

A town council for **Sutton Coldfield?**

Consultative ballot and
frequently asked questions

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Consultative ballot

The enclosed ballot paper gives you the opportunity to voice your opinion on whether a town council should be created for the Sutton Coldfield area. You have been sent a ballot paper because you are on the electoral register for the Sutton Coldfield constituency.

This information booklet explains the background to the ballot and answers some frequently asked questions about town and parish councils. This is to provide you with impartial information to help you make your decision on how to answer the ballot question.

Both the frequently asked questions and answers, and the consultative ballot question, have been reviewed by a group of Sutton Coldfield residents from the Birmingham People's Panel to ensure impartiality. In deciding on the question we have taken into account the Electoral Commission's question assessment guidelines.

Your ballot paper must be returned in the envelope provided and reach us by 3pm on Thursday 16 July 2015.

Why is a consultative ballot taking place?

In October 2013, a petition was submitted to Birmingham City Council calling on it **“to make the necessary provisions for establishing a Sutton Coldfield Town Council for the area designated by the existing Sutton Coldfield Constituency boundaries”**.

As this was a valid petition, Birmingham City Council was required by law to carry out a ‘Community Governance Review’. This is the process by which it decides whether the proposal in the petition should be accepted. The council has to make a decision on the petition by September 2015 (a year after publishing the terms of reference for the review).

A consultation on this and other proposals was held as part of this review in February and March this year, and more than 200 Sutton Coldfield residents responded. However, the city council believes the decision on whether to create a town council is an important one for Sutton Coldfield residents and has therefore decided that all those on the electoral register in the constituency should be given the opportunity to express their view.

Find out more

Further information is available from your local community libraries in Sutton Coldfield, Boldmere, Mere Green and Walmley, or by visiting the following websites:

- birmingham.gov.uk/community-governance-review
- dclg.gov.uk
- nalc.gov.uk

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Constituencies, districts and wards

A map of Birmingham showing the parliamentary constituencies (districts), including Sutton Coldfield, is shown below. The Sutton Coldfield parliamentary constituency is the geographical area that would be covered by a Sutton Coldfield Town Council. It is also known as Sutton Coldfield District and is one of ten districts in Birmingham.

Each district is made up of four wards and three city councillors are elected from each of these wards. This gives 12 city councillors per district who meet as a district committee to discuss issues affecting their district, including the local performance of public services.



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Frequently asked questions

■ What is a town council?

Town and parish councils are a legally independent, additional local government layer, elected at the same time but in addition to a principal council (such as Birmingham City Council). Town councils are legally the same as parish councils but tend to cover larger areas.

Each town council will have elected town councillors. These are elected in the same way as city councillors and their term of office is four years. It is likely that elections for town councillors will take place at the same time as elections for your city councillor.

To be eligible to stand as a town councillor you must live or work within the area covered by the town council or within 4.8 kilometres of it.

■ What is their purpose?

Town and parish councils exist in many parts of Britain. They provide neighbourhoods, villages and towns with representation, a voice and one way to improve the quality of life in local communities, including the provision of some local services.

They:

- have rights to be consulted on planning matters;
- can represent the views of local people on issues that they are concerned about;
- can provide a range of additional services for residents and businesses in the area they cover; and
- provide a forum for local people to discuss issues they are concerned about and to plan local action.

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■ Would a town council replace the role of Birmingham City Council?

No. The principal council for Sutton Coldfield would still be Birmingham City Council who would remain responsible for providing most of the local authority services within its boundaries. You would still elect city councillors on the same basis as in other parts of Birmingham and the city council would continue to have a legal duty to provide specific services in Sutton Coldfield.

A Sutton Coldfield Town Council would not have all the powers and resources of a district council such as Cannock Chase District Council.

■ What services can a town council provide?

A town council could decide to provide no additional services or it could decide to provide a range of local services in addition to those provided by Birmingham City Council. The services it can provide are legally defined and include the maintenance of local parks and open spaces, recreation grounds and play areas, community centres, crime prevention, traffic-calming measures, markets and tourism activities. (See Appendix 1 of 'Paper 3: Sutton Coldfield Town Council: Initial Analysis' on the council's website at birmingham.gov.uk/community-governance-review for a longer list of services that a town council is allowed to provide.)

A town council can also ask its principal council to transfer responsibility for delivering some services to the town council, together with the budgets and assets required to deliver them. Both councils would have to agree but, by law, the principal council would only be able to agree if the transfer would mean that the new method of service delivery would provide 'Best Value', a legal term meaning broadly that costs would be controlled and quality maintained.

■ What else can a town council do?

A Sutton Coldfield Town Council would have the legal right to be consulted on planning matters affecting the town. Birmingham City Council would remain the planning authority and would make the final decision on any planning issue consulted upon.

The town council could also work with Birmingham City Council to develop a neighbourhood plan which would set out detailed policies and priorities for the physical development of an area within Sutton Coldfield. These neighbourhood policies and priorities would need to be compatible with the city's development plan. For example, a neighbourhood plan could not change an area designated as one of housing growth in the city council's development plan.

You do not need to have a town council to be allowed to develop a neighbourhood plan. Any parish council has this power according to national legislation, as do neighbourhood forums.

Town councils can also represent the views of local residents on any issue of concern. They can also organise activity with residents and businesses to improve the quality of life locally, so long as the activity is legal. For example, they could organise community litter picks or voluntary work to improve a park or open space.

■ How much will a town council cost?

We don't yet know, as it would depend on factors such as the number of councillors, the staff employed and the number and nature of the services it provides.

However, a broad estimate can be made by comparing it to Shrewsbury Town Council which costs £448,000 to run annually based on 70,000 residents before the costs of providing services are added. With Sutton Coldfield District

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having around 96,000 residents, its basic running costs are likely to be at least £200,000 annually.

How would a town council be funded?

Mainly through an annual precept which is an additional council tax paid by council taxpayers in the area covered by a town council.

Birmingham City Council would collect this precept at the same time and in the same way as council tax, just as it does now for the additional precepts covering police and fire services. All funds raised by the precept would be passed to the town council by the city council although there might be a charge for collecting the funds.

How much is the precept likely to be?

The national average precept for existing town and parish councils is just over £50 a year for a Band D property. If a precept of £50 was set, then residents in higher banded properties would pay more than this (for example, £100 a

year in a Band H property) and those in lower banded properties would pay less (for example, £39 a year in a Band B property).

Clearly, the precept for a Sutton Coldfield Town Council could be set at a lower or higher level than the national average. The table shows what each council tax band would be charged if the precept was set at £30, at £50 or at £70 per year.

Possible annual precepts payable by Sutton Coldfield residents			
Tax Band	Annual Precept at £30 for Band D	Annual Precept at £50 for Band D	Annual Precept at £70 for Band D
AR	17	28	39
A	20	33	46
B	23	39	55
C	27	44	62
D	30	50	70
E	37	61	85
F	43	72	101
G	50	83	116
H	60	100	140

■ **How much would this raise and what other sources of income are there?**

If a precept of £50 for a Band D property was set, then it is estimated that about £1.8 million would be raised for a Sutton Coldfield Town Council. If the running costs were £200,000 a year then £1.6 million would be available for additional services drawn from the list of services that a town council is allowed to provide.

Remember that these are broad estimates. (By comparison, Shrewsbury Town Council with 70,000 residents charges a precept of £39.89 for a Band D property and raises £948,000 including Council Tax Support Grant. As a result of income from other sources, its annual expenditure is £3.4 million.)

A Sutton Coldfield Town Council would also be able to obtain funds from three other sources:

- charging for services such as entry to any visitor attractions it manages;
- applying for grants or sponsorship from a variety of bodies; and
- funds transferred by Birmingham City Council for services that it transfers to the town council to provide.

■ **Will my council tax reduce by the equivalent amount of the precept payable?**

No, the precept is an additional charge on top of council tax. This is because it pays for additional services, functions and responsibilities specifically to be provided in Sutton Coldfield, over and above those paid for by your existing council tax.

■ **Who decides the town council precept?**

A Sutton Coldfield Town Council in consultation and agreement with Birmingham City Council.

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■ **What area would be covered by a Sutton Coldfield Town Council?**

The parliamentary constituency of Sutton Coldfield – which is the same area as Birmingham City Council’s Sutton Coldfield District. This is shown on the map earlier in this booklet.

■ **What would be the role of the district committee if a town council is created?**

Under current Birmingham City Council devolution arrangements, there would still be a district committee for Sutton Coldfield and ward committees/forums. These would still include the Sutton Coldfield city councillors and they would maintain an overview of all public services provided in the district. They also have the right to comment on local planning issues although the decision on whether or not to grant planning permission remains with the city council.

■ **What happens next?**

All ballot papers have to be returned by 16 July 2015 to be valid. These will be counted and the result announced publically during the week beginning 20 July. The final decision will be made at a meeting of Birmingham City Council in September 2015, taking into account the results of the consultative ballot.

If the decision is to establish a town council, then the first election for town councillors could be in May 2016 if the government’s approval process can be completed in time. However, even if approval could be obtained in time, due to changes in how city councillors are to be elected, further town council elections would need to be held again in 2018. Alternatively, it may be decided to defer the first town council elections until 2018 as there are no local elections in 2017.

Glossary

District committee

Ten committees of 12 councillors introduced in Birmingham in 2004, each covering the area of one parliamentary constituency (four wards). Under the Local Government Act 2000 they are 'area committees' to which decision-making powers may be devolved by the council's cabinet.

Neighbourhood plan

A plan setting out policies for the physical development of a neighbourhood. Under the Localism Act 2011, it may be drawn up by recognised local bodies, such as a neighbourhood forum or parish council. They must be in line with local development plans and national planning policy.

Parish council

The lowest formal level of local government in England. Since 2007 parish councils can be called 'neighbourhood', 'community' or 'village' councils.

Precept

An order issued by one local authority to another specifying the rate of tax to be charged on its behalf.

Town council

A parish council that covers a whole town, usually a much larger area and population than most parishes.

Ward committee/forum

40 committees of the three councillors in each ward which have existed for many years in Birmingham. Their main role is to engage the surrounding community in local decision-making.

