

To :

**The Local Government Boundary Commission
for England**

Boundary Review for Maidstone BC
Representation by Ward Member

Maidstone Borough Council

Maidstone House,
King Street ME15 6JQ

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Patrik Garten

Councillor for North Downs Ward



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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 ward of Harrietsham and Lenham. I therefore profess that I am very familiar with the issues of that ward as well as my own.

Introduction

The Commission may remember the initial proposals put forward by MBC, which, essentially split up North Downs Ward and attached their areas to neighbouring wards.

The Commission thankfully did not accept the initial proposal and I am very grateful for this.

The Commission's answer was that North Downs ward will continue to exist in its entirety but it is to merge with Harrietsham & Lenham to form a 3-member super-ward, covering more than 25% of the borough's total land area.

This outcome addressed the serious concerns previously raised, in particular regarding the continued community cohesion in the West of North Downs ward, along the A249. The local communities and I welcome the Commission's understanding of those issues.

Issues arising

However, the proposed North Downs, Harrietsham and Lenham super-ward raises a new concern with regards to **efficient political representation** of residents in the very remote areas within the North Downs AONB. Democratic representation will suffer in real life:

- The representation, or lack of, of residents in the smaller communities: will an elected councillor heed the smaller, remote communities' concerns when the bigger issues in Lenham are the real vote-winners?
- And secondly, from a candidate's view, such a large ward by area is simply too big to be campaigned on, especially in all-out elections as we will have from 2024 onwards.

The main concern is the potential lack of representation of the rural population. Any future politically-savvy councillor of any party colour will appreciate that it is easier to win large chunks of votes in the service centres/villages rather than in sparsely populated areas.

Frankly, the 'work-effort-to-results-ratio' is stacked against the sparsely-populated areas. Residents may not necessarily appreciate election leaflets, but any political candidate can lobby and leaflet hundreds of potential voters in a village within a few hours but it will take days, if not weeks, to get the same effect in the AONB. The same goes for problem issues, be it planning applications or missed bins.

The political reality will be that a councillor will spend his or her available time on the bigger issues in the service-centres to the detriment of the outlying hamlets in the North Downs.

This is even more so emphasised as particularly Lenham displays a magnitude of local issues and local campaigning and opposition regarding the forthcoming Local Plan.

Rural residents in sparsely populated areas need to get equal value for their council tax as residents in the local service areas. A North Downs Harrietsham and Lenham superward will not support this quest.

The conundrum is that North Downs' registered voter numbers have been dwindling over the past years. So while North Downs is already the largest ward by area, the number of residents no longer stack up to allow for one councillor to represent these communities.

The Local Government Boundary Commission's main task is to assure that all councillors represent an equal amount of residents. In doing so they will also look at natural borders like major trunk roads, rivers, parish boundaries, etc. It is appreciated that, preferably, parishes shall not be divided.

By throwing North Downs, Harrietsham and Lenham into a single pot and forming a super-ward with three elected members, the commission complied with the mathematics and did not cause unnecessary divisions. Unfortunately, this proposal is likely to disadvantage about 1/4 to 1/3 of residents in this new ward, namely those who live in the very sparsely populated and remote areas of the AONB. The current proposal runs the real and foreseeable risk that they may not receive effective representation.

Proposed Amendment

With the support of the community who I represent, I like to invite the Electoral Commission to re-address the boundaries of North Downs ward in order to keep the ward independent and allow for effective representation of residents in an unusually sparsely populated area of outstanding natural beauty. I hope that my suggestion is of some assistance to the Commission:

Some twiggling around the Lenham/A20 ward boundary could easily adjust the elector numbers in order to retain the borough wards in their existing form, namely keeping North Downs separate from Harrietsham & Lenham ward.

Residents north of the A20 and north of Lenham village live in a sparsely-populated area, mostly inside the AONB. One could even lean as far as to say that their concerns generally align more with those of residents in the current North Downs ward than those in Lenham village. That is by no means to say that they are not interested in Lenham issues. Hamlets in the current North Downs ward like Frinsted, Wichling and Otterden already have strong community links with Lenham. It is indeed a strange anomaly that the hamlets of Warren Street and Wichling are divided in the middle of a road. In Warren Street one side of the road is in North Downs ward, while the other side falls into Harrietsham & Lenham. There are houses on both sides and residents are perplexed when a member has to refer them to their colleagues over planning issues with their neighbours across the road.

Otterden Parish Assembly usually meet in the Harrow Pub in Warren Street, which is technically outside their parish and ward. It is the only available public meeting place in the area.

This kind of artificial current ward and parish boundary is not a boundary of common interest. Rather all areas north of the A20, within both the current Harrietsham & Lenham and North Downs wards, are sparsely populated and therefore have a **common community trait** and share already a common affiliation with the village. A newly enlarged North Downs ward would encroach into Lenham Parish, but it would aid to level out the current anomalies in that corridor.

Hence, to adjust the borough ward boundary south-wards would **not** have a huge impact on community cohesion. On the contrary, a future North Downs Councillor having a working relationship with the Lenham Parish Council might even be beneficial to the wider communities.

A ward boundary along the A20, which is a natural dividing line, spanning across parish boundaries will be the lesser evil when compared with the loss of efficient political representation of the rural population.

As for a North Downs ward member's workload, having to attend Lenham Parish Council meetings in addition to the existing workload is not extremely onerous, in order to represent those residents north of the A20 who would belong to both North Downs ward and Lenham Parish. Indeed, the parish council should have no problems to adjust their thinking and working practice to accommodate such arrangements.

I therefore suggest that the part of the Lenham Parish, which is situated north of the A20, shall be placed into a separate North Downs ward.

Pilgrims Retreat

The above proposal above may not suffice to provide enough electors to sustain an independent North Downs ward. I therefore like to draw the Commission's attention to the Pilgrim's Retreat Mobile Home Park. Currently this home park sits right at the current ward boundary and could easily be moved into an extended North Downs ward. This is a fairly independent closed park community with very limited links to the parish of Harrietsham, to which they belong. The history of the park is that it was built and extended largely in breach of planning regulations and there is an understandable hostility amongst parts of the Harrietsham community against the development. The majority of residents in the park moved there from areas further afield and do not have any historic links with the village. To move the park into another MBC ward would have minimal, if any, effects on community cohesion. As with Lenham, a working relationship between the North Downs Councillor and Harrietsham Parish Council may be overall beneficial to the wider communities, which have traditional affiliations with Harrietsham village, such as Wormshill.

Additional Considerations:

When MBC councillors decided earlier this year to reduce their membership, part of the consideration was a desire for more single or two member wards and to move away from three member wards. The establishment of a new ward with three members runs contrary to the spirit of those considerations.

According to MBC Democratic Services, the retained Harrietsham and Lenham would be $(5667/2)/2984 * 100 = 95\%$, while the extended North Downs ward would be $2838/2984 * 100 = 95\%$, both within required tolerance.

The MBC Democracy committee accepted my proposals unanimously on 21 September and, subject to Full Council ratification, MBC will make separate representations regarding this proposal.

Request to the Electoral Commission:

IN ORDER TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF RESIDENTS IN THE SPARSELY POPULATED AREAS OF THE NORTH DOWNS AONB, THE MBC MEMBER FOR NORTH DOWNS WARD REQUESTS ON BEHALF OF THE COMMUNITY WHICH HE REPRESENTS THAT THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION SHALL:

- CONSIDER NOT TO JOIN HARRIETSHAM & LENHAM WARD WITH NORTH DOWNS WARD
- CONSIDER AN ADJUSTMENT OF THE WARD BOUNDARY IN THE CORRIDOR NORTH OF LENHAM AND THE A20

Yours faithfully

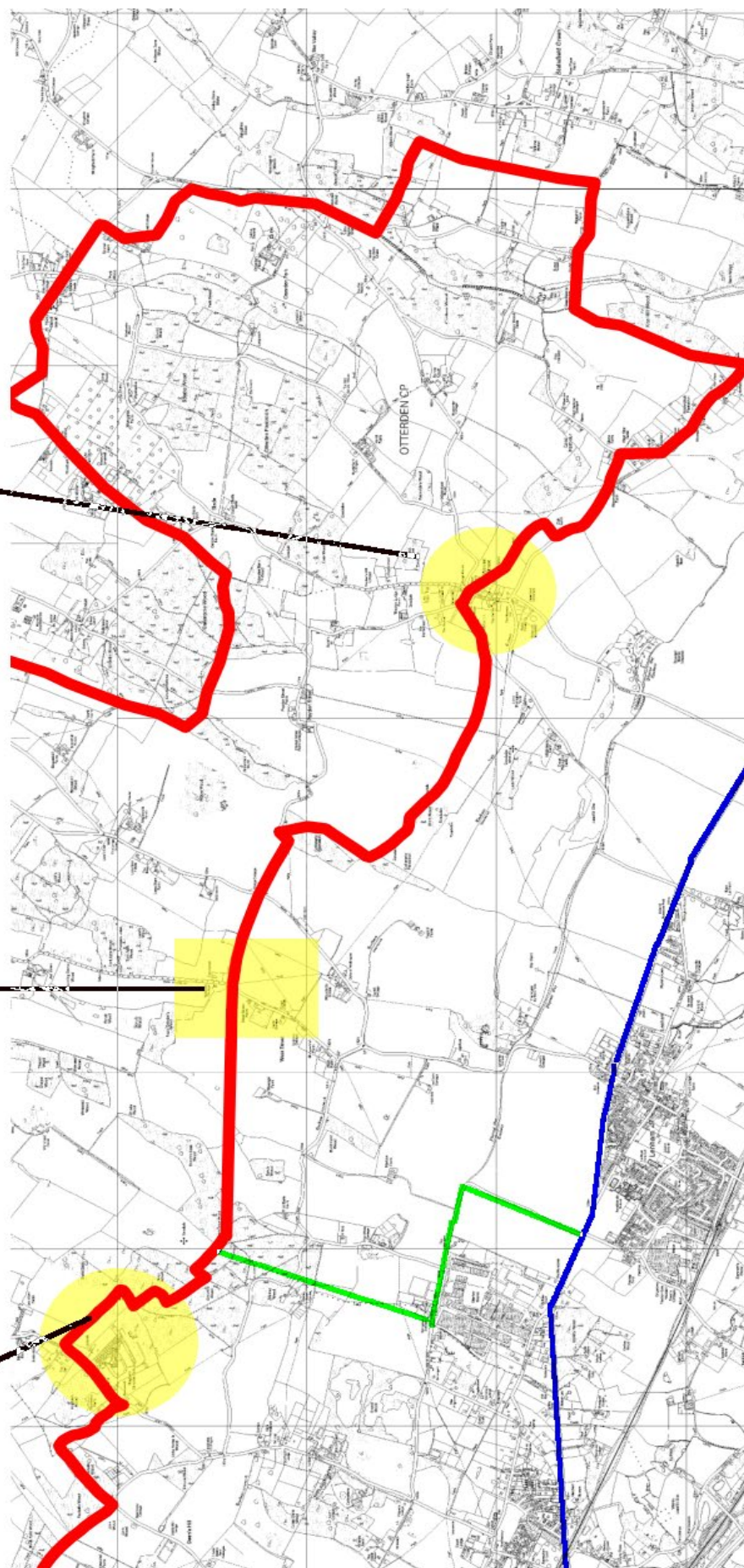
PATRIK GARTEN

Councillor for North Downs Ward

Pilgrims Retreat >200 homes

Wichling

Warren Street



RED Line: current ward boundary, BLUE Line: A20, GREEN Line: Parish Boundary