

Dear Sir or Madam,

The Egham Residents' Association wishes to express grave concern about the course that is being taken in the Runnymede Borough Council response to the LGBCE's review of its wards.

Runnymede Council has decided that it wishes to retain a structure of fourteen 3-councillor wards for its elections. And the LGBCE has said that it is "minded" to agree to this.

But when the council first made that decision its members had not seen any map showing what the detailed impact on local communities would be. That is a very serious flaw in the process. Had the LGBCE seen any such map when it made its statement about being "minded to recommend" this idea?

Runnymede Council has subsequently produced a map in which the Englefield Green East ward would be expanded and pushed – with a new name of Egham Hill - almost right into the very heart of Egham, and the existing Egham Town ward would consequently lose many of its existing electors and territory.

The proposed new Egham Town ward would show painfully little respect for the town's identity and sense of community, and would be regarded by many of its electors as an offensive absurdity. If it were to go ahead, it would be possible to stand within sight of Staines High Street (over a mile way from the heart of Egham) and be in the Egham Town ward, yet stand almost within touching distance of the very core of Egham's High Street (in Grange Road) and be in the Englefield Green East/Egham Hill ward.

All of the streets in the huge 'tile' with over one thousand electors – stretching from Moore Grove Crescent to Limes Road and much of Grange Road – that Runnymede Council is proposing to transfer to Englefield East/Egham Hill are very definitely part of Egham and not Englefield Green. No local person would be in any doubt about that.

Where, moreover, are the identifiable boundaries that would, for example, sever a rump of Grange Road from the rest of that road, and separate Boshers Gardens and Manor Way from the Egham Town ward?

Such a fatuous outcome would be very harmful to the image of the democratic and electoral processes in Egham, and would potentially result in lower turn-out by electors.

We accept that it will often not be easy for a council and the LGBCE to strike a balance between broad equality in ward elector numbers and the retention of community interests and identities.

In the case of the Runnymede Council proposal for the Egham Town ward, however, it seems to us that every regard is being paid to equality and none to community interest and identity.

Runnymede Council should not have started from a position of wanting to keep fourteen 3-member wards irrespective of what was meant for local communities. It should have looked at the two issues together in detail. And if the 14/3 format could not be retained without serious injury to community and ward identity, it should have been prepared to be flexible.

Nothing in RBC's argument for the retention of 42 councillors tells us why there has to be 42 – instead of, say, 41 or 43.

We have looked at various alternative ways of trying to secure numerical equality between the wards in Egham and Englefield Green without sacrificing community identity.

We initially thought of proposing a new Egham Town ward with four councillors and an Englefield Green East ward with two. But we are given to understand that in the case of councils electing by thirds, the LGBCE never countenances having a ward of more than three councillors.

So, we are proposing that the current Egham Town ward should be retained – essentially in its present form (but with the possible addition of Vicarage Road and the cul de sacs off it) – and that it should have three councillors. We also propose that the existing Englefield Green East ward should be retained – again, essentially in its current form – and that it should be reduced to two councillors.

We have looked at Runnymede Council's proposed map in detail, and it is possible – to work out an alternative pattern that would support our proposal for three councillors in Egham Town, two in Englefield Green East and three in Englefield Green West. There would be consequences for Egham Hythe, but we believe they are not insuperable.

The figures we produced were: 5031 electors for Egham Town, 3152 for Englefield Green East and 3995 for Englefield Green West. With some minor alteration, these wards - reflecting community identities and largely sticking to existing boundaries - would fall within the LGBCE parameters.

We also understand that with councils electing by thirds, it is rare for the LGBCE to accept a ward of fewer than three councillors. But we firmly believe that Englefield Green East, with its complication caused by students attending Royal Holloway College, should be one such exception to the rule.

Egham Town, Englefield Green and Egham Hythe have very distinct identities. Egham, which is our over-riding priority, has a very strong sense of community and of what – and where – it is.

We note that in the 1997 Runnymede electoral review, the LGBCE accepted the argument we made at that time, that “Egham Hill would provide a more identifiable boundary and that retaining the streets to the east of Egham Hill in Egham Town ward would better reflect community identity”, (Final Report, paragraph 79) and that in the light of this, they agreed that roads to the east of Egham Hill, both north and south of Egham High Street, should be retained in Egham Ward, where it had been proposed to remove them. These arguments still hold.

We note that the Commission in 1997 (paragraph 79) accepted the properties around Whitehall Lane as being part of Egham, after first proposing their transfer to Englefield Green East. Moreover, Vicarage Road and the roads off it have always identified as being part of Egham Town. We note that the replacement Leisure Centre being built on Vicarage Road is described on RBC’s website as “Egham’s new state-of-the-art leisure centre”!

We are baffled by the proposal that residents living in the area bounded by the Causeway, the M25 and the railway line, for example Avenue Rd and Claremont Rd, should be included in Egham Ward, whilst those living in the roads we have mentioned above should not. Again we note that in paragraph 80 of your 1997 report you “remain of the view that the properties on Woodhaw lie to the east of the M25 which provides a clearly identifiable boundary, and therefore are not amending our proposal to include Woodhaw in Egham Hythe ward”. We hope you will be consistent in this view when you consider RBC’s proposal to transfer Woodhaw and all streets towards Staines Bridge into Egham.

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, and support local Independent councillors who represent Egham Town on RBC. In a typical borough election, more than half of the votes cast in Egham Town are for the Independent Residents’ Association candidate. Such candidates have consistently won all of the Borough seats in Egham Town since 1984.

As well as this political activity, we have formed groups to deal with the challenges that Egham residents face throughout the ward – including motorway noise, aircraft noise and the threat of mineral extraction. Our committee and our members work together to deal with these and many other issues.

We also organize social events for our members, and a litter pick. We are involved in the organization of the annual Magna Carta Day, and are represented on the Royal Holloway Liaison Group, Police Liaison, and the Egham Town Team.

In summary, Egham is a distinct community with a distinct political identity and the current Egham Town ward boundary reflects that very well (albeit not perfectly; it would be better if Vicarage Road were taken back into it).

If implemented, the Runnymede Council ward proposal would drive a stake through the heart of Egham Town's sense of itself. We also believe that it would amount to an utter outrage against the LGBCE's obligation to respect local community interest and identities and to have identifiable boundaries.

That obligation is a statutory one. If the LGBCE were to endorse the wretched RBC ward plan, we would be bound to consider the options available to us under the law.

We recognize that our proposal is not perfect. But it would be vastly preferable to the one-size-fits-all formula Runnymede Council has put forward – which, in fact, does not fit Egham at all. It would also have the added advantage of keeping local electorates very much in the same wards as their communities have been used to since the last electoral review in 1997.

Yours faithfully,

Christopher Fisher

Vice-chairman, Egham Residents' Association

January 26, 2018

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