

Minutes of the Extraordinary Meeting of Sonning Common Parish Council called by the Chairman under Standing Order 18 and held on Wednesday 25 June 2014 in the Village Hall

Present: Mr Kedge (Chairman); Mrs Diwell; Mr Fort; Miss Hunt; Mr Jones; Mr Rawlins; Mr Reynolds; Mr Stoves and Mr Collings (Parish Clerk). Three members of the public.

15/040 Apologies for absence and declarations of interests: Apologies: Mr Greenwood; Mrs Lewis; Ms Noble; Mrs Phillips-Tilbury. No declarations.

15/041 Community Governance Review:

Mr Kedge opened the meeting by reminding members that despite Parish Council's strong representations SODC is proposing to ignore them and put forward no change to the boundary with RPPC and to our councillor numbers. After some discussion it was proposed and resolved unanimously that action should be taken.

The meeting agreed to consider the draft of an open letter to SODC clearly setting out the reasons why the Parish Council considers their proposal to be flawed and illogical. It was agreed to consider the draft page by page.

Modifications were discussed and agreed and the eventual draft is appended.

The proposal that the Parish Council should spend £1,360 to have the letter published as a full page in the Henley Standard was discussed and when put to a vote it was carried by five votes to two with Mr Fort and Mr Stoves voting against it.

Meeting closed at 20.45

Chairman:

Dated:

Appendix

An open letter from Sonning Common Parish Council to the Members of South Oxfordshire District Council A FLAWED AND ILLOGICAL PROPOSAL IN THE COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE REVIEW THAT YOU CAN RECTIFY ON 17 JULY

As one of very few Parish Councils in the District actually elected in 2011, in our first contested election for over 30 years, we have a real democratic mandate. We were elected to be active in furthering the interests of our residents.

We are writing directly to you all now because of our dissatisfaction that both District Councillors elected to represent Sonning Common Ward have not joined in our public discussions on this important democratic process and have actively and, in our view, irrationally campaigned against us.

Where it began.

We welcomed the announcement in February 2013 of Your Community Governance Review (CGR) as an opportunity to recognise the huge changes that have happened since our boundary was first set out in 1952 when our village was a fraction of the thriving community it is today.

The Terms of Reference (ToR) published in April 2013 stated that *'the factors that the council (SODC) will take into account in making decisions are:*

- *Natural or man-made boundaries that help to define clearly one community from another;*
- *Housing developments that straddle parish boundaries, thereby resulting in people being in different parishes from their neighbours;*
- *Effective representation of local residents at parish level;*
- *The LGBC's proposals for the warding of South Oxfordshire for the purposes of district council elections;*
- *The newly created county council electoral divisions;*
- *Views expressed in relation to any changes, particularly from those people directly affected.*

The list offered us a logical and stepwise approach in which the first five factors could be determined factually and were not open to gerrymandering.

Round One:

It was clear that one sector of our boundary failed significantly to meet the first two criteria and, as a result, probably failed the third. In two more places minor changes seemed appropriate. We noted that the changes that we might propose would not materially affect electoral wards or divisions and so, with supporting rationales, on 18 June 2013 we began the exchanges that would lead to our final proposal on 21 November:

1. To reposition our northern boundary along the Stony Bottom ridge to bring in the Sonning Common Settlement as already defined by SODC for planning purposes and housing allocations. (CGR20)
2. To move the tip of the triangle between Kennylands Road and Peppard Road from the parish of Eye and Dunsden into Sonning Common. (CGR21)
3. To move Chiltern Edge School from the parish of Kidmore End into Sonning Common. (CGR22)
4. To increase the number of parish councillors from 12 to 15 to handle our growing workload. (CGR23)
(Return to the status quo ante 12 years ago)

We were and are still certain that those proposals met the letter and spirit of the Terms of Reference. To illustrate this in respect of CGR20, Map A shows in blue the existing boundary that is not *'natural or man-made'* AND that goes through *'housing developments that straddle parish boundaries'*.



Map A - as finalised November 2013

The red line shows the boundary that we proposed; the aerial photo then shows it running along a very clear ridge line, the true natural boundary, before turning to join up with the existing boundary.



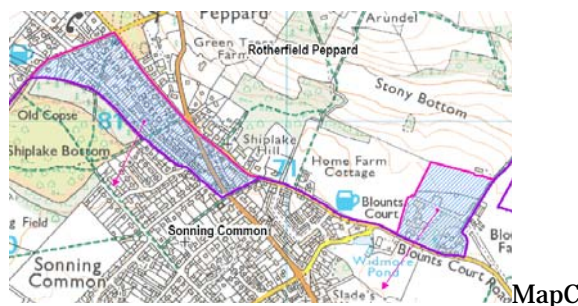
Moving goalposts:

After making our first suggestions we were surprised and concerned to notice in July 2013 that, without any rationale, a seventh factor: *'The extent to which proposals reflect the identities and interests of the affected community'* had been added retrospectively. It seemed duplicative of the sixth factor and was open, as we were to discover, to subjective interpretation.

Round Two:

Our first CGR proposals were sent in without a marked up map because the factors made the solutions seem patently obvious. We were thus surprised when without reference to any factors Rotherfield Peppard Parish Council (RPPC) proposed that some 10% of our housing stock should be transferred to their parish - a proposal since withdrawn.

Map A was submitted on 21 November 2013 and then, on 19 December, we received a CGR Working Group proposal that stated: *'After careful consideration it is minded to recommend the boundary shown on the map below which moves some parts of Rotherfield Peppard parish into Sonning Common parish. It considers that this boundary best reflects the criteria set out in the terms of reference for the review.'*



We responded on 21 January saying that: *'Our proposed north-eastern boundary line was put forward because it follows both a hedge and a ridge line that combine to provide a clear natural boundary to this settlement. The working group proposal on that edge seems to focus primarily on a man-made boundary of minor roads that we find perplexing and **we suggest that it be re-considered.*** Note that we did not reject the proposal.

We also tried to engage the District Councillors for Sonning Common (P Harrison and A Rooke) in discussions to understand why they were actively opposing our proposals. Neither engaged; the minutes of our meeting on 20 January record that Cllr Harrison was asked in public if he would support our proposals to which he opined *'that he is in favour of there being no change as it would upset councillors living in that area'*. No reference was made to the criteria.

Round Three:

By 13 February the CGR Working group had mysteriously withdrawn its proposal and decided to recommend no change as far as the boundary with RPPC is concerned saying: *'... because, although it considers the existing boundary is unsatisfactory in community governance terms, it cannot identify a noticeably improved one that better meets the terms of reference of the review'*. This was despite our proposal clearly meeting those terms of reference and their initial proposal getting tolerably close. We responded strongly by letter on 18 February and verbally to your meeting on 20 February.

While all this was going on we discovered that in arriving at our Core Strategy housing allocation – 138 new homes by 2027 – SODC's Planning team had based its calculations on the continuous built-up area that includes almost half the homes in Rotherfield Peppard Parish. Thus 23 (or 17%) of the new homes that we have to find sites for here were allocated because Rotherfield Peppard homes are in the calculations – mostly those in the area that we proposed be transferred.

We also learned that the Working Group has not seen our proposal 'on the ground' but relied on two officers "driving around the village to have a look" even though the ridge is largely invisible from the road! On 18 February we asked that the Working Group rectify that omission but were refused so they have not seen or walked the proposed boundary. A 'drive-by review' cannot be good enough especially when your Planning Committee members regularly visit contentious sites before making a decision affecting a handful of properties. Why, when faced with a decision that will affect us for at least 15 years, did the Working Group not come to see what is being proposed?

Round Four:

Our Parish Clerk presented our views to your meeting on 20 February. He and we, on seeing the webcast, were shocked by the way in which Cllr Harrison decried our views and those of your members who indicated some support for us.

We now await your Council meeting on 17 July when, despite everything, we are told that it will be proposed that both our carefully considered boundary change with RPPC (CGR 20) and our fully justified proposal for more councillors (CGR23) will be rejected.

If this were to happen you will be supporting a flawed and illogical outcome to your Community Governance Review – a sad and shabby conclusion to such an important democratic exercise.

In summary, Sonning Common Parish Council strongly believes the village boundary must change to reflect the village as it is now by incorporating the continuous built up area of Sonning Common. The existing boundary is:

- **ILLOGICAL:** it does not properly separate Sonning Common from Rotherfield Peppard as required by the Boundary Commission and your own Terms of Reference.
- **UNFAIR:** Sonning Common's housing allocation – 138 new homes by 2027 – is based on the continuous built up area that includes almost half of Rotherfield Peppard. We got their allocation and we may well receive more as a result of the Strategic Housing Market Assessment. We are shouldering the total cost and time burden of creating our Neighbourhood Development Plan when almost a fifth of what we have to plan for should in all fairness have been allocated to Rotherfield Peppard which, by the way, has more than **twice** our geographical area.
- **UNDEMOCRATIC:** In the 62 years since the parish boundary was laid down we have grown into a significant 'Larger Village' settlement with some 4,500 residents. We believe that it is essential that we are able to represent all who actually live within the officially defined settlement for the integrity of which we have drawn up our proposals.

Sonning Common's parish boundary does not reflect the village as it is now. It must change.

We urge you to reconsider before it is too late.

By order of Sonning Common Parish Council

Approved at the Extraordinary Meeting of the Parish Council held on 25 June 2013.

More than half the cost of this page has been covered by donations from our residents.