

Hepscott Parish Council [HPC]

Response to NCC:
Consultation on Community
Governance Review
January-February 2020

following Morpeth Town Council's request to NCC to
amend parish councils' boundaries.

“We want you to love where you live”

(NCC Corporate Plan 2018-2021)

PART ONE: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hepscott Parish Council (HPC) strongly opposes Morpeth's proposed changes to boundaries, for 5 main reasons:

- A. The significant impact these changes would have on Hepscott Parish residents.
- B. The undemocratic nature of the proposals and the process. Such a change would be totally against the wishes of the residents of the 2 estates involved; 96% of residences on Hepscott Stobhill Manor, 80% on South Fields are opposed to these changes; no direct consultation with the residents has been carried out by Morpeth Town Council (MTC);
- C. The lack of valid evidence for these changes;
- D. The precedent, locally and county-wide that would be set by such changes;
- E. A set of other significant issues (eg planning issues; political issues).

NB square brackets below refer to more detail in the main response, Part Two of this document.

A. The Impact of the proposed changes on the residents

A.1 MTC's proposals are based wholly on the aim of securing substantial extra Council Tax for Morpeth at the expense of Hepscott's residents. By the time South Fields is completed this additional tax will amount to nearly £80,000 per annum. [See para 3.2 Part Two].

A.2 The extra tax will be paid by 320 residences that are currently in our parish but would be annexed by MTC, rising to 550 residences when South Fields is complete. Their tax will increase by £100-£160 per annum dependant on tax band [para 1.1].

A.3 Our petition shows 96% of dwellings on Hepscott Stobhill Manor and 80% on South Fields wish to remain in Hepscott. [para1.2]. The petition has been submitted to Democratic Services.

A.4 MTC's parish Council Tax is 6.4 times higher than Hepscott's eg band D £18 Hepscott, £118 Morpeth. MTC's dossier's estimates of expected income need to be multiplied six-fold [para 3.2].

A.5 HPC's parish income will fall by over 50% [para 1.4]. Council Tax for the rest of the Parish will need to double to maintain the existing precept, affecting every household [para 1.3]. [Based on Democratic Services' figures].

A.6 Hepscott Parish's population will be halved. [Para 1.5]. These figures have never been disputed by MTC and are supported by Democratic Services' figures.

B. The proposals and the process are undemocratic

B.1 The proposals and the process are wholly undemocratic. HPC collected a comprehensive and thorough petition which showed that 96% of South Fields dwellings and 80% of Hepscott Stobhill Manor's wish to remain in Hepscott Parish. We have submitted this petition to the Review as evidence. [para 2.6 to 2.7]. No consultation with the residents was conducted by MTC.

B.2 To introduce these boundary changes in Hepscott would be totally against the wishes of both estates, inflicting upon them substantial financial penalties and affecting hundreds of residents and voters.

B.3 It flies in the face of NCC's Corporate Plan 2018-2021 "we want you to love where you live" [para 2.8].

B.4 Morpeth's financial equation is simple. Take money from Hepscott, increase Council Tax six-fold, give to Morpeth. How can this be morally or democratically justified?

B.5 MTC has not consulted with the residents of South Fields once in the 2 years since this exercise began. In contrast Hepscott have circulated 10 newsheets and flyers, visited every occupied property on the 2 affected estates and collected a petition and talked to residents. [Paras 2.2-2.7].

B.6 The residents emphasise to us that their desire to remain in Hepscott is not just financial. They enjoy being part of a well-run community, in a parish that is near to a town but is part of a country parish. [para 2.3-2.4].

C. MTC's proposals lack valid evidence

C.1 MTC have supplied virtually no evidence to the Review or HPC to substantiate their case. By March 2018 the MTC F&GP had produced a dossier with estimated income from the boundary changes but it was not submitted to Democratic Services or HPC. They have presented no evidence for the substantial extra Council tax they will gain.

C.2 MTC underrepresented numbers of houses and their Council tax value to Morpeth in that FGP March '18 dossier. By undercounting houses and not taking into account the higher rates of council tax in Morpeth the £80,000 pa value of the boundary proposals is hidden [See para 3.2].

C.3 Estate residents have asked 'what do I get by way of extra services for my extra council tax'? We have seen or heard no evidence that extra services will be provided . [Appendix I, letter to MTC, para 4, where HPC asked for that evidence in July 2019].

C.4 Many residents are confused by who supplies major services (roads, schools, bins etc) and that of course is NCC not MTC. Virtually all services that MTC supply are also supplied by Hepscott. [App I, letter, para 4].

C.5 It is laughable to suggest, as MTC do, that there "will be less budgetary pressure on the parishes" and that this is a reason to change the boundaries. HPC's precept will be halved. Less budgetary pressure? [See paras 1.3-1.4].

C.6 They offer no evidence that "they will provide services to the new estates at a better cost to the taxpayer". History says that MTC has year on year increased its council tax whilst Hepscott has reduced council tax, 8% in each of the last 2 years.

C.7 MTC raise political representation as a reason. Hepscott has 1 elected representative per 170 parishioners, Morpeth 1 per 1,000 [para 3.4].

C.8 Throughout MTC use expressions like "all disinterested parties would consider..." and "it is appropriate.." without offering any facts, surveys or data to back up these opinions.[paras 3.4 and 3.7 to 3.9].

D. Precedent

D.1 Boundary changes will set a very dangerous precedent throughout Northumberland and locally. Throughout Northumberland the parishioners of small and medium parishes pay less Council tax than the towns. Towns will be eyeing many nearby parishes to supplement their income. Locally, Pegswood would be vulnerable. [See paras 4.1 to 4.3].

D.2 Already other boundary changes are being requested eg Amble. We are pleased to see Democratic Services' recommendation that parts of Warkworth are not annexed. [para 4.1].

E. Other significant issues

E.1 These proposals will lead to planning issues, especially the spread of Morpeth into the countryside in the future. [See para 5.1]

E.2 HPC is very concerned over the future of the land called 'the Triangle' [see para 5.2]. We have concerns that the land over the years will become another housing estate if annexed by MTC and spread into the countryside even further.

E.3 No evidence or justification has been provided by MTC over the annexation of Turner Square [see para 5.3]. Residents in this corner of Hepscott will be subject to the same 6-fold increase in council tax as the estates and all the above arguments apply to them.

E.4 Political issues. The re-drafting of the County Division boundaries needs careful thought as they have unintended consequences. Changes should be driven by the needs of the electorate not the needs of political parties. [See para 5.5].

PART TWO: HEPSCOTT'S DETAILED RESPONSE

Background

With no preliminary discussion with HPC or the other 2 parishes involved, Morpeth Town Council's [MTC] Finance and General Purposes [FGP] Committee began discussion on this subject at the end of 2017. This was shortly after there had been a change in administration.

An informal meeting took place in January 2018 when 2 members of MTC's FGP met with the Chairs of Mitford and Hepscott PCs, the first approach that MTC had made to the PCs. MTC attended Mitford PC and HPC meetings in July 2018. Little progress was made.

It is HPC's belief that MTC has never appreciated or even seriously considered the impact their proposed changes would have on Hepscott Parish and our residents.

We strongly oppose their proposed changes, for 5 main reasons:

1. The impact these changes would have on Hepscott Parish and its residents;
2. The undemocratic nature of the proposals and the process. There is substantial and compelling evidence that such a change would be totally against the wishes of the residents of the 2 estates involved.
3. The lack of evidence and validity of MTC's reasons for these proposed changes;
4. The precedent, locally and county-wide that would be set by such changes;
5. A set of other significant issues (planning issues; political issues; the "Triangle" of land south of Coopies Lane; Turner Square).

1 THE IMPACT OF THE PROPOSALS

- 1.1 The proposals would have a significant direct impact on the residents of the 2 estates concerned. Their Council Tax would increase by £100 p.a. Band D, (£18 to £118) and by £160 p.a. Band G, (£30 to £196), at current values. Morpeth's history is that their Council Tax charges inexorably increase: HPC's have decreased by 9% and 8% for the last 2 years.
- 1.2 The residents realise this and when we petitioned both estates (see paras 2.6-2.7) 96% of Hepscott Stobhill Manor properties and 80% of South Fields properties said they wished to remain in Hepscott Parish.
- 1.3 The proposals would have a significant impact on the remaining residents of Hepscott Parish if these proposals go ahead. Democratic Services confirmed that if we kept our precept at current levels the Band D charge would double from £18.29 to £38.02 (+£20pa) and Band G also double, £30.48 to £63.34 (+£33 p.a.).
- 1.4 The proposals would have a significant impact on the Parish Finances. Our precept would be halved. If HPC aimed to keep Council Tax charges stable (£18.29 to Band D) we would have to reduce our precept from £11,500 to £5,532 (confirmed by Democratic Services) a 52% reduction; 50% of our precept would be totally inadequate to run our Parish basic services.
- 1.5 The population of our parish would also be halved (tax base band D equivalent properties, would fall from 629 to 302 at '19/'20 levels) again confirmed by Democratic Services. The overall effect is not a minor adjustment to the life of the Parish. It is a massive impact. Our letter (8/7/19) to MTC detailed this

but did not receive a reply. It was not included in the papers sent out with this Community Governance Review. We attach this letter as evidence to the Review [Appendix I].

- 1.6 Please note that not one of these impacts upon the residents or the Parish Council have ever been disputed by MTC. We have asked MTC on many, many occasions, "What extra or better services will our residents receive for this extra money?" We have yet to receive a reply.

2. THE UNDEMOCRATIC NATURE OF THE PROPOSALS AND THE PROCESS

- 2.1 It is HPC's view that the motivation for these proposals is simply to garner more Council Tax for MTC. The early reports of the FGP's Working Party contains a "dossier" of facts and figures (para 3.2). It identified (in their FGP minutes of 7/3/18) £2606 of Council Tax from South Fields (at that time from 126 properties) and £3147 from Hepscott Stobhill Manor, a total of £5,753, the amount very close to the reduction in HPC's precept. So it is a simple equation; take from Hepscott, give to Morpeth.
- 2.2 This proposal has been put together without a single consultation from MTC with the residents, not a single flyer, newsheet, not a single meeting with residents. Nothing. HPC of course have talked to residents and have a petition which we present to the Review as evidence. (See paras 2.6-2.7 below). The response was overwhelming.
- 2.3 Since January 2018 we have leafleted the estate on 10 occasions, including our 4-monthly newsletter "Hepscott Herald". We talk with and consult our residents. All the evidence is that they wish to stay in Hepscott Parish and be part of the community.
- 2.4 It is clear that it is not only for monetary reasons. Many have told us they enjoy being part of Hepscott community, near to a town but separate, part of a country parish.
- 2.5 MTC appear to them as wanting one thing--more money. The residents do not wish to be part of Morpeth, to pay more, for no extra services. A move to include them in Morpeth would be totally against their wishes.
- 2.6 Our petition asked the resident to sign if they agreed that they were opposed to the changing of parish boundaries and to being transferred from Hepscott Parish to Morpeth. Each sheet confirms the address, resident's name and date when they signed. We visited every property that was occupied, on both estates. "No replies" received at least another call, sometimes another 2.
- 2.7 So the petition is comprehensive and thorough. It shows 96% of the properties on Hepscott Stobhill Manor and 80% in South Fields wish to remain in Hepscott, an overwhelming, democratic, result.
- 2.8 NCC normally cherishes democracy. It has published a set of priorities, aims and values in its current Corporate Plan 2018-21. One of them is "we want people to love where they live". This boundary proposal flies in the face of this priority when clearly the democratic will is to oppose the changes. If the changes to boundaries proceed, NCC's credibility with voters will be severely diminished.

3. MTC'S CASE LACKS EVIDENCE AND VALIDITY

- 3.1 MTC say they would "provide services to the new estates at a better cost to the taxpayer by using economies of scale and the NEAT team". Where on earth is the evidence? Para 1.1. above already describes the significant increases in Council Tax and the poor record of MTC when compared with Hepscott in reducing Council Tax. How is this "at a better cost to the taxpayer"?
- 3.2 The lack of evidence, facts and figures runs throughout Morpeth's case. The nearest they get to evidence is their dossier used by MTC F&GP to push these proposals forward. We submit the figures from the dossier (considered by full MTC Council on 21/3/18) as evidence to the Review, attached [Appendix II]. But MTC's "evidence" lacks validity, the March 18 dossier is misleading. Its benefits to MTC are under-represented, as only 126 dwellings on South Fields are counted when soon a total of 438 dwellings will be built, so the value to MTC will be 3.5 times greater. They also overlook the fact that their council tax is 6.4 times higher than

Hepscott [Band D £18 Hepscott, £118 Morpeth]. Benefits of £2606 in the dossier for 126 dwellings will be £58,000 when South Fields is completed. Benefits of £3147 for the 114 dwellings in Hepscott Stobhill Manor quoted in the dossier should be 6.4 times higher at £20,000, because their council tax is 6.4 times higher. Total benefit to Morpeth of the boundary changes will be nearly £80,000 per annum (£58,000 plus £20,000). This would add 13% to their parish precept (at '19/'20 rates).

3.3 MTC says that as a service hub it should ensure that "in so far as is practical and sensible it recovers the cost of providing these services." Where does this stop? Many people from the Morpeth area visit the Metro Centre, Cramlington, Blyth, Ashington, Guidepost and many other service centres. Do we pay Council Tax to these places? Of course not. When asked what services are provided that Hepscott Parish does not supply MTC replied "Town Hall", (Hepscott has a Parish Hall but does not employ "Town Hall" staff), Christmas Lights, Carlisle Park etc. Whilst not decrying these services one iota, why should the residents of South Fields and Hepscott Stobhill Manor be singled out for substantial increases in Council Tax whilst others are not? Where does it stop?

3.4 MTC say "it is appropriate that those living (in) the town of Morpeth should have political representation in being able to vote for Town Councillors". Our residents do not live in Morpeth. They have an elected parish council with 7 councillors to cover a parish of 1200 residents, a ratio of 1 councillor to approximately 170 residents. Morpeth Town Council have 15 councillors for a population of 15,000, or 1 councillor to 1,000 residents. Who has the better representation? Para 2.2 discusses MTC's record on consultation; it is poor to non-existent

"It is appropriate" say MTC, without any evidence whatsoever, that the political representation they suggest would provide benefit to the residents of the 2 estates concerned.

3.5 "By divesting the rural parishes of the burden of maintaining the services to the new estates there would be less budgetary pressure on the parishes and less requirement for them to raise their precept" says MTC. We have not raised our precept but in the last 2 years actually reduced the charge per resident. (see para 1.1) To suggest this proposal will provide "less budgetary pressure" is risible--see paras 1.3 and 1.4 on the financial effects on Hepscott Parish. How can halving our precept "reduce budgetary pressure"? With more than 200 houses built on South Fields we have managed budgets well and reduced our Council Tax to the residents.

3.6 MTC say that "one section of the town's inhabitants (is) paying less for the services used by (in some cases their immediate) neighbours." But that is an everyday occurrence to anyone who lives on or near a boundary or border. Northumberland is rife with boundaries, not least a Scottish border that provides free adult social care, prescriptions, university tuition fees on one side and not the other. The Scots would argue that they manage their budget better and have different priorities and that the border goes back a long time. The boundaries on Stobhill Manor were established quite amicably long before the Hepscott Stobhill houses were built over 20 years ago. Move a boundary and the same boundary issues soon arise again.

3.7 MTC keep using the phrase "those living in what all disinterested parties would regard as the town of Morpeth." That, of course, is their opinion, ventured without one shred of evidence, surveys, questionnaires etc to support it. Who are these "disinterested parties?" MTC could hardly be called "disinterested parties" when they will gain £80,000 pa in council tax.

3.8 Adjacent to South Fields is a patch of land, known as The Triangle, to be safeguarded for the expansion of Coopies Lane Industrial Estate. (see also para 5.2). There is no mention whatsoever of this except on their map, but clearly they are eyeing it with a view to future commercial income of thousands of pounds. Again, they cannot be regarded as "disinterested parties."

3.9 MTC refer to the boundaries being "out of date" and "not reflecting the current development of the Town." There is no evidence offered to support this and once again it is an opinion from a very "interested party." It fundamentally misunderstands the nature of boundaries (see para 3.6 above). There is one fundamental reason for MTC seeking this Review--money--and the proper quantified evidence of their likely monetary

gain is missing from their request for a Review. MTC's intent though is clear. It "should maximise its revenue from those houses" [March '18 dossier].

4. PRECEDENT

4.1 HPC has followed the decision on Amble with great interest. It seems to have many parallels with Morpeth's attempted land grab. New estate on the edge of town, large number of houses, public opinion opposed, increase in council tax to residents. We were pleased to see the Democratic Services report and the 'status quo' recommendation. The case supports our argument that precedents will be set.

4.2 HPC believes that agreement to MTC's boundary changes would set a massive precedent. Across Northumberland whenever there is a town (Alnwick, Berwick, Amble etc) the adjacent parishes pay lower council tax. Alnwick and Berwick will be watching with great interest. A glance down the list of band D Parish charges will verify that towns pay substantially higher parish charges.

4.3 Nearer home, Pegswood has a parish precept of £120,000. Its boundary lies only 600 metres from the Morpeth boundary, only 250 metres from the Northern Bypass. The precedent set by this Review would be very worrying for Pegswood Parish. MTC are already seeking to cross the Northern Bypass with its annexation of Northgate, St Andrew's Gardens and the Meadows.

4.4 Where does it stop? MTC are seeking agricultural land to the west of Lancaster Park to be taken from Mitford. If MTC's proposal is granted it is highly likely that Morpeth will soon advance to the A1 By-pass and not only in area D but south of that too. "Any disinterested party" would surely agree?

5 OTHER SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

5.1 MTC maintains that there are no planning issues at stake. This is highly questionable as their proposals will see the spread of Morpeth Town into the countryside, with fewer residents' checks and balances to stop them. Their record on consulting residents, as we have shown here, is very poor.

5.2 HPC is concerned for the future of the MNP. It was extremely disappointed that the hard work and cooperation it put into the Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan has been ignored and future work jeopardised by MTC. Hepscott's support and work for the MNP was second to none (witness the ballot results of the Referendum when Hepscott was streets ahead of any other part of MNP). Yet MTC does not see fit to consult with our residents nor speak to HPC before putting these plans together.

5.3 There is no justification or evidence provided to justify the annexation of "The Triangle", the patch of agricultural land in the north east of area C, adjacent to South Fields across a railway line. This is to be designated (Local Plan) as safeguarded land until at least 2036. HPC has fought hard and long to maintain the nature of that land. If it goes to MTC it will be another encroachment into the countryside. There are grave fears it will end up as building land with no local residents to fight its corner. The Triangle is not part of South Fields, but it is curious that there is no justification for its inclusion in MTC's proposal. Save for a map, there is no mention of this land. Flying under the radar?

5.4 Similarly there is no justification nor evidence for the inclusion of Turner Square (to the south of Choppington Road, north of A196). There are approximately 27 dwellings in that area, with residents facing the same increases in Council Tax for no increase in benefit as described earlier. See para 1.1. They must not be overlooked (and include 3 separate properties, The Gatehouse, Torran House and Woodford House) that are also in Hepscott Parish. They will suffer exactly the same financial penalties as South Fields and Hepscott Stobhill Manor Estates.

5.5 MTC's proposals also raise political issues, including changes in County Council Divisions. HPC is strictly non-party-political, but a look at the proposals indicates possible moves of hundreds of constituents or

future constituents, from rural-based County Councillors to Morpeth-based County Councillors. This might give the impression of strengthening the future position of MTC and disturbs the balance of power. The needs of the electorate should determine boundary changes not the needs of political parties.

6.CONCLUSIONS

The MTC proposals would gravely damage Hepscoth Parish and severely penalise our parishioners. They would fly in the face of the overwhelming majority of our parishioners' wishes. They would set an unwise precedent. The justification for the proposals is very weak and unsubstantiated by facts or evidence. We ask you, for the reasons above, to refuse the request to change the boundaries.

Hepscoth Parish Council

(25/2/20)