

Issue No.	25. Great Thurlow and Little Thurlow
Area or Properties Under Review	Whether or not to combine the parish councils of Great and Little Thurlow. The review arose from a request from Little Thurlow Parish Council during consultation on the terms of reference for the CGR: <i>"Little Thurlow Parish Council request that you carry out an Independent Review of the need for two Parish Councils for Thurlow under your Community Governance Review."</i>
Parishes	Great Thurlow
Borough Ward	Little Thurlow
County Divisions	Withersfield
Method of Consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter to Parish Councils • Emails to elected representatives (Borough, County and MP) • Letters/emails to other stakeholders (see Appendix C) • Online questionnaire available for respondents to use
Projected electorate, warding arrangements and consequential impacts	<p>The Autumn 2015 electorate of Great Thurlow Parish was 150. Little Thurlow Parish was 190. There would be no consequential impacts on current borough wards or county divisions of bringing the two councils together.</p> <p>In terms of the formal options available under a CGR in relation to the specific terms of reference, these are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) no change; (b) merge the two parishes to form a single parish (which means councillors will represent both Little Thurlow and Great Thurlow as a single parish unit); or (c) create a Grouped Parish Council i.e. two separate parishes served by one council (which means there will still be councillors elected separately from both parishes to the grouped council). <p>There are also informal joint governance approaches which could be considered, but these are in the gift of the two parish councils and not a matter for a CGR.</p>
Analysis	<p>This issue was proposed by one of the two parishes for inclusion in the CGR. A range of views have been expressed in the first evidence gathering stage of the review, with no consensus emerging. In particular, Great Thurlow Parish Council have made it clear they favour no change to the current arrangements so, if the Borough Council felt that creating a single parish unit (grouped or merged) was the best way to reflect community identity and/or create the conditions for effective local government, then it would be doing so against the wishes of one of the two parties. It may also be that, reflecting subsequent comments from Little Thurlow Parish Council, a separate and bespoke review process is required which would look at informal ways to build upon the successes of the existing joint arrangements between the two villages, outside of formal constraints of a larger and generic CGR process. This could link to the Council's Families and Communities Strategy and would not preclude this issue being returned to in any future CGR.</p>

Summary of comments received during Phase 1

A. Response of Great Thurlow Parish Council

"Gt Thurlow PC are against any merger with Little Thurlow PC - we have stated this before and our position has not changed. We feel we have totally different views as most of our parishioners live in rented accommodation from the Thurlow Estate. We also feel that the financial gain would be minimal, in fact it would be detrimental when applying for grants for certain village projects. We hope you will bear these points in mind during your consultations."

B. Response of Little Thurlow Parish Council

In relation to the CGR criteria, the Parish Council has provided the following response in respect of how a single Thurlow Parish Council would:

1. Represent a distinctive & recognisable community of interest, with its own sense of identity & a strong 'sense of place'

For many years all significant Thurlow decisions have been made at joint meetings of Little & Great Thurlow Parishes. This indicates that effectively, both Parish Councils see Thurlow as the community. Recently a new children's playground project was started & successfully completed within 2 years by a committee of members from both Parishes. Two years ago we started a campaign to reduce speeding on our main road. Both Parish co-ordinated buying and where to site vehicle activated signs. This year campaigns to save the Pre School and to buy the village pub were organised by residents from both parishes and were supported by both Parish Councils. Not only do the Parish Councils act as if Thurlow was one community, residents from both parishes help to manage village activities such as the Thurlow Fayre, Thurlow Sports Club, Thurlow Village Hall and the Village Link. Each Parish doesn't act separately for these community activities, nor is each Parish named in these organisations. They're called 'Thurlow' not 'Little & Great Thurlow. Our communities' actions show that Thurlow is our community.

2. Reflect patterns of everyday life for those living and working in Thurlow and serve everyone in those communities

Most residents do not work in the village. The main local employer is the 'Thurlow Estate', who own houses in both parishes and employ people from both parishes. Primary education is provided by 'Thurlow VC School' (and pre-school) which caters for pupils from both parishes and eight neighbouring villages. Thurlow Garage serves the whole village. Social and leisure activities such as Thurlow Sports club, The 'Thurlow Cock ' Pub have been run by and used by, residents from both Thurlow parishes.

3. Encourage a sense of civic values, responsibility and pride and generate a common interest in parish affairs and improve participation in elections and/or promote strong and inclusive local community organisations and activities.

Currently all significant Thurlow decisions are taken at joint Parish Council meetings, which have no status in law. A single council would effectively make our current joint meetings the Parish meeting and lawful decisions, made at this one meeting. We'll no longer need both Parish councils plus a joint meeting to make every decision. Single Thurlow meetings will be more inclusive, meaningful and encourage greater participation.

4. Help a community to be well run, with effective and inclusive participation, representation & 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

A single Thurlow Council would need fewer meetings, resulting in reduced costs and more effective decision making. The meetings which would continue would be the joint Thurlow meetings, where all important issues are discussed. The meetings no longer needed would be the separate parish meetings which duplicate these joint discussions. About 35% of Little Thurlow PC's budget is administration. A single Thurlow Council, merged or grouped would halve administration costs. Thurlow will need one clerk, who'd administer fewer than half the current number of meetings and have less paperwork. Meeting costs would reduce from about £3,000 to under £1,250 per year in Little Thurlow alone. For small councils this is a considerable cost saving. The matters currently discussed solely at separate Parish Councils are planning, street lighting and specific environmental issues. These could remain separate parish decisions (if wanted) by forming a grouped council with two Parish sub committees with a remit to deal with planning etc. Thurlow governance will be better & more effective.

5. Give users of parish services a democratic voice in the decisions that affect them, as well as a fair share of the costs.

Single Parish Thurlow Meetings will make decisions where the democratic vote will have legal status. Abandoning the need for further meetings will reduce costs, whilst enhancing the democracy of Thurlow.

6. on parish precepts (the parish council's share of the Council Tax)

As a result of the cost savings outlined with the same services the parish precept will be reduced.

In support of this submission, the Chairman of the Parish Council has also written (*in more than one piece of correspondence, summarised here*) to clarify the Council's position regarding the review, expressing concerns that the generic CGR process (as explained in the terms of reference and Appendix B of this report) is not what Little Thurlow had envisaged or wanted when they requested the review in February 2015, and has caused disquiet among some residents (including concerns about the online questionnaire). He advises that improving the effectiveness and value for money of Thurlow governance was the reason the Parish Council requested a review and that, while the Council recognises that 'a single Thurlow Parish Council' is an option, initially focusing on one solution may not be the best way to identify the range of options necessary to create a governance solution which reflects the deep historic roots of the two parishes. The Parish Council believes that improvements will be best achieved through consensus when all options have been carefully considered in consultation with both Thurlow Parish Councils. In requesting the review, the Parish Council had wanted a comprehensive discussion about improvements with support from SEBC, and not just the focus on formal governance structures that a CGR entails; the effectiveness of joint meetings and the impact of formal and informal decisions of local businesses also community groups is also significant.

C. Local electors

Little Thurlow Parish Councillors produced a short summary of their submission arguments (and the counter-arguments) and the three options under a CGR in "The Village Link" (the newsletter for Great Thurlow, Little Thurlow and Great Wratting) in

October 2015. The article asked residents to let the Parish Council know their views.

19 people with "CB9 7" postcodes used the online response form to provide their views directly to the Borough Council during phase 1 of the review:

- 13 local electors (including a Borough Councillor for another part of the Borough) all with
- 1 local business (The Thurlow Estate)
- 5 parish councillors (3 from Little Thurlow and 2 from Great Thurlow)

While it is important not to attach statistical weight to these responses, they nonetheless provide some excellent local evidence to inform the Council's decision. As a matter of record, however, of the 19:

- **11** favoured no change to the current arrangements
 - *Most commonly because it reflects everyday life (cited by 6), creates community identity (4) and would give easy access to services (4). Respondents also felt it would generate interest in parish affairs (3) and improve the capacity of the parish council to represent community interests/provide services (2).*
- **6** favoured creating a Grouped Parish Council
 - *Most commonly because it would: improve the capacity of the parish council to represent community interests/provide services (5); and generate interest in parish affairs (4). Respondents also felt it would create a strong sense of community identity (3), reflect everyday life (2) and give easy access to services (1).*
- **2** favoured merging the two parishes to form a single parish
 - *Both felt it would improve the capacity of the parish council. Reflecting everyday life, creating community identity and giving easy access to services were also mentioned (all once).*

So, broadly speaking there was no consensus, with an 11:8 split (no change:change), and grouping being the more popular of the two change options. Those favouring no change tended to emphasise the value of reflecting everyday life and different community identities in terms of the CGR criteria. Those favouring change focused on the benefits in terms of more efficient and effective local parish governance. Those favouring no change emphasised the need for both parishes to want to make the change, and not one.

This pattern can be seen in anonymised extracts from their comments, which offer some good background evidence of local opinion and context:

Those favouring a change

- "Ideal scenario would be a single Parish Council, though a grouped council would ensure that residents from both villages would be equally represented. The grouped council would handle decision making much more efficiently, as very often decisions have to be deferred to wait for the other parish Council to respond when issues affect the whole community, which is very frequently. There would be much less administration, less time spent in meetings, a requirement for a single Clerk, and therefore much better use of public money".
- "Grouping should be considered if it can reduce the amount of money spent on administration, allowing more money to go towards services and amenities, and/or if

it enables decisions to be taken more rapidly and effectively. The current system of having a parish council meeting to discuss an issue, then a joint meeting to discuss it together, then separate meetings to implement the decisions, seems cumbersome, costly and inefficient. Do 400-500 residents who share many joint amenities and services, need two separate councils?"

- "I would find it completely unacceptable to create a single parish as Lt and Gt Thurlow have their own separate identities going back to the Domesday book of 1086. Lt and Gt Thurlow have always throughout history been part of big country estates and that still remains the case to this day. The villages were originally called Thurlow Parva and Thurlow Magna and both villages have their own Church, St Peters in Lt Thurlow and All Saints in Gt Thurlow. The question is how can the Parish councils work better together but respect the historic and separate identities of both villages. I believe the grouped council is the best way forward. If the grouped council option cannot be achieved the current situation as two parish councils is my 2nd preferred choice."
- "It seems to me unarguable that meetings should be in common not least as the School is in one Parish only but impacts on the residents of both. BUT: Whilst the nomenclature Little and Great remains in common use for road signs, Churches and "Halls", consideration must be given to a slowly, slowly approach to change, not least as Little Thurlow Green is an "outlier" with unresearched preferences, and the general historical associations that are such an important part of what binds people into a community."
- "With.. the considerable number of properties in Great Thurlow now being let to "newcomers" rather than the historical "local" farm workers with their traditions of decades of localism, it is going to take time to see how the sociological changes impact on the community(ies). It would be a shame to instantly throw out centuries of localism for the sake of an annual £5 per elector cost, when there is the opportunity to nearly halve the costs whilst allowing time for greater thought and consideration. Central Government is, reportedly, in favour of more subsidiarity and localism so let us take the time to reflect how that should be implemented. The numbers of electors in each of the Thurlow parishes exceeds that of others that remain unjoined, and as the pace of housing development accelerates around Haverhill it is important that the residents of the present Parishes have their, possibly very different, opinions properly considered and respected."

Those favouring no change

- "I am well aware that the two communities each have distinctive qualities, identities and populations. While the two villages are very different in character, they do of course have some shared resources, for example the recreation ground. I firmly believe that the current parish council arrangements with two separate councils has worked very well for many years in ensuring that the distinctive needs of each community are well met, while the occasional joint parish council meetings have also ensured that the views of each community are understood and taken into account when coming to decisions over local issues relevant to both communities. Speaking as a councillor on Great Thurlow Parish Council, we have a good complement of experienced and committed councillors who understand their community and the views of the local residents well, as I am sure do Little Thurlow. I firmly believe that the amalgamation of the two councils would introduce unnecessary tensions and lead to a lower standard of decision making, to the great disadvantage of both communities. I therefore firmly support the view of maintaining the current parish council arrangements which work perfectly well."
- "I strongly feel that there should continue to be two separate Councils for Great and

Little Thurlow. They are two separate villages with two very different identities and needs. Combining the two Parish Councils into one will dissolve the identities of the two separate villages into one and the residents voices will get lost. The system has worked well for a very long time and I feel that change, in this case, would NOT be progress."

- "I live in Little Thurlow Parish, and work in Great Thurlow Parish. I feel both have separate identities, are served by their own individual churches, and are made up differently (Gt Thurlow has a high degree of rented properties, whereas Lt Thurlow is principally Owner Occupied). That said, they have good relationships between the Parishes, and share when necessary (as do all Parishes across the Country), their facilities with adjoining Parishes (School and Recreation Ground). Both Parishes have been very well served by their own Parish Councillors for many, many years. It works at present. So much so - that each Parish agreed to meet up several times a year to compare notes - whilst still preserving their independence so that they could make a decision on their own. Gt Thurlow Parish Council was asked by Lt Thurlow Parish Council whether they wished to amalgamate. Gt Thurlow wrote an emphatic reply to say no. However, Lt Thurlow Parish Council still seek to join up the Parish Councils despite this clear expression of rejection. I would vote to leave the current position as it is, as it works - and to try and force an amalgamation when Gt Thurlow Parish Council do not want it strikes me as a take over - not democracy."
- "I live in Lt Thurlow. There is a different identity in Little Thurlow, to that in Gt Thurlow. Although I live in a rented property, most of the houses in this Parish are owner occupied - whereas in Gt Thurlow, most belong to the Thurlow Estate and are rented. Both have their own churches. The two parish councils represent each Parish perfectly well, and have done so without issue for many, many years. I understand that Gt Thurlow Parish Council has already voted once against amalgamation - so why force it upon them. I would vote to leave the status quo."
- "I do not believe this is the will of both parish councils and so were it to go ahead, would be tantamount to a hostile takeover of one parish council by another. This would be a worrying precedent to set for inter-village relations and could prove counter-productive to the stated aims of good governance. As a local resident, I do not wish the current arrangements to change."
- "I see both Parishes as different. Gt Thurlow is predominantly owned by the Thurlow Estate, and is lived in by current, or retired Estate employees, as well as short and long term tenants. Little Thurlow by contrast is 2/3rds owner occupied, has a school, and I think has a different feel. Both Parishes conduct their business very well, and independently of each other. That said, I know that whenever an investment project arises on the Sports Ground in Gt Thurlow, both Parish Councils discuss with each other implications and funding and practicalities as a matter of good neighbourliness and information sharing (by way of a joint Parish Council meeting), but revert to their own Parish Council meetings for the decision process - which I understand Gt Thurlow Parish Council prefer. As a business dealing with both Parishes, I have no issue or problem dealing with both Parish Councils in the current way in which they are set up. If I may suggest - "if it ain't broke - don't mend it" comes to mind. If both Parishes are adamant that they wish to join up together - then we would of course then have no problem with dealing with a singular Parish Council - but I would hope that it was a mutually agreeable merger of the two Parishes rather than a take over bid by one over the other. If for instance Lt Thurlow PC was seeking this and Gt Thurlow PC was not - I suspect resentment would grow."

D. Cllr Mary Evans (Clare Division)

Proposals for any change to the governance of Great and Little Thurlow must be consulted upon with care and in detail. I would like assurances that residents will be fully

consulted.

Map

