

To :

**The Local Government Boundary Commission
for England**

Maidstone Borough Council

Maidstone House,
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Patrik Garten

Councillor for North Downs Ward

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Boundary Review for Maidstone BC

Representation by Ward Member

Dear Sir / Madam

I am writing to you in response to your review for Maidstone BC. I am currently the Ward Member for North Downs Ward, the largest ward by area. North Downs is a single member ward and comprises mainly hamlets and small parishes from Otterden and Frinsted in the East to Bicknor and Hucking in the West. The largest villages are Hollingbourne and Stockbury.

The general political theme and local interest deals with protection of the AONB and the need for the rural residents to receive an adequate service for their taxes. Disenfranchisement from urban centric politics and lack of adequate services due to remoteness are key concerns when representing this ward

Prior to having been elected in 2016, I campaigned in the neighbouring ward of Harrietsham and Lenham. I therefore profess that I am very familiar with the issues of that ward as well as my own.

I understand that Harrietsham and Lenham councillors Tom & Janetta Sams are also making individual representations, which I broadly support. I apologise for eventual duplication by repeating their argument where necessary.

My comments relate to the draft proposals, which were submitted by MBC Democratic Services and ratified by the MBC Democracy Committee.

Starting with the Western Boundary of my ward I note that Hucking and Bicknor are expected to be cut off from the existing North Downs ward and attached to a new Detling Thurnham and Boxley ward. I am mostly concerned about Hucking, which has a strong affiliation with Hollingbourne and Broad Street. The church parish and the distribution area of the monthly parish magazine comprises the area of Hollingbourne, Broad Street and Hucking. While Hucking has no parish council of their own and has not held a parish assembly for many years, it is nonetheless fair to say that Hollingbourne Parish seeks to embrace Hucking's interest and a strong local affiliation exists between the village and the smaller hamlets.

Bicknor, is a very independent parish with a specific individual history. Bicknor does not maintain particularly strong relationships with their neighbour parishes either side but sits comfortably in the middle of the current North Downs ward. However, I am concerned about the increasing split of Stockbury Parish due to the ongoing improvement works at Junction 5 M2.

Stockbury is essentially cut into two parts by the A249. Without going into too much technical detail there is severe concern -and many representations have been made to the highways enquiry- that Stockbury will be even more torn apart due to increased traffic flow; and it will become even more difficult to cross this major national trunk road.

Stockbury has a strong community cohesion and I am confident that the parish will manage to cope with this increased physical rift. However, the attachment of Bicknor and Hucking to a ward which is essentially West of the A249 will leave these two parishes isolated and disenfranchised from the political life and representation of the wider newly proposed ward.

Turning now to Hollingbourne and the Eastern North Downs, as well as the villages of Harrietsham and Lenham:

Harrietsham and Lenham are two distinct villages, which are very keen to maintain their individual identities. The slow creep of new housing between these villages is a main concern for both communities, who are adamant to retain their individual identities and are generally strongly opposed to the villages physically growing together.

Lenham itself consists of two communities who have slightly different interests and priorities: this is the community West of the village centre in the approximately 1960s built "new" part and the very traditional area of village centre and the East. However, recent housing developments, the Lenham Neighbourhood Plan and the villagers' general opposition to a proposed new Garden Community at Lenham Heath provides this community with enough common political denominators.

The communities of Wichling and, to a lesser extent, Otterden have some affiliation with Lenham, which provides the nearest shopping facility and train station. However, rural isolation in the North Downs and a reasonable protection from major development in the AONB gives the residents very different political priorities in the hamlets than in the village. While political interest in Lenham and Harrietsham concerns mainly over-development, the needs for the hamlets is more about infrastructure, like broadband, missed bins due to bad weather and fly-tipping. To put it in perspective by example: a proposed barn conversion in the North Downs draws as much opposition (relative to population) as a 250 homes development in the rural service centres. A councillor representing both, a wide area of the North Downs AONB as well as the growing rural service centres, may find him / herself in conflict of interest and certainly will have to prioritise the interests of one community over the other. It is inevitable that the smaller communities within the AONB will suffer more loss of representation than the larger communities in the rural service centres.

As Councillors Sams correctly point out, Hollingbourne has no alliances with either Harrietsham, which is nearest, nor Lenham. Being to a large extent protected by the AONB, Hollingbourne is well shielded from over-development. Indeed, parish councils of both Hollingbourne and Stockbury are investigating whether rural exception sites should be used to provide additional affordable housing for local people, while Harrietsham and Lenham are so swamped with new development that their political interests are centred around avoidance of further development at all cost. Again, a member representing Hollingbourne and Lenham (Harrietsham to a lesser extent) may find him/herself in a conflict of interest and conflict of priorities.

The fundamentally different problems for Lenham and Hollingbourne, which are 8 km apart make it an impossible ward to represent.

Furthermore, to adequately campaign in the North Downs AONB a candidate will have to cover a lot of physical ground. When I campaigned in 2016 (pre covid) , visiting every residence in the North Downs Ward I spent the best part of a month. During the same timeframe in 2015, I managed to do

three leaflet rounds in Harrietsham and Lenham. It is clear from this example that political campaigning will be prioritised in the larger villages, where many more voters can be reached in a much shorter time. This too will lead to a disenfranchisement of rural voters in the AONB.

A figure of 3042 electors per member is being used. 10% variance to be allowed

- Harrietsham Lenham & Hollingbourne would be a new ward encompassing from East to West Otterden, Wichling Frinsted Wormshill, Bedminton and Broad Street as well as Hollingbourne Village
- It would be a 2 member ward with 6790 electorate, largest electorate and longest geographically in the Borough
- The three larger villages have no affinity with each other and have differing political interests
- The rural electorate in the AONB is running the risk of being disenfranchised.

Councillors Sams made representations to the Democracy Committee about the effects of splitting Platts Heath & Lenham Heath from Lenham. I understand that they will also elaborate on this in representations to the Boundary Commission:

"It is proposed to minimise the impact on electoral integrity and because the railway line forms an easily recognisable boundary. {quoting from the MBC representation:} There are developments going in to the south of the railway line as part of Lenham which are not built out yet. It is recognised that this is not ideal but the boundary does not split off existing electors in those properties.

These areas are {already} built and occupied. Additionally, this area forms a significant part of Lenham Neighbourhood Plan (adopted July 2021) and will provide some 400 additional homes."

I wholly concur with their concerns and I can confirm that the railway line is not a suitable boundary in view of recent building development, which is indeed partially completed.

Conclusion:

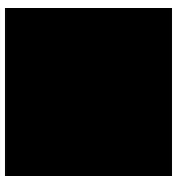
Having listened to MBC Democratic Services' proposals, I understand that any change of a single ward boundary will have a knock-on effect on all neighbouring wards. However a Hollingbourne, North Downs, Lenham & Harrietsham Ward is not workable for the above listed reasons.

There are too many conflicts of interest at stake, with the smaller communities standing to lose effective representation.

While I am particularly concerned about the future of Hucking and Bicknor in the West, I could see the proposed plan finding more acceptance if the Hollingbourne, North Downs, Lenham & Harrietsham area could be split in two single member wards, one comprising Hollingbourne and Harrietsham and the North Downs while the other comprises Lenham with Wichling and Otterden.

While not ideal, this constellation would provide less conflicts of interest for the individual member and it would be simpler to campaign (and represent) across a mixture of semi urban and purely rural households

Yours faithfully



PATRIK GARTEN

Councillor for North Downs Ward