

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 26 November 2012

### Excerpt of minutes

#### 9. Report of the Scrutiny Task Group - Community Governance Review

The Strategy and Engagement Manager introduced the report of the scrutiny task group on the community governance review. Helen Down, as Participation and Engagement Team Leader and author of the report, invited comments from the committee on any aspects of the recommendations.

Councillor Driver, as a member of the working group, commended Helen Down for the work she had done in getting the review to this stage. It had been a difficult process and had felt somewhat chaotic at times with all members of the group wanting to voice their strong opinions.

In the discussion that followed, members raised a number of concerns about the outcomes set out in the report.

- It was very clear that the parish councils were keen to extend their boundaries but Scrutiny members were unsure of the logic behind some of the proposals being made. Members made particular reference to Battledown and Charlton Kings and the old GCHQ site at Oakley where a small number of households would be asked about a large area of land.
- Members felt that The Reddings was a very distinct community and had no real links with Up Hatherley due to the railway line, yet it was suggested that it could be incorporated into that parish council's area. Councillor Britter as the ward councillor for that area, had feedback from his residents that there was no interest in being parished. There was reference that it had previously been a parished area but this was over 30 years ago and the area now consisted of many new houses.
- Advice was sought about the optimum size for a parish council as the recommendations would result in very differing population sizes and could increase significantly with any major developments in those areas.
- There were concerns about the consultation and the fairness if only a small number of people responded. A period of three weeks was too short and some felt the consultation could be much wider across the town, though this would cost more.
- There was concern that if the consultation was done on a household basis, as proposed, individual electors would not have a vote.
- There was concern about the cost of the consultation which was being borne by the borough council.
- Councillor Teakle mentioned an informal survey that she had been part of that suggested that there was a general perception that currently people preferred the status quo i.e. to remain a part of a parished area if they were in one and not to be parished if they were not already.
- There are a number of important changes coming up which could have a major influence including neighbourhood plans, major developments and how would these be taken into account?

- The parish council boundaries should be linked as far as possible to ward boundaries.
- Councillor Sudbury, as a former member of the task group, had found it a difficult experience. She felt very strongly that the starting point for any review should be based on community identity so that people can feel part of a community and focus on the issues that are important to them. This review had only done half a job and it was important that it should be done properly if at all. She felt in particular that residents within the existing parish council boundaries should also be consulted.
- Councillor Regan, invited to speak by the chair, gave her personal view and not as a member of the Leckhampton with Warden Hill parish council. She felt the review was totally unnecessary and felt that the proposed resulting increases to the population in her parish council did not make sense. The consultation should not be undertaken unless absolutely essential.

The Chief Executive advised that although the costs of the consultation were detailed in the report, there would be additional resource implications for the Strategy and Engagement team in supporting the consultation and the analysis of any results. He suggested that the challenge for this committee was to consider whether this was a good exercise in democracy versus the need to be prudent in the current budget constraints.

The Director Commissioning informed members that it was considered good practice to conduct a review every 10 to 15 years and the last review in Cheltenham was carried out in 2002. This particular review had been requested by three of our parish councils to look at some changes to their current boundaries. The timescales for the review had been set in order to have any changes in place for the 2014 elections. However given the concerns raised this evening, members may wish to recommend that the review is stopped at this point and re-instigated in time for the 2018 elections. By then there would be a clearer view on potential growth in the town and the impact of neighbourhood plans. She advised that the review was the responsibility of the borough council and although she had initially asked the parish councils as to whether they would be able to commit any resources to the review, they had only contributed time and not financial resources.

The Strategy and Engagement Manager highlighted the work that officers had put into this review and expressed his disappointment that the review had reached this stage before these concerns were aired. He emphasised that officers had tried hard to engage elected borough council members in the work of the scrutiny task group and he commended Councillor Driver for her persistence in supporting the review. The committee acknowledged the work of officers.

**Resolved that:**

- 1. The committee do not support the recommendations in the report**
- 2. The review should be deferred to a later date when any recommendations can be implemented for the 2018 elections**
- 3. The scope of the review should be reviewed at that time taking into account the views expressed at this meeting**