

A guide for CGR consultees – autumn 2015

N.B. In this note the term "parish" refers to both parish and town councils.

This short guide explains what will normally be taken into account by the Borough Council when it considers submissions made about a Community Governance Review (CGR) during the consultation period which will run from September to November. By providing this advice at the outset, we hope that all consultees will be better able to provide us with the local views and information we will need for the review.

This information is prepared using the national guidance which can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-governance-reviews-guidance>. That guidance offers far more detail on some of the points below.

This CGR for the Borough will look at issues including:

- the alteration of boundaries and wards of existing parishes;
- the creation of new parishes within an existing parish area (the Borough is already fully parished); and
- changes to the electoral arrangements of parish councils.

At this stage of the review, the Borough Council has no adopted position on any of the issues included in the CGR, each of which must be considered on its individual merits.

The Borough Council will, very broadly speaking, assess issues in the CGR against some or all of the following three criteria (as applicable) using the views of local people to inform their deliberations.

1. Impact on interests, identities and community cohesion

Community governance arrangements should reflect the identity and interests of local communities. Electors should be able to identify clearly with the parish in which they are resident as this sense of community lends strength and legitimacy to the parish structure.

There is no right scale for a parish, with huge variation in the Borough, but the general rule is that a parish should be based on an area which reflects community identity and interest and which is of a size which is viable as an administrative unit. Parishes should therefore be natural communities reflecting people's expressed choices, rather than constructed to some model for defining parish sizes.

In terms of geography, it is also desirable for parish boundaries to be readily identifiable if possible. This can be by reference to physical features on the ground, or may follow adopted electoral ward boundaries in the Borough.

Community governance should also help with *community cohesion* i.e. how the different groups that make up communities get on with each other and whether they have a shared sense of what they want for their area. A key contributor to community cohesion is *integration* which is what must happen to enable new residents and existing residents to adjust to one another.

In carrying out the CGR the Borough Council should reject any proposals which it has reason to believe will act against the interests of either the local community or surrounding communities, particularly where the effect would be likely to damage community cohesion. It is also desirable that any new arrangements do not upset historic traditions but do reflect changes that have happened over time, such as population shift or additional development, which may have led to a different community identity.

Therefore, when sharing your views on this CGR you might like to tell us how your proposal will:

- help create distinctive and recognisable communities of interest, with their own sense of identity and a strong 'sense of place';
- reflect patterns of everyday life for those living and working in the affected area;
- build upon what new and existing communities have in common, and serve everyone in those communities;
- encourage a sense of civic values, responsibility and pride;
- generate a common interest in parish affairs and improve participation in elections; and/or
- promote strong and inclusive local community organisations and activities.

2. Impact on effective and convenient governance

An important aspect to the CGR is ensuring that local people have a say in the way their neighbourhoods are managed, with an effective parish level organisation able to do that on their behalf. The convenience and quality of services provided at parish level is also important.

Therefore, when sharing your views on this CGR you might like to tell us how your proposal will:

- help a community to be well run, with effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership;
- give easy access to good quality local services for new and existing residents;
- improve the capacity of a parish council to deliver better services and to represent the community's interests effectively; and/or
- give users of parish services a democratic voice in the decisions that affect them, as well as a fair share of the costs.

The national guidance is clear that the key issue for the CGR is how best to provide the conditions for effective and convenient local government in the long-term. However, the Borough Council recognises that it is inevitable that parish precepts (the parish council's share of the Council Tax) will influence some consultation responses for the CGR.

The average precept in the Borough in 2015/16 is around £47 a year but they range from under £5 to over £100 (see https://www.angliarevenues.gov.uk/pdf_files/A5_SEBC_2015v2.pdf), depending on the size of a parish and the services it directly provides. The level of a precept is also a democratically-accountable matter for an individual parish

council to decide, and will be influenced by what costs a parish has or wants to meet at a particular time, and the number of households eligible to pay Council Tax. It is therefore really hard to predict what the level of any precept will be in the future, just as it is hard to judge the impact (if any at all) of parish boundaries on matters such as property values or insurance premiums.

3. Impact on electoral arrangements

The main focus of any CGR is often on the boundaries of a new or existing parish. However, the Borough Council will also need to consider the governance of new or altered parishes in the form of their electoral arrangements i.e. the number of councillors and how they are organised and elected. Some of the proposals received from parish councils for this CGR focus entirely on these matters.

The size of a parish council (the number of councillors who are elected to it) varies significantly. The minimum number of parish councillors allowed is five, but there is no upper limit. Details of national research and advice are provided in the national guidance referred to at the start of this document. However, broadly speaking, each area should be considered on its own merits, having regard to its population, geography and the pattern of communities. The Borough Council will therefore pay particular attention to existing levels of representation, the broad pattern of existing council sizes and the take-up of seats at elections in its consideration of this matter. Parishes wishing to increase numbers of councillors must give strong reasons for doing so.

Parishes can also be divided into wards where the number and distribution of local government electors, or other local factors, would make a single election of councillors impractical or inconvenient. The Government's guidance is that the warding of parishes in largely rural areas that are based predominantly on a single centrally-located village may not be justified. Conversely, warding may be appropriate where the parish encompasses a number of villages with separate identities, a village with a large rural hinterland or where, on the edges of towns, there has been some urban overspill into the parish. However, each case should be considered on its merits, and on the quality of the information and evidence provided to the Borough Council during the course of the review.

When considering parish ward boundaries the Borough Council should consider the desirability of fixing boundaries which are, and will remain, easily identifiable, as well as taking into account any local ties. Principles of electoral equality (i.e. that each person's vote should be of equal weight so far as possible) will also be applied in determining the number of councillors to be elected from each ward and the number of electors they represent.

When considering the electoral arrangements for a parish, whether it is warded or not, the Borough Council must also consider any change in the number or distribution of the electors which is likely to occur in the next five years. The most recent electoral register should be used to gain an accurate figure for the existing electorate. Planning assumptions and likely growth within the area, based on planning permissions granted or, where they are in place, local plans should then be used to project an accurate five year electorate forecast. This will ensure that the review does not simply reflect a single moment but takes account of expected population movements in the short- to medium-term.

Information on electorates and forecast changes will be provided by the Borough Council at the start of the consultation period.

The Borough Council will also have regard to the potential for consequential impacts on its own electoral arrangements and those of the County Council in considering parish electoral arrangements.