

LABOUR MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR MITCHAM AND MORDEN

Mrs Justice Patterson
Deputy Chair
Boundary Commission for England
35 Great Smith Street
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2nd December 2016

Dear Mrs Justice Patterson,

Re: Boundary Commission - Mitcham & Morden Constituency Consultation

I wanted to follow up my presentation last month at the Boundary Commission hearing with a formal, written response.

I am proud to have served my home town of Mitcham & Morden for almost twenty years, since 1997. I became a Merton councillor back in 1982, and contested the seat from 1987 onwards. I was born and raised in the constituency, where I still live, and where my mum lives too.

It is for this reason that the Boundary Commission's plans sadden me, as they threaten to undo my community.

It is also clear that the Commission's proposals contravene your own guidelines to: Respect borough boundaries; Respect existing parliamentary boundaries; and respect local community ties.

Firstly, the proposals do nothing to respect the people of Mitcham & Morden and existing boundaries that the community is familiar with.

The borough of Merton currently has two MPs, whose parliamentary constituencies presently fall exactly within the borough of Merton. However, under the Commission's proposals, one of London's smallest boroughs will be split between five different MPs, taking no regard of existing borough constituencies.

Indeed, in three of these new constituencies (Tooting, Streatham & Mitcham and Sutton & Cheam) Merton wards will make up a minority of these constituencies – and the very

smallest percentage of electors. Most shockingly, the Merton ward of Graveney will become an ‘orphaned’ ward - in a Wandsworth dominated parliamentary constituency.

Secondly, it is clear that no attention has been paid to the existence of Mitcham & Morden constituency since 1974, and to its existing parliamentary boundaries, which will be changed out of all recognition under these plans.

Thirdly, no respect has been paid to the community of Mitcham, which has a long and proud history, and which will be split right down the middle between Merton & Wimbledon, and Streatham & Mitcham. **Under your proposals, Mitcham will be moving from the heart of one constituency to the periphery of three.**

With 66,320 electors, Mitcham & Morden is just 4,711 short of the minimum requirement of 71,031 (or less than one ward’s worth). Surely, this cannot justify the splitting up of the constituency.

I sincerely hope you share my belief that Members of Parliament are here to represent communities first – and that parliamentary constituencies must reflect those communities, and not the other way round. As such, the Commission should make their plans fit around the community of Mitcham – and should not try to manipulate our community to fit into the plans.

Moving Graveney ward to the parliamentary constituency of Tooting

I imagine that this move was inspired by the fact that there is an existing ‘Graveney’ ward in Tooting – however, moving Merton’s Graveney into Tooting is an extremely bad idea.

To look at its history, Graveney takes its name from the River Graveney which traditionally has marked the boundaries between the parishes of Mitcham and Tooting, as it does to this day. However this too will be ignored under the Commission’s plans.

Merton’s Graveney ward might share the same name as its neighbouring ward in Tooting, but it is a Merton borough, which will be orphaned in the Wandsworth-dominated Tooting.

Our Graveney ward will make up just 1/8 of the constituency of Tooting – the constituency’s smallest ward (with just 5,900 electors – the next smallest ward in Tooting has 9,800 electors) and the only one in Merton borough.

Undoubtedly, Merton's Graveney residents will not get the representation they deserve under this configuration. This is in no way a reflection of Tooting's parliamentary representation – but MPs' time is limited, and it goes without saying that a political representative must spend most of their time representing the majority of constituents.

Merton's Graveney residents deserve better.

Moving Figges Marsh, Longthornton and Pollards Hill into Streatham & Mitcham

Moving south, it is clear that the new constituency of 'Streatham and Mitcham' will be 'Mitcham' in name only, because it will be split right down the middle of the community – dividing Mitcham along London Road and Commonside East, right in the town centre.

Dividing Mitcham up between Wimbledon and Streatham will have severe repercussions for our community, as the case studies below demonstrate.

Case Study: Mitcham British Legion and Remembrance Day services



Unless you are very familiar with the area, it will be very difficult to understand the repercussions of the Commission's decision to split Mitcham up.

The threat of Mitcham's servicemen and servicewomen being forgotten was eruditely expressed by Mr Alan Barley, Chairman of the Mitcham Branch of Royal British Legion, at the public hearing last month.

Mitcham British legion was founded in 1924 and has flourished on its original premises for well over ninety years. Having been bought by the well-known philanthropists, the Mizen family, the building was extended twenty years ago, to provide a larger social club, with funds raised here used to help the branch and support local members in need. The legion's

address is in the Figges Marsh ward, which under the Commission's plans would be transferred to 'Streatham & Mitcham'.



This will have huge repercussions for Mitcham's annual Remembrance Day parade, which is attended by hundreds in our community, with veterans joined by local children to remember all those who have served.

Under the Commission's plans, the parade will leave Mitcham British Legion (now in 'Streatham & Mitcham', and march a few hundred yards along the road to the war memorial at Mitcham Cricket Green. This memorial was erected by Mitcham Borough Council in 1919 to 'honour the Men of Mitcham Killed in the Great War'. But the Commission's proposals mean that the memorial will now be sited in the 'Wimbledon and Merton' constituency.

In other words, *Mitcham* Royal British Legion, honouring the sacrifice of *Mitcham* people in conflicts, will be meeting at a memorial in 'Wimbledon & Merton', a constituency that by its very name disregards the Mitcham community. I share Mr Barley's sentiments when he says this does a great disservice to the people of Mitcham.

Our Remembrance Day parade means a great deal to local people in Mitcham. It is incredibly well attended, with hundreds of residents marching through the town centre to the sound of the Mitcham Scouts marching band. Every year more and more young people attend, with Mitcham's Guides, Brownies and Rainbows, the Police and Sea Cadets all taking part. The culmination is the laying of over 50 poppy wreaths by Mitcham community groups, veterans and their families. It is a powerful, moving and wholly appropriate way to honour the people of Mitcham who gave everything for our country and community.

Mitcham British Legion also organises an Armistice Day memorial at the clock tower in the centre of Mitcham Fair Green. Every 11th November children from over 13 Mitcham schools come together here and pay tribute to past generations. As well as commemorating sacrifice, it's a key moment in reinforcing wider Mitcham community ties and our local identity, something that will undoubtedly be under threat if we are split up.

If the Commission’s proposals go through Mitcham British Legion faces the prospect of having to establish and maintain relationships with different MPs, who will undoubtedly have to consider the big population centres of Streatham and Wimbledon in their constituencies as they make their choices about attending and supporting our Remembrance Day and Armistice Day events, and the work leading up to them.

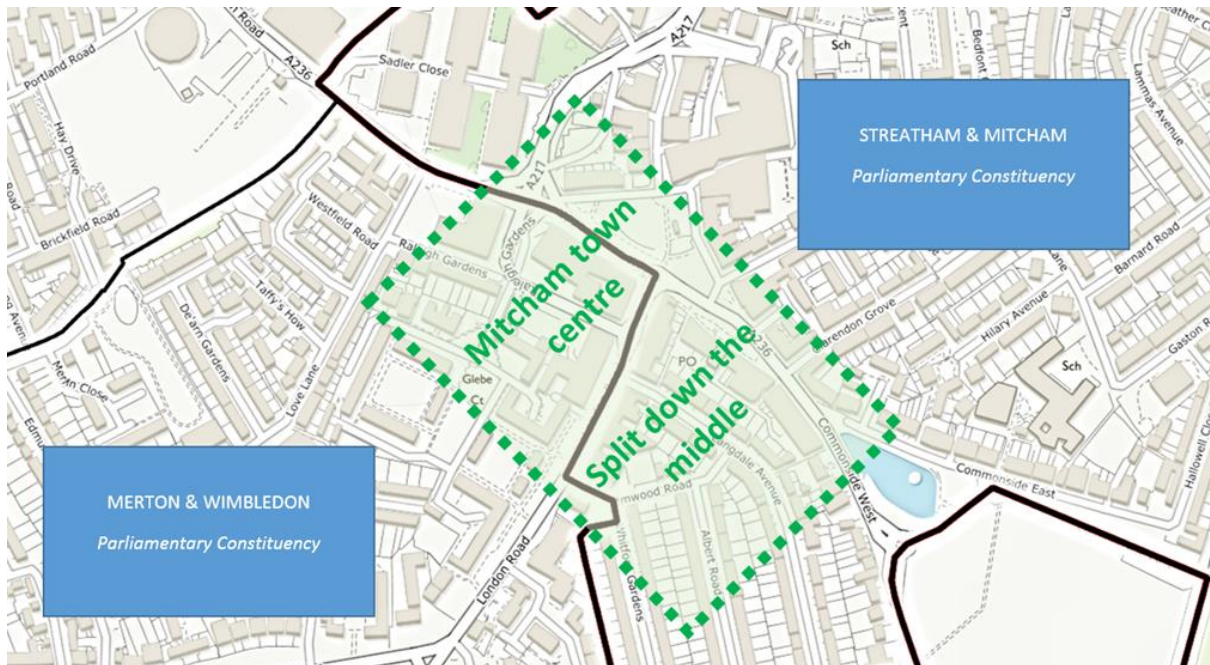
At present I am proud of having a great relationship with Mitcham British Legion. I take part in the parade each year, laying a wreath, reading at the service, and selling poppies in Mitcham shops in November. I do this because Mitcham is central to the community I represent and because of the longstanding relationship I have with the Mitcham British Legion. **But, if Mitcham no longer has one unitary MP, who will perform this function in future?** Sadly, I do not believe that either the MP for ‘Merton and Wimbledon’ or ‘Streatham and Mitcham’ would attend in future, because of their existing commitments in the communities of Wimbledon and Streatham respectively, on Remembrance Day.

I agree absolutely with Mr Barley when he says this will be bad for local ex-service people of Mitcham and the memories of those who have come before us. They should be remembered and celebrated by a unified, whole community.

Furthermore, these three Merton wards will represent just one the total of the new constituency – exactly three out of the total nine Streatham & Mitcham wards. In addition, these will be the three smallest wards in the new Lambeth-dominated constituency. So Merton residents will represent just 28% of all electors in the new constituency, meaning these deprived wards will be left out.

This change is also unreflective of the community. Mitcham residents go to Mitcham town centre for their shopping, not to Streatham.

Furthermore, Figges Marsh, Pollards Hill and Longthornton all have their own issues that requires real representation and attention. These areas are less affluent– and while they are extremely diverse, they have much lower levels of race crime and much higher levels of community cohesion. No one wants to see these minority Merton wards being left behind – which is what will happen under your plans, because MPs have to prioritise.



Splitting up Mitcham in this way also ignores our community’s proud history. Under your plans Mitcham town centre will be split right down the middle, between Figges Marsh and Cricket Green.

Mitcham’s local history spans centuries, and I strongly believe it is disrespectful to the history of the area to ignore this under the plans.

This is ultimately demonstrated by the decision to split Mitcham Common between Merton & Wimbledon and Streatham & Mitcham – whilst at the same time, the proposals stress the desire to maintain Wimbledon Common intact. This decision undermines your own requirements to respect existing geographical boundaries.

Case study: The extensive history of Mitcham and of Morden

Mitcham has a great deal of local community history, which should be borne in mind by the Commission as it reviews its proposals.

Mitcham Common is ancient common land, which once extended much further and before clearance in Neolithic times was oak woodlands, attached to Croydon Common, Beddington Farmlands and Waddon, and included the various greens that remain around Mitcham. It was

divided between four manors and was long used for agriculture and grazing, and in the early 19th century was used for gravel extraction. In its present shape, the Common dates back to Metropolitan Commons (Mitcham) Supplemental Act 1891, after George Parker Bidder QC established an independent board of conservators to manage the common in 1891 (before this time the Common was used predominantly for gravel extraction)

In 1931, there were moves to partition the common which would have greatly reduced the size of the area for public space. A campaign was launched against these moves. Mitcham Common was essential in the efforts of the Second World War, used for agriculture and anti-aircraft gun emplacements.

The historic **parish of Mitcham** can be traced back in its entirety to at least 1762, with some earlier references in other sources. The initial proposals would see this historic parish splintered, and become minority parts of other larger, wealthier constituencies.

Similarly, the **parish of Morden** can be traced back to 1731. The current proposals also suggest dividing the wards of St. Helier and Ravensbury, which together make up a large part of the St. Helier Estate.

Mitcham Cricket Green is the world's oldest cricket club. Cricket has been played on Mitcham Cricket Green since 1685 and Lord Nelson was once a spectator, and over time the Green's players have gone on to represent England, in both men's and women's teams. The current generation of players and members understand that they are present-day custodians of a club that has been here for centuries and, we hope, will remain here for many hundreds more years.

The club has an identity that is synonymous with our local community of Mitcham. Under the Commission's proposals this would be broken. Firstly, the club and ground will no longer reside in the constituency of Mitcham and Morden, which itself is being scrapped. Instead we will be located at the far edge of the new Merton and Wimbledon constituency. A large part of the town centre of Mitcham will now be located in the new constituency of Streatham and Mitcham. **The result of these changes is that this historic, world-renowned club will no longer be part of a unified town and community.**

AFC Wimbledon was formed in 1889 and played locally at Plough Lane, Wimbledon from 1912. During the 1990s the club lost its ground and eventually the club was sold, controversially moving to Milton Keynes where it was renamed MK Dons FC. Since then, the fans have clubbed together to form a cooperative and start a new amateur football club. 15 years on, AFC Wimbledon remains fan-owned and is a huge success story, and this July AFC

Wimbledon was promoted to the first division of the Football League. The club will be coming home soon, to its original home in Plough Lane.

Furthermore, in reference to both Tooting and Streatham & Mitcham, it should be noted that the borough of Merton is **significantly different to Wandsworth and to Lambeth** – which will respectively have majority representation in these new constituencies.

Merton's crime rates are significantly lower than the other boroughs. For instance, in 2014/15, Merton's crime rate was just 60 per thousand of the population, while in Lambeth it was significantly higher, at 105 per thousand.

Merton's migrant population are also different. In Merton, the largest migrant communities are Polish and Sri Lankan while Lambeth's largest are Jamaican and Portuguese, and Wandsworth's are South African and Polish. These are different populations with different identities and needs.

Merton's council tax levels are significantly different to these boroughs.

And finally, Merton has much higher levels of civic and political engagement than Wandsworth and Lambeth. In Merton, 41% voted in 2014 local elections, while just 35% voted in Lambeth and 37% voted in Wandsworth.

The identities and differences of these communities should be respected and maintained.

Moving Colliers Wood, Lavender Fields, Cricket Green and Ravensbury to 'Merton & Wimbledon'

Combining the other half of Mitcham with affluent Wimbledon also makes no sense for our community. There is a longstanding division between the east and west of Merton, the former being the latter's poorer sibling – and even the title of this new constituency seems to suggest that Wimbledon will be the central component in this parliamentary seat.

As such, the rest of Mitcham in this constituency will get left behind, as their needs will not be met.

Indeed, the Mitcham wards of Lavender and Cricket Green in particular share almost nothing in common with Wimbledon.

The Mitcham wards have high percentages of ethnic diversity, in comparison to Wimbledon. Consider the fact that in Lavender 46% of the local population is BAME, and in Cricket Green 47% is. Compare this to neighbouring Wimbledon wards of Canon Hill (where just 25% of the population is BAME) and Trinity ward (where this percentage is just 22%).

These Mitcham wards also have a lower percentage of economically active individuals as a population. For instance, in affluent Abbey ward in Wimbledon, 81% of the population is economically active, whereas this percentage in Ravensbury is just 71%.

Health inequalities in Mitcham are also starker than those of their affluent neighbours. Life expectancy across the borough differs by a staggering seven years between wealthy Wimbledon and Mitcham town centre. Consider the fact that in West Barnes, male life expectancy is 83 – but in Ravensbury (which comprises Mitcham and Morden communities), it is just 76.

Finally, on a practical level, as Mitcham is poorer, it has a much higher dependence on social and council housing – bringing a range of unique challenges that are not so understood in majority home-owning or private rental areas.

For instance, in Mitcham’s Cricket Green, 31% of residents are in social rented accommodation, while in Trinity ward (Wimbledon) just 12% are.

This information should make clear that Mitcham residents have their own unique set of identities and needs that need proper political representation, and which should not be subsumed into a more affluent whole, where they will no doubt get ignored. **Mitcham community has different problems, characteristics and needs and it needs effective representation to address these challenges head on.**

The History of Mitcham and Morden churches

Mitcham and Morden is home to many historic churches each with centuries of history.

The Parish Church of Morden, St Lawrence's, is Grade 1 listed, and is one of the three ancient parishes of London. Saxon in origin, an even older burial bound lies just to the rear. Within its churchyard lie Commonwealth War Graves Commissions marker stones to 6 of Morden's sons and daughters who lost their lives in serving their country and who were returned home either in death or to die.

A short distance across the constituency lies the **remnants of Merton Abbey**, dissolved by Henry VIII and sold off – though later to find fame as the **home of William Morris and the Arts & Crafts movement**; Liberty fabrics found their home here too and, even during the Second World War, the craft factories adapted their machinery and, instead, turned out gun turrets for Blenheim fighter-bombers.

Mitcham Parish Church has stood on its present site for at least 800 years, and its present Georgian building was built back in 1820. Under the Commission's proposals, the parish church will be transferred into Merton and Wimbledon.

Mitcham Baptist Church, in Figges Marsh, has over a one hundred year history. The church was founded back in 1881 and was moved to its current address after 135 years, this year.

St Peter & Paul Catholic Church, is at the heart of Mitcham in Cricket Green, which, under the Commission's proposals, will be transferred into the constituency of Merton and Wimbledon. This means that this part of the parish will be transferred into an altogether different constituency, separating the church's part of Mitcham from the neighbouring Figges Marsh ward which will be moved into 'Streatham and Mitcham'. The remaining churches in the area will go to Tooting.

Peter & Paul's religious community in Mitcham has a long an illustrious history. It is based close to **Mitcham Garden Village and the Wilson Hospital**, both of which were built by the famous Mitcham philanthropist, Sir Isaac Wilson, a famous Mitcham philanthropist: the former provides residents in the historic parish of Mitcham over the age of 50, and the latter provided healthcare before the formation of the NHS. The church is also next to **Mitcham Cricket Green**, which is the oldest cricket green in the world.

Moving Lower Morden and St Helier to Sutton & Cheam

These Merton wards will comprise just 20% of Sutton & Cheam – just two out of ten Sutton wards. Merton electors will therefore represent just 18% of total voters, as these wards are amongst the new constituency's smallest wards. This ultimately means that, like in Tooting and Streatham & Mitcham, Merton wards will be second-class in this Sutton-dominated constituency.

Your plans will also **split St Helier estate between two different parliamentary constituencies**, Sutton & Cheam and Merton & Wimbledon.

This means, rather strangely, that you can walk from Farm Road to Morden station and pass through two different parliamentary constituencies, all while remaining on the St Helier estate.

St Helier estate

The St Helier estate is split between the wards of Ravensbury and St Helier, which under the Commission's plans will be split between two different parliamentary constituencies.

Building of the estate started in 1928 as a 'London overspill' to rehouse people from inner London, on farmland. It was the largest of the London County Council estates south of the Thames, and the second largest overall.

The estate was designed as a 'garden city', following the ideas of Sir Ebenezer Howard, founder of Letchworth and Welwyn garden cities: preserving as many as possible of the existing trees and natural features, and including many open spaces and sports and recreation grounds. The area was intended to function as a community, or a series of communities, and for this purpose eighteen schools, seven churches, two large pubs, and the 2,000-seater Gaumont cinema (now a bingo hall) were built. There were 9,000 houses and flats, to accommodate 40,000 people.

The huge St. Helier Hospital, a landmark for miles around, built near the top of Rose Hill, was opened in 1938. Here, in 1943, John Major, later to be Prime Minister, was born. His family lived in Worcester Park.

The estate itself was named after Lady St. Helier, a former Alderman of the LCC from 1910 to 1927 who had fought hard for the improvement of housing facilities in London.

Nowadays, the St Helier estate is home to a large elderly white working class. These older people and their families need to know their MP. London can be a scary place for the elderly – and dividing up the community in this way will add extra and unnecessary confusion for

these residents. Furthermore, they need a unitary MP that understands Merton Local Authority and Merton Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

As with the case against splitting up Mitcham town, splitting up Morden, by moving Ravensbury into an altogether different parliamentary constituency, makes little sense.

Like Mitcham, Morden has a proud and longstanding history, and its residents deserve to be properly represented.

Conclusions

My submission to you is not based on personal interest. It is true that your proposals would likely mean the curtailing of my own career of political representation – but I know that I have more years of representation behind me than I do ahead of me.

My concern is for the area that I have served for almost twenty years on a parliamentary level, and almost thirty-five years at a local level.

Mitcham & Morden is for me the best place to live in the whole country. But it has its issues and these deserve proper and thorough representation.

Unlike its more affluent London neighbours, Mitcham & Morden has no representatives in hospital or CCG boards. I am their representative. But what will happen if the area no longer has one, unitary MP? Who will represent their interests? Or will their problems just be pushed to the side by bigger, more affluent areas?

Furthermore, Merton borough is one of London's smallest, with a population of 208,000, making it substantially smaller than both neighbouring Lambeth and Wandsworth, with populations of 322,000 and 318,000 respectively.

But like most of London, the numbers of voters in an area does not accurately reflect the number of people residing there and potentially needing assistance from their MP.

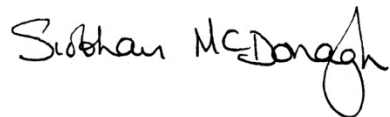
I do not envy your job to reduce the number of parliamentary representatives by fifty – at a time when we need more and not less political representatives. Furthermore, I recognise that it was not the Commission that established these rules.

Siobhain McDonagh MP

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However, I urge you to bear your own guidelines in mind, and ensure that the people of Mitcham & Morden, and of Merton more broadly, continue to have the thorough political representation they deserve.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Siobhain McDonagh". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped 'S' at the beginning and a long, sweeping tail on the 'h'.

Siobhain McDonagh