

# Clarifying matters <sup>1/2/02</sup>

AS YOU may be aware it is not often I publicly respond to letters within the Observer Mailbag.

However I find it necessary to make a formal response to the letter from Richard Comotto (July 28) which is, unusually for Mr Comotto, incorrect so far as his comments relating to the council are concerned.

Had Mr Comotto been able to attend the count of the Parish Poll, he would have heard me give those present an explanation of the role of Rother District Council in this, which may have helped to clarify matters for him.

In particular I drew the distinction between my role as returning officer for this poll and the roll of the local authority. So far as the actual comments made in his letter are concerned, there is no provision in the regulations for either voting cards, proxy or postal votes, only voting in person is permitted.

The council is under no duty to publicise the poll and indeed the Electoral Commission expresses the view that we should not be seen to publicise such polls as we could be seen to be favouring one particular view.

This is purely a parish matter, and with regard to this, and publicity of the parish meeting which he called, these are issues he needs to take up with the parish council.

So far as his comments relating to the cost of a parish poll, namely 'these are usually absorbed by District Councils', I have to correct him again since they are a proper charge to the parish council, and are of course part of the cost of the democratic process.

Under the relevant act a local authority has the power to charge the cost of parish polls and elections to the parish which we and other authorities have done consistently. I would point out, however, we are bearing the cost of the parish survey.

Rother District Council has been keen throughout this process, to ensure as wide a possible voice is heard so far as the question of the separate parishing of Winchelsea town is concerned.

A parish poll on its own, cannot give a conclusive answer to such an issue, and the results from the poll bear witness to this fact, since a fundamental element of any restructuring is the impact upon adjoining wards and parishes.

Rother District Council, in taking a decision to carry out a parish survey, is seeking to gain both qualitative and quantitative data on this important issue, and the results of the parish survey will be combined with the results of the poll, and will be considered by the council's licensing & general purposes committee in the autumn of this year.

If it is the decision of that committee that it wishes to consider further a separate parish for Winchelsea town, then we are obliged to carry out more consultation, at the end of which a final decision will be taken as to whether or not to submit a request to the Secretary of State for the separate parishing of Winchelsea town.

The decision at that time will be taken by the Secretary of State, who may refer it to the Boundary Commission, and not by Rother District Council.

It is, of course, inevitable Rother District Council will find itself 'in the firing line' on this issue, suffice to say I hope the contents of this letter have clarified the council's position and corrected the inaccuracies in Mr Comotto's letter.

DEREK STEVENS  
Chief Executive, Rother District Council

## Winchelsea voted for separate parish

THERE is some very strange logic being employed both in your reporting of the Icklesham Parish Referendum, **Parish referendum rejects calls for 'Winchelsea split'**, and in the responses of some of your correspondents.

The facts are quite straightforward. Voters in each of the wards were asked if they wanted to form a separate parish.

That was the question, not whether they wished for Winchelsea to have a separate parish (except, of course, in the case of Winchelsea itself). Three wards said 'no' and one, Winchelsea, said by 2 to 1 of the votes cast, 'yes'.

So voters in Winchelsea, the ward in which the request for a referendum originated, did in fact give a very substantial 'thumbs up', notwithstanding your headline.

This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that, as you recently reported, there already exists a petition in support of a separate parish signed by more than half the voters of Winchelsea.

I am glad Councillor Bronsdon celebrates this referendum as an example of democracy in action and I hope in due course he will show respect for the clear wish, democratically expressed, of one of the wards in the present parish.

Mr Kerr's implication that votes not cast are votes against is a very strange take on the electoral process and calls into question the validity of any democratically elected government.

A turnout of 47.78%, the figure for Winchelsea, is very respectable for a local poll, particularly given that there were no facilities for postal or proxy voting. No one has the right to assume knowledge of the intentions of those who could not or would not vote.

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