

Worth Parish Council Meeting held at The Haven Crawley Down
4th March 2022 at 7:30pm

Chairman of the Meeting: Andy Beams

Councillors promoting the division: Alex Cruickshank, Ian Gibson and John Hitchcock

Councillors representing Worth Parish Council: Trevor Hodsdon, Chris Phillips and Kerry Scott

Andy Beams welcomed visitors to the meeting and explained how the evening would proceed.

Councillor Ian Gibson read from his speech which is below:

Good evening, thank you for coming tonight.

Can I start by getting a quick understanding of my audience?

Can you put your hand up if you're a resident of Crawley Down?

Thank you and if you're a resident of Worth put your hand up.

This highlights the key issue that we are discussing tonight: IDENTITY; we think of ourselves as living in Crawley Down or Copthorne, not Worth.

I am going to say a few words about the importance of identity in local government and then talk about the level of service that you could expect from a new Council

What is involved in setting up the new Council and finally, why this is happening now.

The importance of Identity in local government

For those who don't know me I am Ian Gibson; I have lived in Crawley Down for 24 years and I am a Worth Parish Councillor; a District Councillor and your County Councillor; however, in none of these roles am I representing just Crawley Down.

Lack of identity was one of the problem that I highlighted in 2019 in the leaflet that I delivered to every property in the village.

Crawley Down is effectively invisible in local government; it is twinned with Copthorne in Worth Parish Council; with Turners Hill in Mid Sussex District Council and with part of East Grinstead in West Sussex County Council.

A village with a population of 6,000 should have a separate voice in local government.

Both Crawley Down and Copthorne are classed as large villages in Mid Sussex along with Cuckfield, Hassocks, Hurstpierpoint and Lindfield, all of which have a Parish Council.

There are 15 other parish councils in Mid Sussex with smaller populations, one as low as 300. All Parish Councils are treated equally in local government, it is not dependent on size.

Crawley Down already has the basis for a clear identity. It is geographically separate. There are a large number of active community groups and sports clubs which represent Crawley Down in leagues. It also has a Neighbourhood Plan which set out the criteria that new developments must follow.

A Parish Council that speaks for just Crawley Down will be better placed to address local issues than one which has to balance its position across more than one village.

So what level of Service could you expect from a new council

The funding for your Parish Council is a very small part of the Council Tax bill that will soon drop on your doormat. The bill for a Band D property this year will be £2,023.90. Just £62.89 of this is for your Parish Council.

Since 2015 Worth Parish Council has had no offices in Crawley Down and has held no Council meetings in the village. Residents have to travel to Copthorne if they want to ask questions or speak to the Council about planning applications or other issues.

A Crawley Down Village Council would rent offices and hold all its meetings in the village.

Worth Parish Council has a complex structure of Committees and sub-Committees that in total hold some 60 meetings a year. A Crawley Down Village Council will adopt a simpler model of one council meeting per month like Turners Hill which will significantly reduce the amount of time spent in preparing minutes and agendas by the Parish Clerk and in meetings by Councillors.

Since Worth Parish Council moved out of the village in 2015 it has become increasingly difficult to find residents who are prepared to represent Crawley Down as Councillors. Attending meetings in Copthorne twice a month is not an attractive long term option. The creation of a separate Council for Crawley Down that holds its meetings in the village will lead to more residents willing to become Councillors.

A new village Council dedicated to Crawley Down would do the simple things that have eluded WPC, like installing speed indicators on the rat runs through the village. Solving the Royal Oak would become a top priority and ALL the Council tax money that funds the Council would be spent back in the village.

So what is involved in setting up the new Council?

Firstly, it is important to understand that Worth Parish Council is not being abolished. Staff will not be made redundant and contracts cancelled. There will be no need to renegotiate leases.

A new Council will be established for Crawley Down and the remainder of Worth Parish Council is then expected to change its name to Copthorne Parish Council.

The new Council will be created in May next year when its first Councillors are elected in the scheduled local elections. We expect the number of Councillors to be 9 as at present.

TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment)) rules will apply to the creation of the new Council. We expect to see the same staff doing, broadly, the same work. Worth Parish Council has two qualified Clerks, a Finance Officer, two Handymen and a Communications and IT Administrator. We think that a Crawley Down Village Council will need a Clerk, a Finance Officer, a Handyman and in the longer term an assistant.

Many Clerks are also the Finance Officer and Turners Hill have just appointed a new Clerk who will also be the Finance Officer.

The Petitioners, 523 of us signed the petition, have published a draft budget last August which demonstrates that the new Council could achieve the promised benefits without an increase in the Parish element of the Council tax.

The Parish Council has challenged our figures, but they have inflated the energy costs to reflect the recent increases and failed to take account of reduced administration in the staff costs. Otherwise their assessment agrees with our budget and we thank them for that endorsement.

When we revise the budget in preparation for the new Council we will need to include the jump in energy costs, I'm afraid that is inescapable.

The Copthorne Councillors opposing the split have suggested that it will cost, well various figures at various times over the last 6 months - £50,000, £100,000, £300,000 – and they seem to have settled on £150,000 but, even as late as yesterday, they have not published a breakdown or any evidence to support this figure, or indeed any other.

We have studied a large number of recent new Councils and found no evidence of such costs. We spoke again yesterday with the Clerk and Chairman of Hextable Parish Council who split from Swanley Town Council in 2008 who recall only that Sevenoaks District Council gave them a loan of £20,000. This is a Bradford City Council report on the creation of Bingley Town Council in 2015 which includes a figure of £20,000 for set up cost, precisely the figure we published last August.

We are forced to conclude that the figure of £150,000 has been published to scare you. Please ask them for details tonight, are they counting redundancy costs, or anticipating constructive dismissal cases. Press them for evidence, don't let them hide behind phrases like staff confidentiality – they can talk generally about numbers, maximum costs and probabilities. It is called Risk Assessment.

It goes without saying that it would be more advantageous for all Councillors to work towards a well-managed split and we are disappointed that the Parish Council has chosen to resist the creation of a new Council so aggressively.

And finally, why this is happening now

The benefits of a separate Parish Council for Crawley Down have been evident for many years, in fact since Turners Hill left Worth Parish Council in the 1990s. So why has the petition been brought forward now.

Note from Chris, Turners Hill Parish Council was set up in 1986.

When current construction is completed in 4 years there will have been 30% growth in both villages since 2010. The villages will be the same size and the Parish population will have risen to around 12,000, past the threshold at which a Parish Council should consider becoming a Town Council.

But the villages are facing different challenges. Proposed housing developments are drawing Crawley Down into East Grinstead, while Copthorne faces a similar challenge from Crawley with the threat of a further 2,500 homes on Crabbett Park either side of Old Hollow.

Administratively, May 2023 is a good moment to go separate ways. The District Council elections are due to be held then so the £8,000 cost of separate elections for the new Parish Council will be avoided.

The Copthorne Neighbourhood Plan was finally completed last year, so both villages now have the protection of current Neighbourhood Plans.

I am not going to pretend that the split will be as financially beneficial for Copthorne as it is for Crawley Down in the short term. There is an imbalance in the land and buildings owned or leased by Worth Parish Council. The lion's share will go to Copthorne as both the sports pavilion and the offices are there. The down side for Copthorne is that the associated running costs and loan repayments will fall on them. However, the level of debt is very low, the loan for the pavilion was paid off this year and the lease agreement for the offices is such that the loan repayment of £10,000 a year is equivalent to the £10,000 budgeted by the Petitioners for the rental of offices in Crawley Down. We think that this is fair, especially as the villages will be the same size when the 500 homes on Copthorne West are completed.

Of course, the new council in Crawley Down will have the same ability to take out low interest loans from the Public Works Loan Board for capital projects. This is one of the key opportunities that we expect the new Council to exploit.

I look forward to your questions and I will be around afterwards if anyone wants to ask about wider issues relating to my District or County Councillor roles.

John; have I missed anything?

Councillor Kerry Scott read from his speech which is below:

Good Evening and thank you for sparing the time on a dark and dismal Friday to meet here tonight. I am the Vice Chair of Worth Parish Council and am accompanied by fellow Councillors Trevor Hodsdon and Chris Philips. You may have seen me around the Village on the Father Christmas Float, a Churchwarden at All Saints, or with the fearsome Speed Camera.

All of us on the Council have been hard at it for the last few weeks trying to get to grips with just what is involved with this Corporate Governance Review resulting from the Petition put forward by the four Petitioners, now called "Promoters", that Crawley Down should have its own Village Council rather than be part of Worth Parish Council.

Worth Parish Council as a whole hasn't yet reached a final opinion on the merits of a separate Council for Crawley Down. We do though have responsibility to ensure that the residents of our villages understand the relevant issues hence we have arranged tonight's meeting.

The principal authority – Mid Sussex - in performing this review, has advised that the main considerations which will decide whether to divide or not are:

Which outcome better reflects the identities and interests of the community in the affected areas and is the most effective and convenient.

These are very subjective criteria. Our objective this evening is to find out why the Promoters have concluded that a separate Crawley Down Parish Council would better reflect the identities of their and, my village and would be a more effective and convenient alternative to the status quo.

And, most importantly, are they right?

With all the above in mind, let's focus on the reasons stated by the Promoters for the division, and whether they justify the disruption and costs involved.

Whilst the comments I will make now may appear to be largely negative about a possible division, I do think we need to bring some realism and practical common sense to the issue.

Do the Promoters think that, Crawley Down is a poor relation and misses out because the Council meets at the Copthorne Hub? This is just not so as can be seen in the Minutes of our Meetings and the expenditure dedicated to the two villages. Let us also remind ourselves that there are 9 Crawley Down Councillors and only 8 Copthorne.

They claim that a separate Council would “give Crawley Down a clearer identity”. Don’t **both** villages already have, and will always have, perfectly clear identities, defined in many different ways over the years, irrespective of which Parish or District Council they belong to?

The Promoters suggested that the Villages are very different in Layout and Character. Although both villages differ in layout, are they really “very different in character”. For example, they have a very similar socio-economic make up, primary schools, doctors, road network and public transport. Both have poor support for our young people and share significant concerns relating to anti-social behaviour, road congestion and air traffic. Indeed, it seems that the similarities far outweigh the differences and, by continuing to work together, in one Council, the Villages can cooperate to make improvements.

What are we missing here?

Both villages have their own Environmental Working Parties, members of which include local stakeholders, representatives of village community groups and local Councillors. In practice, this means that the needs of each Village, at grass roots levels, can be placed before the Council for decision, resourcing and subsequent action **effectively and conveniently**. Both Working Parties have their own budgets but it is amazing how many similar ideas are put forward by both.

The two Working Parties mentioned above have put forward separately, their Vision for a strategic plan to prioritise major initiatives for the Council to progress over the next few years. This exercise clearly showed that the priorities of both villages are very aligned - for example, CCTV to make our villages and roads safer and the need to provide better support services to our young people came out top in **both** villages.

The promoters say that a separate Crawley Down Village Council will:

“Open an office and hold meetings in the village” – Opening a new office in Crawley Down represents a duplication of people and equipment. Who needs more Offices and bureaucrats these days?

Is the current arrangement really so inconvenient and inaccessible and don’t most people now use technology to make distance largely irrelevant? There are excellent transport facilities between the villages?

Until about 5 years ago the Offices were in Crawley Down and visits to them were a very rare event except by Councillors.

In terms of holding meetings in Crawley Down, this has been done in the past and is straightforward but the extra expense has to be justified when a room is available at no cost at the Hub. When this can be justified, like tonight, arrangements are made.

The Promoters mention a number of things they would prioritise and perhaps do if they sat in a new Council. The question is “what has stopped them from doing this in the past”? And why would a new Council and the concomitant infrastructure be required for this.

I cannot recall any issue raised by the Promoters in Council that has not been discussed and taken forward. Maybe, during the Q and A later we can look at this more?

As an example though, new development here, the Council strongly supported and financed the Neighbourhood Plan which provides the only protection available locally under current legislation. Subsequently the Council took action many times in defence of the Plan including expenditure exceeding £90K on a failed appeal to the Secretary of State. **Perhaps the promoters might explain what extra could have been done and how a smaller Council would have afforded this?**

So, I think you can appreciate it is difficult to see how creating a new Crawley Down Village Council will make anything better.

But let's think about the costs of any division. At the end of the day someone, i.e. you and me have to pay for Council services.

The promoters claim they can deliver "an improved level of service without any increase in your Council Tax". If you pay peanuts you get monkeys!!

After our detailed research, we have published our analysis of both their illustrative annual budget and set up costs. Our conclusion is - that to provide an effective Parish Council service, a precept increase of over 10% would be required. For a poorer service this could be lower but is this what the residents want or deserve. Allowing for the initiatives that the promoters suggest they might pursue or those identified in the Vision would bump this up considerably. The Council has properly budgeted for these in their accounts. We need also to consider the impact on Copthorne village where a division would likely require an increase of 35% to the existing precept.

Another major consideration is the costs directly related to the actual Division. Our published research shows that it is likely these costs would exceed £150,000 of taxpayer's money.

The Promoters are saying that the costs for the division would be minimal, and a Crawley Down Council can run on a budget requiring no increase in precept; quite frankly that is contrary to all previous experience of Council Divisions elsewhere. **Is it the Promoters being naive or is this deliberately misleading.**

Furthermore the Promoters suggest is that "Copthorne faces becoming part of greater Crawley and Crawley Down is being drawn into East Grinstead". Surely, neither of these possibilities are attractive to those of us that live in either village. Dividing into two separate, smaller Councils could make these scenarios more rather than less likely?

In summary, we have great difficulty in understanding why the Promoters believe that undertaking this division is:

- in the best interests of Crawley Down and Copthorne and our existing loyal staff
- how it will better reflect the identities and interests of the community
- and how it offers a more effective and convenient local government arrangement for the future?

It is also of real concern that this whole exercise diverts valuable resources and focus away from the real issues our residents are facing.

So why make the Division when it seems the existing arrangements serve our residents conveniently and effectively. We will listen carefully tonight to see if the Promoters can make a better case for it.

We hope that our calling this Meeting will provide the answers we need to respond to the consultation in a fully informed manner.

Please do respond and make your views known to Mid Sussex.

We thank you for your attention.

Andy Beams asked for questions from the residents:

Rowfant Resident: Can you provide evidence of what this transfer will cost, can you give us an idea?

Ian Gibson went through the costs involved where Councils have split in Kent and Yorkshire. He advised no Councillors would be elected until the elections in 2023 but the new Council could be brought into existence before the election.

Chris Phillips quoted from an HR Statement.

Ian Gibson introduced Barrister Sandy Gibson, who advised that if the staff do not transfer, they will have to resign, they will not be made redundant and they cannot go for constructive dismissal.

Crawley Down Resident: You have been talking about financial backing and Worth fighting issues in this area. If we become a smaller Council will we have a smaller amount of financial backing? Will we have the funding and how will we get the funding?

Ian Gibson: Probably not.

Kerry Scott: Will there be any funds, no but the cost of this would seriously deplete the reserves.

Andrew Metcalf This is a question for Ian under budgeting. How much money will be in the Crawley Down Parish Council bank account from day one?

Ian Gibson: £150,000, 50% of reserve needed.

Crawley Down Resident: No one has given us any proof. We are two separate villages and Crawley Down is rural, we want our own identity. I moved here in 1979. Why is it called Worth Parish Council? You are representing Copthorne, there is a massive geographical difference.

Trevor Hodson spoke about costs and how larger Councils have more clout.

Ian Gibson: The Government actively asks for small communities to set up their own Councils.

A lady who did not say where she was from: What is the annual budget of the current Council? Where does it come from? What is it spent on and what is the Council responsible for? What are the running costs and the percentage of the annual budget? What does it cost to run the Council? What do Copthorne residents think of this? Examples of situations in the past when split Councils would be better.

£300,000 for Worth Parish Council. £450,000 includes ear marked reserves for projects i.e. CCTV.

£360,000 for split of two Councils. £127,000 staff costs, £73,000 for Crawley Down. The Hub £19,000, £286,000 precept, budget £388,000, street lights £22,000, £40,000 next year.

Phillip Coote/ Crawley Down Resident: How would you address the Royal Oak, it was purchased for £720,000, it would cost over £1 million in today's money. How would you raise that money and the amount of money needed to make it a viable business? A compulsive purchase would reduce the value.

Ian Gibson: There is £3 million in land holdings in the centre of the Village, 1/3 Parish Council, 1/3 MSDC, 1/3 Village Centre Action Group.

Crawley Down Resident: Everyone in Crawley Down wants their own identity. Worth Parish Council have taken the advice of a Solicitor who said it will cost £150,000, not an accountant. MSDC have quoted £10,000. You have lost the room. I am open minded to staying together but I would like a breakdown of the £150,000.

Crawley Down Resident: Everyone wants evidence and a breakdown of the £150,000 and the Royal Oak.

Kerry Scott: Worth have tried to sort the problem, MSDC cannot be persuaded to compulsory purchase the Royal Oak.

Ian Gibson: First meeting in the next week or so on how to improve the Village Centre,

Crawley Down Resident: What is best for Crawley Down and Worth, forget the money, what are the advantages for a split and staying together?

Crawley Down Resident: What is the economy of scale?

Kerry Scott: Strength in numbers.

Ian Gibson: Worth is more like a Town Council. A small Council would have one meeting a month where decisions are taken, like Turners Hill. Their SID is put up by one person in the Village.

Kerry Scott: Worth has streamlined meetings and staff efficiency. Decisions are taken at the meetings.

Copthorne Resident and Worth Parish Councillor: I have tried to understand what the consequences of this split are. Promoters have had nine months, started with six Councillors, reduced to four and now three. Unable to convince Worth Parish Councillors or Crawley Down Parish Councillors, they do not support it. Why do you believe it is worth splitting, when you cannot get the support of Crawley Down Parish Councillors.

Ian Gibson: Turners Hill Parish Council shows how a Parish Council should be run. It gets things done.

Summing up by the Promoters:

Councillor Ian Gibson:

There are advantages, I have covered the benefits. Crawley Down would be more effective, every pound would be spent in the village and it would improve community engagement. There is a handout, pick up a copy as you leave.

Councillor Kerry Scott:

Trevor Hodsdon had carried out a quick calculation of the costs involved in setting up Crawley Down Parish Council and these would be: Set up - £20,000; MSDC - £10,000; TUPE - £55,000; Legal - £10,000; cost of Project Manager or temporary Clerk £25,000 = £120,000.

What would be done differently by people in Crawley Down than Worth Parish Council? You will have loss of economy of scale and loss of experience. Worth are doing well at addressing Crawley Down issues. How many attend Council meetings or visit the office? We have professional people, properly equipped. We are meeting with Copthorne residents then Worth will make the decision on whether to divide. You really need to question why would you have disruption or change if there is no benefit.

Meeting finished at 9:22pm