

MERTON PARK WARD

Response to Boundary Commission Proposals from Merton Park Ward Independent Residents (MPWIR) and Merton Park Ward Residents Association (MPWRA)

1. Introduction

In this final stage of consultation on ward boundaries in the London Borough of Merton you ask whether your proposals “respect communities”. In the case of Merton Park Ward they very clearly do not – indeed they break our community apart as we will explain. We will also show below how, logically, our Ward could be enlarged to the number of electors required for a 3-member ward.

2. Geography of the Ward and its Boundaries

2.1 The current Ward boundary largely follows the boundary of the Parish which, we must emphasise, includes both areas that you propose to remove. In the mid-1800s John Innes (of compost fame) bought several farms in and around the Parish with the aim of building the first Garden Suburb. This land became the John Innes Estate. The majority of the housing in the Ward was built either by John Innes or, after he died, on the rest of the Estate.

2.2 The Ward also encompasses part of Morden with the Morden Baptist Church, the Morden Islamic Community Centre and the Ahmadiyya Mosque (one of the largest mosques in Europe). The Civic Centre is home to Merton council, Morden Library and Merton Heritage Centre. All these features contribute to our community from all its corners.

2.3 The technical guidance calls for “boundaries which are ... easily identifiable, and which will not break local ties”. Yet the boundaries now proposed for Merton Park Ward are inferior on both counts to the current boundaries. **Our current boundaries envelop the community, those proposed would split it apart.**

2.3.1 Western boundary (Watery Lane) – Watery Lane is very much at the heart of the John Innes (Merton Park) Conservation Area, and it makes no sense to split residents on one side of the road from those on the other. After Watery Lane, the boundary ceases to be accessible or legible as it turns south along the backs of the gardens in Aylward Road; the access track is gated for much of its length.

Although this is the current polling district boundary, it is of comparatively recent origin (designed to accommodate a change in polling stations when the old Nelson Hospital was closed for redevelopment) and has no historical significance.

We cannot accept the claim that there is “reasonable access across the

railway line by means of Kingston Road, Whatley Avenue and Cannon Hill Lane" to connect the two parts of the proposed Cannon Hill Ward. The distance between the two stations is 1Km with just one intermediate crossing point. Please revisit this boundary and review your claim that this constitutes "reasonable access"

Because of the height of the railway embankment residents in Aylward Road will barely be able to see the rooftops of their new neighbours in Cannon Hill Ward – hardly conducive to building community ties between them.

2.3.2 Northern boundary (Kingston Road) – whereas the present boundary along Henfield Road and Wimbledon Chase marks the northern extent of our community in Merton Park, Kingston Road cuts right through it.

Parts of the Parish of St Mary's extend north of Kingston Road, as does the John Innes estate. Independent local shops along Wimbledon Chase are on both sides of the road, our local ("The Leather Bottle") is on the north side, whereas the new Nelson Health Centre is on the south side. Residents criss-cross to access facilities on both sides all day long.

A resident suggests that Kingston Road forms a natural boundary. It is indeed a busy road, but with slow moving (often stationary) traffic subject to a 20-mph speed limit, four light controlled pedestrian crossings and numerous central islands. It is not difficult to cross.

It is incorrect to suggest that Kingston Road defines the catchment area for local schools. In fact, the catchment areas for Wimbledon Chase and Dundonald primary schools both extend south of Kingston Road, and many Merton Park children attend them because of the pressures on Merton Park Primary, which has only one Form of Entry.

3. The Community of Merton Park

3.1 We have a close-knit community based on the housing that John Innes built, represented by the John Innes Society which seeks to preserve the heritage of the area, and provides educational, social and horticultural events.

3.2 Merton Park Ward Residents Association (MPWRA) sponsors the Merton Park Ward Independent Residents (MPWIR), three Independent Resident councillors who represent our community on Merton council. MPWRA was founded 30 years ago when residents decided they would prefer to represent themselves than rely on the national political parties. Merton Park Ward has returned Independent Resident councillors in local elections ever since.

MPWRA has 469 member households, equating to c.1000 electors. Membership is drawn from right across the Ward. It is a thriving, active residents' association with a wide range of events and publications managed by the committee and supported by the three Ward councillors (for more information, see section on why the Ward needs three councillors for our community to flourish)

3.3 In addition to MPWRA and the John Innes Society, the Parish Church and many other sport and social clubs and youth organisations ensure support for our community with a wide range of activities and events.

We have Merton Park Bowls Club and Merton Park Croquet Club both of which take place in John Innes Park (which would stay in the Ward), and Merton Park Cricket Club in the John Innes Recreation Ground (which you propose to remove from the Ward). We also have the Parish Players (amateur dramatics) and Merton Park Scouts, three primary and one secondary school and the Old Rutlishians Association Ground which provides sporting and social facilities.

There are four retirement flat complexes in the Ward, with many flats occupied by downsizers from family homes nearby. Once in Merton Park, our residents prefer to stay in the community even when moving home.

- All this brings the community together across the age ranges and from all parts of the Ward.
- **Those who provide the events and activities, as well as those who come to enjoy them, live in the areas you propose to remove, as much as from the area you would leave us with.**

3.4 Merton Park Ward is an exemplar of social capital in Merton, ranked first out of Merton's 20 wards on this composite index. This is an objective statistical measure of its effectiveness as a community. Social capital is scored on five broad indicators, each made up of measures based on council statistics or the Merton Residents Survey 2019 (24 measures in total). The five indicators are:

- Social infrastructure *eg. public transport accessibility level*
- Civic participation *eg. voter turnout in local elections*
- Community volunteerism *eg. % undertaking voluntary work in past 12 months*
- Informal sociability *eg. % knowing more than 10 people in local area well enough to speak to*
- Social trust *eg. % feeling safe in their local area after dark*

The full analysis with scores for all 20 wards is appended.

Merton council's rationale for undertaking this analysis is "to identify areas with high social capital, existing community assets and good practice that can be tapped into". Does the Boundary Commission now want to break up this exemplar ward, just as it has been singled out for what it could demonstrate to others?

4. Merton Park Ward needs three councillors

4.1 Merton Park Ward is currently a 3-member ward, but the Boundary Commission proposes to reduce it to two. With only two councillors we would not be able to serve our community as effectively as we do now.

As Independent Resident councillors, we have no affiliation to any national political party and no back up from any external organisation.

Because we derive our electoral legitimacy solely from the residents we

represent, we have an unusually active programme of engagement with them through MPWRA, our sponsors. This includes:

- Well attended monthly meetings (99 in February) for which we book speakers, deliver reports on our activities, listen to residents' concerns and answer their questions
- Email alerts to inform residents of forthcoming meetings and consultations, conduct surveys to guide our policies and publicise community events
- Our website (www.mertonpark.org.uk) is the community noticeboard for the Ward, as well as the link to council information and other local organisations. It is designed and maintained by one of our councillors.
- FORUM, our bi-annual newsletter is delivered to every household in the Ward, to keep residents informed of local developments and our activities. The most recent edition celebrating our 30th anniversary is attached.

4.2 As well as their seats on council committees, our councillors contribute to a number of bodies designed to foster good relations and serve our diverse community in Merton Park:

Ahmadiyya Muslim Association liaison group – chair
Merton and Morden Guild of Social Service – trustee
Merton Park Primary School – governor
Merton United Charities (Almshouses)- trustee
Ricards Girls Secondary School – chair of governors
Police Ward panel – members
Old Rutlishians Junior Rugby – coach
Merton Heritage – volunteer

Given a full load of casework helping individual residents in addition, it would be difficult if not impossible for two councillors to maintain such a wide range of activities for our community as three councillors undertake now.

5. Correcting wrong impressions

5.1 We feel that your conception of the extent of the community in Merton Park may have been misled by comments in the Conservative and LibDem submissions during the earlier consultation.

- "The much of Merton Park is now a conservation area where the ward has its community focus with the John Innes park at its heart."
Merton Conservatives Boundary Review Ward Pattern Submission
7/8/19 p.38

Comments under "Ward: Merton Park" in the Liberal Democrat submission to the earlier consultation add to the above incorrect impression. The areas you have chosen for removal are the areas suggested in the map in the Liberal Democrats' submission.

- 5.2** As shown above, the community of Merton Park Ward is far larger than just the Conservation Area. Indeed, MPWRA's membership is spread right across the community and the Ward, as much from the areas you propose to remove as from the area you would leave us with.

MPWRA serves the community round all the parks in our Ward not just round the John Innes Park. The others are Kendor Gardens and Mostyn Gardens, both well south of the Conservation Area – and both with active “Friends” groups supported by the community.

6. Expanding Merton Park Ward to achieve electoral equality

- 6.1** When he built Merton Park, John Innes did not regard the Kingston Road as a boundary. He built on both sides of the Road. Currently the part of Merton Park to the north of the Road (known as the John Innes (Wilton Crescent) Conservation Area) is in Dundonald Ward.

John Innes built one Garden suburb, not two, and he called the whole of it Merton Park.

Residents of the part of Dundonald Ward that is in the John Innes Estate see themselves as living in Merton Park.

Now that Dundonald is proposed for abolition, this is an ideal opportunity to put into Merton Park Ward, that part of Merton Park which is outside it.

- 6.2** We would like to propose that all the roads currently in Merton Park Ward remain, and the following roads are transferred from Dundonald Ward to Merton Park Ward:

- Wilton Crescent, Wilton Grove, Mayfield Road, Kingswood Road, Sherwood Road – all part of the John Innes (Wilton Crescent) Conservation Area.
- North side of Henfield Road, Merton Hall Road from Henfield Road to Avebury Road, Rayleigh Road and Cliveden Road. All these roads are part of the John Innes Estate i.e. built on land owned by John Innes.
- Extend this to include the east side of Merton Hall Road from Avebury Road to Dundonald Road and also Fairlawn Road as these run along either side of Dundonald Recreation Ground which was gifted to the council by John Innes. Fairlawn Road follows the natural boundary of the Tramtrack on its other side.

(See map appended)

As well as uniting the John Innes Estate it also brings into one Ward various co-terminous conservation areas. The John Innes (Merton Park) CA, the John Innes (Wilton Crescent) CA, Wimbledon Chase CA and Merton Hall Road CA.

6.3 We believe that adding the above John Innes areas would provide 870 voters, enough to justify Merton Park remaining a 3-member Ward (based on the 2019 register):

Polling Districts

Part PA (Trinity)	870	
RA	726	
RB	3,278	
RC	<u>3,164</u>	
Total	8,038	(8,377 projected in 2025)

A road by road count of the additional electors is attached. This addition achieves close electoral equality for Merton Park Ward in 2025.

7. Compensating adjustments to accommodate proposed Merton Park Ward

7.1 Expanding Merton Park Ward as proposed will necessitate revisions to ward boundaries and electorates elsewhere. We do not presume to know the communities in neighbouring wards as well as we know our own, so our suggestions are simply based on topographical analysis of boundaries and electorate numbers.

7.2 We started by ranking Merton’s existing wards by electoral inequality, based on 2025 projections:

	<u>Shortfall</u>
Village	- 26%
Hillside	- 25%
Lower Morden	- 18%
Raynes Park	- 15%
Merton Park	- 14%
Dundonald	- 13%
Cannon Hill	- 12%
Trinity	- 12%
Graveney	- 12%

Hillside is to be reduced to a 2-member ward, and Village will adjust its boundaries with Wimbledon Park (+23%) to achieve better electoral equality in both wards.

7.3 Seven wards have electoral deficits ranging from –18% to –12%; six of them are neighbours or near neighbours to Merton Park Ward. Yet only our ward has been proposed for reduction to a 2-member ward, in both the Conservative and LibDem submissions. That both groups make the same proposal should not be taken as objective evidence that Merton Park Ward is the optimum choice from the seven candidate wards to lose one member.

7.4 Instead we suggest reviewing Cannon Hill, Lower Morden and West Barnes together to reduce Lower Morden to a 2-member ward and to retain Cannon Hill and West Barnes as 3 member wards. A schedule and map are attached showing how roads might be exchanged between the three wards to achieve this. All three wards reach electoral equality by 2025.

7.5 To compensate for moving some electors from Trinity (formerly Dundonald)

into Merton Park Ward, we suggest reviewing Trinity's boundary with Abbey (between polling districts PB and QA), to move some electors from Abbey into Trinity. The attached schedule and map show how this might be done. This improves electoral equality for Trinity Ward from what is currently proposed. Abbey Ward is forecast to achieve electoral equality by 2025, predicated on the anticipated growth in population with the regeneration of the High Path estate.

8. In Conclusion

- 8.1** Meanwhile, having drawn your attention to the undoubted community of Merton Park, we hope you will honour your **Statutory Duty** to respect the identities and interests of local communities. Please restore the integrity of Merton Park Ward to its existing boundaries and take the opportunity to extend the boundaries to include the other parts of its community currently in Dundonald Ward.
- 8.2** We do hope you will revisit Merton Park Ward to examine our proposed changes in greater detail, particularly where they affect the John Innes (Wilton Crescent) CA in Dundonald Ward. We understand that you do not normally invite interested parties to accompany you, although we stand willing to do so, and we are ready to answer any questions you may have.