

Boundary Review Statement – October 2015:

(Doc 52756)

This statement outlines the position of Salisbury City Council in response to Wiltshire Council's preliminary proposals on parish boundaries in the Salisbury area.

SCC considered all aspects of the Governance Review at its Full Council in July 2014. A number of options were considered and a preferred option agreed. This was subsequently put forward to Wiltshire Council as SCC's position. This remains SCC's position.

SCC is surprised and rather disappointed that WC's proposals do not appear to have taken sufficient account of a number of key points, which may lead to a less than best possible outcome for the long-term good of local government and service provision in the Salisbury area. However, we are encouraged that no decision has yet been made, so put again the following points:

1. **Reality** – Settlements grow over time. Salisbury is no different. It and its neighbouring areas have changed in the last 40 years and will continue to do so.

The SCC proposals were based on the demonstrable physical reality of the aerial photo view; setting the boundaries where the built up area ends and the really open countryside begins (although there is no reason why countryside cannot be administratively within an urban area – as Epping Forest is within London).

This area now includes almost all of the Laverstock and Ford and Britford Parish areas – which are little more remote or separated from the City than Bemerton or Harnham.

The relevant government guidance states that:

“As far as boundaries between parishes are concerned, these should reflect the “no-man’s land” between communities represented by areas of low population or barriers such as rivers, roads or railways. They need to be, and be likely to remain, easily identifiable.”

2. **Democracy and Accountability** – Democratic accountability is a key requirement of all good government at any level. This requires open and contested elections: the ability to have and exercise choice over who makes decisions on local issues and to change them if not satisfied with past outcomes. Salisbury has, and always has had, 100% of its Councillors elected in fully contested elections. This has produced administrations with members from many parties, of diverse backgrounds and wide ranging abilities and experience.

It is a sad fact that smaller parishes rarely achieve this type of representation, relying on the willingness of a hardy but often restricted and rather self-selecting group to serve by co-option. Expansion of the City would inevitably spread the reality rather than theory of electoral accountability.

The relevant government guidance states that:

“One of the characteristics of a sustainable community is the desire for a community to be well run with effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership”. This means:

2.1. Representative, accountable governance systems which both facilitate strategic, visionary leadership and enable inclusive, active and effective participation by individuals and organisations;

and

2.2. Effective engagement with the community at neighbourhood level including capacity building to develop the community’s skills, knowledge and confidence.”

3. **Capability** – Boundaries are key determinants of the resources as well as responsibilities of local government. Those responsibilities and their funding are changing fast. The localism and devolution agendas of central government, as enthusiastically and rightly followed by Wiltshire Council, are pushing for decisions to be made and services to be delivered at the most local level. In respect of this review this means parish level.

SCC has shown its willingness to accept the responsibilities and accountability of local decision making and service provision, in order to secure benefits for local residents, including by involvement in the now advanced discussions about asset and service transfer from WC.

But it cannot do this to best effect if it is not given the capability to deliver or the coverage to manage its true urban area as a whole. Doing so will be of benefit to all within that area.

4. **Efficiency** – All parishes have a minimum overhead cost of simply existing. Small parish councils spend a high proportion of their income on such overhead. Larger bodies benefit from economies of scale and the ability to ‘right-size’ resources, getting more benefit from every pound of public income. Some parishes can be simply too small to undertake some tasks at all. SCC also has significant and resilient non-precept resources (such as crematorium and market income) that can be put to use to benefit a wider area.

The relevant government guidance states that:

“The Government believes that the effectiveness and convenience of local government is best understood in the context of a local authority’s ability to deliver quality services economically and efficiently, and give users of services a democratic voice in the decisions that affect them”.

5. **Fairness** – Most SCC activities affect open public facilities or services, such as the provision of high-quality parks and open spaces, free sports facilities and public events and arts and community support. Potential new responsibilities will cover matters such as street cleanliness and the wider public realm.

These services cannot be restricted and are available to all who wish to benefit from them. An element of what economists call 'free riding' – use without contribution to cost – is therefore inevitable. That is fine for occasional visitors but basic fairness demands that all who benefit from the activities of SCC as part of their everyday lives should make an equal contribution to them. That type of benefit is in practice a matter of geographic proximity to the City centre and other City facilities, not historic boundaries drawn on maps. But when such boundaries are redrawn they should wherever possible reflect the physical reality. Equal contribution would of course come with equal access to resource and SCC has greater resource, expertise and capacity than adjoining parishes.

6. **Identity** – Many residents within all of the areas suggested by SCC for inclusion in the City already identify strongly with it. This is not necessarily to the exclusion of more super-local identities around neighbourhoods, including former separate parishes such as Harnham, Bemerton, Milford and Fisherton.

Many institutions outside the boundaries have always identified themselves with the City, including three of the six secondary schools in the area, the hospital, the football club, many of the Park & Ride sites, the racecourse, cattle market and a golf club. The Mayoralty of Salisbury is seen as a local civic function and Mayors have for years regularly been invited, and willingly attended, events in the areas affected by this review.

WC's own Salisbury Area Board deals with Laverstock and Ford and regularly receives applications for grants in respect of activities beyond the City boundaries, including most recently in respect of playing fields in Netherhampton. SCC also receives requests for 'out-of-area' support from bodies keen to work in partnership to utilise its capacity to aid their causes.

Much of the rapidly growing Old Sarum remains administratively separate from New Sarum, as if its rotten boroughs still existed.

It is surprising that all of these clear signs of identification have to date been ignored, whilst WC has (in draft) found sufficient community identity to propose parish changes for some fields that are only used for grazing and are expected to remain so as such and other fields that will only ever house the deceased, but has not yet suggested putting the Harnham Trading Estate into Harnham?

7. **Future Proofing** - Governance reviews of this type and scale are very rare (the last equivalent one was in 1954). It is therefore incumbent on the reviewers to not simply address current issues but to look to the future, taking into account both known near future developments and providing 'breathing space' to anticipate the possibilities of the coming decades. The draft proposals simply fail to do this at this time.

SCC believes that the minimalist nature of the current proposals represents a potentially great lost opportunity for all within and near to Salisbury. SCC welcomes the involvement of all within the physical City. It has no desire to have disputes with its neighbours and is more than willing to make its resources equally available to all in need of them. But it can only do this with updated parish boundaries that reflect the truth on the ground and ensure fairness of contribution as well as benefit.

Previous higher authorities have had the courage and foresight to seize the rare opportunities of boundary reviews to keep the City boundaries up to date, to the long-term benefit of many thousands of mostly unaware residents. SCC hopes that WC will follow them and reconsider its current proposals and recommend a fair, future-proofed proposal which enables a strong partnership between SCC and WC to equitably deliver local services to all local residents who see Salisbury as their home.

Salisbury City Council

13 October 2015