Wokingham Borough Council Community Governance Review

Second stage consultation submission from Wokingham Town Council

Wokingham Town Council has read and reviewed the output from the borough's CGR working group. The town council would like to take the opportunity to recognise the work that the borough group has undertaken and thank the working group for their time and effort.

Wokingham Town Council is disappointed by the working group's decision not to recommend a change to the town boundary to incorporate the new South Wokingham SDL housing into the town.

The purpose of this community governance review is to ensure that governance arrangements reflect the identities and interests of the new local community and provides effective and convenient local government.

The town council submitted a robust and positive case for why the town boundary should change; from highlighting the borough council's own reference to the development as being an urban extension of the town, through the design, scale and appearance of new housing (which will run seamlessly from Montague Park into the new development area and through to new development in the town area by Tesco), to the draw and convenience of the facilities and infrastructure in the town, and active opportunities for residents to engage in local governance.

The Working Group states that it gave weight to Wokingham Without Parish Council's plans to integrate the new area into the parish. There is just one reference to integration for this area in the submission from Wokingham Without Parish Council, and that is the creation of a neighbourhood plan; no further details are given. Indeed, arguing that there are no residents to be consulted on moving the boundary of the SDL and, at the same time, accepting a proposal that residents will be consulted on a neighbourhood plan is contradictory.

<u>Identity</u>

The Working Group states that it is not possible to determine a sense of identity because the residents are not in place to consult, therefore the boundary will remain unchanged. This decision overlooks the fact that, by not moving the boundary, WBC is making a decision on behalf of those residents. A decision has been made even though the boundary has not been moved; it's as much as decision on behalf of those residents as moving the boundary.

Identities are forged early. As soon as new residents move in, they should feel a sense of welcome and a sense of belonging. The area south of the railway borders the southern edge of town, and on a map, appears to complete the town, as the last remaining area surrounding the town not currently developed. The new housing is physically located very close to the town. Developers bringing forward homes in this area will undoubtedly market them as being in Wokingham; new residents will believe they are moving to Wokingham. Retaining the housing in Wokingham Without therefore leads to inconsistency and confused identity, rather than positively supporting the development of a strong community identity.

Residents who shop in Wokingham town will identify with Wokingham; there are no shops of note in Wokingham Without. Residents whose children attend schools in Wokingham town will

identify with Wokingham. The nearest state primary schools to the new development are Floreat Montague Park (for those in the east), St Teresa's, Wescott and Westende, and Evendons (for those in the west). All are accessible safely and conveniently on foot. Apart from St Teresa's, all are non-denominational. The only primary school in Wokingham Without that is north of Nine Mile Ride is St Sebastian's CE. Even though pupils will not be able to claim for travel to school, there is no public transport and the schools are not safely accessible on foot or by bicycle. In terms of secondary schools, St Crispins is accessible from all areas of the new development; there are no secondary schools in Wokingham Without.

Residents' nearest medical provision will be in Wokingham town. There are no plans to provide new doctor surgeries within the new housing development, so key facilities such as doctors, dentists and pharmacies are all closest in the town.

For all the above reasons, residents in the SDL will identify with Wokingham.

We note the extensive changes proposed in the Arborfield SDL under the CGR, with more than a thousand properties potentially changing parish, with the aim of making the SDL more coherent. Our understanding is that, had it been possible to establish the parish boundaries coherently with the SDL at an early stage the parish level focus on building the community would have been significantly stronger, and a lot of confusion and disruption from the CGR change could have been avoided. Wokingham Town Council feels strongly that lessons should be learned from this experience.

Wokingham Without Parish Council in their response to the CGR recommendations argue that the naming of the area as Sawyer Green in recognition of the owner of Ravenswood House should mean that the SDL remains in Wokingham Without Parish. This name (associated with the southernmost parts of Wokingham Without) has been imposed with minimal consultation. We question whether the residents of the hamlet of Chapel Green in Wescott – an area that existed as far back as 1664[1] - which is encompassed within the borders of the SDL will respond favourably to their almost 400-year-old identity being obliterated. Should the SDL be incorporated into Wokingham, we would recommend carrying out a consultation about naming the new areas with Wokingham residents and local groups such as the Wokingham Society who understand a great deal about the history of this area, while referring to the Wokingham Virtual Museum for sources.

Community interests

The town council has experience in integrating new development into the town. The council has successfully welcomed new residents from homes in the north Wokingham SDL into the community, making them feel part of the town and supporting the delivery and management of new community facilities such as allotments and improved parks and play areas, all of which contribute to the sense of identity and give people roots in their local communities. Furthermore, among our 25 councillors are three who live in the newer developments, demonstrating the extent to which the council has reached out and engaged with new residents.

[1] https://museum.wokingham-tc.gov.uk/item/434

Development of new and existing events run by the town council throughout the year offer opportunities for residents to come together and for the community to thrive. The Town Council runs a broad range of events and activities for all ages across the year, which help to create and build social cohesion and support the physical and mental wellbeing of our residents. These range from funding weekly outdoor yoga sessions in the summer, to providing volunteering opportunities with Wokingham in Bloom, to our large outdoor community events. The town council relishes the opportunity to welcome new residents to the town, and through precept generated by a wider tax base, to continue to develop and grow our programme of events and activities to include residents from the South Wokingham SDL.

Effective and convenient local government

The town council takes its role seriously and feels that resident engagement in local decision-making is important. The town has 25 seats on the council, all occupied, and regularly has competitive elections, meaning that councillors are both chosen by residents and also held accountable to residents for their decisions.

Wokingham Without Parish Council, with vacant council seats and no public ballot for membership for at least 10 years, does not represent, in our view, a better case for effective and convenient local government than the town council.

The Working Group also states that the governance arrangements will be effective and convenient if the parish boundaries are not changed. The location of the polling stations tells a different story. Residents in the new development have easy and convenient access to the two polling stations in Wescott. Both St Crispins and the Salvation Army Hall can be reached on foot or by bicycle along well-lit roads with pavements:

- via Montague Park which has pedestrian cut throughs to London Road and Waterloo Road
- via the Star Lane level crossing; the section of unpavemented road from the White Horse to the Star Lane crossing will not be open to cars as a through route
- via Finchampstead Road by Tesco.

There is also convenient pedestrian access via the bridge across the railway onto Gipsy Lane, with just a small stretch of Gipsy Lane without pavements, This would, however, require some upgrades for safe access.

By way of contrast the trek to St Sebastians Memorial Hall polling station from the SDL is on fast and narrow roads that are unlit, and a deterrent to sustainable travel. Wokingham Without Parish Council present no credible plans to address this lack of access before the neighbourhood centres are built.

Mitigating the impact of new development

We welcome new residents into the town but acknowledge that this will undoubtedly result in increased demand for services, and on infrastructure, provided by Wokingham Town Council. We cannot, and do not seek to resist this demand from new residents, whom we recognise will see the town as their natural home. Some of the financial pressures resulting from this demand

could be alleviated were the new dwellings to be incorporated into the parish, and the precept directed to it.

Summary

In summary, the new housing is an extension of the town. It will be located immediately adjacent to the town and will provide the majority of day-to-day community infrastructure and facilities that new residents will use. New residents will see themselves as part of the town, even if their local authority does not currently recognise this. Wokingham Town Council has an excellent track record of supporting the local community and integrating new residents. We welcome the opportunity to integrate the South Wokingham SDL residents into the town.

On one other matter in relation to the town, it is noted that an amendment to the warding arrangements affecting Broad Street at a borough ward level has resulted in an anomaly between the borough and parish wards for the property known as Tudor House, which should be corrected at parish level as part of this review, in order to be consistent.