

TONBRIDGE & MALLING



BOROUGH COUNCIL

Cllr James Lark
Borough Councillor for Medway Ward

7 Newton Avenue
Tonbridge
TN104RP

21ST June 2021

The Review Officer (Tonbridge and Malling)
Local Government Boundary Commission for England
PO Box 133
Blyth
NE24 9FE

Dear Sirs,

Please accept this letter as my response to the current stage 2 consultation run by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England on the electoral review of Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council. This letter is sent in my capacity as one of the three current Borough Councillors for Medway Ward, Tonbridge that I have represented since 2019. I will focus fully on the boundaries of the area I represent and not on any other part of the Borough as I know the Council will be making a submission as will my political party.

I fully accept that either the number of Borough Councillors representing this area, or the external boundaries of the Ward, will have to change with the Commission inviting representations for warding arrangements to accommodate 43 councillors. All of the Medway Ward currently falls within the unparished area of Tonbridge.

This letter will, like my colleagues, focus purely on community interests and identities within the current Medway Ward, along with a suggestion about how to best ensure effective representation for the residents in a council with 43 members. I do not currently live within the Ward itself but have been a town resident for in excess of 50 years so bring a depth of experience of the area in part and as a whole.

At present the Medway Ward consists of two polling districts (TLA and TLB), which are divided by the Tonbridge to Paddock Wood railway line. In between the two main residential areas, to the south of the railway line and north and close to the River Medway there is a large industrial estate, which is the commercial, as opposed to retail, heart of the town. I would however suggest that to facilitate residents further another Polling Station be considered at the Bishop Chavasse School on Somerhill Green.

In recent times we have seen a rapid growth of this area, particularly around Cannon Lane with greater residential and retail activity which is drawing local residents to the area for the facilities now in place. Shops such as Aldi, Home Bargains, B&M, and M&S food hall have replaced previous occupants and contributed to a change in shopping patterns for residents from across the town and outlying areas. For the

residents of Medway Ward these new retail locations are now the most local and convenient access for them.

Accessibility to this retail area is helped by the A26 that runs through Medway ward from North to South. From the A26 (Hadlow Road) in the north it directly connects to this newer retail area and heading south it meets residential developments south of the railway line at Lodge Oak Lane. The nature of this road means it serves the residents well and avoiding the alternative of Tonbridge High Street.

The ability for vehicles to get to the A26 Cannon Lane from Medway Wharf Road, Cannons Wharf along with other residents living around the River Medway additionally gives residents easy access to these new retail units which are their nearest larger supermarkets. The presence of the Public Rights of Way MU93 and MU33 south of the River Medway provides a clear and direct link.

Public footpaths are very important to many residents of Medway Ward. As appears to be the current norm, the ward being a town centre location, many recent developments have been built without much outside space and parking places meaning that travel by foot and public transport has become increasingly important. In addition to the PROW MU33 which links Cannon Lane with Medway Wharf Road at Townlock, MU35 that connects Strawberry Vale with Tonbridge town centre is essential to many resident of southeast Tonbridge for their community facilities. The western end of MU35 is at The Botany that is extremely close to residential developments as well as the supermarkets Sainsbury's, Waitrose and Iceland. Additionally the community centre, The Angel Centre is located in the immediate vicinity.

Currently, there is one convenience store located on Lodge Oak Lane that acts as a location for local residents where they can access essential facilities in the south east of town. Therefore, the connections with both Cannon Lane through the A26 and Tonbridge town centre through PROW MU35 are essential for residents living here to gain access to a greater range of household essentials and other goods. They are well used and over the past two years having spoken with local residents we are well aware of the importance of such routes. Indeed Kent County Council have recently repaired the bridge over the Botany Stream as recognition of the importance. We are currently working with Network Rail in making the under bridge crossing between Vale Road and Prior Road more appealing.

It is important to draw the distinction between southeast Tonbridge around Lodge Oak Lane, Hectors Road, Goldsmid Road and the other areas south of the railway line. Those areas located to the west of Lavender Hill, primarily look towards the Quarry Hill parade of shops for their local convenience stores. However, the nature of this footpath means that the residents east of Lavender Hill are quicker in using PROW MU35 as a cut through to access facilities further north that is shared by the residents of homes north of the River Medway. I would argue that this clearly demonstrates why the Tonbridge to Paddock Wood railway line is not an identifiable boundary for this community.

Tonbridge is blessed with excellent schools that are very highly valued by the local residents. In south east Tonbridge both the Weald of Kent Grammar School and Hillview school for girls are very popular with local residents which leads to them being often oversubscribed. Both schools take pupils living north of the River Medway in part due to their accessibility. Many of the pupils indeed walk to and from school. This demonstrates the close connection across the railway line between this part of Tonbridge.

Additionally, it could be argued that the railway line is not a suitable boundary for the purposes of Primary School provision. Both the new Bishop Chavassee School and Royal Rise Primary School are located south of the railway line but the latter takes students from north of the railway line due to its proximity and easy pedestrian access through the footpaths previously mentioned.

The current ward boundary runs down the entirety of the High Street. Whilst the High Street has a reduced number of offerings, the presence of national chains on the Tonbridge Retail Park encourages residents who live close to the High Street to favour the High Street and the retail park for their required services. The type of housing varies greatly on each side of the High Street and I would support retaining this boundary as is. To the west, both The Slade and Barden Road area include older housing stock that is in the main pre-war and terraced. To the East, the historic industrial area of the town, much of the housing is newer and indeed is predominantly flats. In recent years historic roads such as Lyons Crescent and East Street have seen a number of conversion to flats including the old Methodist Church, Croft House, Surety House, Ronnies Wharf and Harry's wharf which was formerly a public house.

These have a clear shared interest with the developments south of the Medway much more than those west of the High Street. Like the developments on Lyons Crescent and East Street – Riverbank House, The Bank House and Whitefriars Wharf have all been converted to flats over the past couple of decades, Sovereign House is now the 197 units Waterside Reach Development whilst Cannon Wharf has become highly residential. This trend is growing on both sides of the river shown by the construction of the former R. Allen site in Lyons Crescent and plans to convert the former West Kent Clinical Commissioning Group offices at Wharf House on Medway Wharf Road both into residential accommodation. There is also a long-term plan by SGN to demolish the gasholders east of Cannons Wharf to provide more residential units.

Consequently I would ask in the strongest terms that it is in the best interests of the community for the High Street to remain the boundary. Indeed, the interests between those living on the East of the High Street and those to the West are markedly different. The East of the High street share far greater interests in no part due to the involvement of management companies with all the flats involved. We have had many and varied dealing with the management companies. Many of these issues revolve around parking, quality of service and cleanliness and access to communal bin stores. There is a shared interest in all the larger flat developments for all these reasons. It is therefore essential that the same Councillors represent these areas to ensure swift and effective resolution. Additionally, as an aside Kent Police have allocated the PCSO's on the basis of one for Medway and Castle Wars and one for Judd and Vauxhall wards. This to date has worked extremely well.

I would also request the Commission pays close attention to ensuring that Waterside Reach and Somerhill Green be kept in the same Ward. These are two large although different developments located East of the High Street and in the South East corner of Tonbridge respectively. Although the nature of their concerns varies, they both have the same management company Trinity Estates and the Regional and Property Managers share responsibility for both developments. Being able to liaise on both these developments through a single channel is efficient for quality representation for residents and we have been able to resolve a number of issues relating to both as a result. Whilst the community interest is invisible to those non-residents, the shared interests are very strong for the residents themselves.

I am aware that changes to the existing Medway Ward are necessary however, I do not consider it appropriate to use the River Medway or the Tonbridge-Paddock Wood railway line as a natural boundary and that the High Street should remain the boundary. The retaining of the existing along with the addition of some neighbouring areas with shared identities will in my opinion better reflect community interests.

The current southwestern boundary of Medway Ward is mainly the Tonbridge-High Brooms railway line which runs in a tunnel and therefore not visible. I would suggest increasing the existing handful of homes on the Pembury Road in the ward. The suggestion is to extend the Ward boundary west from the tunnel to the junction with Lavender Hill in the North and Deakin Lea to the South. This is marked by a zebra crossing ensuring good pedestrian access. Approx. 110 electors would move Ward but this would in my opinion better reflect the nature of Pembury Road ensuring a balance for residents in terms of whether they access their community facilities at the bottom (west) or the top (east).

I would also like to suggest the The Ridgeway and Yardley Park Road are added to the ward including all roads that are offshoots of these. Both these roads have major junctions on to the A26 Hadlow Road (currently within Medway Ward) with the major issue here being road safety. There have been a number of accidents at these junctions in recent times and in order to facilitate a speedy and satisfactory conclusion to these matters it would make sense for these roads to be within the same Ward.

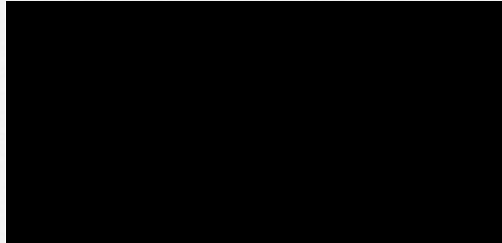
This would be a change from the current arrangements where these roads fall within other Wards and they both do indeed join with the A227 at the other end. However the A26 is a much more major arterial road than the A227 Shipbourne Road and this was demonstrated by the fact the A26 was not included in the recent KCC 20mph trial area. Congestion at the Hadlow Road end is far worse than the other end showing that most residents use the A26 junctions as their main access and egress points.

Additionally, we feel this would have common community facilities and interests with the rest of the existing Ward. The retail area at the Tonbridge Retail Park remains the closest place for convenience for both these areas and the 208 bus serves part of The Ridgeway. This is one of the major routes through Tonbridge and serves Goldsmid Road, Hectorsage Road, Lodge Oak Lane and Tudely Lane in the south of the current ward. It is indeed the only bus route so to do. Consequently, there would be a defined public transport from the far North to the far South of the Ward.

We would also like to point out the connections between The Ridgeway and Yardley Park Road themselves including the Hadlow Road. PROW MU11 connects the Ridgeway and Town Acres with Dernier Road as a clear cut through and PROW MU19 and MU20 connect the Haydens off Yardley Park Rd with the A26 Hadlow Road. This then has a controlled crossing over towards Mill Stream area that borders Tonbridge Retail Park. The nearest accessible countryside outside the conurbation of Tonbridge for the residents of the Hadlow Road, The Ridgeway and Yardley Park Road is all to the East of the A26 Hadlow Road using PRWO MU32 and Tanyard Farm, whilst Swanmead east of the A26 Cannon Lane remains the nearest open space for the Hadlow Road community south of Higham Lane together with residents of the offshoot road therefrom.

I would therefore strongly argue for the retention of the current Medway Ward boundaries plus those additional roads as previously mentioned. This would mean the retention of a three member Ward and most importantly better reflect community identity and interests.

I would also make comment on the request for names for Wards. The existing name " Medway Ward" is not only confusing to residents but lacks clarity geographically. I would therefore respectfully suggest that a name such as "Tonbridge East" is worthy of consideration. This would avoid confusion for the residents, recognises the Ward includes those areas in the east of Tonbridge and also includes the town name.
Yours faithfully,



James Lark
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