

## Response by Englefield Green Village Residents' Association to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England proposals for Runnymede Borough

Englefield Green Village Residents' Association - EGVRA - are strongly opposed to the ward boundaries change proposal to merge part of Egham town ward with parts of the two Englefield Green wards. It should be noted that we are a Village Residents' Association.

If the Runnymede Borough Council / LGBCE proposal were endorsed and implemented the majority of Englefield East ward and a portion of Englefield Green West ward on the Eastern side of Priest Hill would disappear and be merged with the western side of Egham Town ward in a new ward called Egham Hill. Not only is the name inappropriate to those who reside in Englefield Green Village, but much more fundamentally the geometry of the proposed ward is long (ca 3.5Km) and thin (ca 1.6Km at its widest point) which we submit is not by any measure respectful of community identity. We understand that LGBCE has a duty to work to three statutory criteria, one of which is to reflect the identity and interests of local communities - this proposal, we respectfully suggest, does not approach giving sufficient weight to that criterion.

The ward of Egham Hill, if it were to be adopted, would take in the following locations within Englefield Green East and West wards - Runnymede House at the bottom of Priest Hill, South Lodge Farm, Magna Carta memorial, J F Kennedy memorial, Priest Hill Farm, Air Forces Memorial, Coopers Hill Lane, Tite Hill including Runnymede Park, Middle Hill, Bakeham Lane, Prune Hill, RHUL, St. David's Drive on London Road (A30) and many others.

The Englefield Green Village Residents' Association regards this as an intolerable assault on the identity and sense of community of Englefield Green Village, and I stress the word Village. It also believes that combining Englefield Green East and the part of Englefield Green West adjacent to the river Thames in the North with part of another different community on the southern side of the A30, several kilometers to the South, would seriously weaken the commitment of some voters to the notion of truly local representation. It may, and this would most certainly be completely undesirable, dissuade some residents from voting at all and damage our local democracy, which is valued highly.

Contact by EGVRA with as many of our membership as possible (we have 800 in total) has revealed no support whatever for the proposed ward boundary changes. All those who responded said we should write to you to oppose. Indeed, one resident commented that he had no wish to be living within 'Greater Egham' - again, an indication of the need to respect community identity. I live close to The Green itself and most definitely do not wish to vote in a ward named Egham Hill. Both of the present wards of Englefield Green have a pride in jointly being part of Englefield Green Village and do not wish to be divided in this way. Indeed, Englefield Green East is the original part of the village dating back at least to medieval times. We publish an EGVRA magazine 'The Clarion' which is distributed to virtually all households in our village.

I turn now to another of the three statutory criteria, namely, electoral equality. EGVRA is firmly of the opinion that too much weight has been given thus far to this important criterion which needs to be addressed, however, we emphatically believe this must be achieved with the central focus being the reflection of the identity and interests of local communities. We are aware that Egham Residents' Association - ERA - has proposed reducing the representation of the existing Englefield Green East ward to two councillors as a solution to the Runnymede Borough Council voter inequality problem, and we believe that it combines the virtues of being electorally fair, respecting community identities and being easy in the sense of not requiring major modifications to the local electoral map. It also allows any future changes in student population, whichever way they move, to be accommodated more simply, by changing the number of councillors covering Englefield Green East ward. We are well aware of the precedents that exist for LGBCE departing from the 3-member ward formula and are willing to see the representation of Englefield Green East ward reduced to two councillors in order that it can survive in essentially its present geographical form.

Runnymede Borough Council's proposed Egham Hill ward - essentially endorsed so far by the Commission - would truly be a nonentity. The name refers to an area through which a section of the A30 runs. This highway surely ought to be regarded by the LGBCE as a boundary - indeed a 'natural' boundary - rather than a 'centre' for a community and ward.

That is certainly the way local people feel about it. As far as we are aware, virtually everyone who lives on the Egham (Southern) side of the A30 on Egham Hill considers themselves to live in Egham Town, and virtually everyone who lives on the Englefield Green (Northern) side regards themselves as a resident of Englefield Green Village. There is no cross-over in people's minds; on the contrary there is a firm geographical divide in terms of thinking as well as it being a major 'A' road leading to the West of England.

I should inform you that we have been in detailed discussion on this matter with the ERA and our respective officers and committee members are of one mind in considering the proposed Egham Hill ward as anathema because it would offend against and assault community identity.

The two communities are obviously geographically close and live in harmony, but Egham is Egham and Englefield Green is Englefield Green. Both communities have a strong sense of what and where they are and are very different in character. Egham is a town and has two big supermarkets, a busy High Street with a Post Office and banks, and a railway station. Englefield Green remains a village with the site of the sealing of Magna Carta within its boundary, an ancient, large green (The Green) where cricket is played and the annual Village Fair is held and close proximity to The Crown Estate which reaches across to Windsor Castle, albeit – partly because of the presence of Royal Holloway College – one with a sizeable population. Both communities cherish and fervently wish to retain 'effective and convenient local government' - the third of the LGBCE statutory criteria. Linking a part of a town with part of a village to form a new ward completely goes against the criterion of community identity. The proposed Egham Hill ward would bring together parts of two distinct communities in a forced union that would be greatly regretted on both sides of the existing border between the two. It would also run counter to the objective of promoting effective and convenient local government. For many electors it would be anything but convenient to be in a ward they could not identify with, and the severing of established links between communities and the council would make for less effective local government.

I have an additional thought to express with regard to the foregoing paragraph. If you are a Councillor of the proposed Egham Hill ward and reside in Egham Town, what affinity do you have with the interests of residents in the Englefield Green Village side of the ward you represent? Obviously, this could apply the other way around. Arguably you could be caught in a potential conflict of interest between the two and, as we all know, no-one should be put in a situation where such a dilemma can be avoided, particularly from the outset.

There is another aspect to this before I finish this submission. EGVRA has a sub-committee which is well ahead with work towards the formation of an Englefield Green Village Neighbourhood Forum and has submitted a boundary plan to the Local Plans Manager at RBC based, not surprisingly, upon the Englefield Green East and West ward boundaries. Discussion is ongoing and a meeting is in process of being set up to move ahead to what we anticipate will be work on the Neighbourhood Plan soon.

From an EGVRA perspective the proposal is simply unacceptable. RBC has paid no regard whatsoever to Englefield Green Village's sense of community and identity. But the LGBCE is under a statutory obligation to do so. We believe that that obligation would be breached if the Commission gave final approval to the Council's ward plan.

In conclusion, because the Englefield Green Village boundary contains the site where the Magna Carta document was sealed in 1215, residents live very close to the worldwide acknowledged birthplace of democracy. It would be an understatement to say it would be regrettable if, just over 800 years on, local residents felt that their basic democratic rights were likely to be undermined by very ill-judged, unnecessary ward boundary changes.

Yours faithfully,

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