

## MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

<b>TO: Council</b>	<b>REPORT NUMBER: MC/24/5</b>
<b>FROM: Community Governance Review Working Group</b>	<b>DATE OF MEETING: 22 May 2024</b>
<b>OFFICER: Head of Electoral Services and Land Charges</b>	<b>KEY DECISION REF NO. N/A</b>

### COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE REVIEW – ONEHOUSE AND STOWMARKET

#### 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 Mid Suffolk District Council ('the Council') is asked to consider the recommendations of the Community Governance Review Working Group ('CGRWG') in relation to the Onehouse Parish Council and Stowmarket Town Council local government boundaries.

#### 2. OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 The options available to Council are set out in the recommendations.

#### 3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To note the results of the recent consultation and the final recommendations of the CGRWG (Appendix A and B); and subject to paragraph 9.4.
- 3.2 To make no changes to the local government boundaries between Onehouse Parish Council and Stowmarket Town Council (as recommended by the CGRWG); or
- 3.3 To extend the Stowmarket Town Council local government boundary into the Onehouse Parish area - moving the areas marked as A, B, C in Appendix A into the Stowmarket Town Council area; or
- 3.4 In recognition of Stowmarket Town Council's concerns, highlighted in paragraph 4.9 below, to conduct a fresh public consultation of residents in Onehouse and Stowmarket.

#### REASON FOR DECISION

To ensure that the local governance arrangements reflect the identities and interests of the communities, and is effective and convenient.

#### 4. KEY INFORMATION

- 4.1 The Council was originally asked by Stowmarket Town Council in 2017 to carry out a Community Governance Review ('CGR'). As permitted in law, the Council declined to do so at that time as a Local Government Boundary Commission for England ('LGBCE') review of the district ward boundaries was being conducted at that time.

Instead it was intended to consider the elements Stowmarket Town Council had raised as part of the next whole district CGR. This whole district CGR began in March 2022.

- 4.2 On 26 January 2023 Council noted that during the CGR Stowmarket Town Council made a submission for boundary changes with Onehouse Parish that would also affect the District Ward and County Division boundaries and associated electoral arrangements.
- 4.3 Electoral arrangements for District Wards and County Divisions are made as a result of reviews carried out by the LGBCE. As a result, no changes to the parish / town boundaries can be made by the Council without the agreement of the LGBCE.
- 4.4 In May 2023 the Council appointed a cross-party CGRWG which is comprised of Cllr Anders Linder, Cllr Janet Pearson, Cllr Rowland Warboys and Cllr Adrienne Marriott. Councillors were appointed on the basis of having no vested interests in the areas under review.
- 4.5 The CGRWG designed a further public consultation, which would be in line with the requirements of the LGBCE; and this commenced on 26 July 2023 with emails sent to all interested parties, local District and County councillors and Suffolk County Council.
- 4.6 The CGRWG met on 27 September 2023, to consider all the responses and their draft recommendations were presented to Council on 26 October 2023 for approval to undertake wider public consultation in Stowmarket and Onehouse based upon the CGRWG's draft recommendations.
- 4.7 Those recommendations were published for public consultation on 10 November 2023, and emailed to all interested parties and businesses. In addition, although not a legislative requirement, an information pack containing a map, questionnaire and explanatory letter was sent to all households in the Onehouse and Stowmarket areas.
- 4.8 The initial consultation was set to end on 22 December 2023. A request from the District Councillor for Onehouse was agreed to by the CGRWG for an extension to the consultation up until 10 January 2024, to ensure maximum participation from stakeholders.
- 4.9 Concerns were raised during the consultation by Stowmarket Town Council about the clarity of the language used in the questionnaire, in particular whether it was in Plain English and easy to understand, and whether it was limiting public engagement. This was based upon feedback Town and District Councillors in Stowmarket were receiving from the public.
- 4.10 In response to contact from Stowmarket Town Council about the quality of the map and clarity of the questionnaire the CGRWG reconvened on 8 January 2024 and concluded, based upon the volume and nature of responses that had been received, that no corrective actions were required for the consultation. In addition, the Council has taken legal advice from Counsel to confirm that the procedure adopted and consultation approach was legally compliant.

- 4.11 The CGRWG met on 22 January 2024 to consider the responses to the consultation and make their final recommendations. It was agreed that the draft CGRWG report would be published earlier than the usual Council publication requirements to ensure greater transparency for all interested parties. It was also agreed that this would provide more time for the respective Town and Parish Councils to be able to hold their council meetings and prepare any representations that they wish to make in person at the Mid Suffolk District Council meeting.

## **5. LINKS TO OUR PLAN FOR MID SUFFOLK**

- 5.1 The Review is linked to the Communities outcomes in the Mid Suffolk strategic plan as more effective local government arrangements enable communities to be more “engaged in decision making” and encourage greater civic participation.

## **6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 The costs of conducting a CGR must be borne by the District Council however there are limited financial implications associated with this review. The main costs of the review are the expenses incurred by undertaking public consultation, i.e. printing and postage.

## **7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 Principal Councils (which includes District Councils) have a responsibility to undertake CGRs and can decide whether to give effect to recommendations made in those reviews. However, any consequential recommendations for related alterations to the district ward or county division electoral areas require approval of, and implementation by the LGBCE.
- 7.2 In relation to consequential changes to district ward boundaries, the LGBCE need to see that specific consultation has been undertaken on ward / division boundaries as well as the parish / town boundaries. The LGBCE can only accept or reject all the requested related alterations. Accordingly, if there are changes to ward boundaries which are likely to have a significant impact on the electoral equality of the affected district wards, the LGBCE may not support these.
- 7.3 It should be noted that the period of 12 months to complete a CGR only applies to Community Governance Reviews undertaken in response to petition or application and thus no fixed timeframe applies to the current district wide CGR.
- 7.4 If, at the conclusion of the review, the Council decides to alter any parish boundary or electoral arrangements a Community Governance Order will need to be made to effect the change. This order will be drafted by the Council’s legal team.

## 8. RISK MANAGEMENT

8.1 Key risks are set out below:

Key Risk Description	Likelihood 1-4	Impact 1-4	Key Mitigation Measures	Risk Register and Reference*
The Council may suffer a perception of untrustworthiness and poor reputation	3	2	Legal Advice sought to assess the possibility of a successful challenge. Officers to ensure CGR processes align to statutory requirements	SRR005

*\*Name of risk register where risk is currently documented and being actively managed and it's reference number*

## 9. CONSULTATIONS

9.1 The Community Governance Review process was undertaken in accordance with the agreed terms of reference and associated guidance. It included a further consultation which sought the views of local residents. Links to the responses received during the consultation period can be found within Appendix B.

9.2 The County Division electoral arrangements of Stowmarket and Onehouse are protected until July 2027 as a consequence of the LGBCE's last Suffolk County Council review. Therefore, any changes to the parish electoral arrangements of either parish, which would require consequential changes to the district or county electoral boundaries before July 2027 would require LGBCE consent.

9.3 Legal advice obtained in relation to the processes and consultations undertaken by the Council has confirmed that the language used in the Council's questionnaire was sufficiently intelligible to allow for a considered response. Legislatively, the Council has full discretion in relation to the form and conduct of the consultation.

9.4 Depending upon whether Council decides to adopt recommendation 3.2, 3.3 or 3.4 then a further consultation may be required. All options will also require a final period for comments before Council then makes its final decision.

## 10. EQUALITY ANALYSIS

10.1 Equality monitoring from the consultation can be found within the Consultation Report in Appendix B.

10.2 An Equality Impact Assessment can be found in Appendix C.

## 11. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are no environmental implications.

## 12. APPENDICES

Title	Location
(a) Final Recommendations of the CGRWG – Onehouse and Stowmarket	Attached
(b) CGR Further Consultation Report for Onehouse and Stowmarket	Attached
(c) EQIA Community Governance Review	Attached

## 13. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

13.1 No additional documents

## 14. REPORT AUTHORS

14.1 Patrick Richardson-Todd, Electoral Services Team Leader