

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE REVIEW
WORKING GROUP HELD IN THE COUNCIL
CHAMBER, WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON
THURSDAY 26 JUNE 2025, AT 6.00 PM

PRESENT:

Councillors D Andrews, M Connolly, A Holt,
D Jacobs, J Thomas and G Williams

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Erica Gant	- Electoral Services Officer
Edward McCreddie	- Deputy Elections Manager
Katie Mogan	- Democratic and Electoral Services Manager

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE
There were no apologies for absence.

2 APPOINTMENT OF A CHAIR
It was proposed by Councillor Connolly and seconded by Councillor Jacobs, that Councillor Thomas be appointed Chair of the Community Governance Review working group for the 2025/26 civic year.

After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, the motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that Councillor Thomas be appointed Chair of the Community Governance Review working group for the 2025/26 civic year.

3 CONSIDERATION OF CONSULTATION RESPONSES AND

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Councillor Thomas welcomed everyone to the meeting. He said that councils were required to review their community governance arrangements every 10-15 years and the group had been set up to consider those changes.

He said he would hear representations in the order of the agenda and said each parish council had ten minutes to speak. The working group would be able to ask for clarification.

He said that the group would meet again on 3 July 2025 to consider all representation received and to make their final recommendations to Council.

4 REPRESENTATIONS FROM ASTON PARISH COUNCIL

Councillors Lovett and Cantwell and Roy Falder, the clerk gave their representations to the group as follows:

- At its Annual meeting in 2024, the parish council discussed and held vote on the creation of new community council for Hazel Park. 90 out of 91 residents voted in favour of this. East Herts Council (EHC) then announced its intention to undertake a Community Governance Review (CGR), and Aston Parish Council asked to be included.
- Consultation launched, a number of residents, the village society and the parish council commented. There was a great strength of feeling on matter and there was concern about the draft recommendation to wait until the development was completed in 2030. There felt this was too long to wait as the next local election was in 2027, and there could be as many voters from Hazel Park as there were in Aston. The consensus view was that the opportune time to create a new council was when the development was at 50% occupancy.
- Residents of two parts of parish, different outlooks for four reasons:
 - 1) Lack of community cohesion – Aston was a rural community with a farming heritage with some Some families going back generations and a significant

number of residents had lived there over 30 yrs. There was a strong community identity with a number of clubs and facilities all funded by villagers and supported by the parish council. Hazel Park was an urban development on the Stevenage ring road. No residents are currently from parish or East Herts and look to Stevenage for their facilities. The two communities have different identities, and little if any community cohesion.

- 2) Physical separation – no road links between them. To reach Aston from Hazel Park, it is a 2 mile trip mostly on Stevenage ring road. The residents look to Stevenage for their amenities and the development will eventually have their own facilities meaning residents of Hazel Park don't need to interact with parish at all.
 - 3) Democratic inequality – Aston currently has 693 voters, and Hazel Park has 8 making 701 total. The number of voters has been constant over the years with a slight decline in recent years. When the development is complete with 618 dwellings and a care home, there could be around 1,400 voters. With the current completion date of 2030, Aston could have 2,100 voters of which 65% are from Hazel Park, meaning that Hazel Park residents could have a clear majority and could take over the Parish Council. At 50% occupancy, each community would be roughly equal and the current build out plan suggests 50% occupancy would be reached at some point in 2027.
 - 4) Financial disadvantage – Hazel Park are in effect paid twice for services. Residents pay Aston Parish Council a precept of £66 on a band D property. On top of this, they would be paying annual maintenance charge of £200. At 50% occupancy, £66 x 309 properties equals £20k. Residents spending on own community rather than subsidising Aston Parish Council.
- Hazel Park seen as extension of Stevenage in all but law. The marketing website for the development places it in Stevenage and although external boundary changes are outside the scope of the review, they therefore

asked the working group to reconsider the draft recommendation and create a new council when 50% occupied to ensure democratic and financial parity for two disparate communities.

5 REPRESENTATIONS FROM BISHOP'S STORTFORD TOWN COUNCIL

Councillors Swainston, Skinner, Wyllie and Estop presented the Bishop's Stortford Town Council (BSTC) representation.

- There was unanimous support at BSTC for moving the boundary to take on the St James' Park development. The people that have moved in have moved into a town, not a rural location. Bishop's Stortford has the facilities that residents will look to use.
- BSTC also support (although not unanimously) moving this boundary even further to considering incorporating the whole of Thorley parish into Bishop's Stortford.
- There were far more councillors per voter, 200 residents and 6 cllrs in Thorley and BSTC had 17 cllrs for 40k residents. Appreciate for some people that they don't like the idea of paying more precept on their council tax but it was not much more when all the service the TC provide are taken into consideration. St James' development should be part of the community and contribute to it.
- Some assets may well be handed down from largest authority in the local government reorganisation and BSTC has infrastructure and funds to look after larger assets such as the Southern Country Park and were capable of making sure continues as good as it is at the moment. Have office 5 days a week, sharing services, could be looking at opening that for new authority and town council.
- St James' Park was justified in planning terms as a strategic extension to the town and would be sustained by the town. There was a precedence for the town growing and previously the TC has taken in St Michaels

Mead. There were central services that the TC provide such as the play park, splash park and South Mill Arts. The governance arrangements make sense as a whole town council. Some meshing with District Council representation and ward boundaries would be good.

- Thorley had a problem with identity as it was not one coherent area and residents there look to Bishop's Stortford.

Councillor Jacobs asked BSTC if:

- a) there had been any consideration about warding arrangements should this recommendation be agreed;
- b) St James' Park was moved into BSTC, where would they draw the boundary line; and
- c) BSTC had evidence of clear and sustained local support for the abolition of Thorley PC as required under the MHCLG guidance.

BSTC responded and said that they felt the boundary should lie between Obrey Way and Thorley Street and BS South ward was under represented currently and one member could be added to this ward.

6 REPRESENTATIONS FROM THORLEY PARISH COUNCIL

Councillors Lumsden and Arnott presented Thorley Parish Council's representation.

- EHC appears to have endorsed the proposal put forward by BSTC. Thorley also put forward a proposal and there was no demonstration from EHC why the BSTC suggestion had been taken forward.
- Government guidance states that an abolition of a parish cannot be undertaken unless clearly justified and cannot see anything in proposals that demonstrate this. Thorley lost St Michaels Mead in the last review. No advantages to residents noted from takeover.
- Amenities in Thorley parish include the church and hall, used for local events and available to hire, the Southern country park, Thorley scout group, allotments. All of these were accessible to BS residents, no demonstration of advantages for residents in BSTC.

- Thorley continues to be impacted by the development which was still not complete, and Thorley PC had been heavily involved in the remaining planning development process. 80% of the development was in Thorley and the PC were heavily involved in monitoring it. BSTC had not actively participated in any stage of this still ongoing process and do not have an understanding of how development is to be delivered.
- Thorley had a leading consultation role at all stages of development, with strong representation at original district plan examination in 2017. No participation by TC, despite all development areas under consideration by examiner.
- The controversial McDonalds application had received 1100 community and stat objections with the PC leading consultations with EHC and the school with planning and procedural objections. Most of remaining green belt south of BS was in Thorley and under pressure for development in new district plan. PC lead engagement on the District Plan.
- PC believes it to be wholly inappropriate and premature make sign changes until majority changes at unitary are resolved.

Councillor Jacobs asked the councillors if they were concerned about the viability of the parish council if the proposed changes do go ahead.

Thorley PC said they would be concerned about the viability of the parish council at a practical level.

Councillor Jacobs asked if Thorley were concerned about the increase of residents from the development impacting their community.

Thorley PC said they would welcome new residents to the community. They felt that Thorley's proposal about their boundary had not been considered by the working group.

Councillor Jacobs asked if Thorley PC would step back from their involvement in the planning process if the boundary was

moved.

Thorley PC said they would not have a central role in the process like they do currently.

Councillor Thomas asked how many Thorley parish councillors lived in the St James' Park development.

Thorley PC said none.

7 REPRESENTATIONS FROM SAWBRIDGEWORTH TOWN COUNCIL

Councillor Parsad-Wyatt presented the representation from Sawbridgeworth Town Council (STC):

- STC had been consistently opposed to warding. This cross party view was a long standing one and well evidenced and had been rejected by a clear majority of cllrs with 11 cllrs against and 1 abstention. This position was also shared by all three EH district cllrs and the county cllr.
- Community identity and interests – Sawbridgeworth had a single community and did not have distinct zones and neighbourhoods with all facilities centrally located. Issues that arise in one area affect others and the reality demands town wide governance.
- Community cohesion – there were strengths with the current model as residents can contact any of the 12 representative without having to check who is their cllr. STC was a collective body serving a single community. Warding of the town would be a major change and residents were likely not be aware where boundaries fell. There was currently a thematic responsibility amongst members and warding the town could cause unnecessary friction.
- Effective and convenient governance – there were various political groups and diverse representation without the need to ward the town. There were instances where cllrs had to be coopted in 2020 and 2022 and warding could worsen recruitment. A resident

wishing to stand might want to stand to serve whole town, not one ward and this would be a loss to democracy. Operationally, STC had a small team of officers and warding of the town could increase their workload, and cllrs may have to compete for officer time and increase need from residents.

- Every four years, the Town Action Plan reflects community priorities and guides the term. The plan making process actively seeks and collates views across the town. Warding introduces risks that approach becomes fragmented. Think about own ward instead of whole town.
- Fair and balance elected representation – residents know who local cllrs are and balanced as can be.
- If review was to proceed with draft recommendation, there should be consideration given to how fair. Currently proposal suggests warding based on current polling districts which would be unworkable due to the variance in electoral sizes. SAW1 has 3000 electors, SAW2 has 280 electors. There was no detailed implementation plan presented as part of process.
- There had been repeated objections and it was important to reflect on whole review process. If it moves forward against direct objections, residents might feel that the process has been predetermined which would be damaging to trust in local democracy.
- Hope that committee give due consideration to objections.
- Understand thought process behind, and there was a logic on the surface and recognise that it would make administration of elections more straightforward. But this should not be the driving reason to split up a cohesive town.

Councillor Jacobs said that Sawbridgeworth was one of the largest towns that was not warded. He asked if Sawbridgeworth could see a time where it could be beneficial to ward the town, especially if the town was to grow.

STC said that they were fair minded and were not saying never. If there was a significant increase in residents and a

change to how the community operated then there could be case. They stressed that this should not be a blanket approach.

8 REPRESENTATIONS FROM BUNTINGFORD TOWN COUNCIL

Councillor Wallace presented the representations on behalf of Buntingford Town Council (BTC):

- Not opposed to change and the 2016 review was initiated at the request of BTC due to significant development north of the town. Having accommodated far in excess of its allocation, further significant change in short term unlikely.
- BTC is focussed centrally on traditional high street with the Council offices based centrally, with a reception open Monday – Thursday providing an efficient central hub for council business.
- Allocate enquiries based on natural skill base instead of geographical area. Current size of BTC means that there is 1 cllr for approx. 700 residents. Compares favourably with Hertford which has 1 cllr for 1750. Issues raised can be addressed in timely manner.
- Have asked and been assured that there have been no enquiries to discuss benefits or negatives of ward division. See warding as significant change and consider it unnecessary and could cause division not cohesion.
Most importantly, fail to see how proposal will benefit or enhance services provided to community.
- Holding of opinion does not mean it has not been considered. At the town's last election, three places were available to anyone wishing to stand but went untaken. BTC had to Coopt members to fill the vacancies. If there was a strong feeling of under representation in the town then why didn't those people contribute.
- Not saying never, further applications were coming in for development and the town was encircled by agricultural

land, secured by developers. Should these planning applications be approved, there would be a significant change to town identity.

- In response of opposition to application, BTC stated that we would seek CGR if that application were to be approved should not automatically be triggered. Necessity may dictate a more appropriate need in the future.
- Uncertainty around unitary auth and implications that have on parishes, may need to be reviewed in future. Urge that do not change until future when balanced consideration can be applied.

The meeting closed at 7.10 pm

Chairman

Date