

Dorset Council - Community Governance Review

Bryanston Parish Council's response to Blandford Forum Town Council's proposed boundary changes

Bryanston Parish Council (BPC) submitted a brief response to Dorset Council's Community Governance Review, published in July 2021, in August 2021, with no material comment.

However, on 22 October 2021 Blandford Forum Town Council (BFTC) notified BPC of their proposals (agreed at their Town Council Meeting on 18 October) to review and amend the town boundaries to include, inter alia, the entire parish of Bryanston.

In response to Dorset Council's Community Governance Review, the Parish Council now rejects, in the strongest terms, the proposal by Blandford Forum Town Council.

In objecting to Blandford Forum Town Council's boundary proposals, Bryanston Parish Council has set out their evidence to retain the current parish boundaries, in the context of the following documents:

- 1 The Local Government Boundary Commission for England: Guidance on Community Governance Reviews – March 2010; and**
- 2 Dorset Council's Community Governance Review Consultation Paper – 22 July 2021.**

Background

The proposal to incorporate Bryanston Parish into the Blandford Forum Town Council administrative boundary was presented and agreed at the full BFTC meeting on the 18th October. The Chair of BPC Parish was notified late on Friday 22nd leaving just 4 working days to give full consideration and appropriate response to this important matter before the Dorset Council deadline for their Community Governance Review on 28th October. Although BFTC had no obligation to consult with the parishes about the proposed boundary changes, it would have been good governance to consult with them and to take the opportunity to outline the benefits of their proposal. Therefore, Dorset Council should not take the absence of a lengthy response to this proposal as any indication of Bryanston's agreement to any point we have not challenged. We expect Dorset Council to give their full consideration and weight to our views, notwithstanding the fact that we have been unable to submit the response we may have wished.

Bryanston Parish Context

Bryanston is a small RURAL village which extends over 1,512 acres of mainly agricultural land lying some distance to the west of Blandford and the River Stour between which is 'The Cliff', an area of designated Woodland. The whole parish is designated as a Conservation Area.

Bryanston village itself is spread out amongst the rolling Dorset fields and woods and lies almost entirely within the Dorset AONB. The countryside areas still bear traces of historic lynchets and ancient field systems. Historically and geographically unique, Bryanston has Neolithic and Roman origins and is referenced in the Domesday Book. It predates the town of Blandford.

A significant proportion of the parish (1,326 acres - 87%) is in the ownership of the Bryanston Estate. Viscount Rothermere purchased the Estate from the Crown in 2015, who in turn bought the Estate from the Portman family in 1950. A substantial portion of the remainder is owned by Bryanston School. The Bryanston Estate rents two farms and 43 residential dwellings. The parish is small, having less than 180 dwellings and less than 300 residents, excluding the pupils and staff of Bryanston School.

As a rural parish, it is also home to a stud farm with riding facilities and the Portman Hunt Kennels. It is an important provider of rural pursuits including shooting, horse riding, bird watching, cycling, and walking. It has a network of footpaths, bridleways, and rights-of-way.

Being a small village, Bryanston is spread out into many small clusters, including:

- The large and dominating house, grounds, and drive, once the home of the Portman family, and now owned by Bryanston School.
- Near the flood plain, in a picturesque setting with sweeping views across the meadows, is the original settlement of Bryanston, now part of Bryanston School's grounds, with the former parish church of St Martin's and the Portman Chapel. Also in this area is the 'Old Kitchens, a building from one of the former mansions that stood on this important site and is now a SSSI of national importance for a large nursery colony of Greater Horseshoe bats.
- Clustered below The Cliff is the area known as 'Old Bryanston' consisting of a significant group of older buildings, many listed, that formed part of Lord Portman's 'Model Farm', now converted to a number of picturesque and historic Portman Estate cottages and mews.
- A number of Victorian / Edwardian houses, a small estate of former Council-owned housing together with some more modern detached houses that run along The Cliff.
- Historic cottages line the bottom of New Road, close to the boundary with Blandford St Mary, and known as 'Lower Bryanston'
- A small group of Edwardian and later houses along New Road, near the junction with The Cliff.
- Former Portman Estate cottages surround the Portman Kennels and Old Park Farm at Quarleston.
- Small Farm complexes scattered throughout the agricultural land.

Bryanston is an environmentally sensitive area and home to at least seven species of birds of prey, fifteen species of bat, dormouse, wild deer, bluebells and orchids, otters; all of them protected species (at least two in Annex11).

It is clear from the various surveys of Bryanston, during the Neighbourhood Plan process, that Bryanston residents come and stay for the rural setting and the strong sense of community. The parish has a good mixture of dwelling types. Many people were born here and many more have moved in over the years.

Boundaries

Bryanston Parish has clear geographical and historic boundaries which consist of the River Stour, ancient woodlands and historic roads, strong, clearly defined boundaries tied to firm ground features.

The 'Cliff's ancient woodland, rises steeply above the River Stour overlooking extensive meadows and a flood plain giving a large and clear separation between the rural parish of Bryanston and the conurbation of Blandford Forum town.

Physical connections with Blandford Forum

The only physical connection with Blandford town is one bridge which was originally a ford dating back to at least Roman times. This bridge is in Blandford St Mary parish. It is accessed via New Road.

Bryanston has other physical connections with the villages of Durweston, Winterborne Stickland and other rural areas.

Cohesion

Bryanston has its own strong community cohesion and identity. Evidence shows few residents look to or indeed work in Blandford. Many are retired, own businesses they run from home, work at Bryanston School and many more work in nearby large towns such as Poole, Bournemouth and Dorchester.

Although the few older Bryanston children attend the Blandford School, most younger children attend the primary school in Durweston. Bryanston also shares its Parish Church with Durweston, together with various festivals, fairs and thanksgivings. Bryanston children also enjoy the play equipment situated at Durweston playing fields.

As Blandford has few entertainment venues, most residents rely on the larger towns for cinemas, restaurants, and theatres. Bryanston has its own thriving social club, the Bryanston Club. The Club has regular social events for residents, "pop-up" food outlets, indoor sports, and provides a venue for many community-interest groups and clubs. It also has thriving skittles, darts and snooker leagues.

Bryanston has a strong inclusive community, strong sense of place and pride, as demonstrated by these examples:

- Very effective communication via its own, well-used, Facebook page (Bryanston residents only) called the "Bryanston Village Community".
- Regularly produces and distributes to every Bryanston dwelling a free newsletter, written by Bryanston residents for residents, with listings of Bryanston social events, Church Services, matters of local interest and matters brought to the attention of the Parish Council.
- An annual Tea on the Lawn event enjoyed by village residents that raises funds to cover the cost of printing the newsletter.
- During the height of the pandemic, parish volunteers operated a COVID support team that communicated with and ensured vulnerable residents were cared for, including collecting their prescriptions.
- Residents are proud of their village and regularly engage in litter picks, bulb planting etc, usually followed up with coffee and cakes.
- The Bryanston Village History Group has been meeting regularly to record the history of the parish and to publish the information electronically for public perusal.

These events are organised by Bryanston residents for its own community. If Bryanston loses its identity, by absorption into a large town, the village community spirit will be lost forever.

Governance

Bryanston has a strong Parish Council with excellent leadership which works hard to address the specific needs of its parish, including:

- ⇒ The Parish Council meets 6 times a year, with additional meetings as required but is in regular electronic communication.
- ⇒ The Parish Council has 7 members, all who live in the parish.
- ⇒ The Council has a fully qualified Parish Clerk, who works closely with the council, the dedicated County Councillor (Cllr Sherry Jespersen) and the DAPTC to enable BPC to effectively respond to the needs of our rural community – and more effectively than a Town Council ever would.
- ⇒ Maintaining a BPC website to inform residents of parish council matters, essential information such as tree work, highway restoration, changes to rubbish collection and NHS services etc.
- ⇒ Distributing a “Welcome Pack” for new residents with listings of essential services
- ⇒ Supporting the important Bryanston Club which became a Community Interest Company (CIC) Ltd, in June 2021. Two Parish Cllrs sit on the CIC development committee.
- ⇒ Currently working on the formation of a Village Hall for music, theatrical and other community events. BPC has requested S106 money from the Lower Bryanston Farm development towards the refurbishment of the Portman Hall building attached to Bryanston CIC, to form the separate village hall. Many of the community events, recently held at Bryanston CIC, have been fund-raising for this purpose.
- ⇒ Supporting/carrying out tree-planting and wild planting in this important rural environment
- ⇒ The regular maintenance of its village grass and verge management - paying for contractors to carry out this work
- ⇒ Responsible for the upkeep of 7 grit bins, essential in the outlying areas of the parish during winter
- ⇒ Replacement of 3 parish fingerposts
- ⇒ Has forged close and effective links with the major landowners in Bryanston – Bryanston School and Bryanston Estate, Social Housing providers and local farmers, many of whom regularly attend parish council meetings.
- ⇒ Has forged excellent links with other councils to facilitate effective working on common problems and with Simon Hoare, the local MP.
- ⇒ Rents and maintains a red “telephone-box” book and horticultural exchange.
- ⇒ Organises voluntary litter-picks, village bulb planting etc.
- ⇒ The Officers of the PC have individual roles, including:
 - Planning
 - Bryanston School
 - Bryanston RFE
 - Environment
 - Highways

Trees
Bryanston Club
Footpaths, rights-of-way, and signage (all regularly inspected)

Our community feel very comfortable with our councillors as they live in the village and are a big part of the community themselves. It is important that BPC represents the interests of all residents within the current Parish area, as each area has its own specific needs.

BPC provides an efficient local governance. With a ratio of 1 councillor to 53 residents it delivers a very effective ground-level service which would be difficult to replace with a ward councillor who may or may not live locally.

So, losing the autonomy of the parish council would be detrimental to the interests of the local population, destroy local democracy and accountability and be in direct conflict with stated Central Government policy.

Blandford + Neighbourhood Plan

Members of Bryanston Parish Council have worked on a Neighbourhood Plan for 10 years, and with Blandford Forum Town and Blandford St Mary Parish Councils as the Blandford+ Neighbourhood Plan for the last 8 years. Throughout the NP process, Bryanston residents, in public consultations, have made it clear they wish the parish to retain its rural status and character – it is their main reason for living there.

This is clearly reflected in Policy 1 of the B+NP (now statutory), with no settlement boundary/countryside policy for Bryanston for planning applications. Policy B13 also sets out the design policy for this area of unique rural and historic character. Blandford Forum Town Council, as part of the B+NP, agreed to this designation at every stage of the NP process, which is contrary to the present proposal under consideration as it now wants Bryanston to be part of the town. The Memorandum of Understanding for the B+NP facilitated three councils to work together in a mutually respectful partnership and was never foreseen or intended as an opportunity for one council to use it as a land grab.

Issues raised by the Blandford Forum Town Council submission directly affecting Bryanston parish:

1. Dorset Council Draft Plan

In BFTC's submission, it states *"In their Draft Local Plan, Dorset Council (2021) in terms of development and proposed development, have regarded the whole of the local Blandford area in closest geographical proximity as one. This includes the parishes of Blandford St Mary and Bryanston."*

This is clearly not the case, and taken out of context, as Blandford Forum is a Tier 2 Town settlement and Bryanston is a Tier 4 small village.

Further point 12.1 of Dorset Council Community Governance Review consultation paper states parishes should not be grouped without the consent of parish meetings of each parish in the proposed group. This clearly has not taken place.

2. Administrative Boundaries

The BFTC submission, simply states that the reason for placing a BFTC administrative boundary around Bryanston Parish is to “*Facilitate ease of administration*” - not to improve or even preserve the character and wellbeing of the parishioners. BPC, therefore, has no confidence in BFTC being able to meet the specific needs of the unique rural community of Bryanston. BFTC recognised and agreed was the case in the B+ Neighbourhood Plan.

3. Existing Parish Boundaries

BFTCs proposal claim was made that the river boundary between Blandford and Bryanston is a “*historic vestige that is arbitrary, obsolete and illogical*” is itself - an opinion that is arbitrary and illogical, with many boundaries throughout the world based on rivers. The Boundary Commission refers to the importance of boundaries that are easily identifiable - such as rivers.

It is equally illogical to consider the “*omission of the flood plain*” as it patently exists and is in integral part of the geography and large distance between Blandford and Bryanston.

4. Services

BFTC’s statement ‘*Blandford St. Mary and Bryanston parishes rely almost solely on Blandford for goods services, sport and recreation*’ is patently untrue

Blandford is Bryanston’s closest hub for supermarket essentials, but this is also the case for all the other surrounding villages (Durweston, Stourpaine, Charlton Marshal to name but a few). Currently, many residents shop at the nearby Tesco in Blandford St Mary parish (free parking, 24hour petrol station and other services such as key cutting), or shop in the larger surrounding towns, or use local farm shops. BPC minutes show the extent that parking charges in Blandford have discouraged the use of Blandford town for shopping.

Bryanston residents look to the village, or further afield, for their entertainment and outdoor pursuits, as Blandford has little in the way of entertainment venues to offer, except pubs.

There is no evidence provided to support the claim ‘*service provision can be enhanced and more easily augmented if Blandford becomes a larger settlement*’ as most services are not provided by BFTC.

The BFTC statement claiming the ‘*current and proposed developments have placed additional burdens on Blandford’s services*’ does not apply to Bryanston. Although 75 houses are planned for a site at Lower Bryanston Farm, North Dorset Council resolved to grant outline planning permission in February 2019, subject to the completion of a Section 106 agreement. The S106 has not yet been completed (after early 3 years of negotiation) and the applicants still need to discharge all of the reserved matters for the new development after the issue of outline planning permission. It is thus likely to be a number of years before any building work commences on this site.

The countryside policy that now applies to Bryanston in the statutory B+NP mean that only dwellings can be built if shown to be essential. So, Bryanston has not placed any additional burden on Blandford town. Indeed, BPC contributed to the upkeep of the public toilets in the town, from its small precept, and is always mindful of the services the town provides that Bryanston residents might use, as a good neighbour.

5. Electorate size

There are approximately 300 residents in the parish of Bryanston. With limited new development planned and the B+ Neighbourhood Plan in place, Bryanston will have little impact on electorate size over the next years. A predicted 48 people only.

6. Ward Councillors

It is also difficult to understand how one ward town councillor (the submission was unclear), could ever replace the existing very effective Bryanston Parish Council, with its excellent governance, that properly meets the specific needs of this unique and distinct community, on the ground, in an environmentally sensitive rural area. How could this boundary change ever be effective for the residents of Bryanston when the current representation ratio is 53 and BFTC is on average ten times higher? The small parish will be lost in the melee. In point 14.3 of Dorset Council Community Governance Review Consultation Paper the importance of the parish council budget is an important factor. Bryanston would see a significant rise in taxation with no indicated benefit. The proposal of BFTC does not address the point 17.2 that seeks to equalise the numbers in each ward - Bryanston is likely to become an afterthought in a town -focused governance, losing the quality-of-life Bryanston residents currently enjoy.

In conclusion

BFTC's proposal does not set out the benefits that Bryanston's council taxpayers would receive as a result of this proposed boundary change. It is clear, however, that this would undoubtedly increase the revenue for Blandford Forum Town Council.

If Bryanston Parish was to become absorbed into the town of Blandford Forum, Bryanston's rural character, rich heritage and distinct community enjoyed by Bryanston's residents will be lost forever and Bryanston will inevitably become yet another anonymous urban sprawl.

In conclusion, should Blandford Forum's proposal proceed to a Public Referendum, Bryanston Parish Council is very confident that the proposal would be soundly rejected.

Bryanston Parish Council
28 October 2021