B R O M S G R O V E D I S T R I C T C O U N C I L

MEETING OF THE ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

2ND FEBRUARY 2021, AT 6.00 P.M.

PRESENT: Councillors L. C. R. Mallett (Chairman), A. J. B. Beaumont, S. R. Colella, R. J. Deeming, S. G. Hession, J. E. King and M. Middleton

Officers: Mr D. Whitney, Ms M. Bassett and Ms. A. Scarce

10/2020 **APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN**

RESOLVED that Councillor L Mallett be appointed Chairman for the purpose of this meeting.

11/2020 **TO RECEIVE APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M Glass and R Hunter, with Councillors A Beaumont and J King attending as substitutes respectively.

12/2020 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

13/2020 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of the Electoral Matters Committee held on 29th September 2020 were submitted.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Electoral Matters Committee held on 29th September 2020 be approved as a correct record.

14/2020 **COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE REVIEW FOR PROPOSED NEW PARISH WITHIN THE CURRENT STOKE PARISH AREA**

The Electoral Services Manager presented the report and in so doing highlighted the following:

- The results of the survey and questionnaire which went out to all households in the Stoke parish area, consultation was for 14 October, originally up to 14th December, but the Committee had agreed to extend this to 28th December 2020.

- 265 paper forms had been returned and 53 had been made via the website, that was a 15% return from households. There was also a submission from the Parish Council and a separate written response from a resident of the parish.
- The main question was "did residents want a new parish to be created from the Stoke Heath ward". 116 residents were for the creation of a new parish and 197 against. In the Stoke Heath ward 60 were for and 61 were against.
- The Committee needed to consider whether there was due regard for community cohesion between the areas within the parish. The question was asked did the parish create a feeling of local community for and including electors in Stoke Heath. 154 thought it did create a feeling of community and 138 said there was not. In looking just at Stoke Heath 44 said there was and 68 said there was not.
- The question was then asked to the reasons why there was or was not that feeling of community cohesion (as detailed in appendices 1 and 2 of the report). The main areas highlighted appeared to be the central use of the recreation ground, the parish newsletter and events held in the parish. A number felt that the parish council concentrated on Stoke Prior and the newsletter put Stoke Prior first and in some cases, Stoke Heath residents felt ignored and that it was two areas of different environments.
- The third question was would you be interested in standing as a parish council. 277 had said no and 20 had responded yes.
- The residents were then asked if the changes were to happen, if they had any suggestions as to any different names for the parishes. The current Ward names were the most supported with 77% of the respondents said Stoke Prior and Stoke Heath. There were however a number of other suggestions including Stoke Works, Charford South and Stoke and Avoncroft and Stoke Heath.
- Consultees were finally asked to give any other comments, and these were detailed in appendix 3 to the report. There were a number of different remarks, but three in particular came up a number of times, concerns about the cost of council tax for the new parishes to be created, the area Polling District RHA (Stoke Heath ward) did not contain the whole of Stoke Heath and it was suggested that it should include Polling District AVB as well as RHA, and that the number of Councillors representing each ward should be reviewed.
- The response from the Parish Council was attached at appendix 4 and they were in support of the status quo and the response from the resident at appendix 5, was for the creation of another parish and addressed a number of areas including community identity.

The Electoral Services Manager explained that the Committee had three options in respect of the send stage of the consultation, which were

detailed within the report. That consultation would begin of 15th February and continue until 17th May 2021.

The Chairman asked whether a response had been received from either of the District Councillors in relation to the consultation, it was confirmed that they had not responded. It was questioned whether it was possible to ask them to comment and it was noted that they would automatically be consulted in the second consultation and the Chairman asked for it to be noted in the minutes that it would be helpful for them to respond to the second consultation.

Following presentation of the report, Members raised a number of points and asked a variety of questions, including:

- Whether there was a rule for the number of parish councillors needed – it was confirmed that this was a minimum of 5 seats on a parish council. It was also noted that there were a number of Members on this Committee who were or had been parish councillors.
- What the drivers had actually been for the suggested split when the petition had been put forward. It was confirmed that the petition had simply said the undersigned requested that the Council consider making the area known as Stoke Heath Ward a civil parish, independent of Stoke Parish Council. A number of areas had also been included in the covering letter, for example that people felt a disproportionate amount of the precept was being spent on Stoke Prior Ward and it would be fairer if they were able to set their own budget.
- It was commented that it would have been useful to have a map which showed the exact Wards that would be affected by the suggested changes. It was highlighted that the area had changed in recent years and now was very much rural and village type environment to one side and the other was more urban and almost a suburb of Bromsgrove itself, which was perhaps the driver for the new parish to be created.
- It was noted that details of the number of residents in each ward was included within the report and the Electoral Services Manager provided the breakdown by polling district and the number of parish councillors. The new proposed parish would cover 1,123 electors.
- Members discussed the shared facilities which appear to sit on the border.
- It was highlighted that there were also similar situations in other parishes and an example was given.
- It was questioned whether there needed to be a second consultation and it was confirmed that this was the case.
- The question was asked that, should the new parish be created what its roll would be and what facilities would it need to maintain. It was discussed that if the original parish covered the majority of amenities, then there was the possibility that it would have to “back fill” the loss of the precept from those that would be moved

to the new parish area, with those residents still in fact using the amenities.

- How the parish council would be financed, and the concerns raised in respect of any increase was discussed and it was confirmed that the precept was set by the parish itself and therefore it could drop, remain the same or increase.
- Whether the route to becoming an unparished area was first to become a parished area. This was understood to be the case and an example of this happening in another area was briefly discussed.
- The Chairman clarified that the Committee's roll was to set the question(s) that would form the basis of the second consultation.
- Members questioned what the second consultation would involve if the Committee were to suggest that the situation remained in is current position. It was clarified that this would simply be did residents think that Stoke Parish Council should remain covering its current area with a simple yes or no response.
- From the evidence provided Members did not believe that there was clear evidence to support any change. It was therefore agreed that going into the second consultation that would be the suggestion from the Committee.
- It was confirmed that the balance of Parish Councillors was based on the area of population representing those households.

The Electoral Services Manager then went on to explain that the Committee needed to consider how the draft recommendation would be carried out. The options were a letter as in the first round of consultations, with access to the website or whether the Committee wanted to suggest an alternative format. Members suggested that any further consultation should be carried out at a minimal cost to the Council as a substantial consultation had already taken place involving a large number of residents. It was suggested that the opening up of the website could be the main format, with advertising throughout the parish, but not to send out individual letters to all residents. Following discussion, it was agreed that opening up the website with the appropriate advertising was the most cost effective option available. It was confirmed that a press release could also be made and that the Parish Council would be on the consultation list as there was a number of statutory consultees who would receive a letter. It was noted that within the agenda pack a detailed letter had already been received from the Parish Council. It was suggested that Officers draw up a document which would be sent to Members outside of the meeting before it was issued.

Members took the opportunity to thank Officers for the detailed piece of work which they had carried out and the time taken to prepare it, particularly in these difficult times. The Chairman also thanked all the residents who had taken the time to respond to the consultation.

RESOLVED that

a) **the results of the consultation undertaken as a result of a valid petition regarding a parish separate from Stoke Parish Council consisting of polling district RHA be noted;**

b) **that no change be undertaken; and**

c) **that the consultation be carried out through advertising and press release, with the proposed wording shared with the Committee for comment before publication.**

15/2020 **POLLING STATION CHANGES - VERBAL UPDATE**

The Electoral Services Manager confirmed that at the current time it was still proposed that elections would take place in May 2021, this would be combined Worcestershire County Council and Police and Crime Commissioner elections in Bromsgrove. His team had been doing work around contacting all Polling Station to ensure that they were Covid Secure. Members were reminded that this was a verbal update, as outside the mandatory Polling Places review, which was carried out in 2019, delegated authority was given to the Returning Officer in consultation with the Ward Member and the Portfolio Holder to make decision on any changes to polling places.

The Electoral Services Manager provided updates on the following Polling Stations, where different options were being considered, due to the nature of the station:

- Rubery Sports and Social Club – Polling District RNA
  The function room at the rear was unavailable, due to building works. It was hoped that this would be available for future elections, but for May 2021 the potential to move back to Holywell School or perhaps use Rubery Community Leisure Centre. This would be visited on 5th February 2021 to see whether it was suitable.
- Lickey End First School
  It was acknowledged that both this Committee and the Council to try and move away from the use of school wherever possible. This school had asked if it could not be used and as an alternative Lickey End Social Club had been contacted and they were happy to offer their services. It had better parking access and access for social distancing.
- Members were reminded that, if elections had gone ahead in 2020, the School at Clent would ave been used. However, Clent Parish Hall Committee were now happy for the Hall to be used again.
- Millfield Social Club
  The Social Club had raised concerns about Covid access and officers would be visiting the site on 3rd February to investigate further.

- Court Leet – this was currently closed, and Officers were having difficulties in contacted anyone to discuss its use.

The Electoral Services Manager confirmed that once the new venues had been assessed and deemed suitable the relevant Ward Members would be consulted.

The Chairman raised a point in respect of the area which fed into Court Leet, the Rock Hill area, for which he was County Councillor. It was felt that the Court Leet was a compromise solution and the use of a portable unit at another site might be more appropriate. It was suggested that the turnout at the polling station was traditionally quite low due to the distance outside of the boundary that some of the electorate would need to travel. Officers were asked to consider whether there was any land suitable to put a portable unit on in the estate in question. A number of areas were suggested, and the Electoral Services Manager agreed to investigate this matter further.

RESOLVED that the verbal update in respect of the Polling Station changes be noted.

The meeting closed at 6.54 p.m.

Chairman