

Community Governance Review Consultation Response

Worth Parish Council was disappointed that four of its number commenced campaigning for a separate Crawley Down Council without any prior notification to the Council as a body. Prior to Summer 2021, there had been no indication from any quarter that the WORTH PARISH COUNCIL was not providing strong accountable local government and leadership. Nor had there been a sustained campaign by any community group.

We will express our response under the following headings

- Better local democracy
- Improved community engagement
- More effective and convenient delivery of local services and local government
- The identity and interests of the community
- Enhanced community cohesion
- Economic considerations
- Conclusion

Better local democracy

The council comprises of only two wards of roughly equal electoral size, with overlapping communities and services. There has never been an issue with co-opting Councillors onto either ward.

At the time of the latest Boundary Commission review, it was noted that by 2027, the electorate of both villages would be the same – c4,800. The Council discussed seeking a Community Governance Review itself, to examine reducing the number of Councillors from 17 (currently 9 for Crawley Down ward, 8 for Copthorne ward) to 16, 8 for each ward. However, it decided to wait until after the Boundary Commission review to consider in more detail. This review did make a change impacting Crawley Down's representation on the Principal Council, removing Turners Hill but leaving two Councillor seats, thus able to focus absolutely with a single voice on Crawley Down issues regarding planning and sports and leisure services.

Local democracy is already well-served by the existing arrangements.

Improved community engagement

During the course of 2019, due to the perceived restrictive nature of conducting business at Council meetings due to Standing Orders and other legal requirements, two Working Parties were formed, one for each village.

Membership of both Working Parties involves Councillors and members of the public and their remits have evolved to incorporate consideration of any project that will enhance the local area. Recent examples already include consultation on whether to introduce a one-way system in Copthorne and how to improve the appearance and accessibility of the area in front of the shops in Crawley Down.

This initiative has been very successful. Community engagement is now strong through these Working Parties, which have attracted members of the public to join these groups, concentrating on immediate community issues, and promoting ideas without taking on the responsibilities of being a Parish Councillor.

This initiative is successfully engaging the Council with both communities.

More effective and convenient delivery of local services and local government

Banking on this success, in early 2021 a Governance Review Working Party was formed, made up of Chairs and Vice Chairs of Council and Committees to examine the whole Council structure to ascertain if it was fit for the purpose and the most efficient way to conduct Council processes and business. It used evidence from a Staffing Review conducted during 2020 in order to ensure that staffing levels would be able to support any changes introduced. Its aim was to reduce time spent in the Council meeting room whilst improving the level of service to local residents and the scope of improvements to local

infrastructure. An example of the success of this Working Party is that the Council Planning & Highways Committee meetings have reduced from around an hour to an average of fifteen minutes.

Experience shows that a larger council can harness greater depth and range of skills from both councillors and staff and can afford projects which would be far beyond the reach of an authority with a smaller tax base; one example being the call in to the Secretary of State to overturn decisions relating to development on two major sites in Crawley Down, the cost of which approached £100,000.

Much has been made in literature supporting the division of the parish, of the location of the Council offices being in Copthorne, with Crawley Down residents having to drive a seven-minute journey to visit. The current premises, on the first floor of the Parish Hub in Borers Arms Rd, are occupied as a result of a very advantageous lease agreement, which allows for a 15-year rent free period. This office provision provides a convenient location and is excellent value and responsible use of public money. It is worth noting that there is currently no office space available to rent in Crawley Down on reputable agency websites. With the government being urged to change legislation to allow for virtual/hybrid meetings, the venue of Council meetings will become much less of an issue as residents will have the option to attend meetings from their own homes enhancing the wide use already made by residents of electronic communication.

Worth Parish residents already benefit from a representative body which optimises significant economies of scale while still maintaining close engagement with its communities.

The identity and interests of the community

Underpinning all the above, the Council has developed a Vision document – a business plan covering a rolling five-year period – which identifies both long- and short-term projects. During workshops held in both villages, it was established that the top three priorities were the same for each – installation of a CCTV system, joint funding for a youth support officer and resolution of traffic/speeding issues.

Both villages already have strong identities largely independent of any legislative representation. Each enjoy residents' associations, which complement the activities of the Parish Council, and are represented on the Working Parties mentioned above.

The deterioration of the abandoned Royal Oak has been a matter for concern since it closed. The Parish Council has had the pub registered – and re-registered – as an Asset of Community Value. It has corresponded directly with the owner requesting meetings to no avail. It managed to gain outright ownership of the car park immediately adjacent to the pub to secure this facility for ongoing community use, and to prevent commercial exploitation of the site. It has strenuously objected to proposals to convert the pub into residential dwellings. MSDC advised that it would not consider a compulsory purchase order. It is difficult to see what more could have been done by Worth Parish Council or indeed any other public body.

We conclude that there is no evidence that dividing the Parish will provide any benefits in this category, indeed the opposite is more likely.

Enhanced Community Cohesion

Worth Parish Council is both reactive – quick to respond to changing circumstance - and proactive. It recognised a need to better engage with all of the community and created a new post of Communication and IT Administrator to promote the Council and its activities within the Parish, giving residents the opportunity to interact more with the Council, thus enhancing community engagement.

Low attendance by residents at meetings evidenced that the Council needed to employ more hybrid means of communication via modern technologies and platforms.

Because the two villages are close together there is significant cross over between their residents to access facilities such as doctors, schools, transport and leisure facilities. Creating an artificial barrier, should a separate Parish Council for Crawley Down be formed, presents a risk to the existing social cohesion that currently exists between the two villages.

Economic considerations

Worth Parish Council's reconfiguration of the proposers' budget of £160,000 using figures based on factual evidence, gives a total precept value of nearly £186,000, a discrepancy of £26,000. It should be noted that the proposers' budget will only allow the basic functions of a Parish Council to be carried out, playground and open space maintenance, and litter bin emptying, with no provision for staffing cover for absences. There is very little (£15,000 only) for any project work, or contingencies, and no allocation for two of the three aspirations identified in the Vision document – provision of CCTV and provision of a youth support worker. It is difficult to see how any of the aspirations of the new Council – investing in sporting facilities, resolving the Royal Oak, resolving speeding and other local issues – can be successfully addressed with such meagre funding.

Worth Parish Council has compiled estimated budgets for separate Crawley Down and Copthorne Councils, and both entail an increase in Band D tax; an increase of 10.5% for Crawley Down, and nearly 36% for Copthorne, an average of over 20% across the two villages.

Worth Parish Council has considered all elements of dividing the existing Council into two, benefits presented by the Promoters are almost all illusory and these do not justify the increase in cost, not only for the division itself, but also for ongoing funding.

This proposed division comes at a time when many residents are experiencing economic difficulties and Parish Councils are being urged to cluster together to create a greater voice in local government. As the fourth largest Council in terms of electorate in Mid Sussex, behind the three towns, Worth Parish Council already has a recognised presence in the district, an influence which can only diminish with two smaller entities.

The benefits being claimed cannot be justified economically.

Conclusion

Worth Parish Council provides strong accountable government and leadership and is a proven capable place shaper.

Crawley Down's "Voice" will not benefit from a division as suggested.

The Council has undergone a structural and cultural change over the past few years, such as the creation of village Working Parties, clearer accountability for delivery and a modernisation programme harnessing the benefits of technology. There has been insufficient time for these changes to fully manifest themselves due to Covid and as the majority of resources and efforts being diverted to deal with this opportunistic Community Governance Review.

The differing aspirations of the two villages are already fully considered and are progressing via its village Working Parties. It has been proved that the core aspirations of the two villages are the same, and these are being facilitated via the Vision document and the upskilling of Council resources.

The current Council office and meeting space are provided at minimum cost to the public purse.

The Council asks for time to continue its re-structuring and if residents feel that this is still not working, then it will ask for a Community Governance Review itself in time for the following election in 2027 by which time a more sustained and widely supported campaign for division might have materialised.

Worth Parish Council fully supports any change to the name of the Council that better reflects the names of its villages and geographical location and strongly believes that addressing this simple matter will resolve a substantial part of the proposers' concerns without incurring significant avoidable cost, upheaval and loss of economies of scale.

Worth Parish Council urges MSDC to resolve to keep the current local government status quo and to vote against the division.