

The future of Icklesham Parish

What is being proposed?

You may have read about the proposal for Winchelsea to become a separate parish. In fact, the idea is that each of the four wards within the current Parish of Icklesham should be given the opportunity to decide democratically whether to become its own parish.

The proposal is currently being considered by Rother District Council, who will be consulting with residents across the Parish.

Why should there be separate parishes?

We believe that separate parishes would have greater **relevance** to local people and encourage greater **democracy**.

Greater relevance to local people

At the moment, residents are hardly aware of the existence of the Parish Council. Most Council meetings are in other villages and most Councillors live in other villages. The Parish Council is as remote from daily life as the District Council in Bexhill, but not so easy to get in touch with.

The consequence is that, when a local problem arises, it is rarely brought to the Parish Council. Instead, local problems tend to be tackled directly by local people. For example, residents' groups have been largely or entirely responsible for youth provision in Icklesham, the re-opening of the shop and post office in Winchelsea, and the new cycle path in Rye Harbour. And much of what goes on in Winchelsea Beach is organized by the Residents Association there.

The irrelevance of the Parish Council also reflects the fact that the Parish is simply too large and the wards are too different from each other for the Council to be able to focus adequately on individual wards. Each ward has a distinct set of problems and priorities, ranging from conservation in Winchelsea to economic regeneration in Rye Harbour.

This is not how it is supposed to be. According to the Local Government Commission, "...a Parish should reflect a small, distinctive and recognisable community of interest with its own sense of identity." That definition fits each of the individual wards but not the Parish.

If each ward had its own parish council, it would always meet in the village, would be composed entirely of local residents and would be able to focus exclusively on local issues. Residents would identify with the parish and its parish council, and use the parish council as it is supposed to be used.

Greater democracy

The irrelevance of the current Parish Council to local issues is very evident in the poor public attendance at Parish Council meetings and the lack of interest among residents in standing as a Parish Councillor. Seven of the current 13 Councillors are unelected (they have been picked by the other Councillors). Three do not even live in the wards they represent. This means that many Councillors are not truly representative of the residents of their ward.

Moreover, because each ward is a minority on the current Council, a proposal affecting only one ward --- even if it is supported by all the Councillors from that ward --- can be blocked by Councillors from the other wards. And, contrary to the basic democratic principle that representatives can be held to account at elections, the electors in the frustrated ward cannot vote out the obstructive Councillors.

Separate and smaller parishes would refresh interest in local democracy by bringing decision-making closer to each community and making councils more relevant to local people.

Can the wards afford their own parish councils?

Each ward of the current Parish is large enough to be a parish in its own right. A separate parish for the village of Icklesham would rank 18th out of 36 in Rother District. Winchelsea Beach would be 20th and Winchelsea would be 24th. Rye Harbour would be 28th.

There are therefore many smaller parishes already in existence (including Bodiam, Rye Foreign and Playden) which are financially viable and work well for their villages. Even the Working Group set up by the Chair of Icklesham Parish Council to report on the proposal for a separate parish for Winchelsea concluded that "any new council would be viable".

It is often suggested that a bigger Parish Council benefits from *economies of scale* in that costs like the salary of the Parish Clerk can be spread over more tax-payers. This is just theory. In practice, organizations often become too big and too complicated to be efficient (look at the Home Office). With size and complexity come problems of duplication and co-ordination. In the case of the current Parish Council, this is clearly evident in the fact that it has to employ two Parish Clerks. Smaller parishes would be simpler and cheaper to run.

Smaller parishes will also benefit from forthcoming government proposals for the *clustering* of parishes, which means independent parishes sharing common resources like qualified parish clerks.

It is also sometimes argued that a larger parish council can afford bigger capital projects than smaller parishes. That is simply not true. If the current Parish Council undertakes a very big project in one ward, it tends to mean that big projects in the other wards have to wait their turn. If separate parish councils wanted to undertake very big capital projects, they might have to save. Either way, the delay would be the same for a separate parish as it is now for a ward within the current Parish. In addition, many projects are financed with external grants to which smaller parish councils have as much access as larger parish councils.

Would separate parishes divide the four villages?

Another odd suggestion is that separate parishes would somehow cut the day-to-day links between Icklesham, Winchelsea, Winchelsea Beach and Rye Harbour. This is clearly nonsense. After all, none of the communities in the current Parish is isolated from Rye, Pett, Guestling or Udimore just because they fall into different parishes! The creation of separate parishes would have no impact on ecclesiastical parish boundaries, access to schools, shops or membership of clubs.

PARISH COUNCILS SHOULD BE LOCAL COUNCILS