



# Sutton Poyntz Society

## Notes on a village meeting starting at 2.30 p.m. on Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> June 2017 at the Mission Hall to discuss the possibility of seeking Parish Council status for Sutton Poyntz.

The meeting was attended by Cllr John Parker and Hilary Trevorah, Chairman and Chief Executive of the Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils (DAPTC), Cllr Ian Bruce, and about 42 villagers.

After a short introduction by Mike Blee, welcoming the villagers and guests and thanking them for giving up a Saturday afternoon to attend this meeting, Hilary Trevorah gave a presentation which outlined how Parish Councils fit in to local government.

Currently Dorset has a County Council and several District or Borough Councils. The County Council deals with matters such as health, social care, education etc., and the District/Borough Councils deal with planning. There are proposals currently under formal consideration to create Unitary Authorities in Dorset, which would combine all these functions.

In some parts of the County, there is a lower tier of local government, in the form of Parish or Town Councils (Parish and Town Councils are identical in function). These Councils act with powers and procedures granted under legislation; they have elected Councillors, open meetings, open finances. They employ a Parish Clerk who acts as professional manager for the Council. These Councils focus on the local needs of their residents in order further the objectives of their community and to make their local area a better place to live. They can own property and can (where agreed with the District or Borough Council) provide specific local services such as litter bins, sports facilities, youth facilities, community centres, community transport, etc.

The Parish Council prepares a budget, including income from grants or property and including expenditure on services. In accordance with legal constraints, the Parish Council then declares a “precept” in order to raise money for Parish Council activities through an addition to the Council Tax.

In order to set up a Parish Council where none exists, the Local Authority sets up a Community Governance Review. This can be done either at the instigation of the Local Authority or as a result of a petition by local residents. A consultation process then starts. If the Review concludes that a Parish Council should be created, then an election date for the first Parish Council will be set. A new Parish Council will then need to create a Development Plan, a process for vesting and transfer of any assets, a budget, staff, a calendar for Council meetings, and processes for financial control and communications.

Cllr John Parker added a few points to the above:

A Parish Council does not have to have an office; it can instead allow the Parish Clerk to work from home, with an allowance for costs.

In deciding whether to seek Parish Council status, a community needs to consider the size of the Local Authority and therefore whether a smaller unit can benefit the community by providing closer focus on its own aspirations.

There is lots of support available to communities in this situation, including the DAPTC.

A number of questions were then raised by villagers:

Councillors are elected for a term of 4 years.

Parish Councillors are often independent rather than being affiliated to a political party, but there is no general rule on this.

To be successful, a Parish Council needs enough people to volunteer to serve; Parish Councillors need to live within 3 miles of the Parish.

The size of a Parish Council depends on the Parish population; in the case of Sutton Poyntz this would probably mean a Council of 5 or 6.

A Parish Council is a “statutory consultee” for planning purposes, so is asked to comment on all relevant planning applications.

Councillors are not granted expenses for attending regular meetings, but can be given reimbursement for additional meetings attended on behalf of the Parish Council.

Some Parish Councils run or subsidise bus services; there are good examples on the Isle of Wight.

It is not necessary to move forward on this now – we can wait to see the result of the possible Local Government reorganisation in Dorset.

Cllr Ian Bruce then spoke from his perspective as local Borough Councillor.

The Local Government review for Dorset has looked at two options, a single Unitary Authority or two. Under both these options, one layer of local government would disappear by combining County Council functions with District/Borough Council functions. Under both these options, it is expected that Portland will continue to be a Town Council, under the new Unitary Authority rather than under Weymouth & Portland Borough; Weymouth will become a new Town Council under the new Unitary Authority.

The way forward is uncertain, as Christchurch, Bournemouth and Purbeck are all opposed to the proposals.

The new idea to add to this mix is for Sutton Poyntz to become a Parish Council, independent of Weymouth Town Council. Possibly other parts of Weymouth, such as Upwey, might consider the same option.

On the matter of Parish precept, Cllr Bruce noted that Weymouth have about £4M of assets which could mean that only a very small precept would be necessary, possibly a zero precept; he noted that Lyme Regis is in the same situation and has no Parish precept. It was noted from the floor that West Dorset at present has a lower Council Tax than Weymouth & Portland because West Dorset has significant assets from past sales of Council houses, but that this money would be transferred to the new Unitary Authority and would therefore benefit all parts of the Unitary Authority area.

Cllr Bruce noted that there is a benefit from being a statutory consultee on planning matters, but that a Neighbourhood Plan gives many of the same benefits. He suggested that at present the Sutton Poyntz Society arguably has more influence on planning matters than the Portland Town Council, despite not being a statutory consultee.

On the way forward, Cllr Bruce concluded that before a decision could be reasonably reached, a working paper should be written looking at the actual options for parish status. In answer to a question, Cllr Bruce agreed that we could wait and split from Weymouth Town Council later, but that it might be more difficult.

Cllr Bruce then asked what functions a Sutton Poyntz Parish would take to itself, and therefore how it would justify its administrative costs. Looking at the list of possible functions shown earlier by Hilary Trevorah, he suggested that the only likely function was Neighbourhood Planning, which is being done anyway. In partial contradiction of this, it was noted that North Dorset had taken the decision to divest quite a lot of Council functions to Parishes.

Finally, in answer to a question there was a discussion of whether it would be more logical to have a Parish based on Preston and Sutton Poyntz, rather than a much smaller one based on Sutton Poyntz alone.

At the end of the meeting, Cllr Bruce was keen to have a show of hands so that he as our representative could know how much support the concept of a Sutton Poyntz Parish might have. However the meeting as a whole concluded that it still did not have enough information to judge the matter, which was left for the Sutton Poyntz Society to consider.