

Cllr John Parker

Romsey Town Councillor, Tadburn Ward

Dan Carlsson-Hyslop
Review Officer (Test Valley)
Local Government Boundary Commission for England
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Dear Mr. Carlsson-Hyslop

ELECTORAL REVIEW OF TEST VALLEY: DRAFT RECOMMENDATION COMMENTS

I am a Romsey Town Councillor and last year had the privilege of being Romsey's first citizen, being elected Romsey Town Mayor. Prior to that, I was a parish councillor for Romsey Extra Parish Council for more than 30 years. I live in the Highwood area of Romsey just beyond the town boundary in Romsey Extra.

Over my time in local government I have been heavily involved in planning matters and have represented various councils and other bodies at numerous planning enquiries and examinations in public. In particular I have found myself often making the case for the protection of Romsey and its associated hinterland in Romsey Extra and the maintenance of the separation of Romsey from North Baddesley.

I have examined the proposals you have put forward for revised wards in and around Romsey and, in general, conclude that while they may work in terms of electoral equality they fail to meet broader objectives. Unfortunately, I do not have the resources to work up an alternative solution but please accept these comments as an explanation of what I see is wrong with your proposals.

I note that you have four main objectives that you seek to achieve:

- Equality of electoral numbers
- Reflection of community identities
- Clear and meaningful boundaries
- Effective and convenient government.

Equality of Electoral Numbers

I agree that your proposals achieve the targets as far as equality of electoral numbers is concerned.

Reflection of Community Identities

However, I do not believe that your proposals reflect and maintain the historic and current communities around Romsey.

Romsey Infra Parish (known as Romsey Town Council - RTC) and the completely surrounding parish of Romsey Extra (REPC) are always seen as being one integral unit with the built area of the Town being set off by the rural countryside of its Romsey Extra

hinterland with the shared and world-renowned Romsey River Test flowing through them both.

As a specific example - Broadlands, the historic seat of the Mountbatten family, has always been seen as an integral part of Romsey albeit being just beyond the Romsey Town boundary. It is situated in the surrounding parish of Romsey Extra. The Mountbatten family has always been closely involved with Romsey. The family has held for generation after generation the title of High Steward of Romsey. Broadlands itself is used for many Romsey events including the famous Romsey Show. There is nothing that would suggest that Broadlands is part of North Baddesley.

From a planning viewpoint Romsey and Romsey Extra are seen as one entity. Housing developments allocated to Romsey are almost always situated in Romsey Extra as that is where the capacity exists. However, these developments see Romsey as their shopping, leisure and cultural centre. To this end a community-lead joint vision and plan for the area is being developed under the title of Romsey Future. At a land use planning level RTC and REPC are jointly developing a Neighbourhood Plan for the combined parishes.

The Halterworth and Highwood areas of Romsey are areas that local plans have consistently designated as forming a local gap to protect against the coalescence of the two separate settlements of Romsey and North Baddesley. Putting Halterworth and Highwood into North Baddesley ward flies in the face of what of councils have sought to avoid over many years. Given this strong desire for separation it could well cause severe conflicts of loyalty for the councillors of the proposed North Baddesley and Halterworth ward should they need to choose between housing development going into Halterworth/Highwood or North Baddesley.

Clarity of Boundaries

The proposed boundaries are difficult to follow especially in respect of the division of Romsey Extra ward and its allocation to adjacent wards.

If one takes a step back and looks at the proposed constituency boundaries, the new Hampshire County Council divisions, the proposed Test Valley wards and the existing parishes one begins to appreciate the confusion that will arise in the minds of electors.

Currently, the three RTC wards are almost identical to the three TVBC wards. It is clear who ones five RTC councillors are and who the corresponding two TVBC councillors are in each ward. In Romsey Extra one is familiar with the seven REPC councillors and, on the same boundaries one has two TVBC councillors. These simple and understandable relationships will be lost by your proposals. There will be some electors in TVBC Cupernham ward who are part of the RTC area and some who are part of the REPC area. In the new Blackwater ward some people will be in Wellow Parish while others will be in REPC. I do not believe that the average elector will understand this and that interest in local government will be adversely impacted.

At a central government level there will be some challenging anomalies to explain. The current constituency boundary changes are being based on the 2015 TVBC wards while you are proposing a new set of wards. As a consequence there will be at least two wards which will be split between two constituencies. In the new TVBC Blackwater ward that part that is currently TVBC Blackwater is proposed to move to New Forest East constituency while the new section inherited from the current TVBC Romsey Extra ward will remain in the successor to the Romsey & Southampton North constituency. The same situation will apply to the proposed TVBC Mid Test ward.

Effective and Convenient Government

The proposed changes will make local government very confusing for the electorate with an expected decrease in engagement but it will also make the administration of elections far more complex.

As a result of the way you are proposing to distribute the existing TVBC Romsey Extra ward you will need to ward REPC into six separate wards. This will be difficult to explain to the electorate and difficult and more expensive for the local political parties to campaign. There will be far less opportunity for joint election literature given the increased permutations of TVBC wards and parish wards. Your requirements for six wards is in direct conflict with the requirement put forward as part of the recent county council divisional boundary review which split REPC into two wards with four councillors covering Woodley whereas you suggest merely two.

It will also make the administration of elections more complex and more costly. Given that TVBC elections are run on an all-up basis every four years on the same day as parish elections there will need to be an increase in the number of different polling cards issued, an increase in the number of separate polling stations and a commensurate increase in staffing. This can hardly be described as effective or convenient government.

Allocation of Councillors

I do not see the point of changing the number of councillors representing the TBVC wards of Cupernham and Tadburn nor changing the number of councillors representing the corresponding REPC wards. The old adage: "if it ain't broke don't mend it" would seem to apply here. What exists now works, so why change it? It seems to be change for the sake of numerical pedantry.

Comments on the Proposed Ward Boundaries for RTC

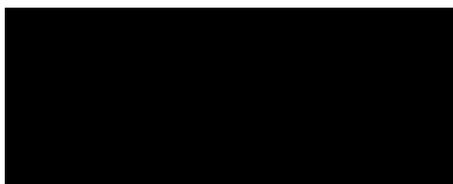
Romsey has a well-defined town centre represented by Abbey ward. This is reflected in terms of the Look at Romsey Town Design Statement and generally understood by the residents. To move Romsey railway station, the Plaza Theatre, Winchester Road and Alma Road out of Abbey ward would be counter-intuitive as these are considered to be strong focal points of Romsey town centre.

Summary

There are four key objectives to meet to achieve a good reorganisation of TVBC wards. I feel that priority has been given solely to the numerical objective to the complete detriment of the others. These proposals are far from satisfactory for the wider Romsey community and need to be rethought, if necessary allowing the numerical imperative to take second place.

As a final observation the legislation and its implementation which leads to separate and conflicting boundary reviews at parliamentary, county, district and parish level seems to be designed to create confusion and risk alienating the electorate even further.

Yours sincerely,



Cllr John Parker
Romsey Town Councillor for Tadburn ward and immediate past Romsey Town Mayor