



Case study on a Community Governance Review

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL (CAMBRIDGESHIRE)

The context

This case study describes a Community Governance Review which considered all the parish boundaries in the district of Huntingdonshire. Its outcome was to make changes to a total of 28 local (town and parish) councils, including the abolition of two and the creation of four new ones. These changes came into effect in 2010.

A Review in Huntingdonshire was needed because the last full parish boundary review had taken place in 1980. It was known that changes to the infrastructure, together with the growth and movement of population, meant there were imbalances between parishes. Some boundaries were also anomalous or inconsistent, where they split land, settlements or properties. These needed re-aligning and adjusting.

Huntingdonshire retains a three-tier governance structure. It forms one of four districts in the county of Cambridgeshire and it is entirely parished. In total, there are 84 local councils in the district, which include larger parishes for the main towns of Huntingdon, Ramsey, St Ives and St Neots.

The District had a population of 165,200 in 2008. Almost half of this is concentrated in the four market towns. Huntingdonshire covers an area of over approximately 350 square miles and a large proportion is rural, with village settlements providing the main focus for community facilities outside the market towns.

What happened in the review

This Review followed a previous electoral review that started in 2001 and completed in 2002, looking at all the ward boundaries in Huntingdonshire, reducing the number of wards from 34 to 29 and changing local council electoral arrangements.

However, there had not been a parish review for some time. The decision to hold one was made by Huntingdonshire District Council alone. It was not prompted by a petition or any

other external factors, though some parish councils had contacted the District Council about anomalous or illogical boundaries.

“It had been over 20 years since the last full review and there had been a lot of changes to the district, so a new review of the parishes was needed.” –

Huntingdonshire District Council

The Review formally began when the Terms of Reference were published in 2006. Because this was a full boundary review, covering all parishes in the district, every local council and the county association were contacted about participating in it. The Terms of Reference were advertised in local newspapers, in public buildings and on the District Council’s website.

Proposals were published later in 2006 and were underpinned by the District Council’s aim that governance should better reflect community identities. All parish councils, as well as groups and individuals who had expressed an interest in the Review, were sent the draft proposals for comment.

In total, 28 parishes were affected. The main changes can be summarised as follows:

Abolition	Creation	Alteration
<p>The abolition of the two parishes of :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eynesbury Hardwicke; • St Neots Rural. 	<p>The constitution of four new parishes of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hamerton and Steeple Gidding; • Offord Cluny and Offord D’Arcy; • Waresley-cum-Tetworth; • Wyton-on-the-Hill. 	<p>Alterations were proposed to a further 22 parishes, involving the transfer of small parcels of land between adjacent parishes.</p>

There was a healthy response to the draft proposals although, unsurprisingly, the largest responses came from the areas most affected by the proposed changes. This included the St Neots and Abbotsley parishes, which contained the main proposals for transfer.

There was one contentious boundary change between the parishes of Ramsey and Bury. This had to be revisited and revised because the initial proposal was objected to strongly by the residents of the affected properties.

Following the draft proposal stage, Huntingdonshire’s Elections Panel oversaw the production of a final set of proposals which were put before a meeting of the full council and agreed by it in December 2007.

However, by this stage the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 had

changed the system for reviewing local governance arrangements, delegating review decisions from central government to principal authorities. Transitional arrangements had been devised by the Department for Communities & Local Government (CLG) to deal with outstanding review recommendations submitted prior to the 2007 Act coming into force.

As a result the District Council was asked by CLG whether it wished their Secretary of State to implement its recommendations or would prefer to undertake this work itself. It asked the Secretary of State to implement the changes. CLG completed the process by issuing the Huntingdonshire (Parishes) Order in July 2009, which formally took effect on 1st April 2010.

Lessons from the review

Successful outcomes

The outcomes of this Review seem to have been universally welcomed. The county association, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Association of Local Councils (CPALC), have commented that the decisions have led to fewer illogical and anomalous boundaries and that many parishes now better reflect the population patterns across the district. There is also evidence of a positive effect on local democracy.

“The decision to split Wyton-on-the Hill away from the rest of Houghton & Wyton made a lot of sense. Wyton was almost a self-contained community around the RAF base and felt very different from the other parts of the parish down the hill. When both areas were part of one parish it was very difficult to recruit councillors for Wyton. Since the split Wyton has become very active and now lots of people have come forward to represent that area.” – Houghton & Wyton Parish Council

Timescale and new legislation

However, the Review actually took much longer than expected and Huntingdonshire District Council was involved in more sustained activity than it originally envisaged. The scale of the Review, in terms of the number of boundary alterations rather than the number of representations or contentious proposals, clearly had an impact on this. On the whole, the proposals were well received, but the number of changes meant there was a significant time investment needed to map and test the many detailed boundary amendments, as well as the merging and disaggregation of local councils into new ones.

In addition, and more significantly, the final parishes order was delayed because of the introduction of the 2007 Act and the repeal of the earlier legislation. The Huntingdonshire Review was effectively stuck in the middle and issues needed to be resolved about whether

or not the Order was signed by the Secretary of State; or, indeed, whether parts of the Review should be re-done to comply with new guidelines.

The combined effect on these factors on the Review process is a point emphasised by some of the local councils directly impacted by the review.

“There was not much communication from Huntingdon soon after the decisions had been taken and there was some confusion about when the Order was to come into effect. The whole process seemed to take a long time.” – Houghton & Wyton Parish Council

Value of the guidance

Huntingdonshire District Council finds that the Community Governance Review guidance which accompanied the 2007 Act is reasonably helpful, though in reality it came too late to influence this Review. Instead, Huntingdonshire drew on earlier guidance and, in particular, on its own extensive experience of electoral reviews to ensure the process was a success.

Local councils sector involvement

The county association, CPALC, was involved in the Review in only a minor way. Whilst it responded to the consultation and was broadly happy with the outcome, CPALC feels that the Review could have taken a more strategic approach to the parish boundaries in Huntingdonshire. CPALC argues that the draft proposals were more about ‘tidying up’ boundary problems and some limited action on mergers and disaggregation. Consequently, the consultation was felt to be presenting a developed set of proposals, rather than seeking views on what should happen.

“From our perspective, the Review was a missed opportunity to both fundamentally review the make up of parish councils in the district, and to build better and stronger relationships with the local councils sector.” – Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Association of Local Councils

Concluding comments

The scale and timing of this Review meant that it was not straightforward. The process became subject to delays associated with the new legislation and, to a lesser extent, the number of changes proposed. Ironically, the introduction of a streamlined review process just happened to delay this particular Review.

There have been some minor issues (now resolved) about implementing the Order at local level – for instance, about dividing the finances and responsibility for assets from some of the disaggregated or abolished parishes. For Huntingdonshire District Council, there was also the sizeable task of managing the consequential electoral changes for each of the 28 local councils.

The outcomes of the review have been well received. Though there were some calls for a much more fundamental review, the clear consensus is that the boundaries of the local councils affected are now much more logical and practical, and the evidence is that they have improved local democracy.

Huntingdonshire District Council parish review pages:

<http://www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk/Councils%20and%20Democracy/Council/Pages/Parish%20Boundaries.aspx>

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Association of Local Councils: <http://www.cpalc.org.uk/>

Houghton & Wyton Parish Council website: <http://www.houghtonwytonpc.org.uk/>

This document was written for the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) by Brian Wilson Associates and David Atkinson Consulting.

Particular thanks are due to Huntingdonshire District Council, the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Association of Local Councils and Houghton & Wyton Parish Council. It should be noted that this document does not necessarily represent their views and any errors are the author's.

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