

Sandwell

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Comment text:

Related subject: Cradley Heath & Old Hill

The Local Government Boundary Review is clearly an appropriate process to try to ensure that council wards contain the appropriate number of voters related to the councillors representing them, so that fairness and proportionality is achieved. This is an important principle and given the changes in house building locally, it is understandably necessary to review ward boundaries on a regular basis.

I strongly believe that consideration of such boundary changes ought to reflect geographical, social and cultural emphases of the local area, and of course local knowledge and history are important in informing such proposals. In this context, I had some difficulty in reconciling the Boundary Commission's proposals specifically relating to separating Old Hill from Cradley Heath and moving it to join with Blackheath, to these principles, as local behaviours and tendencies do not seem to have been taken into account. I have spoken with local people on these proposals and there is widespread confusion about why these proposals have been put forward, apart from the principles of equalising the number of voters in the revised wards.

Geographically, Cradley Heath and Old Hill adjoin each other, with a natural affinity between the two areas, as reflected in shopping patterns and community organisations, including residents' associations and faith groups as examples. This is the case to the extent that many local people do not understand where any boundary between them could sensibly be drawn. This is due to the cultural, social and geographical closeness, and this is not felt to be the case when the joining of Old Hill with Blackheath is suggested. Blackheath sits the top of the hill above both Cradley Heath and Old Hill, and is not perceived as part of the same area, as is exemplified by shopping trends. It is the case that Old Hill residents generally choose to go to the Tesco Extra supermarket in Cradley Heath High Street, rather than the Sainsbury's supermarket in Blackheath, as it seen to

be physically distant. This is also true of the choice of post office made by residents, with Blackheath people using their local facility, and Cradley Heath and Old Hill residents using either of their local offices, these two now operated by the same sub postmasters, reinforcing the local nature of their service.

These behaviours are understandable given that there are natural boundaries in the form of the local canal, along with Waterfall Lane and Station Road, and the A459 Heathfield Way, with no residential houses on either side, being an industrial and commercial roadway. These reinforce the separation of Old Hill from Blackheath physically as well as socially.

The proposals put forward for public consultation propose that the following streets are moved from Cradley Heath and Old Hill into Blackheath and Old Hill: Trinity Street, Mace Street, Claremont Street, Haden Road, Old Hill High Street, Sidaway Street, Church Street, Elbow Street, Slater Close, King Street and Hill Passage. The proposed boundary around this area does not follow any natural geographical boundary, and appears to be based on a convoluted, contrived and overtly political proposal. The zigzagging boundary makes no social or cultural sense, given the issues identified above, and would also divide residents who work together into two separate wards. This is highlighted by the existence of the Claremont and Sidaway Streets Residents' Association, which works well and cohesively and this would be disrupted by this proposed boundary change. Claremont Street is a narrow street with Victorian terraced houses on each side and there appears to be no logic to put a boundary between these indistinguishable properties, Similarly, joining Old Hill to Blackheath would divide the local population which attends the adjacent mosque in Plant Street, which is within easy walking distance, and there seems little justification to require them to be in contact with councillors in two wards rather than one.

In summary, the proposed changes, while equalising voter numbers, appears to seek to secure particular areas to be joined based perhaps on projected voting intentions rather than natural affinity culturally, socially and significantly geographically. Using the natural boundaries of the A459 and canal route seem to be more reasonable and as well as aligning voter numbers, is more credible and understandable to the residents of Cradley Heath and Old Hill who share a natural cohesion and have done so for many years.

The attached map identifies the suggested boundary below.

Attached Documents:

- [choh-map.jpg](#)

