

1 Swindon Borough Council Labour Group

1. The Labour Group believes that no new parish councils should be set up without the support of the majority of residents of the non-parished area expressed through a referendum. We believe that the Cabinet's decision to avoid a local poll on this issue is a subversion of local democracy.
2. Should the Cabinet ignore the wishes of local people and proceed with parishing the current non-parished area, the Labour Group believes the best option would be to introduce one single parish covering the whole area.
3. We are concerned about the lack of administrative detail in the plans.
4. We are concerned that parishing will not fill the gap in the council's finances.
5. We believe that the Cabinet has not complied with its duties under the 2007 Act in conducting the CGR review.
6. We believe that the consultation has not been carried out in accordance with the Gunning principles.
7. If parishes were to be imposed, a single parish is the only option which would have public support.

1. The Labour Group believes that no new parish councils should be set up without the support of the majority of residents of the non-parished area expressed through a referendum. We believe that the Cabinet's decision to avoid a local poll on this issue is a subversion of local democracy. The proposed creation of a new layer of local government and the transfer to it of discretionary and statutory place-based services is a fundamental change in how Swindon is governed, and as such it should not be introduced without the democratic mandate which it so conspicuously lacks.

In the period to 2020 a transfer of costs of £17 million is predicted. There is no democratic mandate for that transfer or for the changes in methods of funding and management of town-wide spaces such as Queen's Park, the Town Gardens and the town's major shopping precincts. We are aware that during the May 2016 elections some canvassers of the controlling group asserted that "no decision has been made" about parishing. Some Cabinet members and principle officers make that statement currently despite the fact that Cabinet has approved the budget that predicts savings derived from extended Parish involvement in 'place-based services'. Further progress on implementing such savings should be dependent on the will of the people of Swindon expressed by way of a referendum of all eligible voters in the Borough.

2. Should the Cabinet ignore the wishes of local people and proceed with parishing the current non-parished area, the Labour Group believes the best option would be to introduce one single parish covering the whole area. We believe that a single parish would have the following advantages over multiple parishes:

Appendix Four

- a. A smaller proportion of the precept would be spent on administering the parish.
- b. Such a parish would be more sustainable than several smaller parishes. There would be the opportunity to gain efficiency and value for money through economies of scale, and no geographical limits to efficient service provision.
- c. The transition of staff, responsibilities and assets from Swindon Council to a single new parish would be easier. Some senior officers are known to be concerned that the interests of the employees of Swindon Council have been entirely neglected in these plans. The staff have not been properly consulted and their views have not been heard. There is much to consider around TUPE. Local government officers have always been underpaid relative to their counterparts in the private sector but until recent years they enjoyed greater security of employment. If the parishes plan proceeds, we believe that much of the incentive to work for local government will be lost. We foresee that variety of work, on-the-job training, career progression with the same employer and professional supervision will all be reduced or lost and that general conditions of employment will deteriorate. Parish employment will become stop-gap employment and employee retention will be an issue. Anecdotal evidence and turnover statistics imply that these problems affect even the employment of Parish Clerks. However, the outlook for staff will not be nearly so bad if the non-parished area becomes a single parish.
- d. There would be more long term security for town-wide community land assets such as parks. There are a number of town-wide facilities that are too general in their use to lend themselves to be maintained in good condition by any one Parish. They are the major town shopping areas including Old Town and Gorse Hill, the river valleys of the Ray and the Cole including the lake there, Nova Hreod including Plaums Pit lake, Queens Park and Town Gardens and other large public open spaces.

The Cabinet has accepted that the condition of the public space in the town centre itself, which is vital to the regeneration of the area, cannot become the responsibility of a single parish. The Cabinet is asking town centre businesses for a contribution of £400,000. These businesses are already paying a contribution to the BID and are unlikely to welcome a further imposition that does not fall on their competitors in the Outlet Village or any of the out-of-town shopping outlets. There can be no guarantee that businesses would continue to pay up in future, and they would be in a position to make demands in return for the contribution. This imposition is likely to lead not to regeneration but to a further decline in the town centre.

- e. Most importantly to the Labour Group, the pooling of resources among the more affluent and poorer communities would be retained.

Under the current proposals, individual Parish Councils would be responsible for maintaining community spaces such as Queens Park, the Town Gardens and the borough's major shopping areas. Community assets enjoyed by the whole town would be paid for only by sections of the population, often among the less well-off. How is this fair? By pooling our resources across the borough we can maintain a decent environment for everyone. If each area is forced to pay for its own local

Appendix Four

services, poorer areas will have worse services than the more affluent outer areas and the quality of public space will be much worse in poorer areas.

The term “deprivation doughnut” is used to describe an inner circle of deprivation which develops around the failing core of a once thriving city economy. Shoppers then take flight to the peripheral shopping malls and residents who can do so move to the suburbs, leaving behind only people on low incomes or none. Business rates and council tax contribute less and less and this depresses the environmental spend further, feeding the deprivation spiral. We do not contend that this will happen overnight, but happen it will.

We have been told that parishes would benefit from the freedom not to cut the grass, clear graffiti, clean the streets or manage public toilets where they exist. This is a proposal unworthy of any local government officer or member. These are services which the whole town requires. If poorer parishes are driven to abandon them, they will not be doing so through choice.

It is a cornerstone of civilised society that we all pay for common facilities for the good of all whether we ourselves use them or not - sewage, clean water, electricity, leisure space, libraries and so much more. Cross-subsidy and town-wide facilities within agreed boundaries is the established method of organisation. There always has been debate on how best to deliver the common facilities but that they should exist at all has not been questioned before. But residents are now being encouraged to question why they should pay to support other areas of our town. “Why should I pay to pick up litter in Parks?” is a question that has been heard. The questioner did not reflect that Parks contribute not only to picking up their own litter but also to cutting the grass on Moulden Hill, tackling flooding problems in Covingham and Haydon Wick and so much more.

3. We are concerned about the lack of administrative detail in the plans. There have been no clear answers to date on what transitional monies will be available to Parish Councils or what formula will be used to arrive at a figure. In one case there has been a veiled threat that if the Parish did not sign up to the whole package, it would receive no transitional funds whatever, not even the transitional relief granted in compensation for the changes in Council Tax benefit recharge to the government. There have been no answers to date on whether reserves would be transferred to the parishes along with assets or whether the entire general reserve would be retained by Swindon Council. This information should to be made public at the earliest opportunity as it will be critical to the sustainability of all new Parish Councils. We deduce (though we have not been told) that ownership of every asset would remain with SBC but that full responsibility for that asset, including legal responsibility, would rest with the successor authority. As with some play areas already transferred, that will entail an inspection regime. Part of the Council’s £6 million of general reserves and all specific reserves should be transferred with the assets.

Appendix Four

4. We are concerned that parishing will not fill the gap in the council's finances. There can be no doubt that in planning to parish the borough and transfer responsibilities to the parishes, the Cabinet is motivated by the financial constraints under which it is operating. For the purposes of this response we will ignore the spending pressures but draw your attention to the reductions in government grants over the past five years and the draconian reductions predicted in the Efficiency Statement attached to the 7th September forward financial plan. The details are: 2017-18, reductions of £11.5 million; 2018/19, new reductions of £11 million and in 2019/20 yet further reductions of £9.7 million. The result is an unavoidable reduction in spending power of £32.2 million by 2020. The great sadness of this whole time-consuming and expensive exercise is that, should this plan to extend parishes and parish activity be imposed in full, much of that spending gap would remain and the question of how to tackle it would remain to be answered.

5. We believe that the Council has not complied with its duties under the 2007 Act in conducting the CGR review. The 2007 Act states that "The principle council must take into account any representations received in connection with the review". Representations received have been overwhelmingly opposed to parishing and yet the Council has pressed on with its plans. The Act states that "the principle council must have regard to the need for community government within the area under review to reflect the identities and interests of the community in that area". But the suggested boundaries do not define identifiable communities, and the unparished area in general has expressed a keen interest in not being parished. Furthermore we are not aware that the council has taken into account, as it is obliged to do, "any other arrangements that could be made for the purposes of community representation or community engagement".

6. We believe that the consultation has not been carried out in accordance with the Gunning principles. As the cost savings to be achieved through parishing were included in the 2016-17 Budget published in February, the proposals were not "still at a formative stage" when they were first presented for consultation. We are now engaged in the third round of consultations on these proposals. People involved in the consultation were not given information to make an intelligent choice: definitions of the services to be transferred, the sums to be saved to the council and the likely cost to the taxpayer have changed during the process, and no residents were aware until very recently that the parishes are expected to take over a large workforce from the Council. The second stage of consultation was squeezed in at short notice and inadequately publicised. The overwhelmingly negative response to the first two stages of consultation has not been conscientiously taken into account. If it had been, the process would have been abandoned. At each stage the Cabinet has attempted to confine the debate to a consideration of where the boundaries between new parishes should be set, and the first two stages of consultation have been recast as "engagements".

7. If parishes were to be imposed, a single parish is the only option which would have public support. Labour Councillors have been holding consultation meetings in our communities over the past few months and are continuing to organise more of

these events. At these meetings we offer residents the opportunity to vote in a secret ballot. They vote on whether or not they support creating parish councils in every part of the borough, and then on what boundaries they would prefer if parishes are imposed. The result has been an overwhelming vote against parishing in general, but, if parishes are imposed, in favour of a single parish covering the non-parished area. To date there have been 10 community meetings where a secret ballot has been conducted, scrutinised by members of the public attending. The results so far are 215 against universal Parishes and 1 in favour. Were Parishes to be imposed we have 160 for a Town Council of all the current non parish areas and 27 for Swindon Parish with the exclusion of West Swindon and the more recent East Swindon. While the options for all three of the Councils maps are on the ballot paper they received almost no votes. Attendance lists, ballot papers and tellers certificates are held in the Labour office for inspection.

Swindon Labour Group Secret Ballots

As at 4th October 2016, the Swindon Labour Group had conducted 11 secret ballots at meetings in public with the total number of votes cast being 254 and the counts were conducted by appropriate scrutineers. Of these, 251 opposed creating parishes and 3 were in favour. However, on the additional questions, 180 were in favour of a single parish for the unparished area, 32 favoured a parish covering the former Swindon Corporation boundaries, which were not defined on the ballot paper, 8 supported the Cabinet's proposals as set out in the August Cabinet paper, 4 favoured the indicative boundaries presented in stage 2 while 16 favoured an unspecified alternative.

A copy of one of the ballot papers is reproduced below.

Feedback on stage 3

Swindon Community Governance Review.

I support creating Parish councils Yes ☐
in every part of Swindon Borough. No ☐

If parishes are imposed I would opt for

A Swindon Town Council of ☐
the entire non parished area _____

A Swindon Parish in line with the ☐
Swindon Corporation boundaries _____

Appendix Four

The Boundaries as proposed by
Council Officials on 17/8/2016 ☐

The Boundaries as proposed during
round 2 of the consultations ☐

Something else ☐