

Harrietsham Parish Council

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(Sent via email to: reviews@lgbce.org.uk)

Local Government Boundary Commission for England
PO BOX 133
Blyth
NE24 9FE

Dear Sir

Re: Boundary Review - Maidstone Borough Council

Background

The Local Government Boundary Commission of England have announced that they are carrying out a review of the Ward allocations in Maidstone Borough Council, especially as the number of Councillors will be reducing from 55 to 48 from 2024. The Commission have requested the views of local people and organisations for a new pattern of Wards in Maidstone, subject to the overriding criteria that the ratio of electors to councillors in each electoral Ward is, as nearly as possible, the same. However, this should be balanced with the need to reflect local community identities and interests and provide for effective and convenient Local Government.

The requirement to maintain "*the need to reflect local community identities and interests*" is crucial to this representation, especially as the representation from Maidstone Borough Council itself, which is discussed below, entirely undermines, we believe, the historic and community ties between Harrietsham and Lenham.

Based on the March 2022 number of electors as advised to the Parish Council by the Electoral Services department of Maidstone Borough Council, the current Ward of Harrietsham and Lenham currently has 5,523 electors and is served by two Councillors. The split between the villages is Harrietsham parish - 2,603 electors - and Lenham parish - 2,920 electors. Maidstone Borough has today a total of 127,709 electors, which split over 48 seats (the proposed number of Councillors following the review) provides an average of 2,660 per seat or 5,321 for a two-seat Ward.

This works out well in terms of community building as the two parishes, Harrietsham and Lenham, sit on the eastern boundary of Maidstone borough and, being only 2 miles apart, are distinct from the other larger settlements, such as Headcorn 6 miles to the south and, to a lesser extent, Hollingbourne 4 miles to the west, and share much common infrastructure in terms of services, for example:

- a. Both are designated Rural Service Centres by Maidstone Borough Council
- b. Both have the same County Council Community Warden

- c. Both are served by the same Police Community Support Officer
- d. Both are served by the Len Valley Practice, part of the Ridge Primary Care Network, with surgeries at the Glebe Medical Centre, Harrietsham, and the Groom Way Surgery, Lenham

Aside from these shared services, there is much mixing of the two communities of both Parishes as many of the local community organisations involve residents from both parishes. The Football Club, the Cricket Club, Young at Heart, Community Hub Club, Dance Club, Ballet School, Scouting and Guiding movement are but some of the examples of joint enterprises.

Both Parishes also sit directly on the A20 Ashford Road, the major A-road between Maidstone and Ashford which mostly carries non-freight or port-bound traffic, and forms part of the string of villages, settlements and rural service centres along this route.

The current electorate ratio

The figures provided by the Boundary Commission illustrate that between 2016 and 2020 the electorate enlarged from a position in the original assessment in 2000 of 4,051 electors to a place where in 2016 that number had increased by 10% and a 16% increase over the original figure by 2020. In March 2022 the elector per Member for the Ward is 2,761, which is the second highest in Maidstone Borough. Parkwood Ward being the highest at 3,034 electors per Member.

Since the last Ward boundary review in 2000, over 500 dwellings in Harrietsham parish have been built and a further 277 proposed. Further development is also expected in Lenham and that parish is committed to supporting the building of 1,000 more homes through the adopted Lenham Neighbourhood Plan between 2021 and 2031 over and above those dwellings permitted before the neighbourhood plan was made, which we understand, amount to around 500 since the last review in 2017. As a result, Harrietsham and Lenham Ward has grown substantially since 2000, when there were 4,051 electors, to 5,523 electors today and is expected to grow further over the next few years.

Option suggested by Maidstone Borough Council

In a report from the Democracy and General Purposes committee of Maidstone Borough Council, presented at their meeting on 9 March 2022, the Committee set out the draft proposals which it will be forwarding to the Boundary Commission. This report, which covers all potential Ward alterations in the borough, specifically makes reference to Harrietsham and Lenham Ward thus:

Harrietsham, Lenham and Hollingbourne - 2 Members - 6,790 (+11%)

To the northeast of the rural area Harrietsham, Lenham and Hollingbourne have been combined along with the North Eastern part of the Downs. Again the geographical extent of this ward is in part due to the sparsely populated downs. However, this ward is slightly above the tolerance for electoral equality. Whilst this is not desirable the ward cannot be split without worsening electoral equality and it is necessary to include all the communities on the Downs. In order to keep electoral equality within reason the southern part of Lenham parish has been split and is part of Headcorn ward. This split is a difficult boundary in the sense that it clearly cuts close to Lenham. It is proposed to minimise the impact on electoral integrity and because the railway line forms an easily recognisable boundary. 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.

Harrietsham Parish Council **does not** accept the conclusions reached in this comment.

The community of Harrietsham has no real local community identity with Hollingbourne and does not believe that the criteria of the Commission for community involvement and convenient local government would be enhanced by the Ward being combined with Hollingbourne, which is totally separate to Harrietsham and Lenham and has little in common with either village.

In addition, the number of electors do not stack up. Based on the March 2022 electors figures, this proposed new Ward, before removing Lenham South Parish, would have, not 6,790 electors, but 6,850 electors. This number, at 28%, is well outside the criteria of 10% of the new current equality of 5,321 (based on 48 Members) for a two Councillor Ward. Even removing Lenham South Parish, which only contains 739 electors, would not reduce the number of electors to an acceptable variance from equality as the revised number then would be 6,111 (15% of equality).

Whilst disagreeing with the conclusions of the Democracy and General Purposes committee, Harrietsham Parish Council agrees that the areas immediately north of Harrietsham and Lenham **could** be incorporated into an expanded Ward, if deemed necessary by the Commission. The villages of Finstead, Otterden, and Wynchling lie directly northeast of the current Ward of Harrietsham and Lenham and have some association with Harrietsham and Lenham and it may be logical to include them. Based on the current polling districts, the number of electors in these villages total 342 and we would not expect this number to change much in the foreseeable future.

However, the villages of Harrietsham and Lenham appear to have been marked by Maidstone Borough as villages to provide more additional housing required by central Government, and therefore should expect to grow beyond the current 5,523 electors in the near future. Such growth could increase the equality of electors per Councillor above the 10% permitted margin, within the foreseeable future. This measure of growth has been seen in the past. In 2000 the number electors in the Ward was 4,051 with a 3% equality variance and this has now become 5,523 electors with a 19% variance, based on 55 Councillors but only a 4% variance based on 48 Councillors.

Enlarging the area by including Hollingbourne and the other villages making up the current North Downs Ward would mean that the new Ward (Harrietsham, Hollingbourne and Lenham) would have (based on the March 2022 electorate) 7,557 electors or 2,519 per Member if it were a three-Councillor Ward. This is 95% of the equality figure of 2,660 electors per Councillor and should be acceptable to the Commission and also provides for further housing and electorate growth in the villages in the future.

Possible options for the Commission to consider

Option 1 - Keep Harrietsham and Lenham Ward boundaries as they are

Whilst a Commission representative, at an on-line presentation recently, said that keeping the Ward boundaries as they are is not an option, the fact that the existing two-Councillor Ward of Harrietsham and Lenham with 5,523 electors is within 4% of the average number of electors in Maidstone Borough, based on 48 Councillors, to maintain equality, currently at 5,321, cannot be ignored.

As was mentioned previously, both Harrietsham and Lenham villages form a natural local community and in addition are each expected to grow further in the near future by over 1,200 dwellings. However, some of the other Wards in Maidstone Borough are also expected to grow as more housing is required by central Government to be built in the south-east of England. All this should mean that the current Ward should stay within the acceptable 10% variance limit of elector equality for the foreseeable future even if Harrietsham and Lenham receive more housing proportionately than any other Ward in the Borough.

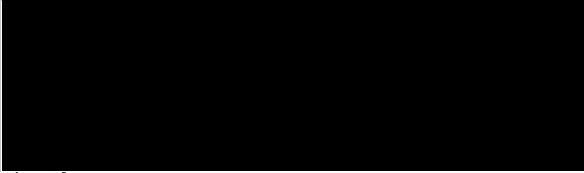
Option 2 - Allow the Parish of Harrietsham to be a Ward and to have its own Councillor

We believe that the Parish of Harrietsham, as it is currently constituted with 2,603 electors and a further 277 proposed dwellings, is of a size to warrant having its own Councillor. The number of 2,603 is currently 98% of the average number of electors per Councillor based on 48 members of 2,660, and this should provide for future expansion over the years.

Option 3 - Enlarge the Ward to include the current North Downs Ward

As was mentioned above, enlarging Harrietsham and Lenham Ward to include Hollingbourne and all the other villages currently making up the current North Downs Ward would mean that the new Ward would have (based on the March 2022 electorate) 7,557 electors or 2,519 per Member if it were a three-Councillor Ward. This is 95% of the equality figure of 2,660 electors per Councillor and again provides for expansion over the coming years.

Yours faithfully



Mrs A Broadhurst
Clerk to Harrietsham Parish Council