

## Response by the Egham Residents' Association to the Local Government Boundary Commission proposals for Runnymede Borough

The Egham Residents' Association was not merely disappointed but dismayed by the draft recommendations for Runnymede Borough published by the Local Government Boundary Commission in May of this year.

We made a representation of almost 1700 words to the LGBCE in January expressing our great concerns about the proposals from Runnymede Borough Council for ward boundary changes in the Egham area – and especially about the impact they would have on the Egham Town ward and the town itself – and we had not supposed in our worst nightmares that our arguments would be largely dismissed in just a handful of paragraphs.

We very much welcome the fact that a couple of changes we proposed – relating to Whitehall Lane, Manor Way and Boshers Gardens, and Vicarage Road and its tributaries - were accepted by the Commission. But a much bigger re-think is required about the RBC proposals for the Egham Town ward, which are fundamentally flawed.

In rejecting our idea of essentially retaining the existing Englefield Green East ward but reducing its representation from three to two councillors, the LGBCE said that “as Runnymede elects a third of its councillors each year, there is a presumption in law that it will have a uniform pattern of three-councillor wards”.

What is the rationale behind such a presumption? It seems to defy logic – especially as no such presumption covers councils that have all of their councillors elected at the same time, once every four years.

One such council, Slough – which is very close to Runnymede – has a pattern of 13 3-member wards, one 2-member ward and one 1-member ward as a result of final recommendation made by the Commission in 2012.

Another, Surrey Heath – which adjoins Runnymede – has seven 3-councillor wards and seven 2-councillor wards in consequence of recommendations made by the Commission last year.

It would seem quite obvious that a council that elects by one-thirds has closer contact with its electorate than a council that goes to the polls only once every four years. So, logically, the law ought to be at least as prepared to allow exceptions to the norm with the former as with the latter.

The one-member ward of Slough gets to elect one councillor every four years. If Englefield Green East were reduced to two councillors, it would miss out on elections only one year in three in the Runnymede cycle.

The LGBCE has made it clear, however, in paragraph 35 of its report that the presumption in favour of ward uniformity in the case of councils electing by thirds does allow exceptions. It stated that “we were not persuaded that compelling evidence has been received that would justify a two-councillor ward in this area”.

In endeavouring to answer this (more than we have already) we sought evidence from the Commission informing us what previous exceptions to 3-councillor wards have been permitted by it for councils electing by thirds. In response, we were told that the councils that have been allowed such exceptions include Peterborough, Swindon, South Lakeland, Crawley and Wyre Forest.

In the case of Crawley, the Commission has recently produced draft recommendations for 10 3-councillor wards and three 2-councillor wards. In doing so, it said: “Crawley has a strong neighbourhood principle that clearly guides its community identity. The Commission are of the opinion that to propose wards containing parts of more than one neighbourhood to produce a wholly uniform pattern of wards would undermine its other statutory criteria.”

This is music to our ears. The proposed Egham Hill ward in Runnymede would bring together parts of two distinct communities or neighbourhoods in a forced marriage that would be greatly regretted on both sides of the existing border between the two (Egham and Englefield Green). 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.

In the case of South Lakeland, the Commission originally proposed a uniform structure of 17 3-member wards, but eventually recommended 15 3-councillor wards and three 2-councillor wards and said that this would allow for electoral equality “while reflecting community identities and interests where we have received such evidence during consultation”. That is exactly what we ask for ourselves, and we would be unable to understand why we should be deprived of what South Lakeland has been granted.

The evidence put forward by such organisations as Colton Parish Council and the Windermere and Bowness Civic Society is very similar to ours – and we do not regard it as any more “robust” than ours. Yes, we accept that the complaints against the RBC plan are not borough-wide and are largely confined to one part of Runnymede. But that is because the adverse impact of the proposals in terms of loss of community identity will fall on that part of the borough.

In Wyre Forest, similarly, the Commission originally proposed a uniform set-up of 11 3-member wards, but was persuaded – after protests from community groups and individuals - to change its recommendation to one of 10 3-member wards, one 2-member ward and one 1-member ward. Having made that alteration, the commission said that “we will not recommend a uniform pattern

of wards if, in our view, it... does not reflect communities." Hooray. We appeal to the Commission to repeat that in reference to Runnymede.

There were similar stories in Swindon - where the Commission was eventually persuaded to recommend 18 3-member wards, one 2-member ward and one 1-member ward - and Peterborough where it also decided to depart from a uniform 3-member ward structure and finally recommended 18 3-member wards, two 2-member wards and two 1-member ward. In both cases arguments about community identity helped produce the change of thinking.

What is the cause of the electoral inequality that the LGBCE has to address? It is decidedly not that communities have changed since the last boundary review. The cause is the law change in voter registration that happened between the 2014 borough elections and the 2015 elections, which put the onus for registering to vote on individuals, rather than households/institutions. Englefield Green East ward is unique in Runnymede in that it contains a university campus, which prior to 2015 will have taken responsibility for registering on-campus students to vote, but now does not do so. As a consequence the number of electors in Englefield Green East ward dropped by a staggering 36pc (from 4393 to 2828) between the 2014 and 2015 borough elections. Many students are choosing not to register to vote in their university town. The point is that the change in numbers of electors was not due to any change or movement of communities - the communities post 2014 are the same, in Egham and in Englefield Green, as they were up to 2014.

Maybe you have come across similar situations in other university towns.

We have proposed reducing the representation of the existing Englefield Green East ward to two councillors as a solution to the Runnymede 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, rather than by shifting the Egham Town and Egham Hythe boundaries yet again.

By contrast, Runnymede Council's proposed Egham Hill ward - essentially endorsed so far by the Commission - would be a soulless entity. At its heart, if it had one, would lie the A30. 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 side of the A30 on Egham Hill considers himself/herself to live in Egham, and virtually everyone who lives on the Englefield Green side regards himself/herself as a resident of Englefield Green. There is no cross-over in people's minds, just as there is no cross-over for

vehicles; on the contrary there is a firm geographical divide in terms of thinking as well as tarmac.

At this point we wish to state that we have been in consultation on this matter with the Englefield Green Village Residents' Association (EGVRA), and it seems that we 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 geographically close and obviously 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 they 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, albeit – partly because of the presence of Royal Holloway College – one with a sizeable population.

We acknowledge that ward boundaries are an esoteric subject. A substantial proportion of the electorate will show no more interest in this subject than it does in local government generally – or, indeed, in voting in local elections. But among those who do care about such matters in Egham, the provisional recommendations from the Commission have produced a mixture of hilarity and anger.

Comments such as “They have got to be joking” are common. A plan under which part of Grange Road – within shouting distance of the core of Egham High Street – would be excluded from the Egham Town ward, but an area at the southern end of Staines Bridge would be added to the ward is widely regarded as both ludicrous and offensive.

Streets such as Moore Grove Crescent, Nobles Way, Lynwood Avenue, Ripley Avenue, Clarence Street, Osborne Road, Rusham Road, The Crescent, Spring Avenue, Spring Rise, Limes Road, Milton Road and Grange Road are very much part of Egham. They are very definitely not part of Englefield Green, and the residents of these streets have no desire to be detached from the Egham Town ward and linked up with Englefield Green East in an artificial ward called Egham Hill.

From our conversations with officials of EGVRA we know that feelings are also running strongly in Englefield Green against the RBC ward proposals. People living close to the actual green in Englefield Green do not want to have to vote in a ward called Egham Hill.

Further to this, we have ascertained that EGVRA leaders are sufficiently attached to the Englefield Green East ward to be willing to see its representation reduced to two councillors in order that it can survive in essentially its present geographical form.

The sense of incredulity in Egham over the current LGBCE recommendations is increased by some of the detail in them. By what logic, for example, can North

Street in Egham be regarded as a suitable ward boundary (between the Egham Town and proposed Egham Hill wards)? How can the Commission recommend that the A30 be at the centre of a ward and that North Street – which is locked into the Egham community – be a ward boundary?

To anyone who knows Egham well, moreover, it is absurd that the Commission has provisionally gone along with the idea that a number of streets at the Staines end of the Causeway should be tacked on to the Egham Town ward – even though they are separated from it by half a mile of industrial buildings and the M25. These streets naturally belong to the Egham Hythe ward.

These are examples of what is generally wrong with the RBC proposals for the Egham Town ward (and the Commission's provisional endorsement of them).

The existing ward is almost a perfect match for what local people think Egham is and where it stands.

By amputating a large part of the ward on the south-west side and stretching it to Staines Bridge on the eastern side, Runnymede Council and the Commission would turn it into a sort of Frankenstein Monster. It would be an object of scorn and sadness. Such a terrible deed would be a great blow to Egham's sense of identity and self-worth.

When we wrote to the Commission in January we stressed what a strong community Egham is, and we wish to repeat some of what we then said:

“Egham High Street is the heart of Egham. It contains Egham Library, two churches, Egham Museum, many shops, restaurants and banks and Egham Post Office. Everyone living in the roads that feed into the High Street and the Avenue uses the High Street frequently. Most of the people in this ward also use the centrally located Grove Medical Centre. Residents living in the roads that RBC proposes to remove from the ward all use these facilities just as much as do residents from any other roads in the ward. For example, people in Limes Road, in Spring Rise, and The Crescent all use them as much as do people in Crown Street, Denham Road and the other roads north of the High Street.

“Egham can also be defined by its many Community Groups: church communities, allotment groups, a bowls club, scouts and guides etc. The Egham Residents' Association is a very prominent and active community group. We were set up in 1984 to protect the Manorcroft playing field, in the centre of Egham, which was threatened with development. Our membership (currently more than 500) is open to everyone living within the present Egham Town ward, and in those streets that were removed from the ward in the previous boundary review of 1997. We serve a single community...”

It is for EGVRA rather than for us to speak up primarily for Englefield Green, but we are well aware that that community also has many thriving and distinct (non-Egham) local community groups.

In the email we sent in January we also said that we believed that by reducing Englefield Green East to two councillors, the need to produce ward elector equality could be largely satisfied. No-one can seriously suppose, moreover, that Runnymede Council cannot function as well with 41 councillors as it does with the current number of 42.

It is a recurring theme in those cases where the LGBCE has departed from a uniform 3-member ward formula that insistence on sticking to that structure would have required downgrading and devaluing community identity in order to satisfy the other statutory criteria under which the commission operates.

We firmly and passionately believe that the plan put forward by Runnymede Council unintentionally calls loudly on the LGBCE to make another exception to the 3-member ward norm.

From an Egham/Egham Town perspective the proposal is simply insufferable. RBC has paid no regard whatsoever to Egham'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.

A final thought: Many of us in Egham regard it as the Magna Carta town because of its proximity to where that document was sealed in 1215. It can be claimed that we live in or very close to the birthplace of democracy, and every year we celebrate the Magna Carta anniversary with a festival in the High Street. It would be a great shame if, just over 800 years on, the residents felt that their basic democratic rights were being assailed by very ill-judged ward boundary changes.

Yours faithfully,

Chris Fisher

Vice-chairman, Egham Residents' Association