make the Legal Services proposal impossible.

The Cabinet could have also decided to vary the proposed timetable for service integration. It was not possible to do everything at once and so choices had to be made. The proposed approach reflected the approaching deadline Legal Services and the greater readiness of the two proposed services which would act as in effect "pilots" from which to learn for subsequent integrations.

The Cabinet could decide to wait until a decision was made on the political merger before deciding on seeking joint office accommodation. However, a delayed decision would mean a delayed start and as both Councils were actively seeking to secure alternative office accommodation and both wished to seek savings as a matter of urgency, a deferral seemed contrary to both Councils interests and priorities.

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee supported the recommendations in the report, but also requested that a further recommendation be made to produce a summary of risks through a risk register due to the size and complexity of the project.

The Committee also requested that regular service level performance data should be available to Councillors on the Service Area Dashboard, providing comparison between current service area performance levels against the merged service areas.

In response to a comment about the merger's inevitability, Councillor Day recognised that it was not inevitable, but that there were several successful mergers across the country, but the WDC/SDC merger requires a lot more political work.

In response to the comments from The Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Chief Executive agreed with the need for a summary of risks. He also stated that we could provide a performance baseline report, but highlighted that Stratford did not record the data in the same way, therefore it would be difficult to draw direct comparisons.

Councillor Cooke proposed, Councillor Rhead seconded, that the recommendation from Overview and Scrutiny Committee, approved.

Councillor Bartlett proposed, Councillor Rhead seconded, the report as laid out and it was

Recommended to Council that irrespective of the decision relating to the full political merger of Stratford-on-Avon District Council and Warwick District Council (expected in December 2021):

- (1) work progresses on the full-service integration of teams across Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils; and
- (2) work progresses on the identification of sharing civic and office accommodation between Stratford-on-Avon District Council and Warwick District Council.

Resolved that

- (1) the timetable for service integration, as set out in Table 1 in Appendix 1, be agreed; and
- (2) a summary of risks through a risk register due to the size and complexity of the project

(The Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Hales)
Forward Plan Reference 1,243

(The meeting ended at 7:32pm)
CHAIRMAN
4 November 2021