

## SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Notes of a meeting of the Workshop for Parish Council held on:  
Thursday, 27 August 2015 at 6pm

### PRESENT:

Parish	Enid Bald	Linton
Council	David Bard	Sawston & SCDC
Reps:	John Beadsmore	Great Wilbraham
	Malcolm Bore	Foxton
	Anna Bradnam	SCDC
	Jane Coston	Milton
	Simon Crocker	Caldecote & Cambourne
	Kevin Cuffley	Sawston & SCDC
	Genevieve Dalton	Little Abington
	Judy Damant	Meldreth
	Mary Drage	Fulbourn
	Bev Edwards	Barton
	Sue Ellington	SCDC
	Arthur Greaves	Whittlesford
	Ian Hack	Wimpole
	Colin Hoptroff	Orwell
	Liz Jones	Waterbeach
	Jackie McGeady	Gamlingay
	Cicely Murfitt	SCDC
	Mike Oakley	Oakington
	Niall O'Byrne	Harston
	David Pepperell	Stapeford
	Elizabeth Sim	Elsworth
	Sandie Smith	Swavesey
	Margaret Stalkie	Horningsea
	Avril Taylor	Arrington
	Derek Thorn	Fulbourn
	Richard Turner	SCDC
	Robert Turner	SCDC
	Geoff Twiss	Over
	John Vickery	Cambourne
	Robert Williamson	Waterbeach
Officers:	Patrick Adams	Senior Democratic Services Officer
	Jo Cox	Electoral Services Officer
	Andrew Francis	Electoral Services Manager
	Clare Gibbons	Development Officer
	Graham Watts	Democratic Services Team Leader

Apologies for absence were received from Barrington, Hauxtion, Heydon, Ickleton and Willingham Parish Councils .

### 1. INTRODUCTION FROM ELECTORAL SERVICES MANAGER

Andrew Francis, Electoral Services Manager, thanked all the Parish Council representatives for attending the meeting. He explained that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England had recently started a review of South Cambridgeshire District Council's electoral arrangements because growth within the

District meant that some councillors represented many more electors than others. The review had been triggered because the number of electors being represented by the councillors for the Histon & Impington ward was more than 30% above the average.

The District Council had been invited to make a recommendation to the Boundary Commission on the total number of councillors at the authority. The purpose of this meeting was to allow parish councils to give views on their relationships with District Councillors following a request by Members of the Civic Affairs Committee. This would assist the Committee in considering the issue before making any recommendations to Full Council.

## **2. QUESTIONS FROM PARISH COUNCILS**

Q: How many wards would there be under the new arrangements?

A: The Boundary Commission have not specified a figure. Their main concern was that the District's electorate was equally represented.

Q: Could Council boundaries mirror the Parliamentary boundaries?

A: This could only be achieved by review of Parliamentary boundaries, which was a separate process. The Government was likely to start a boundary review in the near future.

Q: Could the District Council's ward boundaries mirror those of the County Council?

A: In theory it could, but the County Council's boundary review was entirely separate from the District Council's review.

Q: Could parishes be merged?

A: A Community Governance Review would be required to merge parishes, but this was a lengthy process, which was unlikely to be completed in time to affect the Boundary Review.

Q: Did the new electorate figures take any planned development into account?

A: Any development that was expected to increase the electorate size by the year 2021 was included in the electorate figures.

Q: How many people should each councillor represent?

A: This varied greatly throughout the country. The Boundary Commission gave no guidance on this, only to state that it should be an even number within the authority's area. It was noted that accommodating small villages, without over-burdening individual councillors, could prove challenging.

Q: Could the review take into account the number of parish councils being represented by each councillor?

A: The primary concern of the Boundary Commission was to ensure that councillors represented the same number of electors. A submission would risk rejection if it ignored this in favour of ensuring councillors represented an equal number of parish councils.

Q: Was it possible that a Unitary Authority could be set up, thus negating the need for a boundary review?

A: Officers present were not aware of any plans to set up a Unitary Authority and the Boundary Commission had initiated a review of the District Council's electoral arrangements. Obviously if a Unitary Authority was set up then its electoral wards would need to be agreed under a separate process.

Q: Could parish councils receive the projected electorate figures for the existing wards?

A: This information was not to hand but could be provided.

Q: Surely the Council should first look at possible wards and use this to agree on a number of councillors, instead of deciding on a number of councillors and then looking at possible wards?

A: The Boundary Commission insist that Councils first agree on a number of councillors, using evidence to justify this number which did not include possible ward boundaries. It was noted that looking at possible ward boundaries without first deciding on a number of councillors was a huge amount of work due to the large number of variables.

Q: Was this review being driven by a desire to reduce costs?

A: The Boundary Commission had initiated this review because of electoral inequality. The Boundary Commission's reflection that the number of councillors might be reduced was based on comparisons with other authorities, which had similar characteristics to South Cambridgeshire and had nothing to do with attempting to reduce costs.

It was agreed that, if possible, the Council's submission on the new wards should be a cross-party recommendation and not just represent the views of one political group.

### **3. BENEFITS OF ATTENDANCE OF DISTRICT COUNCILLORS AT PARISH COUNCIL MEETINGS**

The meeting divided into three informal workshop groups.

Parish councillors made the following points about the benefits of District councillors attending parish council meetings (counter-points made in brackets):

- District councillors can quickly answer complex questions that would otherwise take time to find from officers (would trust officers to answer complex questions.)
- They provide a direct link to officers – copied into e-mails helps.
- Allows public access to district councillors directly as other ways not always responded to.
- Allows district councillors to make decisions based on knowledge direct from parishes, especially at planning committee.
- District councillors can help a parish council to take things through the Planning Committee.
- District councillors can contribute to meetings without making decisions.
- E-mails to district councillors before meetings can determine if issues need chasing and allows non-agenda items to be discussed.
- Members of the community benefit from hearing from both parish and district councillors.
- District councillors are the parish council's first point of contact, even on County issues, as they are always there.
- District councillors can guide the meetings and give them a formal structure (Chairman, not the District Councillor, should keep order at meetings).
- District councillors can share workload, attend more meetings and feedback to parish councillors more easily.
- They provide the reassurance of expertise.
- District councillors can access information from SCDC more easily than parish councils trying to find it themselves. (This should work both ways).
- A district councillor attending a parish council meeting can:
  - Offer advice
  - Contribute to the meeting
  - Try to resolve problems with the Council

- Answer questions to resolve issues on the spot
- Report on District matters coming through
- Provide updates on any changes
  
- Benefits of attendance depends on:-
  - Quality of member
  - Number of parishes
  - Other council roles
  - Other commitments
  - Good communication is vital.

#### **4. THE PROBLEMS CREATED BY NON-ATTENDANCE OF DISTRICT COUNCILLORS AT PARISH COUNCIL MEETINGS**

Parish councillors made the following points about the attendance of district councillors at parish council meetings (counter-points made in brackets):

- Attendance at parish council meetings is the fundamental role of a District Councillor - if they don't turn up, what are they for?
- When the district councillor lives in the village it's easier for them to communicate with residents and attend parish council meetings.
- Sometimes parish council meetings clash, especially the annual meetings.
- Parish councils should liaise with District councils so that clashes can be avoided.
- Parishes have to be flexible with dates for meetings (meetings should be held when convenient to parish councillors and it is possible for district councillors to attend two meetings in an evening.)
- Clashes do occur, making attendance impossible.
- Fewer district councillors mean more parishes to a councillor and should lead to negotiation between parishes on when meetings are held to allow attendance.
- Meeting schedules can be planned to ensure there are no clashes.
- Joint meetings on big issues would ensure that all could meet with the District Councillor at the same time.
- Value of attendance depends on quality of district councillor.
- If district councillors don't attend they don't take into account parish views.
- Non-attendance means that the parish council have to contact the Council directly through officers.
- Would be harder for a district councillor to attend if they represented more parishes.
- Twin-hatted councillors sometimes forget which hat they are wearing.
- District councillors should not be parish councillors due to a conflict of interest.

#### **5. OTHER WAYS IN WHICH DISTRICT COUNCILLORS COMMUNICATE WITH PARISH COUNCILS OTHER THAN ATTENDING MEETINGS**

Parish councillors made the following points on different ways in which district councillors could communicate with parish councils without attending meetings.

##### **Other ways of communicating**

- No substitute for District Councillor coming to parish meetings.
- If the District Councillor has not attended, he/she should read the minutes.
- Written reports or verbal reports? Perhaps both.
- Page in the parish magazine.
- District councillor has contact details in the parish magazine.

- E-mails to chairman and clerk, which is then “cascaded”.
- E-mails to all parish councillors.
- Monthly report – issued in the report and agenda pack. Should be published on parish council website.
- Electronic bulletins.
- Newsletters.
- Is a member of the Parish Council so the link is automatic.
- District Councillor represented on Parish Councils when more than one parish is represented. Potential conflict of interest.
- Monthly meeting with Chairman and District Councillor.
- Social media (training course was valuable here) – but not attractive to older people and can be misconstrued and/or lead to personal attacks.
- Parish Council website.
- District councillor’s website.
- Parish councils should consider “shared services”, over areas such as website domains etc.
- Response to direct contact, by e-mail, phone or a knock on the door.
- Key contacts outside of the parish councils is important, as is local knowledge.
- Face-to-face meeting is valuable (can’t beat 1:2:1).
- Drop-in surgeries.
- Social functions attended by the district councillor is very important.
- Attendance at village events.
- Written materials through doors.
- Local pub!

#### **Issues with effectiveness**

- District councillors do not always understand the role of the Parish Council.
- They need to be familiar with parishes to be effective.
- Councillor are not the only blockage – it can be the officers.
- District Councillors sometimes respond before fact checking with the parishes - more of an issue if their attendance is low.
- Small parishes have low hours of clerking, causing communication challenges, which can be overcome.
- Concerns that smaller parishes are missed out when they have bigger neighbours.
- Sometimes the District Councillor will have different points of view, but that is normal and to be expected.
- Parishes have to reflect the communities point of view.
- Reporting with respect to what is happening at SCDC needs to be accurate.

#### **Representation in a multi-member ward**

- Two District Councillors means double expertise and more likely to guarantee attendance (complicated if district councillors are of different political parties).
- Co-operation can prove difficult if different political groups are represented in a multi-member ward.
- Partisan representation when there are multiple councillor wards.
- Dislike – don’t like politics coming into play at parish meetings.
- Electing in thirds allows constant representation by experienced district councillors.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Andrew Francis stated that the views expressed by parish councillors at this meeting would be presented to the Civic Affairs Committee meeting on Thursday 10 September, which will make a recommendation on the number of councillors to Council. Full Council will make a formal recommendation on the authority's size to the Boundary Commission at its meeting on Thursday 24 September.

The decision on whether to continue to elect district councillors in thirds or to hold all-out elections every four years would be taken at a special Council meeting also to be held on 24 September. The Boundary Commission had made it clear that if the Council continued to elect in thirds all wards would have to have three councillors.

The actual review of ward boundaries will formally start in November 2015, with final recommendations being published in August 2016. It was understood that implementation was planned for May 2018.

It was noted that more information available from the Boundary Commission website: [www.lgbce.org.uk](http://www.lgbce.org.uk)

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**The Meeting ended at 7.30 p.m.**

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