

Bridgnorth Town Boundaries – Community Governance Review

Bridgnorth Town Council established a working party to consider the appropriateness of the Town's Boundaries in February 2015. This was prompted by the emerging SAMDev (Site Allocations and Management of Development) plan, which was submitted for examination by the planning inspectorate on 1st August 2014. The SAMDev plan sets out land which will be allocated for development in Shropshire, broadly up to 2026; it also defines the role of the various types of settlement in Shropshire, and their proposed development boundaries. The examination is continuing, and SAMDev is likely to be adopted in Autumn 2015/ early 2015. Within SAMDev, it is proposed that future development in Shropshire is focussed on Shrewsbury, the Market Towns, and Key Centres. Smaller settlements (designated Community Hubs and Clusters) will see much more limited development. Bridgnorth is defined as a Market Town and is to be a focus for development.

The working party considered whether the proposals contained in SAMDev indicated a need to reconsider the boundaries between the Town of Bridgnorth and surrounding parishes, and concluding that this merits consideration in the case of Tasley parish.

The parish of Tasley adjoins and lies to the north west of Bridgnorth. Until the 1970s the only significant settlement in that parish were the few houses along two roads, Church Lane and Wenlock Road, and both of these roads are connected directly to the boundary of Bridgnorth. There is no clearly identifiable centre to the village or hamlet of Tasley, but it is said to lie 1.5 miles from the centre of Bridgnorth.

From 1974, the Borough of Bridgnorth ceased to exist, and the Town Council was no longer responsible for planning matters in the town. All planning decisions were then made by Bridgnorth District Council, and after the latter's demise in March, 2010, all planning decisions have been made by the Unitary Authority, Shropshire Council.

From the 1950s onwards, a significant number of new houses have been built within the town of Bridgnorth, mainly on housing estates. Much of this development has been on land beyond Innage Lane and Victoria Road, to the north and west of the town, finally reaching the town boundary when houses on Hook farm Road were built.

In the late 1980s, there was further development in this area, when the estate of Tasley Park was built off Hook Farm Road. However, the land on which Tasley Park was built lay in the parish of Tasley, though there was no known clearly defined natural feature to delineate the boundary; it was just the next field. There was no actual connection of Tasley Park housing estate with any other part of Tasley; the only way to enter or leave Tasley Park was and still is via Hook Farm Road and other roads in Bridgnorth.

In 2006 Bridgnorth District Council adopted The Bridgnorth District Local Plan 1996 -2011. The biggest area allocated for housing – Policy BRID 1 – was a site of 10 hectares between Wenlock Road and the A458 for an estimated 300 houses. Even though this area lies exclusively within the parish of Tasley, all reference to this area in this extensive document is to Bridgnorth, and there is no mention of Tasley. The houses have now been built, and the estate is referred to as Wenlock Rise.

Under SAMDev, it is proposed to build a further 500 dwellings in Tasley, but like the previous two developments mentioned above, this further development will be attached to and an extension of urban development within Bridgnorth. All references in the SAMDev documents talk about the expansion of housing in Bridgnorth, and not about an intention to expand development in Tasley for the express purpose of creating a new but separate vibrant community. It is estimated that by 2026 the number of dwellings in Tasley will be roughly equivalent to 20% of those in Bridgnorth Town itself.

Currently, Bridgnorth acts as a shopping, employment and service centre for the surrounding hinterland, and this is unlikely to change with the development of further housing in Tasley, though there are aspirations to provide some local services. SAMDev does, however, allocate employment land in Tasley for future development; again, this is driven by the perceived needs of the settlement of Bridgnorth rather than an express requirement for Tasley itself. Currently, the inhabitants of Bridgnorth Town are represented at the parish level by Bridgnorth Town Council, which provides a range of Town services (parks and gardens, a market, a cemetery, historic buildings, a CCTV system, some street lights, bus shelters, support for Town Events, etc.) Residents of surrounding areas are represented by their own parishes and have no formal mechanism for influencing the development of the services provided by Bridgnorth Town Council, nor do they directly contribute to the cost, despite being able to use the Town's facilities and benefitting indirectly from the contribution which the Town's infrastructure makes to the economic and social life of the area. This appears increasingly anomalous in the case of Tasley as it becomes the major focus for growth in the settlement of Bridgnorth.

To make changes to the boundaries of Bridgnorth, a Community Governance Review would have to be undertaken by Shropshire Council. A Community Governance review provides the opportunity for a principal council, in our case Shropshire Council, to review and make changes to community governance within their areas. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England suggest that it can be helpful to undertake Community Governance Reviews in circumstances such as where there have been changes in population, or in reaction to specific or local new issues. There are detailed guidelines about the factors to consider issued jointly by the Local Government Boundary Commission and the Department of Communities and Local Government. Crucially, these identify that:

1. Community governance should reflect the identities and interests of the community in the area under review, and the need to secure that community governance in that area is effective and convenient. [2]
2. Ultimately, the recommendations made in a community governance review ought to bring about improved community engagement, better local democracy and result in more effective and convenient delivery of local services. [2]
3. A community governance review offers an opportunity to put in place strong, clearly defined boundaries, tied to firm ground features [2]

Any review, if it should take place, will be comprehensive and all sections of the communities involved, including individuals, will have the opportunity to be consulted. Such a review would take time to complete, and at this stage it is not possible to accurately predict how long it would take. Ideally, it would appear sensible to commence a review as soon as possible, with the intention of

completing the work and enabling any resulting changes that may be recommended to be fully implemented in time for the next local elections scheduled for May, 2017.