

## **Worth Parish Council Public Meeting held at the Parish Hub, Copthorne on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2022**

Chairman of the Meeting: Douglas Denham St. Pinnock

Councillor promoting the division: John Hitchcock

Councillors representing Worth Parish Council: Tony Dorey, and Trevor Hodsdon

Also present: Harry Quenault (Note Taker) and 19 Members of Public.

### **1. Introduction**

The Chairman opened the meeting and introduced the panellists as noted above. The Chairman explained that he was elected as an independent chairman for this meeting only. The Chairman went on to explain that both sides have agreed not to record the meeting and asked that those in attendance respect this.

### **2. Council Representatives on the Council's Division**

The Chairman invited the Council's Representatives a chance to speak on their reasoning.

Cllr Dorey stated his current interest in the division and his position within the Council. Cllr Dorey then stated the following two questions for the thought of the public.

Which solution best reflects the identities of the community concerned?

Which solution is most effective and convenient?

Cllr Dorey asked for a show of hands over the identity of whether they recognise or feel part of Worth Parish Council if they were either a Crawley Down Resident or a Copthorne Resident. He then informed the public that they were indeed both. He then explained that he does agree with the promoters that there is a current issue with identity. One way to counter this would be a name change from Worth Parish Council to Crawley Down and Copthorne Parish Council.

Cllr Dorey then moved on to the issue of a division. It was stated that both parish Councils would need a Clerk and the services that are currently being undertaken would be limited. The flexibility of the current service would be lost if the Council was divided. The increase of Council tax would be expected at a 35% increase to fund Copthorne Parish Council if there was a divide. Cllr Dorey said they believe that this will lead to 'less service but for more money' something that the promoters of the split oppose but provide little evidence. The issue of convenience for local Councillors is negligible due to the current drive needed to any destination in Crawley Down. The actual meeting attendance is normally low at Council meetings and therefore convenience is not so much of an issue for residents of both villages. The general cost of the divide is widely understated by the promoters. Although they believe there will be a legal transfer of £10,000, the representative has consulted a lawyer who thinks an additional legal cost to Worth Parish Council of around £10,000 would be foreseeable. The cost of a new locum clerk could exceed £20-25,000. There will also be unknown costs that include current staff and the implications of a change in contract and any legal costs surrounding that.

### **3. Promotors on the Council's Division**

The Chairman invited the promotor a chance to speak on their reasoning.

Cllr Hitchcock explained his role in the Council. He explained the research that had come about via the petition that was presented to the village of Crawley Down on a divide leading to 500 signatures in support of this. Cllr Hitchcock explained that a benefit would include a clearer identity when working with the community and other local groups. He explained that currently some of the representatives of Worth Parish Councillors are co-opted rather than elected, the promoters would propose elections in future if there was a divide. The budget could be financially met by the Council. The suggestion of a better democracy with Councillors being elected to represent their village. Cllr Hitchcock explained that there would be an improvement on services which would include a more responsive office team that would cut administration. Council tax would be directed to the village only. The community benefit would include both villages being able to independently fight against any new developments with more strength. There have been some agreements between the promoters and the representatives. The agreement over reserves has been accounted for with the current £340,000 split between the two parishes. Another is the partnership of working together with one another over certain issues and that the first election would happen in May 2023.

Cllr Hitchcock explained the finances as discussed with his recommendation. He stated his belief that the evidence in their budget has been completed for Crawley Down Village Council but that he is unsure any research has been completed by Worth Parish Council in their draft. A draft of the new Village Council budget has been reviewed by the Clerk and Councillors of Worth and has undergone tough scrutiny. The budget would be used predominantly for Crawley Down and will be focused on the promotion of that village. There will be a small increase for Copthorne residents in Council Tax in the short term. The building that we are currently using would be an asset of Copthorne Parish. Cllr Hitchcock explained that the fairness on Copthorne may not been seen in the short term but would benefit both villages individually in the long term.

#### **4. Public Question Time**

The Chairman opened the floor for questions from the public.

##### **Point of clarification from a MOP:**

**In regards to the election of Councillors rather than co-option. Co-option is the best option when there is a lack of people who wish to be a Councillor.**

Cllr Hodsdon spoke on the common practice of co-option without the need for a traditional political badge.

Cllr Hitchcock explained that he did not think that co-option was a bad thing, but explained that a new village Council would promote the interest of those who wish to be elected.

##### **Why did the representative speak in favour of those who don't want to have a political badge?**

Cllr Hodsdon explained that his comment was sourced from a House Of Commons Library report dated September 2021 over the commonality of and reasons for co-opted Councillors across Councils, one of them being not to be associated with political elections but still wishing to serve their community.

##### **Point of clarification from a MOP:**

**The current situation with the lease of the Parish Hub (found in Copthorne) is currently paying a peppercorn rent until the full loan is repaid. Then rent will be paid at half the market value of the building for five years and then the full market value of the rent will be charged.**

### **What would happen to a Council employee if they wish to not accept the new terms if the Parish Council's divides?**

Cllr Hodsdon from the Council explained that if they enter into consultation and then negotiation, they had a decision right of resignation. He went on to say that the current issue with the division assumption position made by the promoters is it does not allow for the various outcomes of consultation with staff which may lead to different considerations. It does not also provide for any monetarily for any redundancy payments which could arise.

Cllr Hitchcock explained he did not want to comment on this due to his inexperience of the issue.

### **Why does the division benefit Crawley Down more than Copthorne and is this to create more power for themselves?**

Cllr Hitchcock explained that the village of Crawley Down does not have a current identity and wants its own Council. Therefore, as the people have voted towards this it was for himself to be involved in promoting the division. The figure of 10% of the electoral roll signed the petition in favour of a divide when it was circulated by Crawley Down promoters.

Cllr Dorey explained that he agreed with the promoter about the electoral roll being reached but said that the petition was misleading and didn't establish clear facts to the Crawley Down residents and did not take into consideration the residents of Copthorne.

### **Why did the promotor want the split?**

Cllr Hitchcock explained that it was part of his duty for the residents of Crawley Down who feel that the current parish Council does not represent the village and the community felt that Worth Parish Council stood on its own in Copthorne. One of the promoters elected in the most recent election put the divide in his manifesto and wants to deliver on his promise.

Cllr Dorey explained that when the petition was conducted in Crawley Down, the residents thought that the split would lead to a referendum and that some of the facts within the promotion of the split were incorrect. This may have misled the residents.

### **Why is the Royal Oak part of the argument for the divide?**

Cllr Hitchcock explained he is not involved with the Royal Oak.

The member of the public explained that the other promoter could not explain where he would find the £2.5 million needed for the save the pub campaign.

**Cllr Dorey explained that the £2.5 million is unfounded and there were no facts to back the evidence over the Section 106 money proposed to fund the regeneration of the pub.**

Clarification from a member of the public stated the facts about the purchase of the Royal Oak and the issue the owner had when faced with the condition of the pub. It was thought that 3.5 million would be needed for the effective running of the pub so that it was able to make money. It was explained why would Mid Sussex contribute more money than the asset is worth.

### **Why was this not bought before full Council?**

Cllr Hitchcock offered the Council to put the suggestion of the divide within the minutes of full Council, but this was declined.

There was some discussion over this that wasn't relevant to the case.

Cllr Dorey agreed that the minutes did not show this suggestion. He went on to say that he initiated an invite to the promoters to talk about the divide but that this was not accepted. He explained that the petition was floated before any proposal to the Council had been taken.

**Why would the divide improve speeding issues and road matters when they are for Highways to consider?**

Cllr Hitchcock explained that speeding was a big issue for both parishes, and he believed that the divide would allow for both villages to push harder for this.

Cllr Dorey explained that speeding was an issue and explained that Worth Parish Council has a hard time getting results, but the matter was best resolved in a larger capacity.

**Was it the case that all the Parish Councillors (apart from one) voted against a name change for the use of Parish Hub for Worth Parish Council?**

Both parties agreed that this was the case.

**Why doesn't the current Parish Council have a referendum on the future of a divide?**

Cllr Dorey explained that this was something that could not happen within the legal framework, but there were three possible outcomes. These included staying the same, a name change or a divide in Council.

**What would be the cost of the referendum?**

Cllr Dorey explained that the cost would be approximately £9,000 if it was a mail-in vote but that an online poll would be lower in cost.

Cllr Hitchcock wanted to express his support of a poll for the local community and would offer a true reflection on the thoughts of the residents.

**Is the current set-up of the Parish Council with two villages being included an unusual arrangement?**

Both sides agreed that many Parish Councils have a similar set-up to Worth Parish Council.

**Is Worth Parish Council considered a small Parish Council?**

Both parties agreed that Worth Parish Council is considered a medium-sized Parish Council but large within Mid Sussex.

**5. Final Remarks**

The Chairman invited Cllr Hitchcock to share their final remarks.

Cllr Hitchcock explained that he sincerely believed that a separate Crawley Down Village Council would be good for the village and that the election of members would be something that could be achieved. The budget is something that the promoters of the divide quoted

is something he feels can be achieved. The long-term impact will also benefit both villages. There will be a shortfall in the Budget position for Copthorne Village and its residents but believes that the future will be bright for the village. However, he addressed that however you feel on the divide it is important to write a response to Mid Sussex to get your voice heard.

The Chairman then invited the Cllr Dorey to do the same.

Cllr Dorey explained he did not feel like the timing was correct in terms of a divide and that the current parish Council is well-run. The current Parish Council has a good number of reserves and a good team of staff. He explained that he had an interest in Copthorne and Crawley Down and introduced working parties for both villages. Cllr Dorey explained that he was unsure that the promoters cared about the Copthorne Village and were only doing this to benefit their Village. However, he also requested that however you feel about the divide it is important to write a response to Mid Sussex to get your voice heard.

**The meeting was closed by the chairman at 8:44 pm.**