

## **Background information on the Community Governance Review**

Most people should now have had the letter from SHBC outlining the community governance review regarding Windlesham Parish Council (which encompasses the villages of Windlesham, Bagshot and Lightwater). I am not going to express an opinion on how you should respond, but I have put together some additional information that you may find useful in terms of background and other things to think about.

The four options presented by SHBC are shown in the attached diagram. These are not set in stone and the community's response may add further alternatives or shape these further. Option 1 is what was suggested by the petitioners from Windlesham village when requesting the governance review (creating a new Parish for just Windlesham village). Option 2 creates a new North Windlesham ward and is what Windlesham Parish Council requested (6 councillors per village). Option 3 creates the new ward but allocates councillors in accordance with the local populations. Option 4 is no change. Note that Option 2 was the situation before May this year when the boundaries changed, except that Windlesham village is split into two wards.

If you respond, note that SHBC cannot change the Borough Council boundaries, so the Bagshot Borough Ward will still include North Windlesham. It also can not create a parish ward that crosses a Borough ward boundary, so Windlesham village must be split into at least two wards. It otherwise is relatively unconstrained in terms of how any new Parish Councils/wards are drawn up. The terms of reference stay silent on how Bagshot and Lightwater villages would be treated if Windlesham village was separated – depending on your views you may think that a single Parish Council for both villages would be better, or that each village should have its own. The boundaries for the Parish(es) are not fixed either – if you feel that certain parts of the villages on the boundaries fit more naturally in a different area, or outside the Parish entirely, then do express that.

The fundamental question of the review is whether you think the villages would be better served by Parish Councils representing a smaller number of people. If you do not, then there is a further question of how you think it is best to allocate Councillors across that larger parish in terms of village identity, effective representation and electoral equality.

I have gathered some data on Parish Council size which may assist in understanding the issue. Windlesham Parish is a large parish. Out of the 8,607 precepting (rate-charging) parishes in England it is the 277<sup>th</sup> biggest (top 4%). This is skewed by the fact that over 5,000 Parishes have an electorate of less than 1,000. At that size, a governance review does not require them to have a Parish Council and can opt for 'meetings' instead. Parishes below this size commonly have uncontested elections and co-opted councillors (where someone is asked to be a councillor by the council). I don't think Windlesham Parish Council, or its successors should aim to become this small. If these small parishes are excluded, then Windlesham Parish is 277<sup>th</sup> biggest out of 3,553 (top 8%). Of the 19.4 million people who live in a parish area, 31% live in parishes larger than Windlesham and 69% live in parishes smaller than Windlesham. This is also slightly skewed by a small number of very large parishes, the top 10 have an average electorate of 60,000. The above suggests it must be possible to run a successful Parish Council at a smaller size than Windlesham currently. For information, Bagshot village has an electorate of 4,592, Lightwater 5,428 and Windlesham 3,490.

If smaller Parish Councils are created, then would this deliver better results for the villages? I consider this two have two main parts: resources and accountability. For resources, it seems intuitive that multiple smaller councils may incur duplicated costs that could be avoided with a single larger council. It may also be however that smaller councils can be more efficient and allocate resources more

effectively to where they are needed. Perhaps smaller councils are less wasteful, or they cut their cloth and make best use of the available funds. Looking at council size vs precept (the amount of money they collect per elector), there is no clear trend. If large Parish Councils were unequivocally better value for money then we would expect to see larger precepts for smaller Parishes and vice versa, assuming they deliver similar levels of service. This is not the case, so there must be other significant factors in determining the size of precept (and hence amount of spend per elector) than just council size.

In terms of accountability, smaller Parish Councils have a higher tendency to have uncontested elections and co-opted councillors. The recommended minimum number of councillors for a Parish Council is seven. In the case that the review concluded each of the three villages should have its own council, that would give a total of 21 councillors across the current Windlesham Parish area, vs. 18 currently. In the 2019 elections there were 26 candidates for these 18 positions (2015, 20). Looking at the election results on the SHBC website, several wards appear to have been uncontested over the last few election cycles with a number of other occasions where there was only one more candidate than seats. The same is true of Chobham and West End Parish councils.

If it is difficult to get candidates to stand, it is difficult to give electors a choice. That results in a council that is potentially not engaged due to positions not being challenged at the elections. As a case in point, of the 18 Windlesham Parish Councillors who were serving in the 2018-9 year, only 11 attended more than 50% of the 11 Full Council meetings. The overall attendance at these meetings (the most important Parish Meetings) was 63%. It is possible that having smaller Parish Councils encourages people to become more involved, but I have no evidence that is the case.

Hopefully the above is of some help if you want to respond to the Community Governance Review. Please consider what it is you want SHBC to achieve in terms of local governance, and what is the best way to go about doing that.

### **Information from**

#### **SHBC Community Governance Review Terms of reference:**

<https://surreyheath.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s15645/9c.%20CGR%20Annex%20C.pdf>

#### **Guidance on Community Governance Reviews:**

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/8312/1527635.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/8312/1527635.pdf)

#### **Parliamentary briefing on Parish & Town Councils:**

<https://www.nalc.gov.uk/library/our-work/1864-parliamentary-briefing-paper-2/file>

#### **Government statistics on Parish & Town Councils\*:**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-council-tax#council-tax-statistics-for-town-and-parish-councils-in-england>

*Government statistics on town councils data modified to give number of electors rather than number of equivalent Band D households, using the Windlesham Parish Council ratio of 2.93 electors per equivalent Band D household.*