

Maidstone Borough Council Ward Review

West Maidstone

I am responding to the Boundary Commission draft proposals for West Maidstone, on behalf of the Fant and Bridge Branch Labour Party.

The Boundary Commission is suggesting the current 11 councillors be reduced to 9:

1. Allington and Bridge (2 Councillors)
2. Palace Wood (2 Councillors)
3. Barming Heath and Teston (2 Councillors)
4. Fant and Oakwood (3 Councillors)

We are pleased that a number of the points that were raised in earlier submissions have been adopted, in particular to recognise the joint nature of the Fant and Oakwood communities, and to Link the communities of Allington and Bridge.

The rest of this submission will consider the proposed Fant and Oakwood Ward.

However we note that the Fant and Oakwood proposal in your draft includes a significant part of Bridge Ward (the area across to London Road south of the Bower Mount Road junction. We will refer to this area as the 'Additional Area' in this submission for simplicity. This creates a Fant and Oakwood Ward with a projected electorate of 9,791 9% over the borough average and the largest ward in the borough. The average electorate for the proposed 3 member wards is 8,641 and excluding Fant and Oakwood 8,450. Therefore, Fant and Oakwood is over 1,150 above the average electorate for a 3 member ward and 1,340 over the average if you exclude Fant and Oakwood.

As proposed it will mean that the Councillors for Fant and Oakwood will represent a ward much above the borough average of 1 Councillor per 2,984 electors in 2027. Applying the 2027 average would suggest a 3 member ward should have around 8,952 electors, not the 9,791 proposed, a figure of 839 above the average baseline. The Maidstone Council, Labour Councillors and the two Labour Party submissions recommended excluding the part of Bridge Ward now proposed for inclusion and had a 2027 electorate of 8,787, which would be just 165 short of the average (-2%).

We fully support the Fant and Oakwood proposal as far as the inclusion of the 'Fant' area to the south of Tonbridge Road and the 'Oakwood' area bound by Queens Road and the rear of Bower Mount Road.

We do not support the inclusion of the whole area from Bower Mount Road to London Road, it increased the proposed electorate by 1,004. We would present 3 options to deal with this:

Map of 'Additional Area'



Option 1 – Keep the boundary along the back of the properties in Bower Mount Road to the junction with Oakwood Road, but include Pembury Gardens, this would add about 12 electors making a Fant and Oakwood Ward of

8,799 (-2% below average), and an Allington and Bridge Ward of 6,467 (+8% above average). In this option Allington and Bridge is 499 above the average per councillor and Fant and Oakwood is 153 below the average per councillor.

Option 2 – The 'Additional Area' is not a cohesive area, its only defining traits are its boundaries with London Road, Terrace Road, Tonbridge Road and the open land to the rear of Bower Mount Road. As an area it has in 2027 about 1,004 electors. The western part of the area could be considered an extension of the 'Oakwood' community as it has easy pedestrian and vehicle access to both Tonbridge Road and Oakwood Road. However the eastern part of the area faces towards London and Terrace Road with no road access toward Tonbridge Road.

The remainder of Fant and Oakwood has vehicular access to Tonbridge Road and can be accessed off Tonbridge Road, which adds to the cohesiveness and argument for linking these two areas. The eastern part of the 'Additional Area' does not share this characteristic. An example of this is demonstrated by membership of the Oakwood Park Community Group, of which I am Vice Chair, we have a fob access scheme for community access to the Oakwood Park Playing Fields. We have 22 households (as at 30th June 2022) in the 'Additional Area', 20 reside in the western part of this area with only 2 households in the eastern part. This reinforces the disparate nature of the 'Additional Area'.

The 'Additional Area', has a natural dividing line this runs along Scrubbs Lane crossing Bower Mount Road, following Scrubbs Lane to the Allotment site, and then running to the rear of the houses in Bower Street and Warwick Place you would also include Bower Close. This would then divide the 'Additional Area' into a westward orientated part and an eastward orientated part. It would also roughly divide it up with 600 electors in the western part which would be added to Fant and Oakwood ward and 400 in the eastern part which would go to Allington and Bridge ward

Option 2 would therefore create a Fant and Oakwood Ward with about 9,400 electors (+5% from the 2027 average) and an Allington and Bridge ward with about 5,900 electors (-1% from the 2027 average). This would also make Allington and Bridge Ward very close to the borough average whilst reducing the size of Fant and Oakwood Ward, but still having it as the largest ward in the borough. Option 2 also follows a clear natural dividing line.

Option 3 The only other way to try to ensure that Fant and Oakwood Ward was nearer the borough average in 2027 would be to move the boundary line so that Warwick Place, Bower Street and Bower Close moved to Allington and Bridge, this would transfer an additional estimated 300 electors from Fant and Oakwood Ward to Allington and Bridge ward giving estimated 2027 electorates of 9,100 (+2%) and 6,200 (+4%) respectively

Conclusion

As proposed the Fant and Oakwood and Allington and Bridge have an artificial boundary between them which does not reflect the outlook of the areas. The area bound by Bower Mount Road, London Road and Tonbridge Road needs to be split to reflect orientations of the area and also to make the two wards nearer the borough average.

Option 2 above reflects the natural orientation of the area, however it still gives a Fant and Oakwood Ward considerably larger than any other in the borough. If equalisation rather than community identity is important then option 1 or 3 should be adopted.

Paul Harper

On behalf of Fant and Bridge Labour Party.