

Cheshire East

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Comment text:

Related subject: Knutsford

Please find attached the formal response to the Commission's proposals for the creation of two electoral wards for Knutsford to replace the current three-member ward. I have submitted this document on behalf of all three current ward councillors; Peter Coan, Tony Dean and Stewart Gardiner. Cllrs Coan and Dean have had sight of the document and have agreed its content.

Attached Documents:

- response-to-cec-ward-boundary-changes.pdf

Response to Electoral Commission's proposal for the Cheshire East warding of Knutsford.

This response is submitted by current Cheshire East ward Councillors Peter Coan, Tony Dean and Stewart Gardiner.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Having considered the recent proposals to amend the electoral warding in respect of Knutsford for Cheshire East, we collectively wish to object to these proposals, save for moving the new Redrow development off Northwich Road into Knutsford from High Legh ward, because this estate sits immediately adjacent to the edge of the Town's boundaries and the new houses form a natural extension to the existing settlement.
- 1.2 Our objection is not based upon any party-political basis but because we feel that the proposal is illogical, represents unfairness in the value of an individual elector's vote and would undermine the aims in recent years to create a unified and cohesive community across Knutsford.

2. An issue of numbers and fairness

- 2.1 The whole purpose of the Electoral Commission's review is to ensure that electoral wards are fair and equitable within an agreed range of electors (less than 10% variance), subject to dealing with any geographical anomalies. However, the Commission accepts that its proposal to create two wards for Knutsford goes against this objective, with Knutsford North East showing a 2023 variance of minus 17%, compared to minus 6% for the Knutsford South & West ward.
- 2.2 While appreciating that the single three-member ward proposed by Cheshire East will itself record a 2023 minus 10% variance compared with the Cheshire East average, this will fall to minus 6% by 2030, taking into account the population growth anticipated because of the Local Plan's housing allocations for the period to 2030. It is accepted that this growth will reduce the variances for both wards by 2030, but it will continue to represent a significant difference between the 2 wards.
- 2.3 Furthermore, there is currently a question mark about whether one of these allocated housing sites within the Knutsford North East ward boundaries can be realised by 2030 owing to planning permission having been refused and the matter currently being the subject of an appeal.
- 2.4 It is noted that in recognising the significant variance for Knutsford North East that the Commission suggests that this is acceptable because of the high levels of deprivation recorded within proposed ward boundaries and as such they require a lower elector to member ration to deal with the increased work load for that elected member.
- 2.5 Notwithstanding that undertaking casework is not a legal responsibility of any elected official, this argument does not hold true, because if as assumed there would be a

disproportionate level of case work coming from a more deprived area. In fact it would support the case for a multi-member ward so as to share the work load, rather than putting unequal pressure on the shoulders of a single councillor.

- 2.6 It is noted with interest that in the initial deliberations of the Cheshire East Working Group for the Boundary Review, it was agreed that wherever possible single-member wards should be avoided as they put too much pressure on that member and only in larger rural areas would this option be acceptable.
- 2.7 In Knutsford the three ward councillors currently share the case load across the whole of the ward and provide cover for each other during holidays or periods of ill health. It also helps in dealing with planning enquiries, of which there are many, because two of us are members of planning boards and we need to avoid fettering our legal positions. As such, should there be a potential conflict for one of us, the other two can pick this matter up.
- 2.8 We should also point out that although we all sit for the same party, between 2019 and 2023 Cllrs Dean and Gardiner sat with a member of the independent Group and the same arrangements worked very well between all three of those councillors.
- 2.9 Additionally, we note that many of the issues which may cause particular concern to residents of Longridge and Shaw Heath surround housing matters, but Cheshire East is not the Social Landlord and has no direct representation on either of the Boards of the Housing Trusts who operate these sites, so we can only direct concerned residents to the appropriate community officer for their estate.
- 2.10 Similarly, when any residents are experiencing issues with the Department for Work and Pensions, these are matters which we would rightly pass to their MP.
- 2.11 Finally, as individual Cheshire East councillors we have had access to an annual grant to fund a project within the ward, we have always determined how to spend this collectively and pooling our grants has allowed up to fund projects which as an individual councillor we could not have afforded to do.
- 2.12 While these projects have been across the Town, should the commissions proposed changes to the ward set-up are accepted this option will no longer be available to the detriment of all Knutsford residents, but most significantly to those in the proposed Knutsford North East ward.

3.0 The use of Arbitrary Boundaries

- 3.1 Not only are the proposal of the revised ward boundaries for Knutsford advocated by the Commission not based upon equitable levels of representation, but the boundaries for Knutsford North East look to be entirely arbitrary, aside from separating the two housing estates of Shaw Heath and Longridge from the rest of Knutsford. They do not use significant dividing lines such as main A roads, railway lines or rivers. Neither do they

follow the boundaries of the former or current parish wards or the boundaries of Over Knutsford.

- 3.2 It is noted that in Mr Godden's proposal the Parish Church and Vicarage, which serve Over Knutsford (Nether Knutsford has a separate Anglican Parish served by St Johns on King Edward Road), are expressly excluded from the ward boundaries along with some 30 houses and a block of 24 apartments. These properties are not divorced in any way from their nearest neighbours, yet they are incorporated into Knutsford South and West despite the land on which they sit being bounded by the A357 and the Chester to Manchester railway line. However, we note that this anomaly has been rectified in the Commissions counter proposal.
- 3.3 However we note the inclusion by the Commission of the playing fields opposite Birch Grove into Knutsford North East. These fields were proposed to serve the houses of Higher Downs, North Downs, the later houses on Boothfields and the cul-de-sacs off these roads, which were built in the late 1970s. However most of these properties would not be included within the proposed new ward.
- 3.4 While we might speculate as to Mr Godden's reasons for excluding polling district 3BB1 from his proposals the failure of the Commission not to adopt a fairer breakdown is less easy to understand. While including polling district 3BB1 into North East Knutsford would mean both wards remaining at variance with the preferred constituent to councillor ratio, the variances between the new wards would be more equitable.
- 3.5 Turning to the properties identified as being within polling district 3BB1- we estimate this numbers some 300- 350 properties. If the total number of households in the current Knutsford ward were to be divided proportionately into one single member and a two-member ward of it should produce a single member ward of 3,471 and a two-member ward of 6,942.
- 3.6 Therefore, we would assert that if the commission proposes to persist with the creation of two wards for Knutsford, one having a single member and the other two councillors, then polling district 3BB1 should be moved into the new ward, so it would be more in line with the proportionality suggested above.
- 3.7 Additionally, when looking at the arbitrary boundaries employed by both Mr Godden and the Electoral Commission, they appear to have paid no regard to the new parish wards created for the 2023 Town Council elections. These changes created two three-member wards of St John's and Cross Town from the former six-member Over Ward. The Commission's two-ward proposal will lead to the Cross Town parish ward, of which Cllr Coan is one of three Town councillors, being split in two.
- 3.8 This will at best present an unnecessary administrative conundrum for electoral staff in carrying out their electoral duties and will serve to confuse the electors themselves, where neighbouring residents will be represented by the same councillors at the parish level but different ones on the Unitary Authority.
- 3.9 For example, if the 2023 Election was fought on the new boundaries and the same three councillors were elected, with each of us standing in the wards where we live, Cllr Coan would serve as Cheshire East Councillor for Knutsford North West and Knutsford Town

councillor for Cross Town, meaning about half of his Town Council constituents would be represented by other councillors on Cheshire East.

- 3.10 The unfortunate reality is that most residents do not understand which Council is responsible for what services and will readily call the Town Council about a pot hole or missed bin collection, despite neither of these services being provided by the Town Council. How much more confusing will it be when they are not sure which ward boundaries apply when.
- 3.11 Furthermore, it will also make it somewhat difficult when the Cheshire East councillor(s) are trying to work collaboratively with their parish colleagues on a project or to resolve a problem for a constituent.
- 3.12 While appreciating that neither of these scenarios is unresolvable, it presents unnecessary problems and makes the likelihood of residents understanding local government, let alone engaging with its agents, even less than it is at present.

4.0 Some Historical Context

- 4.1 Knutsford today is the amalgamation of two historical settlements, Nether Knutsford and Over Knutsford, which were fused together and expanded by a series of housing developments, the majority of which were built after 1950. These developments included several local authority estates on the edge of both settlements, albeit there is a larger number of units on the Over Knutsford side of Town, including at Longridge; a Manchester overflow estate built in the late 1960s.
- 4.2 While there is a recognition that some residents of the Shaw Heath Estate feel separated from Knutsford, this situation is far more marked on Longridge. It is even stated often by the residents who live on these two estates that far from being a cohesive community of former local authority housing they are two very different communities.
- 4.3 This situation is not helped by the history behind the two areas and the fact that many of the original Longridge residents came from greater Manchester whereas Shaw Heath was initially occupied by families with a Knutsford, or nearby, connection.
- 4.4 The purpose of including this context is to show that the proposal to create an electoral ward based upon the two housing estates of Longridge and Shaw Heath might present a homogenous grouping in terms of housing tenure, albeit several houses on Shaw Heath are now privately owned, but that is where the cohesion will end.
- 4.5 All three of us originally were elected as Knutsford Town councillors; we have all been Town Mayor and two of us still sit as members of the Town Council in addition to our position as Cheshire East councillors.
- 4.6 Councillor Coan has served as a Town councillor for Over Ward between 2007 and 2019, which is the area where he has lived most of his life. This ward included both the Shaw Heath and Longridge estates. Cllr Coan's brother and two sisters lived on Shaw Heath with their families.

5.0 Longridge and Shaw Heath

- 5.1 Our collective background as Knutsford Town Councillors and long-standing residents means we have a detailed understanding of the issues which impact the whole Town, including the particular socio-economic issues found on our social housing estates, including Shaw Heath and Longridge.
- 5.2 We recognise the disconnect with the Town which many residents feel and the isolation this can present, but as Town and Borough councillors we have sought to address this with direct engagement – often holding bespoke events for the residents of Longridge and Shaw Heath at the Welcome Café or the Shaw Heath Social Club to secure the views and opinions of these residents and to find out what they want for the Town. The Town Council also recognises the need to assist community cohesion and so often supports local events held in the Longridge and Shaw Heath areas.
- 5.3 The Town Council, supported by us as Borough councillors, has been instrumental in setting up three ‘friends’ groups to help manage areas of public open space within Over Knutsford these are at College Wood, St John’s and The Orchard. While two these open spaces would fall within the boundaries of the proposed Knutsford North East ward and the other is immediately adjacent to it, they are available for use for all residents particularly those living across Over Knutsford.
- 5.4 It is noted with interest that many of the key volunteers who are part of these friends’ groups do not live within the proposed Knutsford North East ward. It is important to note that on action days for these areas, such as litter picks there is support from across Knutsford including friends’ groups looking after larger open spaces such as The Moor and The Heath in the Town Centre.
- 5.5 Additionally, several Town Mayors have in recent years chosen to raise funds for community group, including the Welcome Café, Knutsford Grow and Community Spirit, which are located within and look to especially serve the needs of the residents of Longridge and Shaw Heath.

6.0 Manor Park Primary School

- 6.1 It is noted that Manor Park Primary School is within the boundaries of the proposed Knutsford North East Ward, which makes sense, but the catchment area for the school extends well beyond these proposed ward boundaries.
- 6.2 Cllr Gardiner served for several years as a member of the school’s governing body, including three of them as Chair and he is fully aware of the socio-economic issues of the area and how this impacted upon the issues within the school. Families presented with generations of worklessness, a lack of engagement with any institutions; least of all the school, limited understanding as to why school matters to their children and for some even a reticence to send them.
- 6.3 Manor Park is school graded ‘good’ by Ofsted with some outstanding aspects, this has come about by the hard work and dedication of the excellent, many long-standing, staff members. They understand all the families they are there to serve and are driven by an

ambition for all the children at the school, going that extra mile to bring out the potential in every child.

- 6.4 While staff do not distinguish between children, they recognise that much of the support they receive from parents does not emanate from Shaw Heath and Longridge, but from those parents living on the neighbouring estates of private housing. So, when looking for volunteer parent-helpers, members of the PTA or even school governors it is from this cohort that the majority are found.
- 6.5 However, there is another problem, there are fewer primary-school aged children currently living in Knutsford, than there are places available, meaning that parents have more choice. Unfortunately, despite the Ofsted grading, the same as all the other state primary schools in the Town, many parents living in the Manor Park catchment area choose to send their children to Egerton or Bexton Primary, ironically part of the same Schools Academy Trust as Manor Park. Why because they don't want their children mixing with 'kids from Longridge'. This is despite the other schools being a 25-minute walk away.
- 6.7 The irony being that aged 11, most of them all end up learning side by side at the Knutsford Academy, where children from across Knutsford and neighbouring parishes mix and receive a very high-quality education.
- 6.8 The reason for setting this out is to shine a community-focussed light upon the commission's proposals to separate Knutsford and create a little homogenous ward, of predominately social housing. However, these estates cannot exist in an isolated bubble they need their neighbours and if they are going to thrive, they need to be part of the bigger picture, with a wider sense of community, which is what Manor Park is looking to foster.
- 6.9 If you doubt the veracity of what we are saying, then ask why when considering where to place the social housing on a new development Local Planning Authorities are urged to 'pepper pot' these units across the sites, in order to prevent the creation of enclaves or ghettos. It is a tool being used to advance the concept of social integration. The Commissions proposals for a two-ward Knutsford would work against these objectives.

7.0 Land East of Longridge

- 7.1 The proposed ward boundaries of the Knutsford North East ward include an area of land, directly opposite the Longridge Estate which is allocated in the Cheshire East Local Plan for the future development of 225 new homes. This is the land referred to above which is currently the subject of a planning appeal.
- 7.2 Two of us and the Town Council were supportive of this proposal when it was first mooted and there was support from a variety of interested parties and community organisations across the Town. Why, because it was seen as an opportunity to lift Longridge and provide the potential for better integration and the opportunity to make Longridge part of something bigger and more diverse.
- 7.3 However, despite these views being openly shared with the landowner, the development partner, their planning agents and Cheshire East's officers, the outline scheme which

was tabled would fail to facilitate these objectives. Therefore we now object to the proposal and on Cllr Gardiner's proposition, the Strategic Planning Board members voted the scheme down.

- 7.4 However, it was not Cllr Gardiner's rhetoric, rather the persuading arguments tabled by the two local community groups which secured the application's fate. These groups, Knutsford Residents for Over Ward (KROW) and Save Longridge Green Belt, garnered public opinion and made very cogent arguments as to why the site should not be developed. Primarily to save the application site and the neighbouring playing fields (required to provide the site access) from development and to keep them as amenity assets for all local residents.
- 7.5 These two community groups are led by very focused and selfless individuals, one of whom lives just within the boundaries of the new ward, the other just outside, but neither are residents of the Longridge or Shaw Heath Estates. However, they are part of Over Knutsford, and they highlight that the warding proposals being tabled far from creating a new community will be dividing one which already exists. A community which is based upon common objectives and a sense of community cohesion, with residents who pull together to do what is right for the place they all call home.
- 7.6 At the recent public Inquiry to consider the appeal both KROW and Save Knutsford Green Belt attended as Rule 6 parties, presenting evidence, calling their own witnesses, being cross examined by KCs and in turn crossing examining the other side's witnesses. The fortitude they displayed was an example of true community spirit, not just putting their heads above the parapet but taking the slingshots thrown at them just to save a community asset.
- 7.7 Both community groups were supported in their efforts by Cllr Gardiner and Colin Banks the Town Mayor, and current Chairman of Knutsford Town Council, and by residents from across Knutsford who turned up to provide moral support and even making statements to the Inquiry about why the application should be refused. The outcome of the appeal may not go in the residents' favour, but these people can be proud that they stood up for their community and showed the people of Knutsford that they cared.
- 7.8 The sense of community that can be found across Knutsford is palpable and the efforts of the Town Council and others to ensure that there is full integration of all its residents is to be applauded.
- 7.9 The creation of separate electoral wards, along the lines suggested by the Commission, will do nothing to enhance the community spirit. It also has the potential to destroy all the good work undertaken so far and to prejudice the future objectives of all elected representatives serving Knutsford to advance the case for even greater integration.

8.0 Comments on the author of the suggested ward-boundary changes

- 8.1 Finally, we notice that the proposition put forward by the Commission is based upon a suggestion from a local resident which is a party-politically sponsored proposition with very limited community engagement of some 30 residents out of a total of over 12,000.

- 8.2 We note that the proposition was tabled in the name of Mr Godden, who we know stood as a Labour Party candidate in 2015 for Cheshire East, but he does not sit (nor as far as we are aware ever stood) as candidate for the Town Council. Neither are we aware of his being an active member of any of the many community groups within the Longridge Shaw Heath area or elsewhere across Town.
- 8.3 We make these points to question his overall understanding of the communities within Knutsford, how they work with each other and integrated with their neighbours, perhaps if Mr Godden was more active, he would have realised that his proposal would have consequences that we are sure he had not intended.

9.0 Other factors

- 9.1 Knutsford is a special place with a great sense of community where young and old, people from all socio-economic backgrounds and across the Town coming together for the benefit of the whole Town and all its residents. The Town boasts a raft of community groups and voluntary organisations which often work collaboratively to ensure that they can have the greatest impact.
- 9.2 There are two events each year which are guaranteed to bring the townsfolk together, one has its roots in the mid-nineteenth century the other a more recent development. The first is Royal Knutsford May Day, which consist of a parade through the centre of Town to the Heath where the May Queen is crowned. The procession comprises hundreds of children aged 5-15 from across the Town, with the May Queen chosen from amongst the older girls and while any girl who has been involved in the pageant for many years before can apply the competition is hard fought.
- 9.3 The reason for using this example is twofold firstly to highlight the community cohesion that exists across Knutsford because children from across the Town take part including from Longridge and Shaw Heath and secondly that in recent years the May Queen has more frequently been chosen from Over Knutsford, with the chosen girl often coming from the Longridge or Shaw Heath Estates. Evidencing that far from feeling separate to the rest of the Town most of these residents do feel part of the community.
- 9.4 Whilst the Christmas Market and light switch-on is a more recent event, it draws thousands, mostly residents, into the Town Centre in all weathers. Whilst the market and associated attractions might be welcomed many residents are there to see their children/grandchildren perform on the stage which is set up in the main square. All the primary schools take part, including Manor Park and everyone is there to support them.
- 9.5 While this is a Town Council-sponsored event it couldn't happen without the schools and hundreds of volunteers coming together from across the Town to ensure the event runs smoothly and safely. Yet another example of some genuine community spirit.

10.0 Conclusion

- 10.1 The above submission sets out the reasons why we object to the proposal to divide Knutsford into two un-equal wards for purposes of the residents of our Town electing three councillors to represent them on Cheshire East Council.

- 10.2 Had the proposition been to provide three single-member wards of equal size, whose boundaries were determined by fixed features like arterial roads, railway lines or even rivers then there may have been some support for such a principle on the grounds of fairness and democracy.
- 10.3 However, this is not the case and the suggestion that a ward should be created merely because of the housing type with the ward boundaries drawn arbitrarily; so as to divide electors merely upon the tenure of their homes.
- 10.4 Additionally, the proposal not only divides the existing Cheshire East ward but splits one of the recently created parish wards in two leading to confusion and unnecessary work for both councillors and electoral officials.
- 10.5 Also, the proposals are tabled on the premise that they will help the residents of Knutsford North East to secure better representation and enable the residents to feel less excluded.
- 10.6 However, the creation of the two-ward system is likely to have the opposite impact giving the residents of the new ward less of a voice and denying them many of the benefits currently accrued from being part of a multi-member ward.
- 10.7 Furthermore, the creation of two unequal Cheshire East wards could lead to a more divided community undermining all the efforts of the existing Cheshire East councillors, the Town Council, and the many community organisations which operate within the Town, to foster a greater sense of cohesion and shared community spirit amongst all Knutsford residents.
- 10.8 Therefore, we would respectfully request that the Commission revert to the original proposal of a single three-member ward incorporating the new Redrow Development on Northwich Road into the ward boundaries to be contiguous with the recently introduced parish ward boundaries.
- 10.9 Many thanks for considering our representations.

Cllr Peter Coan, Cllr Tony Dean and Cllr Stewart Gardiner