

**PARISH REVIEW WORKING PARTY held at COUNCIL OFFICES
LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 9.00am on 1 NOVEMBER
2006**

Present:- Councillors E J Godwin, A J Ketteridge and M J Savage.

Officer in attendance:- P Snow

PRWP 5 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 9 May 2006 were received, confirmed and signed as a correct record.

PRWP 6 BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Minute PRWP 4 – Parish Review

Councillor Ketteridge drew attention to a recent Saffron Walden Town Council meeting where there had been criticism of the Council's decision to continue to designate St Mary's School in Castle Street as the polling place for the Castle South-West polling district, instead of the Football Club as favoured by the Town Council.

Members agreed that the correct decision had been taken in this case but felt that it had highlighted a defect in the relationship between area panels and policy committees and the need for more clarity in the definition of delegated powers.

PRWP 7 PARISH ELECTORAL ARRANGEMENTS

The Electoral Services Officer introduced for consideration his report on parish electoral arrangements. He said that it attempted to pull together all of the strands affecting parishes that had emerged in this review and effectively marked the conclusion of the three separate reviews commenced in August last year, relating to parish boundaries and polling districts and places, as well as to electoral matters.

He expressed disappointment that as many as half of the district's 52 parish and town councils had failed to respond to this consultation specifically relating to each of those councils electoral arrangements.

A number of matters needing consideration had emerged during the course of the review and these were highlighted in the report. Those matters that had to be examined in a review under the provisions of the Local Government and Rating Act 1997 (and the 1972 Act) were:

- The number of parish councillors to be allocated to each parish (the minimum being five).
- The question of whether parish wards should, or should continue to be, divided into wards.
- What the size, names and boundaries of any wards should be, and how many councillors should be allocated to each.

- Any grouping arrangements that were needed to maintain effective parish government.
- Whether parish councils should be created in small parishes.

Consideration was given to the role the Council might be expected to play in a monitoring capacity to ensure that parish government in Uttlesford remained strong and vibrant, reflecting the needs of local communities. The report suggested one possible approach might be to adopt a formula to guide the Council in deciding what appropriate electoral arrangements might be depending on electorate size. Members agreed that this was a sensible way forward while recognising the need to maintain a flexible approach to take account of local circumstances.

Councillor Savage said that the formula suggested looked about right but that it should state more clearly that the preferred minimum number of parish councillors should be six. This was because of difficulties in maintaining effective administration for those parishes with only five councillors where absences and/or vacancies occurred. Small parish councils would be advised that they would be able to maintain the statutory minimum of five if local circumstances justified it. However, a final opportunity would be given to parishes to opt for an adjustment prior to next year's elections as long as there was sufficient time for the Council to confirm any revised arrangements and for an order to be made.

At the same time, it was agreed that the Council should adopt a policy stating that any parish wards fixed or altered as part of any parish electoral review should be based on principles of broad proportionality.

It was noted that existing warding arrangements mostly complied with this principle, and with the proposed formula, but that there were some parishes where problems had arisen in the past, or where the number of parish councillors appeared to need review, that might benefit from some revision. This was either because casual vacancies had not been filled for abnormally long periods of time, or where large numbers of co-options had been required following an ordinary election.

Members requested that a letter be sent explaining very clearly why the formula was being adopted and seeking a specific response from each parish.

The Working Party noted the position at Great Easton/Tilty, where a grouping order would now be made as agreed by both parish meetings, and at Little Dunmow where an enlargement of the parish council had been agreed as part of the recent parish review.

The position at Saffron Walden and Swards End was also noted. A muddle had been created as a result of the implementation of the previous parish review in 2004 and this was finally about to be resolved by order of the Electoral Commission. The term of office of the Town Council's ward member for Swards End would cease from the day

after the order was made and the total number of councillors in Saffron Walden would diminish from 16 to 15 with effect from May 2007.

A formal request had been submitted by Quendon and Rickling Parish Council to change its electoral scheme by abolishing the separate wards of Quendon and Rickling and to allocate the existing number of seven parish councillors to the whole parish.

Members agreed that the division between Quendon and Rickling was essentially an artificial one and did not reflect existing community values. In the circumstances the Parish Council's request seemed to be a sensible way forward and should be agreed.

Consideration was also given to the position at Lindsell where the number of local government electors was close to the trigger point of 200 where a parish council must, by law, be created. This position had persisted for the last two or three years. The parish meeting at Lindsell had discussed the possible creation of a parish council on more than one occasion and had expressed a clear view that there was no wish locally for such a step to be taken.

Uttlesford had so far acquiesced with this preference on the grounds that the electorate had not yet risen definitively above the minimum level. It was agreed that the position at Lindsell should continue to be monitored.

Councillor Godwin stated that the relationship with parishes might be affected by the Government's proposal to grant new powers to parish councils. She acknowledged that many of the smaller parishes might lack the resources to accommodate additional responsibilities and functions. One way forward for small parishes might be to consider a grouping arrangement with adjoining parishes, where common community values could be established.

She also wondered about the impact on the operation of parish councils of airport related development and the acquisition by BAA of property in small communities. For example, at Birchanger and Stansted, as well as at Takeley and Little Canfield, the pattern of parish representation might change as a result of the developments at Rochford Nurseries and Priors Green.

The Council was already committed to conducting further parish reviews in these cases once development had reached the point where incoming occupiers could be consulted.

Members finally considered an overview of the procedures for filling casual vacancies and some of the difficulties that had arisen in filling particular vacancies.

In summary, Members agreed that the pattern of parish representation should continue to be monitored on a regular basis, in accordance with the principles established at this meeting, to ensure that it remained relevant, effective and fair.

RECOMMENDED to the Operations Committee that:

1. The previous decision to make a grouping order establishing a new parish council of Great Easton and Tilty be noted, on the basis set out in the report.
2. The decision to increase the number of parish councillors in Little Dunmow to 11, with effect from the May 2007 elections, be noted until such time as a new electoral scheme could be implemented when the new parish of Flitch Green had been created by order.
3. The parish wards of Quendon and Rickling be abolished by order, with effect from the May 2007 elections, and seven councillors allocated to the whole parish from that date.
4. The proposed electoral arrangements for Saffron Walden and Swards End be noted, both in the short term, and from May 2007.
5. Any move to establish a parish council at Lindsell be deferred until such time as it became clear that the parish met the criteria set out in Section 16 of the Local Government and Rating Act 1997.
6. The Council adopt the criteria set out below to guide the Council's approach to parish electoral arrangements:
 - For parishes with up to 700 electors, there should be between six and eight councillors (although the statutory minimum of five continue to be allowed where justified by local circumstances).
 - For parishes with between 701 and 2,500 electors, there should be between nine and 12 councillors.
 - For parishes with more than 2,500 electors, there should be between 13 and 16 councillors.
 - That any parish wards fixed or altered as part of a future electoral review be based on principles of broad proportionality.
7. A further approach be made to all parish councils, drawing their attention to the adoption of the guidelines in paragraph 6 above, and providing one further opportunity to request a revised number of parish councillors, provided that an order is able to be made by no later than the end of February next year to become effective at the May 2007 elections.

The meeting ended at 10.35am.