

The Council's Working Group on a Separate Parish of Winchelsea

What was the Working Group?

In response to Rother District Council's decision to look at the proposal for a separate Parish for Winchelsea, the Chair of Icklesham Parish Council, Mrs Merricks, announced that she had formed a working group to examine the pros and cons of the proposal.

Who was on the Working Group?

Mrs Merricks decided that the Working Group should consist of one councillor from each ward plus three residents of Winchelsea and one resident from each of the other wards, a total of 10.

According to Mrs Merricks, the co-option of residents was intended to make the Working Group more 'representative'. She could not explain why the Working Group was not formed from Councillors, given that they are the elected representatives of the Parish, or why the letter could not be drafted by the whole Council.

As it turned out, the members of the Working Group were hand-picked by Mrs Merricks, which completely finished off the idea that it was at all 'representative' of the Parish. Three of the members from Winchelsea are members of the Corporation: how can such a very narrow group be considered 'representative' of Winchelsea?

The impartiality of many of the members of the Working Group is questionable given that they have serious conflicts of interest:

- All four members from Winchelsea have publicly opposed the proposal for a separate Parish of Winchelsea and are therefore prejudiced.
- Two of the members of the Working Group (Peter Turner of Winchelsea and John Austin of Icklesham) were former Chairmen of Icklesham Parish Council. They are unlikely to be in favour of breaking up the body that they led.
- One member from Winchelsea is compromised by the fact that Icklesham Parish Council allows him to park overnight in Pear Tree Marsh allotments but refuses to allow other residents to do so. The Vice Chairman of the Parish Council has admitted that the Council are breaching a covenant in the deed of purchase under which the land was bought from the District Council.

What did the Working Group decide?

The Parish Council was told that the Working Group would examine the 'pros and cons' of a separate Parish of Winchelsea in an impartial and unbiased way. This implied that the Working Group would start with a blank sheet of paper (ie no preconceptions) and gather evidence from all interested parties.

However, at its very first meeting, the Working Group was instructed by Mrs Merricks to address only the specific points raised by the Parish of Winchelsea Action Group, and to "pickout [sic] obvious omissions and perceived inaccuracies, and present the true facts to the

residents of the parish'. So, instead of setting out the pros and cons of the proposal, the Working Group has merely looked at the cons. This does not seem an 'impartial and unbiased' approach.

Below, we have copied each of the comments of Mrs Merricks' Working Group on the points raised by the Parish of Winchelsea Action Group and added our reply.

Page 1, footnote: **The Working group asked that it be noted that some residents who had wished to attend were, for reasons unknown, barred from the meeting. Therefore these figures cannot be viewed as being representative of the true wishes and feelings of the whole of Winchelsea.***

Only Mr & Mrs Rumsey of Icklesham and Mrs Cummings of Winchelsea Beach were asked to leave the meeting as they were not residents of Winchelsea, being on the electoral registers for the ward of Icklesham and Winchelsea Beach, respectively, and therefore ineligible to vote in Winchelsea or register for a vote.

The comment of the Working Group is a transparent attempt to try to pretend that the clear consensus in favour of a separate Parish Council that emerged at the public meeting was rigged by the exclusion of residents of Winchelsea.

1) The historical rationale for Icklesham Parish no longer holds true:

The argument put forward is not correct. Historically New Winchelsea was built on the hill of Iham which was then Icklesham. As the sea receded Winchelsea Beach and Rye Harbour were understandably joined as they developed. History shows that the four wards have grown distinctly but compatibly with each other. They are certainly not unwieldy and there is no evidence to show otherwise.

The reference to the hill of Iham being in Icklesham is irrelevant: the administrative boundaries of 700 years ago are hardly relevant in the 21st century.

History most certainly does not show that the wards have grown compatibly and the submission by Parish of Winchelsea Action Group to the District Council describes in detail how unwieldy the Parish has become. The Working Group does not bother to provide a single piece of contrary evidence.

2) The current parish does not meet the criterion set out by Local Government Commission that "a Parish should reflect a small, distinctive and recognisable community of interest with its own sense of identity": A short discussion followed and the general thoughts were that all four wards in the parish are different in their own way but this diversity helps to balance and to develop the parish as a whole.

This is goobledgook worthy of a government department in trouble. What on earth does it mean that "diversity helps to balance and to develop the parish as a whole"?

However, the Working Group seem not to have realised that their statement tacitly acknowledges the fact that Winchelsea meets the criteria set out by the Local Government Commission that "a

Parish should reflect a small, distinctive and recognisable community of interest with its own sense of identity”. In other words, parishes are not supposed to be diverse.

3) Winchelsea precisely matches the Local Government Commission criterion that “a Parish should reflect a small distinctive and recognisable community of interest with its own sense of identity”: The WG accepts that Winchelsea has an Historic heritage and many important features, but the statement that nobody would say they live in Icklesham or tried to disassociate themselves with the other ward members is untrue and the statement is disrespectful to all the residents of the Parish.

The Working Group seems to be claiming that the Parish of Winchelsea Action Group, in their submission to Rother District Council, stated that people in Winchelsea try to dissociate themselves from other wards and that this is ‘disrespectful to all the residents of the Parish’. What the Action Group actually said was that “no resident of Winchelsea --- nor any resident of Winchelsea Beach or Rye Harbour --- would ever say that they lived in Icklesham”. This is fact: why would someone living in Winchelsea or Winchelsea Beach or Rye Harbour give their address as Icklesham?

4) The size of the Parish and diversity of its four wards means that Icklesham Parish Council finds it difficult to focus on issues of special importance to individual wards: This statement is not true. All issues brought before Icklesham Parish Council are addressed appropriately and recorded in the minutes.

The Working Group avoids the question with this anodyne bureaucratic answer. Whether or not one believes that “all issues brought before Icklesham Parish Council are addressed appropriately and recorded in the minutes”, the fact of the matter is that most issues of special importance to individual wards are never brought to the Council in the first place. Examples include regeneration and major development proposals in Rye Harbour, the loss of shop and post office, and vandalism in Icklesham, vandalism in Winchelsea Beach, and traffic and conservation in Winchelsea.

5) Winchelsea has unique historic and archaeological importance which Icklesham Parish Council is not helping to maintain, enhance or promote:

Icklesham Parish Council has consistently supported the Corporation who has the responsibility for the maintenance for the Ancient Monuments. Icklesham Parish Council is proud to have the Ancient Town of Winchelsea within its parish.

The wards of Icklesham, Winchelsea Beach, Rye Harbour and Winchelsea have all had problems with crime, youths or other local issues and where appropriate the Parish Council has endeavoured to address the problems

Another evasive answer from the Working Group. The Council has occasionally donated small sums of money to the Corporation. However, conservation issues in Winchelsea go well beyond the four ancient monuments owned by the Corporation. The Council has never discussed conservation issues, eg extending the Conservation Area, supporting archaeological

investigation, conserving monuments under threat (one of which is on the national register of monuments at risk) and so on.

The Working Group shows its ignorance of Winchelsea by suggesting it shares the crime and youth problems of other wards. Fortunately, we do not. However, the Council would not know this as it never speaks to the Neighbourhood Watch, has failed to appoint (as requested by the police) a Councillor to act as liaison with the police and fails to implement its statutory obligation to consider the implications of its decisions on crime and disorder.

6) The difficulty which Icklesham Parish Council has on issues of special importance to individual wards is evident in the frequent formation of associations or action groups in the wards to fill the leadership gap left by the Council: As Parish Councils have to work within the constraints of limited local powers IPC accepts the fact that it is local residents who invariably have to form action groups to fight for or against local issues, but when appropriate Icklesham Parish Council has supported these local campaigns. Over the last 40 years the Parish Council has dealt with the continuing blight of the roads. It was the Parish Council in the 1990's that spearheaded the A259 road conference and the Icklesham and Winchelsea Residents' Associations were formed to back up the Parish Council.

In fact, Parish Councils have very wide powers, if they choose to exercise them. Icklesham Parish Council has not: they cannot claim to be powerless.

But even if Parish Councils decide not to use their powers, they are supposed to lobby on behalf of their parishes. Icklesham Parish Council rarely if ever communicates with the outside world.

This is simply rewriting history. Icklesham and Winchelsea Residents' Associations were set up because the Council failed to take the lead over the A259 By-Pass. After the public inquiry, the Council was criticised for failing to take the lead and John Austin, then Chairman, accepted this criticism.

As everything is supposedly "recorded in the minutes", the Council will no doubt be able to produce evidence of their leadership. We would also welcome any examples of the Parish Council dealing with "the continuing blight of the roads".

Residents of Winchelsea involved in the Community Speed Watch campaign will be surprised to hear that the Parish Council has "supported these local campaigns".

7) The likely growth in the size of wards means that Winchelsea will diminish in relative importance within Icklesham Parish and its representation will become nugatory: This is determined by population and can be reviewed by the District at any time.

This is a statement of the obvious and makes no attempt at all to deal with the problem of the growing imbalance between the sizes of the four wards and the problem it is starting to cause for the representation of Winchelsea.

8) The size and diversity of Icklesham Parish undermines local democracy by preventing identification with the parish Council and making Parish Council meetings inconvenient:

Icklesham Parish Council has always endeavoured to act in the best interests of the whole of the community and ward councillors have accepted their role as being representative of the whole of the parish. Traditionally Icklesham Parish Council meetings have had a low public attendance; the distance to travel is not an issue. In addressing the statement about Parish Clerks, Icklesham Parish Council has appointed the applicant whom they have considered the most suitable candidate for the post.

Ward councillors primarily represent their wards. That is why wards exist.

If distance is not a reason for residents not attending Council meetings, then the problem of low attendance is far worse than imagined and certainly undermines the claim in the Council's letter to the public that Icklesham Parish Council is 'vibrant'. There are no doubt many other reasons why Icklesham Parish Council meetings attract so few residents, but distance is very relevant: you try to encourage residents of Winchelsea to drive to a Council meeting in Rye Harbour on a wet Monday night in January!

The policy of appointing an outsider was made public by a former Chairman of the Council, Derek Ransome, when the previous Clerk resigned. There were many local candidates for the job who were better qualified than the new Clerk (who lacks the IT and accountancy skills that were supposedly a requirement of the job). The Assistant Clerk also lives in St Leonards, despite the understanding given to the Executive Officer of SALC that this post would be based in the Parish to provide a local connection.

9) Winchelsea would be a vibrant and ambitious Parish: Any new council would be a vibrant and ambitious Council, as indeed Icklesham Parish Council is. In future could the community of Winchelsea sustain the commitment and support the requirements of its own Parish Council.

The Working Group helpful confirm the claim that Winchelsea Parish Council would work well.

However, it is grossly inaccurate to claim that Icklesham Parish Council is 'vibrant and ambitious'. How can a Council be called 'vibrant' when most Councillors do not bother to speak at meetings, the Council takes a defensive and often rude attitude to members of the public who attend meetings and most residents are dissuaded from attending by the tedium of meetings? And how can a Council be called 'ambitious' when it refuses to seek Quality Parish status or undertake a Parish Action Plan.

The question over whether Winchelsea could sustain the commitment and support for its own Parish Council is not supported with any argument. It is a bit like asking whether democracy is worthwhile because people might get fed up with voting. We believe that the increased relevance of the Parish Council would increase and sustain interest. But if Winchelsea remains part of Icklesham Parish, we will never find out. The only certainty is that, if Winchelsea remains part of Icklesham Parish, apathy, uncontested elections and co-opted Councillors will continue to be the order of the day!

10) A Separate Parish Council for Winchelsea is viable: The WG felt that any new Council would be viable, but the figures demonstrated in the proposal are misleading and would require more time to appraise the distribution of funds as presented. With the existing PC you have a situation of spreading the costs more over the 4 wards, which allows you more options. The breakdown in point 3 should be related to property data not population data.

The WG felt that Rother District Council should provide the true implication of costs for a separate Winchelsea Council.

The Working Group has had to agree that a Winchelsea Parish Council would be financially viable.

The Working Group claims that the shadow budget provided by the Parish of Winchelsea Action Group is 'misleading' but admits that they have not had time to appraise them. They do not seem inclined to do so, as they want Rother District Council to do the calculations for them.

The Working Group argues that the existing Parish has economies of scale by being able to spread overheads over more tax-payers. However, the fact is that the scale and diversity of the Parish requires the duplication of administration and imposes extra costs of co-ordination. This is obvious from the fact that Icklesham Parish Council has to employ two Parish Clerks.

11) Would there be enough candidates for Winchelsea Parish Council: The WG felt that this may be the case at present but would this be the case in the future?

This is another example of the Working Group failing to understand the inherent strength of real democracy. Too many members of the Working Group seem to be trapped in a world of irrelevant and inactive Parish Councils.

12) Wouldn't a separate Parish Council undermine the corporation of Winchelsea: The role of the PC does not and should not seek to undermine the role and responsibilities of the unique Mayor and Corporation of Winchelsea.

This was an argument put forward by Trevor Elliott at Rother District Council. We agree with the Working Group.

13) Wouldn't a Winchelsea Parish Council confuse residents about the structure of local government: Not if residents are informed.

This was an argument put forward by Trevor Elliott at Rother District Council. We agree with the Working Group.

14) Shouldn't the other wards have a say in the issue: The procedure is prescribed by statute. All necessary steps have to be taken to ensure *all interested persons throughout the parish and elsewhere* are informed of the review and have full opportunity to make representations and thereby enable the District Council to have the fullest understanding of local views.

This was an argument put forward by Trevor Elliott at Rother District Council. We do not see why other wards should have a veto over Winchelsea. We want each ward to decide its own future. The Local Government Commission say that the “feeling of the local community and the wishes of the local inhabitants are paramount”. Given that the scope of ‘local community’ is defined in its guidelines as a ‘community of interest’ (which means Winchelsea), then we do not believe that Trevor Elliott is correct.

15) Elections would be too expensive: The costs of elections are borne by parish councils.

This is simply a statement of fact.

Parish of Winchelsea Action Group
30 April 2006