

Sutton Coldfield Peoples Panel Discussion
1 December 2015
Sutton Coldfield Town Hall

Ten residents confirmed in advance that they would take part, nine attended the focus group. There was representation from each of Sutton wards. The focus group was facilitated by Ifor Jones, Birmingham City Council, and Stephen Smallwood from the Sutton Coldfield Parish Council Steering Group. Olive O'Sullivan was the note taker.

Objective of Focus Group

To consult with Sutton Coldfield residents on the Peoples Panel on the terms of the Community Governance Review Draft Reorganisation Order, that was approved by Council Business Management Committee on 17 November. The workshop also explored residents' views on funding priorities for the Parish Council in the first financial year and the democratic /governance arrangements for the Parish Council.

Background

Ifor Jones gave a presentation (attached) on the Community Governance Review to date, the Recommendations made at City Council on 15 September 2015, the purpose of the Reorganisation Order. Ifor also set out the process for the Boundary Commission review and how that impacts on the terms of the Organisation Order.

In addition, Ifor set out the reasons for the decision of the Community Governance Review Group to recommend to Full Council to establish the Parish Council, on 1 March 2015 with elections held in May 2016, as opposed to waiting until 2018 to hold the first elections to the Parish Council. Ifor explained that the role of the Interim Parish Council is primarily to set the budget and administrative frame for the Parish Council and that any key decisions would not be made until after elections to the Parish Council. The consultation arrangements on the draft Reorganisation Order were set out. In addition, while funding priorities will not form part of the Reorganisation Order, Ifor advised that the Parish Council Steering Group was seeking feedback from residents on priorities for spending, in order to help shape future plans. The focus group and Be Heard survey were identified as an opportunity to seek views on the role and purpose of the Parish Council. Residents were asked the following specific questions in relation to the terms of the Reorganisation Order.

Q 1 Do you agree with the proposed interim arrangement that the parished area of Sutton Coldfield (Sutton Coldfield Parliamentary Constituency) is divided into four voting wards, with the same boundaries as the existing Birmingham City Council Sutton Coldfield wards and for the wards in the parish to bear the same name as the City Council wards?

Residents unanimously agreed that using the existing wards made sense. It was stated that residents are used to this and that as an interim arrangement it was a good idea. It was also stated that if the number of wards were increased to have more of a neighbourhood focus that would also be a good idea. One resident asked if parish councillors would have to come from Sutton Coldfield; it was explained that they would have to live or work within a three mile radius of Sutton Coldfield. Clarification was sought on the criteria the Boundary Commission would use in order to determine the number of wards.

Ifor explained that the Boundary Commission is looking at the city as a whole and that it would look at the existing templates and the historic make up of wards, infrastructure, local centres, the view of residents and of political parties would all be taken into account, but that ultimately the Boundary Commission would exercise a judgement to come up with a pragmatic solution. In addition, Ifor explained that a reduction in the number of councillors across the city as a whole would also be taken into account. A resident asked if current city councillors would be eligible to stand as a parish councillor. It was explained that they could if they met the criteria and that it is not unusual for councillors to be 'twin hatted', i.e. be both a city councillor and a parish councillor. Ifor advised that there could also be independents, i.e. parish councillors not affiliated to a political party.

Q2 Do you agree with the proposal that Sutton Coldfield Parish Council should have 24 councillors to be equivalent to the typical number of councillors per elector as applies in equivalent Town and Parish Councils elsewhere. This would result in six parish councillors for each of the proposed four wards?

Ifor explained that the proposed 24 parish councillors is within the benchmark of parish councillors of other large parish/town councils. Concern was raised by residents about how much it would cost for parish councillors. There appeared to be a perception amongst participants that it would cost in the region of £10k per parish councillor. It was explained that generally parish councils are paid expenses as opposed to a salary and that the cost per parish councillor would be relatively small; the administration costs are estimated at circa £200k, which is less than 5% of the overall budget of £1.8m. It was agreed that there is a need to balance administrative costs with effective leadership, e.g. a town mayor is an important role that gives identity and a sense of heritage and that this should not be seen as an extravagance. Residents further agreed that there needed to be a balance between effective representation and what that representation costs. It was further agreed that there would be a further session in the New Year to look at costs including the level of expenditure for parish councillors and exploring a rate that is proportionate to the ambition of the parish council.

Residents voted 7 in favour of 24 Councillors (78%) When asked if there should be more or less, the suggestion of more councillors was rejected. Again, the response was that the number ought to be dependent on what it cost. The final point made by a resident on this was that Sutton residents had voted in favour of a Town Council, that 24 parish councillors was about right, that the majority who voted in favour of a parish council want that representation and that therefore there is a need to have confidence in those councillors elected to have the best interests of Sutton Coldfield residents, adding that it is up to Sutton residents to hold the parish councillors to account. The two residents that didn't vote in favour of the proposed 24 councillors did not suggest an alternative number.

Q3 Do you agree with the proposal that the Interim Parish Council is made up of 8 serving City Councillors for the ward of Sutton Coldfield and 5 representatives of local community organisations?

A resident raised his concern that some of the existing Sutton Coldfield ward councillors were 'sitting on the fence' in relation to the Parish Council and that they are now on the Parish Council Steering Group and will be on in the Interim Council. Ifor advised that at the cross party Community Governance Review Group meeting held immediately after the

postal consultative ballot, all three parties supported the proposal to establish a Town Council for Sutton Coldfield. All three parties agreed that 'the people have spoken and that they would get behind this and respect the decision of those that voted in favour of a Town Council. In addition, all three political parties were in favour of proceeding to establish the Town Council in 2016 and holding the first elections to the Town Council in May 2016, as opposed to waiting until 2018 for the first parish elections. Ifor also referred to the Paper 4 of the series of papers published as part of the Community Governance Review, in which the City Council placed on record that it did not support the creation of a Town Council, setting out its reasons for this. However, this position has changed and now other parts of the City are looking at the parish council model of local governance. Ifor also explained the difficult and challenging time the City Council is facing financially and that one way of securing a better offer on local services is via parish councils.

A resident asked if there could be a policy decision taken that Sutton parish councillors could not be 'twin hatted'. It was explained that this could not happen and why. A further issue was raised by a resident during this part of the meeting around who would control the money. It was confirmed that the decision making authority would be with the parish councillors and not Birmingham City Councillors, that the City Council would just collect the precept as part of its responsibilities as a billing authority.

Residents confirmed that they were broadly in favour of the proposed Interim/ transitional arrangements.

Q4 Do you agree with the approach the City Council is taking regarding the transfer of any assets, services, right and liabilities from the City Council to the Parish Council?

Ifor explained that the transfer of assets would not be included in the Order, partly because there is insufficient time to do so but also because of the need for a structured dialogue between the parish and city council, led by the Town Clerk acting on behalf of the parish council. He added that there may be assets/ services that are transferred in the first year but others e.g. Sutton Park that would require very serious debate, explaining that Sutton Park is a strategic amenity that covers the city and region as a whole and that the City Council has a Best Value duty to make sure that whatever arrangements are put in place stack up and succeed. Ifor confirmed the need to create the right environment and culture that will facilitate and enable sensible dialogue and debate over the next three years or so to release assets. Residents agreed that it is wise to be cautious and to take it steady and slowly but to ensure that we keep moving forward adding that if we too much was taken on too soon there was the risk of it collapsing and what's achieved to date could be lost.

A resident asked if it would be possible to create a road map that sets out the key steps that should be taken by when. It was also stressed that we should have some measure of what fast and slow meant in terms of progress. Another resident stated that councillors once elected should put in place a plan that sets out their plans and timescales. Reference was made to the Parish Council Steering Group Away Day when discussion took place on the vision, purpose and milestones for the Parish Council and, whether services should be delivered directly or commissioned, or a combination of both. It was agreed that a strategic plan would be prepared for the medium term but a road map would be a good way of describing that.

It was also agreed that such a plan would be dependent on the relationship between the Parish Council and the City Council and the importance of the City Council being on board with the plan. It was confirmed that a partnership approach is being encouraged, acknowledging that there will be times where both parties agree to disagree and but that they should be 'productive disagreements'. Ifor added that the road map should reflect the art of the possible, influenced in part by legislation both in terms of the statutory duties and powers but also the powers under the General Power of Competence as set out in the Localism Act.

Residents generally agreed the approach, walk before you can run, but not to rest that forward progression.

Q5 Do you agree with the proposed precept of £50 a year for a Band D property for the first financial year of the parish council as this was the figure upon which the consultative ballot result was obtained?

Ifor advised that this figure was based on the national average. One resident asked the question, if we are moving slowly if it were wise to take all this money in the first year.

It was confirmed that reserves could be carried forward to create sinking funds and contingency monies. Residents were advised that the inhibitions that principal authorities currently face in terms of council tax increases could apply in the future to parish councils, i.e. having to have a referendum on increases above 2.5%. If this rule applied in the future, it would make it difficult to adjust the rate if it were initially set below bar.

Reference was made to the Shrewsbury experience. Their Town Council was created as part of the 2009 local government reorganisation that saw the dismantling of the County and Districts councils. Shrewsbury Town Council was established and given a dowry that enabled them to grow. This pump primed the development of their successful business model. It was acknowledged that while times are tough for individual households, the town Council shouldn't sink through lack of resourcing.

Residents voted 7 in favour of a precept of £50.00 per Band D property.

There was however a perception amongst some residents that residents could be paying twice for services, i.e. charged for services by both the City Council and the Parish Council and that the City Council could withdraw some of its current funding for Sutton Coldfield on the grounds that the Parish Council could pay for services /activities. It was explained that the parish would fund additional/ top up services. The current budgetary challenges facing the City Council were also explained. Ifor advised that council tax represents a small proportion of the City Council's income, that it is less than 10% of the £1bn controllable spend of the City Council adding that the majority of income, Revenue Support Grant from Central Government, will cease close to 2020. In terms of the financial challenge the City Council is facing, 60% of the controllable spend of £1bn is spent on 25,000 people within the city. Over the next three years this will be reduced to £750m for all services, which will mean that some of the universal services currently provided will inevitably be reduced significantly.

Residents felt that because the Parish Council will have access to its own funds that Birmingham City Council would 'selectively withdraw' from Sutton and that Sutton would therefore be penalised.

It was confirmed that the precept could be used to 'top up' service provision. The library service was cited as an example; if all libraries across the City were to be reduced to a one day service, then the precept could be used in Sutton to enable the service to run on additional days. It was advised that a range of indicators would be used to determine which libraries should have a reduced service; that there are 8 -9 indicators, all challengeable, that would be used across the whole of the City when determining any reduction of the library service.

Clarification was also sought on how Council Tax relief/ discounts would be applied and if they would automatically be reduced from the council tax bill. It was confirmed that council tax relief /discounts would be applied.