

Community Governance Review

A new Parish Council for Weymouth

Final recommendations following public consultation

Introduction

A Community Governance Review considers whether the electoral arrangements for particular areas are appropriate, and if there should be any changes in community governance to make sure communities are represented fairly and appropriately. The Review looks at the number of councillors and the parish boundaries and takes into account expected changes in the area, such as large scale developments resulting in a change in population.

In January 2017, the 9 Councils in Dorset considered a report for the reorganisation of local government in Dorset. The 6 Councils that initially supported the recommendation of the report submitted a case for change to the Secretary of State for the Department for Communities and Local Government (now the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government) (MHCLG) seeking the creation of 2 Unitary Councils in Dorset. The Secretary of State issued a “minded to” decision to create 2 Unitary authorities in Dorset in the Autumn of 2017. This decision, if implemented, would result in the abolition of Weymouth & Portland Borough Council, and therefore the Borough Council is undertaking a Community Governance Review which is the mechanism to create a Parish Council for the Weymouth area. Portland is already represented by an established Town Council.

The Community Governance Review has been overseen by the Steering Group for Democratic Improvement, a working party of Weymouth & Portland Borough Councillors, and is being conducted in accordance with the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, and also taking into account the Local Government Boundary Commission Guidance on Community Governance Reviews.

The Council carried out a public engagement exercise that closed on 12 January 2018 asking for views on the Council’s draft recommendations for a single Parish Council for Weymouth. The Council received 532 completed surveys.

Key facts and challenges of the Area

At 16 square miles, Weymouth and Portland is a densely populated borough with a total population of around 65,170. The population of the Weymouth area is approximately 52,168. The population is becoming increasingly elderly as residents live longer and because many people who come to live in the area are close to retirement age. Over one in five residents consider that they have a long term health problem.

The Borough falls within the most deprived third of district/boroughs in England suffering from low levels of income, child poverty and health needs. Earnings are lower than average and unemployment rates have remained at around the national level. *Three of these areas are in the top 10% most deprived nationally – Underhill, Melcombe Regis and Littlemoor. (*using the 2015 Indices of Deprivation released September 2015).

There are just over 2200 businesses, and 46% of working people in the Weymouth and Portland area are working in knowledge-driven industries, and 82% of local firms employ fewer than 10 people. 14% of employees are working in the tourism industry.

With regard to the diversity of the Borough, 94.9% are White British, 5.1% are black and minority ethnic and 2.1% do not have English as their main language. (2011 Census – Office for National Statistics).

Weymouth and Portland has just over 31,000 dwellings, and of these 67% are owned or part owned and 3.1% are second homes. The number of households that live in privately rented accommodation is higher than the Dorset average. More affordable homes are needed and this will help with the retention and recruitment of a skilled workforce.

The quality of the natural and built environment is a major asset and a key element of the identity and prosperity of the area. Over 800 hectares of land in the Borough are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and there are also over 800 listed buildings. The coastline is protected as part of the Dorset and Devon World Heritage Site.

With its beaches, gardens, RSPB reserves, castles, museums and leisure facilities, Weymouth & Portland offers a host of attractions and activities for all the family to enjoy.

The Borough has road links through Dorchester or Wareham to the Bournemouth-Poole conurbation, and rail links to London and Bristol.

Area covered by the Review

The Review considered the community governance needs of the whole of the area represented by Weymouth & Portland Borough Council with the exclusion of Portland (Borough Wards of Underhill, Tophill East and Tophill West). As a Town Council already exists in Portland, the decision was taken to exclude this area from the Review.

In developing the final recommendations, in addition to the responses received to the public consultation exercise, the Council also had regard for the Guidance issued by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. This included the need to ensure that community governance within the area under review;

- reflects the identities and interests of the communities in that area; and
- is effective and convenient

The Council has also taken into account other factors including;

- the impact of community governance arrangements on community cohesion, and
- the size, population and boundaries of a local community or parish.

It was recognised that there are a number of public organisations working within the Borough that do not split the Weymouth area in to small areas, and aligning any new Parish Council boundaries with these structures would enable effective and convenient partnership working to be established. Examples of these public sector organisations that treat the Weymouth area as a whole, in some cases including the area of Portland, are:

- Dorset Police with a Weymouth Team.
- Dorset Clinical Commissioning Group's Weymouth & Portland Locality Team including the Weymouth Integrated Assessment and Service Project, and the Weymouth & Portland Health Network working with patient participation and health groups.
- Wellbeing Weymouth & Portland that is part of Dorset Health Care working with people with mental health issues.

Reflecting the identities and interests of local communities

Parish Councils have an important role to play in the development of their local communities, working with residents to help people and local groups to create cohesive, attractive and economically vibrant local communities.

In considering the proposals for governance of the Weymouth area, Borough Councillors considered that a new Parish Council should be created, and that this should be warded replicating the existing Borough ward boundaries. It was recognised that the current warding pattern for the Borough Council worked very well in enabling communities to work positively together responding to challenges in terms of economic, social and cultural trends. The creation of a single Parish Council will also offer strong and accountable local government and community leadership, either taking the lead locally on specific issues, or representing the local community as an important partner with others. It will also enable the local representatives to be responsive to challenges and opportunities in the area in a co-ordinated way. A single Parish Council will also facilitate the effective delivery of services at Parish Council level eg parks, that might prove more difficult if more than one Parish Council was created for the Weymouth area.

There are a number of organisations working within the area that cover Weymouth & Portland without further division, and creating a single Parish Council for the Weymouth area will enable local residents to be clear with regard to their local representatives whereas creating a number of Parish Councils could leave to confusion.

Examples of other organisations working in the area that cover either Weymouth alone or the Weymouth & Portland area include:

- Weymouth & Portland Chamber of Commerce

- Weymouth & Portland Access Group that looks at access for all including wheelchair users, those with prams/pushchairs etc
- Weymouth Community Volunteers

Council size

Parish councils vary enormously in size and in the type of activities and services they provide and can represent populations ranging from less than 100 to up to 70,000. Guidance suggests that they continue to have 2 main roles: community representation and local administration, and for both these roles it is suggested that it's desirable that a parish council "should reflect a distinctive and recognisable community of place with its own sense of identity" and that the "views of local communities and inhabitants are of central importance".

National research undertaken in 1992 found that typically councils representing a population of over 20,000 had between 13 and 31 Councillors, and there is no evidence to suggest that this had altered significantly since the research was conducted. Legislation requires that the number of any parish councillors shall not be less than five but there is no maximum number.

Examples of Council Size in some local Parish Councils in the area are set out below:Area	Population	Council Size
Dorchester	19,143	20 Councillors
Blandford	10,541	16 Councillors
Gillingham	11,871	17 Councillors
Lyme Regis	3,637	14 Councillors
Salisbury City	40302	23 Councillors
Proposed Weymouth	52,168	29 Councillors

In undertaking the Review, Members considered the appropriate Council size in relation to the warding pattern that is proposed for the new Parish Council in Weymouth. In proposing the Council Size, Members had regard to the important democratic principle that each person's vote should be of equal weight so far as possible, and have worked to ensure that each Councillor represents approximately the same number of people. The Council has also taken into account future demographic trends and influences, such as new development, that may alter the population significantly in the 5 years following the commencement of the Review. Whilst in reality the achievement of absolute electoral fairness is unlikely to be attainable, the warding pattern proposed keeps variances to a minimum.

The electorate that would be represented under the proposed Warding pattern would be between 1305 and 1490 electors per Councillor, which is significantly higher than the other existing Town Councils in Dorset.

Although 29 Councillors is not considered a disproportionate Council size taking into account the electorate number of Weymouth when compared to other Town Councils in Dorset and surrounding areas, the Borough Council Group gave the Council Size a great deal of thought as this was raised as a concern by many respondents. It was clear that to reduce the number of Councillors it would be necessary to carry out a full boundary review to ensure electoral equality. This process would delay the creation of the Parish Council, resulting in there being no representation at a very local level for some time once the Borough Council ceased to exist. The Steering Group weighed up the benefits of carrying out a boundary review compared with the disadvantages of delaying the creation of a Parish Council to a date after the abolition of the Borough Council. On balance, the Steering Group was of the view that it would be more beneficial to ensure that the Parish Council is established at the same time as the abolition of the Borough Council, with the new Parish Council being strongly encouraged to carry out a boundary review at a later date.

Warding Pattern and Good Community Governance

Government Guidance indicates that characteristics of good community governance to be considered in assessing the options when undertaking such a review include:

- a sense of civic pride and civic values
- a strong, inclusive community and voluntary sector
- a sense of place - with a positive feeling for people and local distinctiveness
- effective engagement with the local community at neighbourhood level
- strong leadership
- the ability of local authorities to deliver quality services economically and efficiently
- an area that is of a size that is viable as an administrative unit of local government.

Parish warding includes the number and boundaries of any wards, the number of Councillors to be elected for any ward and the names of wards. The 2007 Act requires that consideration be given to whether:

- The number, or distribution of the local government electors for the parish would make a single election of councillors impracticable or inconvenient, and
- It is desirable that any area or areas of the parish should be separately represented.

Weymouth and Portland Borough Council is currently divided into 15 Wards; 12 Wards covering the Weymouth area and 3 Wards covering the Portland area. There is already an established Town Council for Portland and, as stated above, for this reason it was decided not to include this area as part of the Review.

The 12 Borough Wards covering the Weymouth area are served by 29 Borough Councillors and include Littlemoor, Melcombe Regis, Preston, Radipole, Upwey and Broadwey, Westham East, Westham West, Westham North, Wey Valley, Weymouth

East, Weymouth West and Wyke Regis. There are currently no Parish Councils serving the Weymouth area.

The boundaries for Weymouth & Portland Borough Council were last reviewed in 2002, and, whilst this was 15 years ago, officers are not aware of any significant migration of people or large scale developments in the Borough area since the review. The electoral numbers for each of these Wards would support this view.

An important aspect to facilitating sustainable communities is enabling effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership, and it was considered that by having one Parish Council for the Weymouth area, residents would be able to identify clearly with the Parish and it was also considered that this sense of identity and community lent strength and legitimacy to the parish structure, creates a common interest in parish affairs, encourages participation in elections to the Parish Council. It also leads to representative and accountable government, engenders effective leadership and generates a strong, inclusive community with a sense of civic values, responsibility and pride. In addition, one council representing the whole area will create a unified structure, better able to respond to the key challenges facing the area.

The Borough Council also believes that a single Parish Council would be able to effectively engage with the community at neighbourhood level including capacity building to develop the community's skills, knowledge and confidence. It will also offer the opportunity to continue with strong community engagement and participation that the Borough Council currently enjoys with people from different backgrounds.

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England's Guidance recognises that "the identification of a community is not a precise or rigid matter and that the pattern of daily life in each of the existing communities, the local centres for education and child care, shopping, community activities, worship, leisure pursuits, transport facilities and means of communication will generally have an influence." However, the Guidance also points out that whilst historic loyalty may be to a town, the local community of interest and social focus may lie within a part of the town with its own separate identity. Community cohesion is the recognition of the way in which people perceive how their local community is composed and what it represents. The Council considered this point in some detail and believes that a single Parish Council for the whole of Weymouth would be appropriate taking all these factors into account.

The Borough Council believes that the warding pattern reflects the distinctive and recognisable communities that already have a clear sense of identity and feeling of local community – the Borough Council is clear that the interests of local inhabitants are a primary consideration in this Review. It is felt that the residents will benefit from a single Parish Council for the Weymouth area, facilitating the empowerment of its residents to work with public bodies, including the Parish Council, to influence public decisions.

There were a number of comments via the survey responses regarding the fact that respondents felt there were too many wards or that the ward boundaries should be re-examined (this was referred to 22 times). The Council considered this view carefully and discussed the proposed Warding pattern recognising that, as with Council Size, the proposed Ward boundaries ensured that the democratic principle of electoral equality was maintained ie that each vote cast by an elector carries equal weight. The

Council will create a Parish Council with 29 Councillors serving 12 Wards, and this can be reviewed after a period of time of the Parish Council operating to ensure that this remains appropriate.

Effective and convenient local government

The Government believes that the effectiveness and convenience of local government is best understood in the context of a local authority's ability to deliver quality services economically and efficiently, and give users of services a democratic voice in the decisions that affect them. It is believed that, as stated above, the proposals will give residents a sense of local identity and make an important contribution to cohesion facilitating a strong base from which to rise to challenges and new opportunities, and additionally will ensure that more efficient and effective provision of services such as beach and parks.

The creation of one Parish Council will enable local communities to have access to good quality local services that will be in one place, making them easy to reach and accessible to local people.

Electoral Arrangements

The Local Government Act 1972 states that ordinary elections of parish councillors should take place in 1979 and every fourth year thereafter (ie next elections due in 2019), and recognised the importance of ensuring that this coincides with the cycle for other principal council elections so that costs can be shared.

An important part of the Review has been determining the Electoral Arrangements for any new Parish Council. The Borough Council has determined that:

- The first election to the new Parish Council will be in 2019 and then every fourth year thereafter or at such other time specified in any Structural Change Order made by the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government;
- The number of councillors to be elected to the new parish council (Council size) will be 29;
- The new parish will be divided into 12 wards for the purposes of electing councillors;
- The boundaries of the wards of the new Council will be as indicated on the maps attached at Appendix A;
- The name of the Wards and the number of Councillors to be elected to the wards is as indicated at Appendix B;

Council name

Weymouth and Melcombe Regis was a borough in England formed by a Charter of Elizabeth I, amalgamating the towns of Weymouth and Melcombe Register in 1571.

The borough continued in existence until 1974 as a municipal borough (a type of local government district which existed between 1835 and 1974) when it was merged under the Local Government Act in 1972, into the district of Weymouth & Portland Borough Council.

With regard to the name of a new Parish Council, Section 245 of the Local Government

Act 1972 allows a parish council to have the status of a town. This also entitles the Chairman and Vice-Chairman to use the style of “Town Mayor” and “Deputy Town Mayor” respectively.

The Council resolved that the new parish council for Weymouth will be called Weymouth Town Council.

Procedural Matters

The effective date for the new parish council will be 1 April 2019.

If the decision is made to create 2 new Unitary Councils in Dorset, the existing Borough Council will be abolished on 31 March 2019, but the Councillors for the new Parish Council will not be elected until the first Thursday in May 2019. To ensure that Weymouth has democratically elected representation at parish level during this short period, the new parish would be represented by those persons who were Councillors for the relevant areas of Weymouth & Portland Borough Council on 31 March 2019.

What happens next?

Group Leaders (or a substitute) will be tasked with producing proposals, including a draft Reorganisation Order, for consideration by the Steering Group prior to Management Committee then Full Council.