

## **Withersfield Parish Council Submission to Community Governance Review (CGR)**

### **Introduction**

The details connected with the first round of consultation associated with the CGR, particularly as they affected Withersfield parish, were notified too late to be formally addressed at a Parish Council meeting (due to the bi-monthly cycle and sequencing of meetings). It was therefore determined that in the first instance the Parish Council would raise awareness of the Review through messages in the Parish magazine, Withersfield News. Parishioners were also asked to make their views known via individual responses to the on-line survey. It is known that those who responded (predominantly from the areas most affected by the proposed boundary change, ie Hanchett End, Barsey Close, and the Arboretum Estate), indicated their wish to remain in Withersfield Parish. In addition, Parish Councillors are aware of representations made to Borough Councillor, Jane Midwood, all of which have exhorted her to ensure that the residences which would be taken out of Withersfield Parish if the Review proposals go ahead, remain in the Parish.

### **Public meeting**

The Parish Council also decided at the time of the first stage of the Review that subsequent to this it would continue to update parishioners through Withersfield News and to hold a public meeting in March to explore the issues further. In addition, residents of the Parish were encouraged to notify the Parish Council of their views via email or letter; the latter produced a small number of responses, evenly split between parishioners who were of the view that the boundary changes were sensible and those, who much more vehemently, were of the opinion that they should not take place.

The public meeting was held on 21 March. This was publicised by distribution of a draft notice and agenda, a flyer providing details of the proposals, and a notice placed on the parish noticeboard, together with, around the time of the meeting, an A-board placed on Town Green. The meeting was attended by over 30 people, drawn from Hanchett End, Barsey Close, and the Arboretum Estate, and from the main village area. Five Parish Councillors were also present, and County Councillor Mary Evans, together with the Parish Clerk.

The meeting commenced with a presentation on the Review by a Parish Councillor, and then moved into a panel-led discussion (the panel consisting of a mixture of councillors and residents), with many contributions also being made from the floor.

Participants were encouraged to contribute on the basis of the way in which the decisions will be made by St Edmundsbury Borough Council, ie community identity and effective local government. The following provides a synopsis of the main points made.

## **Community Identity**

The residences of Hanchett End and Barsey Close were part of the Parish of Withersfield from the time of their construction owing to their closer proximity to St Mary the Virgin, Withersfield's Parish Church, than the Parish church of Haverhill. They were, when built, distinct from Haverhill and it is only recently that they have been fringed by housing estates that have grown north and west from the town and close to the ring road. Consequently, the residents, many of whom have lived in the area for some time, feel part of the community of Withersfield. They receive the Parish magazine and participate in a range of community activities, such as the village fete, and make use of the facilities provided by the Village Hall, for instance playing bridge and bowls. It was quite clear from the contributions made by residents during the public meeting that they identified strongly with Withersfield Parish and wished to maintain their status as Withersfield parishioners. It was also clear from the comments made that residents, particularly in Hanchett End and Barsey Close, have made, and continue to make, valued contributions to the life of Withersfield. The whole parish, as currently constituted, was said to be 'one big family'.

The Arboretum is a much newer community that is only now beginning to form its identity. Nonetheless, residents who contributed at the public meeting clearly felt an affinity with the parish expressing a view that they wanted their children to grow up in a village-like atmosphere that the Parish, because of its considerably smaller scale than Haverhill, can provide. Residents of this estate indicated that they had not been made to feel welcome by Haverhill Town Council and expressed their appreciation of being invited to contribute their views to the Parish Council. The Arboretum residents are being integrated into the Withersfield Parish, for example, through the Parish Magazine now being delivered to the houses in the Arboretum by volunteers from the new residences. The village of Withersfield is beginning to benefit from the younger adults and their children now occupying the residences being built on the Arboretum site and there is the opportunity to move towards a more balanced community identity for the whole Parish. It was also pointed out that the removal of residences from Withersfield Parish could put current village activities in jeopardy if the sense of identity currently felt by residents in Hanchett End, Barsey Close and The Arboretum was taken away.

## **Effective local government**

Residents from both Hanchett End/ Barsey Close and the Arboretum who attended the public meeting clearly articulated their view that Withersfield Parish Council provided them with more effective local government than Haverhill because their voices could be heard more clearly in the smaller community. The point was made that the proposed boundary changes would remove around 50% of electors from Withersfield Parish whilst increasing those in Haverhill by only around 1%; it was therefore thought that any argument that

the interests of those affected would be better served by being within Haverhill was spurious.

If these residents were to be removed from the Parish it would have a considerable impact on the precept. This would lead to a reduction in the quality of local government provided by Withersfield Parish council, reducing its effectiveness.

## **Conclusions**

The vast majority of the views expressed to the Parish Council, either by email or letter submission or at the public meeting, indicated that the residents of Hanchett End and Barsey Close, and perhaps surprisingly from a Parish Council perspective, also of the Arboretum Estate, wished to remain in Withersfield Parish. Conversely, only a very few residents had expressed the view that the boundary change should go ahead. Withersfield Parish Council therefore opposes those proposals affecting Withersfield Parish contained in the CGR on the following grounds:

- A majority of residents making contact with the Parish Council had made it clear that the present boundary should be maintained;
- The presence of geographical boundaries is acknowledged, but cultural and identity boundaries are far more important;
- Concern about the impact on the amount of precept Withersfield Parish Council would receive in the future if the proposals go ahead, and the consequent effect on its ability to provide effective local governance.