



Case study on a Community Governance Review

AFFPUDDLE & TURNERSPUDDLE PARISH COUNCIL (DORSET)

The context

This case study describes a Community Governance Review which considered two neighbouring parishes. Its outcome was to combine the parishes of Affpuddle and Turnerspuddle, removing the boundary between them. The new Affpuddle & Turnerspuddle Parish Council came into effect in 2010.

The population of the combined parish is no more than 450 and the former Turnerspuddle Parish had been particularly small. These two parishes had been jointly run as a 'grouped parish council' since 1954, under a Grouping Order made by Dorset County Council. There were nine Councillors, seven elected by Affpuddle and two elected by Turnerspuddle.

Their formal merger was proposed by some local councillors and residents once before, when Purbeck District Council consulted all of its local councils to ask about possible boundary changes. However, nothing further happened at that stage, because some of the changes put forward (elsewhere) were seen as contentious.

Affpuddle & Turnerspuddle is a very rural parish which lies in the north-west corner of the Purbeck District Council area. It could be described as a mix of woodland, heathland and water meadow. Despite the name, its largest settlement is the village of Briantspuddle. It contains the cottage which was the last home of Lawrence of Arabia, now managed by the National Trust, and the Bovington tank training area is nearby.

What happened in the review

The wish to see Affpuddle and Turnerspuddle parishes formally combined continued to be felt and at a more recent annual parish meeting a resolution was passed, which again asked for the creation of a single parish.

On a technical level, in terms of how the parish council was run, it could have been argued that such a merger would make little difference. However, the settlements along this river

valley held a common sense of identity and local councillors could point to their shared history. This included both parishes having been part of a model estate which was established in 1914 by the drapery entrepreneur, Sir Ernest Debenham.

Moreover, because the grouped council covered two parishes, seven of the nine Councillors had to be elected by Affpuddle and the other two had to be elected by Turnerspudde. This made little sense to local people and it felt like an unnecessary division within the council. How far did Councillors in one parish feel able to speak out about issues arising in the other?

“It just seemed logical to get rid of this anomaly. We have always considered this community to be Affpuddle and Turnerspudde.” – Parish Council Chairman

The result of this resolution was that Purbeck District Council agreed to a review of the arrangements. In doing so they had the support of their relevant Ward member. It is also notable that new legislation had just come into force, putting it within the gift of the District Council to undertake a Community Governance Review of the area and to implement any changes that were subsequently agreed.

“With the 2007 Act the process is a lot more straightforward. The local authority could see no good reason not to remove it [the boundary], especially as it was straightforward to do.” – Purbeck District Council officer

Conducting a review during 2009 also worked well in the sense that it didn't interfere with the usual cycle of parish elections. The next set of parish council elections were due to take place in 2010.

Terms of reference for the Review were drawn up by the District Council, in liaison with the Parish Clerk and the Ward member. These were approved by the District Council in January 2009 and published shortly after. Electors were given until April to make representations about the scope of the Review, though none were received (perhaps reflecting the straightforward nature of the issue).

In June 2009 Purbeck District Council then approved a set of draft proposals for consultation. These were publicised on the Parish website, in the Parish magazine and through locally posted notices. The relevant interested parties were also contacted.

Draft proposals: these recommended that an Order be made to:

- Remove the internal boundary between the parishes, so as to create a single Parish of Affpuddle & Turnerspudde;
- Create a single Parish Council of 9 members for the reorganised parish, to be elected initially on 6th May 2010; and

- Revoke the County of Dorset (Parishes of Affpiddle and Tonerspiddle) Grouping Order 1954 (sic).

Again there were no formal comments sent in by local residents. None of the main organisations involved were particularly surprised by this. The planned change no doubt appeared to be a technicality. However, at the very least the District Council could feel confident there was no obvious opposition. Given that the proposals were backed by the grouped Parish Council and by their own Ward member, they had no hesitation in putting them to the Council in October 2009 as a final set of proposals for approval.

The Reorganisation Order, which gave effect to their approval, was issued in February 2010 to coincide with the announcement of local council precepts for the next financial year. There was no need for any interim arrangements; existing grouped Parish Councillors remained in their role until elections in May 2010 completed the process, by creating Councillors for the single parish of Affpuddle & Turnerspuddle.

There were no consequential issues arising from this Community Governance Review for related changes to District Ward or County Division boundaries.

Lessons from the review

Timescale

As Community Governance Reviews go, this can be seen as a very straightforward example. Given the right circumstances a Review can now be conducted with minimal bureaucracy and modest input from the main parties with an interest. It was a partial review (covering part of the principal local authority's area) to make a simple parish boundary change. It had the backing of all the main parties and was evidently uncontentious among local residents.

Nonetheless, it is notable that this Review process took approximately eleven months to conduct. Given the different stages of a Review, the need to fit key decisions around District Council meetings and the importance of offering local people a full consultation opportunity, it is unlikely that this timescale could have been greatly reduced.

Local councils sector involvement

This Community Governance Review was very clearly managed and undertaken by Purbeck District Council, once the decision was taken to go-ahead with it. The level of involvement of the grouped Parish Council was modest, though there was liaison and they were kept well

informed of progress. This seems perfectly acceptable given that this particular case was so uncomplicated and given that the local council was content with its role.

“It [the Review] was a long time coming, but very straightforward.” – Parish Clerk

Dorset Association of Parish & Town Councils (the county association) was made aware of the Review and was contacted for its views. They take the view that if a Review is requested by a local council they are generally there to support that line. The principal local authority says that it would probably have turned to the county association for more guidance had this Review been a complicated one. The county association, for its part, can cite greater involvement in reviews elsewhere in Dorset where there were issues.

Principal local authority support

One notable feature is that both officers and councillors at Purbeck District Council were supportive of the case for change put forward by the grouped Parish Council. The Review was greatly assisted by the fact that the District Councillor for Winfrith Ward (which includes Affpuddle & Turnerspuddle) had built up a strong working relationship with the Parish Council. The District Councillor regularly attended Parish Council meetings and was fully appraised of the local wish for a single parish. This meant there was an influential voice in favour when the case was discussed by Purbeck District Council at key decision-making points during the Review. Having such obvious backing from the relevant Ward Councillor smoothed the passage of the Review.

The importance of community identity

This example also demonstrates the importance of communities’ own sense of place – something which tends to be more strongly felt in smaller settlements and which, in this instance, was a shared sense of place between neighbouring settlements. Both the geography and the history of the area contribute to its local identity. If this Review were looked at simply in technical terms it would be easy to dismiss it as ‘not worth the effort’, since the grouped Parish Council had been in operation for decades. However, it clearly mattered to local people and was something which they had been requesting over a period of time. It is to the credit of the principal local authority that it recognised this and took action.

Concluding comments

Whilst modest, this Community Governance Review can be considered a success. The process went according to plan and it has addressed the issues that were of local concern. Merging (grouped) parishes also simplifies a couple of important procedural tasks for local

councils, since it removes the need to hold separate annual parish meetings and to show separate (parish) financial accounts.

“We certainly now feel more of a united [parish] Council.” – Parish Council chairman

In this case it can certainly be claimed that the 2007 legislation, which delegated Reviews to principal local authorities, was a prompt. A supportive principal local authority felt more obviously inclined to proceed with a Review because the process had become easier and was now placed within its powers to undertake.

As this was a straightforward example, it raises some interesting questions about the Community Governance Review process, which depend on local and pragmatic decisions. To what extent should local councils expect to be involved in a review of their area? How simple and rapid can the review process be made, whilst sticking within the legislation (and the spirit of central government guidance)? In particular, how formally and how often do local residents need to be consulted when the issues are so basic?

Community website sponsored by Affpuddle & Turnerspuddle Parish Council:

www.briantspuddle.info

Affpuddle & Turnerspuddle Parish Council page on the ‘Dorset for you’ website:

<http://www.dorsetforyou.com/388970>

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 Affpuddle & Turnerspuddle Parish Council, Purbeck District Council and the Dorset Association of Parish & Town Councils for their timely input to this case study. It should be noted that this document does not necessarily represent their views and any errors are the author’s.

May 2011