

Report to: **Council**

Date: **20 February 2024**

Title: **OKEHAMPTON & SYDENHAM DAMEREL
COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE REVIEWS –
FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

Portfolio Area: **Strategy & Governance**

Lead Member: **Cllr Bridgewater – Communities and
Chairman of the People & Community Hub
Advisory Group**

Wards Affected: **Okehampton South, Okehampton North and
Milton Ford**

Urgent Decision: **N** Approval and clearance obtained: **Y**

Date next steps can be taken:
(e.g. referral on of recommendation or
implementation of substantive decision)

Following the decisions of Full Council, officers will then contact the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE)

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RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the People & Community Hub Advisory Group RECOMMEND to Council that:

- 1. the submissions received on the Community Governance Reviews for the published draft proposals for Okehampton and Sydenham Damerel be noted;**
- 2. the final recommendations in relation to these Reviews be approved as follows:**

For Okehampton

- 1. That the existing parish boundaries of Okehampton Town Council and Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council be amended in line with Appendix B; and**
- 2. That the Council strongly encourages the Town and Parish Council to work more closely together for the benefit of their local communities.**

For Sydenham Damerel

That the Parish Council be abolished and replaced by a 'Parish Meeting' form of governance; and

- 3. the Monitoring Officer be granted delegated authority, in consultation with the lead Hub Committee Member for Communities and the Leader of Council, to execute the Reorganisation Orders in accordance with the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.**

1. Executive summary

1.1 At its meeting held on 3 October 2023, Full Council resolved (Minute CM 44/23 refers):

- 1. That the initial submissions received on the Community Governance Reviews for Okehampton and Sydenham Damerel be noted;*
- 2. That a second public consultation exercise be undertaken on the following proposals:*

Okehampton

Option 1 – *that the existing parish boundaries of Okehampton Town Council and Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council be amended in line with Appendix A of the presented agenda report; and*

Option 2 – *that the status quo be retained in relation to the parish boundaries of Okehampton Town Council and Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council.*

Sydenham Damerel

That the Parish Council be abolished and replaced by a 'Parish Meeting' form of governance; and

3. *That, in line with the adopted Terms of Reference as presented at Appendix B of the published agenda report, the final Review recommendations be considered by the People & Community Hub Advisory Group and presented back to the Full Council meeting to be held on 20 February 2024."*

1.2 In accordance with the timelines set out in the adopted Community Governance Review Terms of Reference (Appendix A refers), the second round of public consultation ran from 5 October to 1 December 2023;

1.3 Upon the expiry of the consultation deadline, the People & Community Hub Advisory Group has met on three separate occasions (12 December 2023; 30 January and 6 February 2024) to consider the responses that were received alongside the other related material, information and factors that have formed part of the Review since the petitions were first presented to Full Council on 27 September 2022 (Minute CM 38/22 refers). At the meeting held on 12 December 2023, the Group also received representations from Okehampton Town Council and Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council;

1.4 Following detailed consideration, the Advisory Group has concluded that the following final recommendations should be made to Full Council:

Okehampton:

1. That the existing parish boundaries of Okehampton Town Council and Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council be amended in line with Appendix B; and
2. That the Council strongly encourages the Town and Parish Council to work more closely together for the benefit of their local communities.

Sydenham Damerel

That the Parish Council be abolished and replaced by a 'Parish Meeting' form of governance.

2. Background

2.1 As the 'Principal Authority', West Devon Borough Council has ultimate responsibility for considering this Review and undertaking the statutory consultative requirements which include:

- Consulting local government electors for the area under review;
- Consulting any other person or body (including a local authority) which appears to the Borough Council to have an interest in the Review;
- Notifying and consulting Devon County Council; and

- Taking into account any representations received in connection with the Review;
- 2.2 At its meeting held on 27 June 2023, Full Council appointed the following Members to serve on the People & Community Hub Advisory Group (Minute CM 25/23 refers):
- Cllrs A Bridgewater (Hub lead and Group Chair); K Ball; A Cunningham; J Elliott; P Kimber; A Johnson; J Moody; P Squire; and Cllr C West.
- 2.3 Following the second round of public consultation, the three Advisory Group meetings focused on:
- 12 December 2023 – representatives from Okehampton Town Council and Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council attended to provide presentations to the Group and respond to Member questions;
- 30 January 2024 – the Group gave detailed consideration to the representations made and the responses to the consultation and provided an initial steer as to its final recommendations; and
- 6 February 2024 – based upon the previous meetings, the Group was presented with a draft version of this report for Full Council to ensure that it was supportive of its content prior to its publication;
- 2.4 The local Ward Members for Okehampton South, Okehampton North and Milton Ford and any other interested Members were invited to attend each of the three Group meetings during this Stage of the Review.
- 2.5 The full list of comments received for both Reviews during the two consultation periods are set out on the Council website and can be accessed via the following weblink:
<https://www.westdevon.gov.uk/community-governance-review>

Consultation Responses - Okehampton

- 2.6 For Okehampton, 4,600 households were written to and 193 comments were received during the second round of the public consultation exercise. In addition, a 119 signatory petition had been received on behalf of Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council that supported Option 2 (i.e. retention of the status quo). Further, an alternative proposal had also been submitted that had suggested an amalgamation of the two Councils. Of the 193 comments received, views were broadly broken down as:
- 143 in favour of Option 1 (i.e. to amend the boundary lines in accordance with Appendix B);
 - 35 comments were in favour of Option 2 the status quo; and
 - 15 submissions gave either a mixed or no definitive opinion.

2.7 Further, of the 193 comments received, a number had assumed (or suggested) a preference for a single Council to replace the existing Okehampton Town Council and Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council. A number of comments received from residents living in the Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council had also stated that they had wrongly assumed that they already lived within the boundaries of Okehampton Town Council.

Advisory Group Deliberations - Okehampton

2.8 Throughout its deliberations, the Advisory Group has cross referenced the Local Government Boundary Commission for England Guidance on Community Governance Reviews and, in particular, reverted back to the emphasis that the Guidance placed upon '*community cohesion*'.

2.9 In its deliberations, the Advisory Group made particular reference to:

Low Turnout:

- Since over 4,600 households had been written to, Members noted that the response rate for the first round of public consultation was 2.7% and that the second round yielded a 6.8% rate which the Advisory Group considered disappointing. However, the Group was also of the view that this could be interpreted that the majority of residents had no strong view.

The Strain on Town Council Services

- The Advisory Group was sympathetic to the views expressed by the Town Council and by members of the public during both rounds of the public consultation exercise in respect of the additional strain that is being placed on services that are provided (and funded) by the Town Council as a result of the extensive additional development in the area.

The Local Economy

- Members also highlighted the close linkages between community cohesion and the vibrancy of the local economy. In so doing, the extent of recent economic development that had been carried out on land to the east of Okehampton along the A30 was highlighted. At present, extensive work was underway to establish a BID (Business Improvement District) in Okehampton and the importance of a thriving, cohesive community with an interesting and vibrant town was therefore noted. As a result, from an economic perspective, Members were of the view that either Option 1 or an amalgamation of the two Councils were preferable alternatives to simply retaining the status quo.

The Ongoing Viability of the Parish Council

- As part of the deliberations, careful consideration was given to the comments raised by the representatives of the Hamlets Parish Council in respect of the ongoing viability of the Parish Council should Option 1 be ultimately approved.

Whilst Members had sympathy with the points raised, this was partly offset by the fact that the parish precept was comparatively low and, given that any boundary changes would not come into effect until 2027, there was the ability for the Parish Council to implement incremental increases. On a similar point, Members were of the view that the Parish Council should offer to financially contribute to the services that were being provided by the Town Council.

The Longstanding Nature of this Issue

- A number of Members made the point that the matter of the boundary lines between the Hamlets and Town Councils had been a particularly longstanding issue which had never been addressed or tackled. Given the length of time and consideration that had been given by the Advisory Group in reaching this point, these Members felt that it was now appropriate to address the matter. In expressing these views, Members therefore did not consider it suitable to simply refrain from making a decision and retain the status quo.

Amalgamation of the Two Councils

- Whilst some Members felt that there was still merit in pursuing the option to amalgamate the two councils (with the one Council being warded along the existing town and hamlet boundary lines), the Group referred to its conclusions reached following the first round of public consultation whereby the combination of an urban town council and a rural parish council would not be conducive to community cohesion, and appropriate democratic representation. As a consequence, the Council had not included an amalgamation of the two councils as an option during the most recent round of public consultation.

Closer Working Relations Between the Two Councils

- Notwithstanding the recommendation that an amalgamation should not be pursued, the Advisory Group did wish to strongly encourage the two Councils to work far more closely together for the benefit of their local communities. In so doing, the Group highlighted that the local Borough Council Ward Members represented both councils and, if necessary, it would be appropriate (in their respective Community Leadership roles) for these Members to facilitate closer working relations between the two authorities.

Concluding Recommendations

- In conclusion and, on balance, the Advisory Group wishes to recommend to Full Council that:
 1. *the existing parish boundaries of Okehampton Town Council and Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council be amended in line with Appendix B; and*
 2. *the Council strongly encourages the Town and Parish Council to work more closely together for the benefit of their local communities.*

Delegated Authority and Council Sizes

- Whilst the report also seeks to grant delegated authority to the Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the lead Hub Committee Member for Communities and the Leader of Council, to execute the Reorganisation Orders, the Advisory Group recognises that, if approved by Full Council, there will be implications on the sizes of the new Town and Parish Councils;
- Currently, the Town Council is served by 14 Town Councillors, with the Hamlets Parish Council being served by 8 Parish Councillors. Given the extent of the boundary changes, it is suggested that the Order is drafted on the basis that the Town Council size is ultimately increased to 15, with the Parish Council size reduced to 7 Parish Councillors.

Consultation Responses – Sydenham Damerel

2.10 14 comments were received during the second round of public consultation on the Sydenham Damerel proposals that were broadly broken down as:

- 12 in favour of the Parish Council being abolished and replaced by a 'Parish Meeting'; and
- 2 in opposition to the proposal.

Advisory Group Deliberations – Sydenham Damerel

2.11 In its deliberations, the Advisory Group made particular reference to:

- A response rate of 14 out of a total of 120 households (constituting just a 11.7% response rate) was particularly disappointing, but could also be interpreted that residents were not objecting to the proposals; and
- The views of the local Ward Member in support of the Parish Council being abolished and replaced by a 'Parish Meeting' form of governance.

- 2.12 The Advisory Group proceeded to conclude that the Parish Council should be abolished and replaced by a 'Parish Meeting' form of governance.
- 2.13 Such have been the difficulties experienced in local parishioners wishing to stand to serve on the parish council, the Advisory Group hopes that steps can be taken to implement a Parish Meeting form of governance as soon as is practically possible.

Next Steps

- 2.13 In the event of the final recommendations for Okehampton and Sydenham Damerel Community Governance Reviews being approved by Full Council, then agreement is sought for the Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the lead Hub Committee Member for Communities and the Leader of Council, to execute the Reorganisation Orders in accordance with the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

3. Options Available and Consideration of Risk

Okehampton

- 3.1 The Council has been presented with three options: to amend the Town/Parish boundaries in accordance with Appendix B; to retain the status quo; and to amalgamate the two Councils. For the reasons set out at Section 2.9 above, the Advisory Group is recommending to Full Council that the Town/Parish boundaries in line with Appendix B.

Sydenham Damerel

- 3.2 The Council could opt to retain a Parish Council for Sydenham Damerel. However, the Advisory Group recognises the challenges that have been faced by the parish in finding sufficient numbers of residents to stand to serve on the parish council. This, coupled with just two letters of representation supporting the retention of a parish council, has resulted in the Advisory Group recommending that a Parish Meeting form of governance be adopted.

4. Implications

Legal/Governance		<p>The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 requires the Council to 'consult the local government electors for the area under review and any other person or body who appears to have an interest in the review and to take the representations that are received into account by judging them against the statutory criteria (as below):</p> <p>'That Community governance within the area under review reflects the identities and interests of the</p>
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		community in that area and is effective and convenient.’ The Council is required to complete the Community Governance Review within 12 months from the day on which it publishes the Terms of Reference. A Community Governance Review is concluded on the day on which the Council publishes the recommendations made by the Community Governance Review.
Financial		There are no additional financial implications directly related to this report
Risk		The risk implications are set out at Section 3 above.
Supporting Corporate Strategy		Council Theme – <i>Strengthening Communities</i>
Consultation & Engagement Strategy		The requirements to consult and engage at each stage are set out in the Terms of Reference and are in line with the requirements of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.
Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications		
Equality and Diversity		There are no equality and diversity implications directly related to this report.
Safeguarding		There are no safeguarding implications directly related to this report.
Community Safety, Crime and Disorder		There are no community safety or crime and disorder implications directly related to this report.
Climate Change & Biodiversity		There are no Climate Change & Biodiversity implications directly related to this report.
Health, Safety and Wellbeing		There are no health, safety and wellbeing implications directly related to this report.
Other implications		N/A

Supporting Information

Appendices:

- A. Community Governance Review – Adopted Terms of Reference; and
- B. Map setting out proposed amendments to the existing parish boundaries of Okehampton Town Council and Okehampton Hamlets Parish Council.

Background Papers:

- The petitions received at the Council Meeting on 22 September 2022;
- Central Government Guidance on Community Governance Reviews;
- The report and minutes arising from the Full Council meeting held on 3 October 2023; and
- The representations received during Stage 4 of the Community Governance Review: <https://www.westdevon.gov.uk/community-governance-review>