

Iken Parish Council

Submission re Community Governance Review 2021-2022 (“CGR”)

Introduction

This document contains the response of Iken Parish Council (“IPC”) to the consultation being carried out by East Suffolk Council (“ESC”) in connection with its CGR. As far as possible this document follows the headings contained in the “Considerations” section of the terms of reference published by ESC. IPC has circulated this response to all villagers but has not carried out a detailed consultation of its own. In the covering note to the circulation, the Parish Clerk has given the details of how any villager can communicate a dissenting view to ESC.

Background

Iken has 79 registered voters and is therefore one of the smaller parishes within the ESC district. Its actual population is somewhat higher for two reasons: first, there are several heavily used second homes within the parish whose occupants are registered to vote elsewhere; and second, there is a population of agricultural workers who reside in temporary accommodation in Iken but are not registered to vote.

Iken is a geographically widely spread village with two main centres of population. The biggest part of the population is located in the western part of the village on Tunstall Road and Sandy Lane and surrounding Iken Church. The balance of the population is mainly centred around High Street at the eastern end of the village. The two parts of the village are separated by a distance of about one mile. Iken is an isolated community and has no obvious geographic or social connection with any of the surrounding parishes.

Iken is predominantly an agricultural economy. There are four large estates that own the majority of the land in the parish. The farming undertaken in the village is both livestock and arable. In addition, at any given time several hundred acres of turf are being cultivated. The village benefits from the farmers who are generally the first responders to storm damage and snowfall. However, the use of ever bigger agricultural equipment and the harvesting of turf in the winter is having a damaging impact on the lanes within the parish.

The other economic activities in the village are tourist related. In addition to holiday lettings, there is a popular caravan park, an equestrian facility and Iken Canoe. The footpaths, particularly those along the estuary, are heavily used and a national cycle route passes through Iken. Iken Church is a popular tourist destination for both hikers and cyclists. Iken regularly appears in articles describing great country walks and the number of tourists has grown considerably during the pandemic. The coastal footpath will pass through the village which is of concern to many members of the community but will increase further the tourist numbers.

Much of the area within the IPC district is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (“AONB”). This has significant implications for the village. One obvious consequence is that whilst there have been a few replacement houses built, there has been no new housing built within the district since the 1970s other than to meet specific agricultural needs. As far as IPC is aware, there is no new housing of any nature planned for the village in the foreseeable future. There is a need for additional affordable housing to be available in Iken to house key workers but it is hard to see how this might occur within the AONB.

The only communal buildings in the village are the Church, which holds regular but infrequent services attended by a small proportion of villagers and the village hall. The village hall was constructed in 1957 on land donated by a local farmer and the construction costs paid for from funds of the parish council and by other local donations. In its early years, the village hall appears to have been used mainly as a social club for agricultural workers but as that population dwindled, so did use of the hall. About 25 years ago it was discovered that the hall had asbestos embedded within the structure and it has stood unused for more than 20 years. IPC is actively addressing the future of the village hall but is not yet clear on the best path to follow.

Iken today is a mixed community of land owners, farmers and other permanent residents, second home owners and tenants. The land owners and many other residents have owned their properties for very long periods of time as have most of the second home owners. Equally, many of the tenants have lived in the village for long periods and most work locally. One consequence of this is that most members of the community know a large proportion of the other members. It is not a community that lives in each other’s pockets and the absence of communal buildings limits the scope for village events but most members of the community are well networked with many other members. Another consequence is that the population is relatively old with few children in the village but that was not the case twenty years ago and will inevitably change again with the passage of time.

IPC

ESC is well aware that the recent history of IPC has been unsatisfactory resulting in it appointing the entire membership of the current council in 2021. It would be wrong for the current council to offer any comment on the circumstances that gave rise to this situation. However, IPC does not believe that the difficulties of the previous council in any way call into question the coherence of the community or its general desire to see an effective and motivated council address the issues of importance to villagers, most of which are specific to Iken. Since the appointment of the new council, progress has been made in normalising the affairs of the council. IPC believes it would be highly unfair and unfortunate if Iken was seen as an ongoing problem to ESC best dealt with by disbanding the parish.

The issues that are of particular interest to villagers are:-

- a flood prevention scheme specifically relating to Iken
- the route of the coastal footpath
- the preservation of the AONB
- the maintenance of a vibrant agricultural environment
- the maintenance and development of other local businesses
- planning issues
- the future of the village hall

-the condition of the lanes

In addition to these issues, there is great interest within the community regarding the development of Sizewell C and the Friston sub-station but there are other organisations leading regional representation on these matters

Response to the consultation questions

Parish status

Iken has fewer than 150 registered voters but has had a parish council for a very long period of time. IPC is not aware of any suggestion within the village that this should change. The list set out above illustrates that there is considerable interest in issues that are specific to Iken. The views of the community can best be discerned and then represented by a parish council. IPC does not therefore believe that a move to a parish meeting would be in the best interest of the community.

Parish boundaries

IPC can see no obvious reason to change the parish boundaries. There are a few houses near High Street that in practical terms form part of Iken but fall into the Sudbourne parish but there would not appear to be a pressing need to address this small issue.

Council size

IPC has a maximum number of councillors of seven. Given the small size of the community this might appear large. However, it allows for both geographic parts of the community to be properly represented.

IPC sees a further real benefit in maintaining a council size of seven as it protects the council from a “dominant voice” emerging. It is important to recognise that Iken is not a diverse community in terms of ethnicity but it is in some other respects. The aims of the agricultural community and the residential community are not always aligned. A council of seven is of sufficient size to ensure that a wide spread of views can be heard.

See also comments below on warding.

Parish warding

IPC sees no need to set up a warding structure within a small community. There is an argument that has periodically been advanced that the eastern and western communities should be given separate representation but this seems an unnecessary complication.

Parish names and alternative styles for parishes

IPC can see no reason to consider a change of name.

Grouping of parishes

IPC has carefully considered whether, given the small size of the community, there is any benefit likely to result from a merger with one of the contiguous parishes. These parishes are Sudbourne, Tunstall, Chillesford and Snape. It has discounted Chillesford as it is a considerable distance from Iken and there is little if any overlap between the communities.

Sudbourne, Tunstall and Snape are all much bigger communities than Iken and quite different in nature. IPC considers that to justify merging Iken with any one of those parishes, two conditions would need to be fulfilled. The first is that the power of Iken to make its voice heard would have to be enhanced and the second is that the precept would fall.

Whilst a larger parish might have a louder voice better listened to by ESC, it is hard to see how the voice of Iken would be enhanced by becoming a small part of a parish council dominated by a much bigger community. All three of these parishes are markedly different in nature from Iken and have virtually no social connection with our community or interest in its priorities and opinions.

The precepts of these parishes are similar to that of Iken. Beyond eliminating the role of our Clerk, it is hard to see any large savings being available. The saving of the cost of the Clerk of IPC would be spread over the entire tax base of the enlarged parish so IPC does not believe there would be a material reduction in the precept as a consequence of a merger.

If ESC is considering merging small parish councils, it might also be tempted to consider a four way merger of Sudbourne, Tunstall, Iken and Snape to form a mega parish council. It is impossible for IPC to consider what the financial consequences of such a merger might be. However, it is clear that Iken would be a tiny part of the enlarged parish and would therefore lose its voice more or less completely.

IPC is also very concerned about the implications of any merger on the future of its village hall. At its simplest, the village hall must either be renovated or sold. All the parishes named have village halls and would be unlikely to see the need to invest in a second hall. The most probable consequence of a merger is that the village hall would be deemed surplus to requirement and sold. The site of the village hall is thought to be of considerable value. If the hall were to be sold, the proceeds should accrue to the benefit of the Iken community not to that of a much larger and different community.

IPC believes that the real benefit of parish councils is that they are completely focused on their own community and genuinely understand very local issues. IPC does not believe that grouping with a contiguous parish would increase the voice of the parish or increase the focus on very local issues. Furthermore, IPC is extremely concerned to protect the village hall for the benefit of the Iken community. It is therefore opposed to grouping Iken with any or all of the contiguous parishes.

Ordinary year of election

IPC agrees with the proposal.

Conclusions

IPC has read with alarm the section headed “Reorganisation of Community Governance Orders and Commencement”. It would appear that ESC does not intend to discuss its findings with parish councils but merely to implement its own conclusions. There would appear to be no right of appeal other than recourse to judicial review. IPC can only evaluate any proposal that ESC may put forwards about its future when it knows what it is. IPC therefore strongly believes that a further consultation should be undertaken once the specific proposals have been published.

For the reasons set out above, IPC does not see any benefit being likely to accrue to the Iken community from a forceable grouping of its parish with any of the contiguous parishes and a real likelihood of harm being caused. The evidence from the corporate sector over many years is clear-few mergers create real and sustainable value other than those where substantial cost savings can be captured with certainty. The total elimination of IPC’s costs saves a maximum of £2,500 per annum and probably less. The loss of a strong voice representing a small community is real and cannot be justified by minute cost savings.