

## **Saxmundham Town Council**

### **Meeting – 14 March 2022**

#### **Item: 7**

#### **Subject: Community Governance Review**

Date of report: 9 March 2022

*By: Jeremy Smith, Chair*

#### **Recommendations:**

- (1) To support in principle a change in the parish boundary between Saxmundham and Benhall, so that the proposed new South Saxmundham Garden Neighbourhood and related development would fall within Saxmundham parish, based on the map attached as annex to this report;
- (2) to submit this report to East Suffolk Council as our submission to its consultation on Community Governance Review, while indicating that we wish to discuss the proposals with Benhall Parish Council, and may if appropriate make a further submission following such discussion;
- (3) to send this report to Benhall Parish Council, which meets next on 30<sup>th</sup> March;
- (4) to publicise the points set out in this report and invite any views from Saxmundham residents and businesses.

#### **Background**

1. A Community Governance Review (CGR) is a legal process whereby Principal Authorities (which include East Suffolk Council) can consider the following:

- creating, merging, altering or abolishing parishes,
- the naming of parishes and the style for any new parishes,
- the electoral arrangements for parishes, i.e. the ordinary year of election, council size, the number of councillors to be elected to the council and parish warding,
- grouping of parishes under a common parish council or de-grouping parishes.

A CGR must reflect the identities and interests of communities and should take into account the impact of community governance arrangements on cohesion and the size, population and boundaries of a local community or parish.

2. At our meeting on 13 December 2021, and in the light of the district council's Local Plan policy for the 800 dwelling South Saxmundham Garden Neighbourhood, the Town Council resolved to "invite Benhall Parish Council to work together with a view to making a joint approach to East Suffolk Council requesting it to instigate a Community Governance Review, and to that end, to draw up jointly agreed draft terms of reference and new parish boundary lines to propose for such Review".

The resolution also authorized the Council's Chair, Vice-Chair and Chair of Resources Committee, together with the Town Clerk, to undertake discussions with Benhall Parish Council and to report back.

3. However, in January 2022 East Suffolk Council announced that it was carrying out a Community Governance Review of the whole of its area. This was not known to us in December. The deadline given us for making submissions is Friday 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022.

## Review instigated by East Suffolk Council

The Review includes all aspects of community governance arrangements of existing parishes, including [my emphasis]:

- To consider the name of existing parishes/parish councils
- **To consider the boundaries of existing parishes** and whether existing parishes should be split or amalgamated to constitute new parishes or if any new parish councils should be created **along with the number of parish councillors to be elected for any parish council, whether new or existing.**
- **To consider whether any new or existing parish council should be divided into wards** (or continue to be divided into wards), including the number and boundaries of any such wards, the number of councillors to be elected for any such ward and the name of any such ward.

East Suffolk Council must among other matters ensure that community governance within the area

- reflects the identities and interests of the communities in the area,
- is effective and convenient and takes into account any other arrangements for the purpose of community representation or engagement in the area.

4. The proposed timetable is as follows:

### Review Stages:

Stage	Action	Dates
Commencement	Terms of Reference approved by Council.	26 January 2022
Stage One	Consultation with Stakeholders – initial submissions invited on future arrangements.	Feb-April 2022
Stage Two	1. Consideration of submissions received. 2. Draft recommendations prepared.	April - May 2022
Stage Three	Draft recommendations to be considered by Council and approved for further consultation.	May 2022 (TBC)
Stage Four	1. Consultation with Stakeholders on draft recommendations. 2. Final recommendations prepared.	May – September
Stage Five	Final recommendations to be considered by Council with resolution to make a Re-organisation Order.	September 2022 (TBC)
Completion	Re-organisation Order made.	October 2022

5. The new South Saxmundham Garden Neighbourhood (SSGN), which is a strategic policy of the Local Plan approved by East Suffolk Council in September 2020, allocates land for the purpose which

straddles Saxmundham and Benhall parishes. The proposed site for the main built environment part of the Neighbourhood, under the policy, is mainly between the railway line and A12 bypass. The housing and other facilities would adjoin Saxmundham (close to the Free School) and are required to be well connected to the town and its facilities. Saxmundham is defined in the Local Plan as service centre for the surrounding district (See policy SCLP 12.28).

Paragraph 12.305, for example, underlines the need for the new community to be integrated with the existing town:

“The area to be masterplanned is in close proximity to established areas of residential development, Saxmundham Free School and the town centre. Fundamental to the success of any masterplan is to ensure that the local community can access existing services and facilities as well as those which will be created over the plan period. Taking a comprehensive approach to facilities and ensuring that links connecting the new developments are attractive to use, well designed and implemented at the start of the development will be beneficial to creating a successful community.”

6. The Local Plan policy for the SSGN also includes land to the west of the A12, for employment uses; the site is close to Saxmundham parish boundary but falls within Benhall. It is necessary to take into account also that the developer, Pigeon, has proposed a site to form an effective part of the overall development, to be located to the west of the A12 and to the south of the land allocated for employment. This site is to be proposed to be a service centre for motorists and lorry park, we understand. Pigeon, in the only consultation carried out to date, proposed that the roundabout crossing the A12 from and to the main housing etc. site of the Garden Neighbourhood should be to this area, which would then be linked by road to the employment site to its north.

### **Saxmundham Town Council's approach**

7. While much of the built development of the new Garden Neighbourhood is proposed to be within what is currently the parish of Benhall, it is not connected to the village of Benhall in any meaningful way (it touches Kiln Lane with a very small number of individual dwellings to the west of the railway line). On the other hand, the SSGN will be physically joined to the built settlement of Saxmundham, and will draw on the town's public, private and voluntary services and facilities. This is reflected in the proposals in the Local Plan for CIL contributions to be made e.g. to an expanded medical centre, the library etc., as well as for physical connections e.g. enhanced cycle and footpaths to the station, town centre and residential areas. The new primary school and under-5s centres may or may not be located in Saxmundham parish (this is not clear) but will serve the existing town as well as new community.

8. The population of the SSGN community, when it is built, is likely to be around 2,000 persons. This compares to Saxmundham's estimated population of 4,723 in 2020 (ONS estimate), which will now be close to 5,000 given further new housing to the east of the town. The population of Benhall (also for 2020 estimate) was 585.

9. It is proposed that the Town Council supports in principle a change in the parish boundary between Saxmundham and Benhall in order that the new development of the South Saxmundham Garden Neighbourhood, and related development proposed by the developer, falls wholly within the parish of Saxmundham.

The attached map showing the proposed new boundary line between the parishes, drawn up for this purpose by Cllr John Fisher, reflects (a) the Local Plan allocated site for the SSGN, together with (b)

the additional land proposed by the developer Pigeon to the west of the A12 and connected to the employment land, forming therefore the full proposed site of the development.

10. The changes to the boundary line would, it is submitted, be the right way to properly reflect local identities and facilitate effective and convenient local government, in line with government guidance – see paragraph 15 ‘Guidance on community governance reviews’ (2010):

“In many cases making changes to the boundaries of existing parishes, rather than creating an entirely new parish, will be sufficient to ensure that community governance arrangements to continue to reflect local identities and facilitate effective and convenient local government. For example, over time communities may expand with new housing developments. This can often lead to existing parish boundaries becoming anomalous as new houses are built across the boundaries resulting in people being in different parishes from their neighbours.”

Also, paragraph 26 of the same document:

“A review may need to be carried out, for example, following a major change in the population of a community or as noted earlier in this chapter (see paragraph 15) to re-draw boundaries which have become anomalous, for example following new housing developments being built across existing boundaries.”

11. It must be in the interests of good governance and good administration not to make such changes retrospectively, but to plan properly for change now. Otherwise, the real-world town of Saxmundham will be divided into two separate administrative entities at the most local level, making no sense at all, and fragmenting what should be integrated communities. While Benhall Parish Council will reach its own view, were the new SSGN ‘community’ to fall within Benhall parish, its scale will wholly change the traditional character of the village and its community.

12. Finally, one cannot and should not ignore the financial, property and service-related impacts. The development of the new SSGN community will:

(a) lead to CIL payments by the developer part of which will be allocated to the relevant parish or parishes to use for local physical and community infrastructure purposes, to meet the pressures caused by development. Those pressures will undoubtedly be greater for Saxmundham as local service centre town.

(b) be reflected in parish/town council services, budgets and precept requirements. It must surely be appropriate that Saxmundham as service centre town should take on both the burden and benefit, i.e. the additional costs to provide services for a population that will have grown by around 40%, and increased income from council tax resulting from the large increase in dwellings.

(c) As regards property matters, there is (as I understand it) no property in the area that would be affected by the parish boundary change that belongs to Benhall Parish Council, so no transfers of property would need to take place.

### **Consequential changes – size of Town Council, whether to divide into wards**

13. If the new community of the SSGN were to fall within Saxmundham parish boundaries, as we propose in this report, the population size, including infants, would be around 7,000. This falls within a band of 2,500 to 10,000 for which East Suffolk Council allocate between 9 – 16 members. Saxmundham currently has a maximum of 11 members, reduced from an earlier 14. In the last parish council elections (2019), only 4 persons stood as candidates, though there was a contested

election on the previous occasion (2015). It is suggested that we seek a modest increase to a maximum of 12 councillors, if our proposed boundary changes are accepted.

14. As to the issue of whether to divide Saxmundham into wards is concerned (for Town Council elections), it is proposed not to put this forward, but to maintain Saxmundham as a single electoral entity. This would better help to create the sense of a single Saxmundham town entity, comprising the current and new settlements.

15. The SSGN is due to be developed in stages, so the full change in population will occur also in stages. This means that there is unlikely to be a major impact on the district council ward structure for the district elections in 2023 or 2028. Saxmundham is estimated to have 3,504 voters in 2023, and the new development when complete would add around 1,500, we may surmise, making a future total of 5,000. This would at some stage be too large for a single member ward, and too small for a 2 member ward, given the current average of 3,670 electors per district councillor. However, this can be taken into account in future reviews, as appropriate.

Annex – map showing proposed revised boundary (dotted red line)



