



The Review Officer (Halton)
LGBCE
1st Floor, Windsor House,
50 Victoria Street,
London,
SW1H 0TL

4 February 2019

Dear Sir / Madam,

Boundary Commission Review of Halton

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Commission's proposed electoral arrangements for wards in the Borough of Halton.

The community of Hale is regarded as a close one, with the Parish Council acting as a uniting factor in this area.

Disappointment must be expressed that the Boundary Commission have not seized this opportunity to retain a strong single-member ward for Hale. It is widely recognised that a single point of accountability provides a strong link between a Councillor and the residents they serve. This is of course why multi-member Parliamentary seats were abolished in the nineteenth century.

Hale is a distinct community on the periphery of Halton and it seems incongruous to attach the village to such an industrious area as Ditton solely for the sake of creating a multi-member ward.

Hale has always been a single-member ward and residents have continuously elected a parishioner who resides within the village, serving as an example of how important representation at a very local level is considered central to the effective and convenient governance of Hale by the electors who reside within the current boundary.

The Commission may not have understood the impact this change will have on Hale and its loss of identity. Both Hale and Ditton are two divergent communities, with different issues and priorities regarding transportation, community spaces, crime, health, employment and education.

A large multi-member ward would be incompatible with such a small, semi-rural, and isolated village and the Parish Council believes an opportunity to give greater clarity to local democracy in this area has been lost under the current proposals.

Whilst it is recognised the challenges the LGBCE have faced in this part of the Borough, given the strong feelings expressed in the community, the Parish Council must object to the current proposal, which we anticipate will be reinforced with further representations from residents.

It is understood that an electoral inequality would be produced if Hale remained a single-member ward, resulting in the sole Councillor having approximately 15% less electors to represent than other Councillors in Halton. Whilst this maybe uncommon, the Commission have made similar exceptions for other areas of Cheshire such as Blacon in Chester West who also have a 15% electoral variance and the Parish Council ask the Commission to treat Hale with a similar regard.

Mentioned in the Domesday Book, Hale is one of Halton's oldest settlements and a historic market town with a population of approximately fifteen-hundred electors. The Parish lies in the County of Cheshire, located to the south west of Hale Bank, separated by a rural buffer zone with approximately two miles of open countryside.

Once a holiday destination of Winston Churchill and since described by the Queen as 'a rural oasis', Hale is a small village in a bucolic setting enveloped by ancient woodlands, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, a UNESCO Ramsar Convention site, Scheduled Historic Monuments, listed buildings, conservation areas, and Green Belt - intersected by the Trans Pennine trail and bordered to the south by the popular Mersey Way coastal walk; offering valued views across the River Mersey and surrounding Grade 1 agricultural land (the only ward with land of this grading in Halton, and one of only two wards in the entirety of Cheshire).

With a vibrant tourism economy, Hale remains much as it was in the mid-twentieth century; lined with thatched whitewashed cottages and 'Grade I' and 'Grade II' listed buildings.

Known for its famous 'Child of Hale' - a gentle giant who grew to nine-foot-three-inches and wrestled for King James I - it is not hard to see why this village is coined by the Borough Council as "the jewel in Halton's crown".

Much credit is owed to the Blackburne family of Hale for their historic part in the early discovery and mining of rock salt below Hale Cliff, on the banks of Dungeon marsh. A site recognised by merchants as the catalyst that contributed to the early rise of the nearby Liverpool docklands. The Blackburne, and subsequent Ireland-Blackburne and Hesketh, families provided many of the foundations that have helped Hale to flourish, not least in establishing the buoyant agricultural economy that has ensured the village could continue to thrive as a rural enclave ever since.

Being the most Western point of Halton, Hale lies adjacent to the boundary of the Borough. The physical landscape and Rams Brook strongly reinforces the parish boundary to the north and east. The River Mersey offers a natural boundary to the south. The western edge of the Ward being bordered by the neighbouring local authority, Liverpool City Council.

The current Parish boundary offers a local sense of 'neighbourhood' and provides a sensitive compatibility between nature and those who live, work and carry out business in the area. It is also in line with the catchment area for walking to services and local tourist attractions

such as Hale Head Lighthouse, Hale Cliff, the country walks of Hale Park, and Hale duck decoy (the only Scheduled Ancient Monument of its type in the north west and one of only three in the country).

The current ward is a boundary that electors are familiar with and feedback from residents suggests this is the area they identify with as being a part of Hale's neighbourhood and its character. The present border makes sense to the community of Hale and is logical in spatial terms, allowing the heart of the village and surrounding areas to be planned for and represented together; ensuring best use of the electors understanding of the landscape that has existed symbiotically with inhabitants for centuries.

There are many roads that act as physical barriers and clearly divide Hale between Ditton, with a weight limit in the village which restricts the heavy goods vehicles of Ditton's industrial estates using the village.

Hale is a distinct community with an extremely active Parish Council that has represented the area for one-hundred-and-twenty-five years, overseeing various changes to the Local Authority, Ward Councillors, and MPs since the late 1800s.

As such, many generations of electors in the Parish have always identified as residing in Hale, not Ditton or any other part of Widnes.

Given the historical significance of the Ward, the Parish Council believes changing its name would be short-sighted and detrimental to both the current economy and future tourism trade.

The current footprint of the Ward offers excellent synergy with a vibrant community that boasts countless community groups and committees, all whom work hard to ensure the best interests of Hale are served.

The Parish Council was recently successful in securing over £600,000 in external funding to rebuild Hale's Community Centre - a building that binds the community together.

The past decade has also seen Hale receive close to £500,000 in grants to preserve and enhance the many open spaces that the Ward has to offer.

Residents of Hale have campaigned hard in recent years to prevent the commercialisation of the Ward, by fighting against planning applications for fast food restaurants, co-op supermarkets and cash machines - all components present in Ditton.

With a population density of only 3 people per hectare, Hale shares a rural identity and has issues which align with other rural parishes such as the protection of Green Belt. It is felt that the needs of Hale would not be well suited to sharing a ward with Ditton - a community that is far greater in number than Hale with a population density in some areas of 48 people per hectare. Furthermore, it is felt that Hale's distinctiveness from other areas it is proposed to share a ward with, would be detrimental to the representation of both Hale and indeed Ditton itself.

Residents in Hale have much in common in this largely rural area and less so than with the urban areas of Ditton. It has been a separate ward for many years as it has consistently met the criteria for uniqueness for a long period of time – only strengthening the sense of community.

There are clear geographical restrictions in this area, making no logical sense of any shared community interest. There is no historic or intertwined nature which has ever connected Ditton with Hale, with an extreme contrast in housing stock, shopping facilities, bus services, road links and general sense of community – all making a compelling case to retain Hale as a single-member ward.

Ditton is such an impenetrable ward that there is no easy way for it to be split and it appears that it has been divided primarily to form electoral equality, with a lack of consideration as to whether or not it wishes to be a part of Hale, or visa versa.

In recognition of the long established community of Ditton, and some of its unique social and economic challenges, it would be extremely difficult for three councillors to serve this proposed larger ward.

Having to deal with a community with much more diverse interests and requirements, with no crossover of issues within the newly proposed Ward, means that councillors would be clearly split between having to find solutions to two completely separate communities. This will be more time consuming for the councillors, confusing for the residents and would generally not “help the Council to carry out its responsibility” to provide “effective and convenient local government”.

The Commission should also note the interests of a small community such as Hale could be entirely dwarfed in such an arrangement by a larger community. Merging Hale with Ditton will give too much prominence to Ditton as a much larger community. Hale could become over-shadowed and as a smaller village will become vulnerable to potential exclusion and oversight from key funding opportunities and support.

The current proposal does not appear to chime with all the objectives of the Commission and the Parish Council would urge the Commission to reconsider Hale as a smaller unit, retaining its existing ward boundary, where a community can continue to be represented by people who understand the specific local issues. Under the current proposals we believe that democracy and accountability has taken a step backwards, not forwards, for these communities and this superb opportunity to give local Councillors a footing to be more engaged with the areas they represent could well have been wasted.

At the most recent local elections in May 2018, Hale achieved a turnout of 56.46% - the highest turnout of all wards in Halton (which had an average turnout of just over 26%) - offering an insight into how active electors are in Hale when partaking in local democracy. Conversely, a turnout of only 27.12% was realised in Ditton, with just 16.1% using their vote during a further by-election in October 2018. These figures, show a substantially low interest in local democracy across Halton, with approximately only one in every four electors using their vote, with Hale clearly bucking the trend with more than one in every two electors using their vote. Merging Hale with Ditton would increase the population by more than three times its current figure (from approximately 1,500 electors to over 5000), leaving

residents of Hale unable to ever have full control of electing a representative of their choice, who they know can provide them with an effective voice and secure the future prosperity of such a unique ward. This dilution would affect Hale's historic high election turnout, and lead to a reduced sense of local democracy for residents of the Ward.

Residents have also expressed concern that grant funding will be effected greatly by merging Hale with Ditton. Currently, funding is distributed across each ward in Halton by way of an area forum. When Councillors are seeking funding for projects to improve wards, it is really important that each ward is considered on its own merits. In merging Hale with Ditton, residents worry that most of the funding will be concentrated to the Ditton area of a new super Ward as oppose to continuing to help a prosperous ward maintain its future growth.

Halton is a Borough in Cheshire. It should be noted that the Commission have stated that a 'mix of one-, two- and three-councillor wards...would have good levels of electoral equality and in some places used clearly identifiable boundaries' (paragraph 28, Cheshire West and Chester Draft Recommendations). By creating a completely different electoral pattern in Halton, changes the overall electoral pattern across the County of Cheshire, making the smaller low density Cheshire villages extremely vulnerable to being overpowered by the large higher density communities such as Ditton. Whilst a single-member ward in Hale may appear out of sort with the majority of Halton, it is well-suited to its identity as a historic Cheshire market town.

Hale has a number of well used community facilities including a village hall, primary school, youth centre, sports field, playground, church, bowling greens, cycle paths, and bridleways. Socially, this creates a distinct identity, focussed around communal activities and integration.

Surgeries of Councillors representing Hale have always been conducted in Hale, and there is concern amongst residents that new representatives may expect Hale residents to travel into Ditton, using a bus service that is poor and unreliable.

To conclude, Hale is so rigidly cohesive that the Parish Council believe any sensible adjustment cannot be made without the overwhelmingly strong sense of community identity being negatively impacted.

If the Commission aims to ensure that the pattern of wards reflect the interests and identities of local communities as well as promoting effective local government, it is essential that Hale remains independent where these aims can be effectively met.

We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to and comment upon the Commission's draft recommendations. It is hoped the feedback is seen as a positive response to meet the aims of the review.

Hale Parish Council hope the Boundary Commission will acknowledge the Parish Council's in-depth knowledge of the local area, its electors, and landscape.

With a strong sense of community in such as small closely-knit ward, there is understandable concern that any merger would see differing interests reduce the identity of Hale.

I would be grateful if you could acknowledge receipt of this submission.

Kind regards,

Craig Wyna
Clerk
Hale Parish Council