

Local Government Boundary Commission

Response to proposals for Consett North Division

I am writing to you in response to your consultation on proposed election boundary changes within County Durham.

Recently I attended a public meeting in Medomsley village and heard, with some concern, your proposals for changing Medomsley and the surrounding communities' election boundaries. I have to say there was unanimous concern expressed at this meeting. Subsequently I have worked my way through your consultation document and my 'concern' has developed to 'dismay'.

The Commission clearly has not understood or taken into account the social, cultural, historical and geographical relationships which exist within the 'Medomsley' community. By Medomsley, residents generally consider this to mean the villages of Medomsley, The Dene, Medomsley Edge and High Westwood together with isolated residences.

It is quite astonishing that the Commission proposes break up this community by including Medomsley village in a new Division of North Consett but even more astonishing proposes to include nearby The Dene in the Burnopfield/Dipton Division.

So I have asked myself what the implications would be for myself and other residents of the wider Medomsley rural communities. I summarise the most obvious implications as;

- Poorer representation and democracy resulting from 1. Medomsley rural village being co-joined with the ever growing urban conurbation of Consett and 2. The smaller rural communities of The Dene and High Westwood joining with the larger and distant communities of Burnopfield/Dipton
- Reduced resource allocations to us rural and smaller communities as urban Consett continues to take the 'lions share'
- Dismantling of the wider Medomsley communities strong social, cultural, historical and environment relationships built up over decades.

These are not exhaustive but summarise the main issues which come to mind, and I shall expand on these below.

Democracy

Boundary changes should primarily act to strengthen links between and within local communities. Combining rural with urban communities, with little natural synergy will only result in increased stresses and strains. To therefore to base decisions on boundaries merely in order to achieve statistical objectives and in so doing, ignore present social, cultural and historical within communities act against the overriding presumption of strengthening links.

Medomsley, as I describe above, are a close collection of rural settlements. Consett is an ever expanding urban township with different issues to those of more rural communities. Councilors representing predominantly urban constituents will have relatively little understanding (or concern) of the needs of its less numerous rural constituents. For example, the dominant issues in Consett arise from anti social behaviour whilst that of Medomsley is speeding, partly by commuters in Consett travelling to and from work in Tyneside. I have to say that over several decades Medomsley have been well served by its elected Members who live amongst and understand their constituents.

Meanwhile by analogy the relatively small community of The Dene would be overwhelmed by the constituents of Burnopfield/Dipton.

In December 2021 Medomsley was hit hard by Storm Arwen with many residents without power for several weeks. It was only the intervention of our local County Durham councilors and NW Durham MP which achieved action and response to remediate the situation. It is questionable whether there would have been such effective intervention from more focused urban Members. Of course, any concerns in this respect will be compounded now that these parts of NW Durham are part of the of the distant and distinct urban Blaydon parliamentary constituency as a result of the unfathomable Commission's recommendations in 2022.

Resources

Rural communities nationally, and certainly within County Durham have suffered from the disproportionate allocation of resources toward urban communities. To some extent that is understandable but I note from other County Durham residents submissions to the Commission that Area Action Partnerships (AAP'S) come in for some criticism. Medomsley and indeed the Derwent Valley generally have struggled to secure resources for projects after urban projects have received, leaving scant funding for smaller rural projects. I foresee this situation being exacerbated by the inclusion of Medomsley within urban North Consett.

There are lots of historical examples of urban elected Members discounting such things as playgrounds within Medomsley communities when "there is a perfectly good playground 3 miles down the road in Consett"! Concern about the resulting allocation of resources and the relative priorities given to rural Medomsley were issues of great concern in the public meeting last week citing more such experiences.

Community & Links

The dismantling of community relationships developed over many decades by the Commission's proposals for the wider Medomsley community was also discussed in detail at last week's public meeting. My concerns revolve around what discussions the Commission may have had (or not) with residents or residents groups in arriving at its conclusions.

I note from the interactive map within the consultation that Allendale Cottages is pin pointed. This settlement was of course demolished over 50 years ago but most of the former residents were re-settled in The Dene and in Medomsley village. The family and community ties still exist today. Indeed,

people from The Dene and Medomsley Edge attend churches in Medomsley, send their children to the school and provide custom to the two pubs. Residents of The Dene do not go to Burnopfield for these purposes nor people from Medomsley to Consett. There are consequently few of these familial, social, cultural, historical or geographical connections with Consett nor Burnopfield excepting that the latter is similarly rural in nature. The Commission's proposals will act to strain and dismantle these ties.

The wider community of Medomsley has a long established community association, now called Medomsley Community Action Group (MCAG) which acts to carry out environmental, educational and social activities to improve the area and community. I do wonder whether the Commission has attempted to seek views of such community groups. I am aware that MCAG and former incarnations have tried to secure funding from the AAP but with limited success largely because of the urban v rural issues described above. Meanwhile may I also highlight that Medomsley Cricket Club has its facilities on land between The Dene and High Westwood.

I note with interest the Commission's comment *"While we recognise that the villages of Medomsley and Leadgate are 'arguably' distinct from Consett we note the 'evidence' provided by the Labour Group that they share good transport and community links with the town"*.

Well, that statement cuts no mustard and for the Commission to accept it beggars some belief. The Commission at least accept that Medomsley and Leadgate are villages and therefore by their nature rural, but I would certainly like to see what "evidence" was provided and what the Commission accepted, to substantiate the "good transport and community links [with Consett]".

Presumably evidence was offered by or sought from the public transport providers? There is one bus which runs between The Dene and Consett on an hourly frequency leaving about 20 minutes for residents of Medomsley and The Dene to collect their shopping and conduct whatever community linking takes place. There is another bus, also on an hourly frequency, between Consett and Newcastle which passes through the centre of Medomsley and as it happens, through Burnopfield. Presumably residents will be expected to walk up to Medomsley (500m or so) for the bus to Burnopfield to place their electoral vote for that Division before waiting an hour for the bus to return home. There are no obvious voting stations within The Dene or High Westwood.

Additionally, there are frequent bus services between Dipton and Burnopfield on route toward Tyneside and Newcastle.

It is true Consett have a cinema, swimming baths and other sporting facilities but mainly residents of Medomsley travel to Consett for grocery shopping at the supermarkets and more extensive social activities in Newcastle and Metro Centre. Evidence from the public transport providers might well show where residents travel to for 'community linking', as well as for employment purposes.

I have placed emphasis on the issues above but could have raised a number of others including inconsistencies within the Commission's consultation document such as within paragraph 43 in reference to separation by elevation and transport corridors (A694) whilst in other parts of its proposals

for County Durham have dismissed or neglected such things. Another inconsistency arises around the Commission's use of Parish boundaries.

Finally, it is not appropriate to provide views and in such detail as above, without offering an alternative option, and which I hope the Commission will consider. It would seem to make more logical sense to combine rural communities with rural communities and which already have some relationships. The most appropriate such Division would be between Leadgate/Medomsley and Burnopfield/Dipton. Constituent numbers would meet the statistical objectives of the Commission whilst constituent numbers would dictate **3 Councilors with a rural focus**.

In addition, all of these communities embrace the distinct geographical feature of the Pont Valley. Close social, cultural and historical links exist partly because of the geography but also because over the past decades these communities have worked closely together on economic and environmental concerns, to defeat recurring plans to opencast the valley. I would submit therefore that there are close community links between these communities which the Commission has not considered. Needless to say, there are transport links too.

In conclusion therefore this Medomsley/Leadgate/Burnopfield/Dipton Division could thus be named something like **Derwent and Pont Valley Division** additionally avoiding a dominant urban focus with the attendant issues highlighted above.

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