

Maidstone Borough Council

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Comment text:

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Boundary Commission: response from Lenham Parish Council – March 2022

1. Background

The village at Lenham and surrounding settlements have a long and well catalogued history. Lenham Heath was once part of the Manor of East Lenham half a mile from the centre of Lenham Village. The settlement of Sandway one mile from the centre of Lenham Village was once part of the Chilston estate, which still owns lands within the parish. The settlement of Platts Heath was associated with other Lenham related land ownership. The Domesday Book records these settlements have been part of the parish of Lenham a long time before there was a Maidstone District and its wards.

The requirement, as described within the Boundary Commission criteria to maintain “*the need to reflect local community identities and interests, and provide for effective and convenient local government*” is a crucial part of this response from Lenham Parish Council. The proposals from Maidstone Borough Council entirely undermine the historic and community ties which have been building for centuries and are to be further tested by the creation of new homes as the parishes of Lenham and Harrietsham grow. The need to maintain this community coherence and sense of identity is greater now than at any time in its recent past.

Lenham and Harrietsham ward is presently served by two elected Members at Maidstone Borough Council. The ward, as currently configured, covers the adjoining parishes of Lenham and Harrietsham with the associated settlements.

This works out well in terms of community building as the two parishes, Lenham and Harrietsham, sit on the eastern boundary of Maidstone borough distinct from the other major settlements, such as Headcorn 6 miles to the south, and share much common infrastructure in terms of services, for example:

- Both have been designated in the 2017 Maidstone Local Plan as Rural Service Centres
- Both are in the same Kent County Council Member Division and are served by the same KCC councillor
- Both are covered by the same County Council Community Warden
- Both form part of the same Kent Police area and so are served by known and shared Police Community Support Officers
- Both are covered by Len Valley Practice, the part of the Ridge Primary Care Network, with the primary surgery at Groom Way Lenham and a secondary surgery at the Glebe Medical Centre in Harrietsham

Aside from these shared statutory services, which make continuity a strong facet of the distinct communities of both parishes, many of the organisations that run for both young and old, 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.

Additionally, the one secondary school serves both parishes and beyond, including pupils from Maidstone and Ashford.

The current elected members are completely integrated within the fabric of the ward they represent. When the COVID situation emerged they were there, organising local volunteers to deliver food and help people get their medication under lockdown. That is but one recent example of how they constantly strive to serve this part of the borough.

Both parishes also sit along the A20, the major A-road between Maidstone and Ashford which mostly carries non-freight or port-bound traffic, and form part of the string of villages, settlements and rural service centres along this route. There is no access to the M20 within the ward, or along the A20 between Junctions 8 Leeds Castle and junction 9 Ashford West. The M20 is part of the national trunk route for road-based freight traffic to Dover and Folkestone and inward from those ports to the rest of the UK.

2. 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 to a place where in 2016 that number had increased by 10% and a 16.4% increase over the original figure by 2020. This translates to an elector per Member ratio of 2687, which is the second highest in Maidstone Borough, Parkwood being the highest at 3006 electors per Member.

To date 500 dwellings in Harrietsham parish are already built with a further 277 planned; in Lenham the 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 amount to around 500 since the last review in 2017.

While both parishes have experienced significant increase in housing since the last Local Plan review in 2017 as other areas in Maidstone Borough get built out during the life of the forthcoming Local Plan up to 2037, for example in Marden, Binbury Park and the former Barracks site, this will begin to even out the representation.

3. Options suggested by Maidstone Borough Council

In a report to the Democracy and General Purposes committee, dated 9 March 2022, Maidstone Borough Council has set out the 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.

Comment on this suggestion:

1. Lenham Parish Council **does not accept** the proposal from Maidstone Borough Council that the Hollingbourne area, from North Downs Ward, is co-located with Harrietsham and Lenham – this would make for an unworkable rural area for just two member representatives. Additionally, Hollingbourne has no alliances with either Harrietsham, which is nearest, nor Lenham.
2. Lenham Parish Council **rejects** the proposal in the Borough Council’s proposals that an area south of the railway in Lenham parish, described in the paper thus: ***“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”*** Is hived off to become part of Headcorn ward.

This statement is inaccurate in its suggestion that these areas are not yet built out, they are and dwellings are already occupied. Additionally, this area forms a significant part of the adopted Lenham Neighbourhood Plan (adopted July 2021) and will eventually provide some 400 additional homes. These additional homes have already been mentioned in section two.

Moreover, the area south of the railway, while it does differentiate the north / south parish ward split, includes the minor settlements of Platts Heath and Sandway and the settlement of Lenham Heath which, as has already been noted, all date back to the Domesday Book.

Crucially, under the proposals of the Maidstone Local Plan review, Maidstone Borough Council currently has an ambition to build IRO 1,400 homes between 2029 – 2037 with up to 5,000 homes in total as part of a so-called Garden Community in the area of Lenham Heath. Those proposing this change have clearly done a desk exercise without properly considering the forward plans for the area.

3. However, Lenham Parish Council does agree that the areas immediately north of Harrietsham and Lenham should be incorporated (see option 1 below and accompanying map) and address the anomaly of the area around Chilston Park which, at one mile from the centre of Lenham, currently sits within Headcorn Ward / Boughton Malherbe parish, and should be brought within the new ward boundary.

4. Options for the future suggested by Lenham Parish Council

Given that one of the ambitions of the Boundary Commission exercise is to ensure that *“the need to reflect local community identities and interests, and provide for effective and convenient local government.”* Lenham Parish Council would suggest the realignment as detailed below in option 1 and the attached map:

1. Parts of the current North Downs Ward adjacent to and north of Lenham and Harrietsham villages, consisting of the settlements of Otterden, Wichling, Frinsted and Wormshill could be incorporated into an enhanced Lenham and Harrietsham ward.

These areas adjacent to both villages already associate themselves strongly with the two villages. This change would further align the areas of the AONB from the North Downs into the enlarged ward footprint, providing additional enhancement for tourism and greater cohesion for the communities within them.

Lenham Parish Council would further suggest that this opportunity is taken to address the anomaly of the issue that Chilston Park, with its postal address in Lenham, currently sits within Headcorn ward / Boughton Malherbe parish.

We would recommend that the representation remains at two Members for this expanded ward.

These changes would not greatly increase the Member per elector ratio significantly as the areas mentioned are highly rural and sparsely occupied. The changes could give some potential for realignment around Hollingbourne and the associated settlements to the west of the existing Lenham and Harrietsham ward, so between that and Maidstone, should that be of use to accommodate further growth which is planned for this area, along the Leeds / Langley corridor, for example.

2. Lenham and Harrietsham ward remains as it is to support the proposed future growth through good community-building and place-making founded on the strong existing community infrastructure with Member representation remaining at two for the ward.

Whilst a Commission representative, at an on-line presentation recently, indicated 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 with 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.

Lenham Parish Council - March 2022

Proposed Ward Boundary - Option 1 (Lenham Parish Council)

Harrietsham and Lenham

Lenham

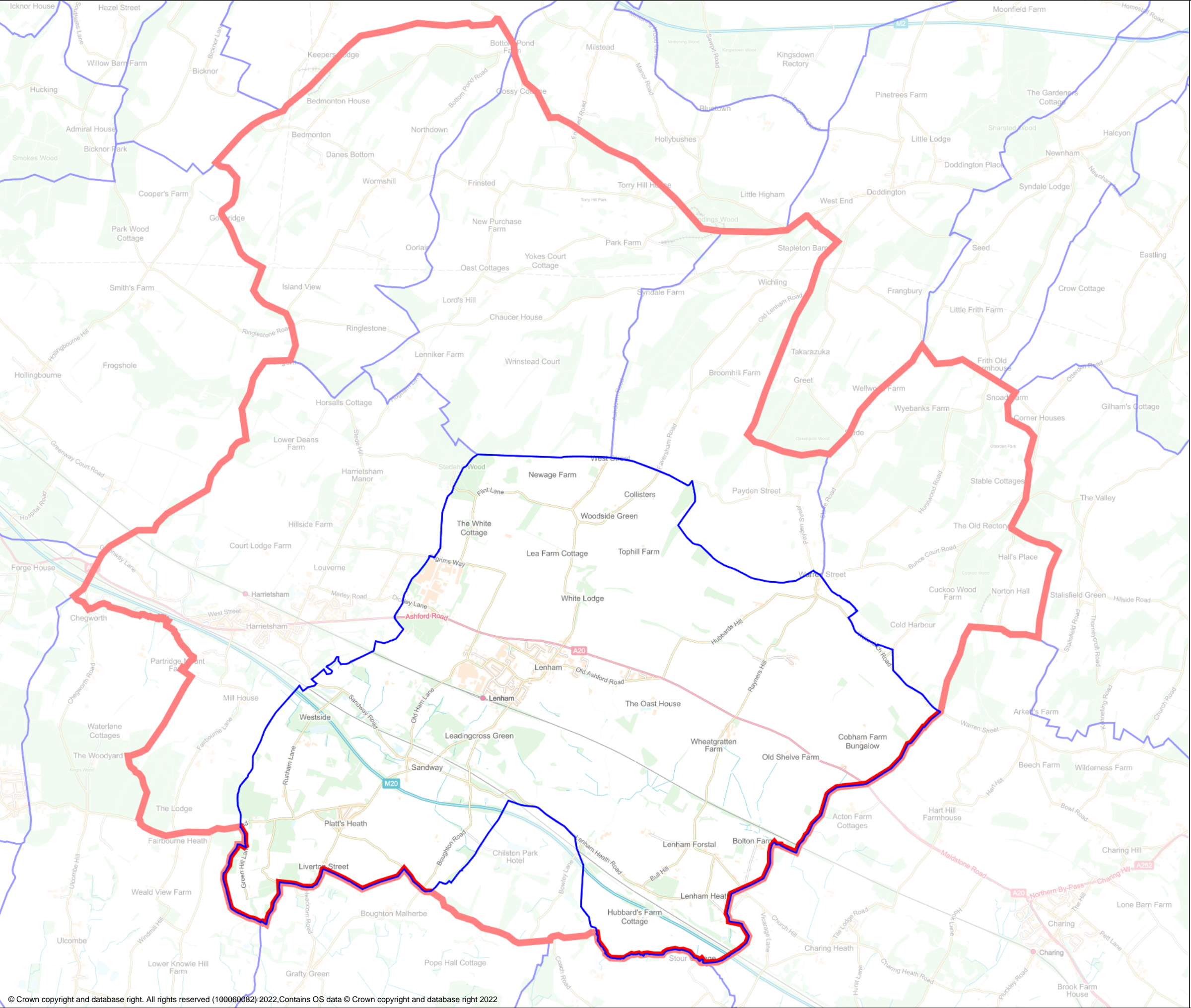
Author: L. Westcott

Date: 16/03/2022

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Scale: 1:40000

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Parish

Proposed ward boundary