

# Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council

## Response to the Boundary Commission for England's initial proposals for the 2018 Boundary Review of Parliamentary constituencies

### Contact information

Further information about this submission is available from:

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### 1 About this submission

- 1.1 This submission is made by Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council, and includes consideration of the needs and views of residents (including the community associations between areas) and the practicalities and administrative considerations to the Borough Council.
- 1.2 It has been prepared by the Electoral Review Working Group and is a submission on behalf of the whole Council.
- 1.3 Party views of political groups, and those of individual Councillors, parishes and other representatives are not included in this submission but have been encouraged to be sent separately.
- 1.4 For ease of reference, the three proposed constituency areas from the BCE Initial Proposals are discussed separately where appropriate.

### 2 Introduction

- 2.1 Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council (TMBC) notes the statutory criteria for determining new Parliamentary constituencies and recognises the significant work undertaken by the Boundary Commission for England (BCE) in developing these initial proposals. TMBC also welcomes the opportunity to comment upon the initial proposals through this consultation.
- 2.2 Given the statutory requirement to have equal numbers of registered electors per constituency, TMBC recognises that there is a need for constituencies to cross over existing Borough/District boundaries as well as across the boundaries between Kent and Medway, and Kent and East Sussex.
- 2.3 The BCE have identified 'sub-regions' within the South East England region, and note that comments are welcome. TMBC have no comments to make on these groupings.

### **3 Initial proposals**

- 3.1 Under the initial proposals, the Borough of Tonbridge & Malling will be served by three MPs – up from the current two.
- 3.2 Despite a diverse community, the residents of the Borough of Tonbridge & Malling share a single council and associated identity. This is distinct from that of neighbouring local authority areas.
- 3.3 We therefore consider that residents of the Borough of Tonbridge & Malling would be better served by having fewer different constituencies, rather than pockets of the Borough being split into different areas.
- 3.4 We believe a constituency that is co-terminous as far as possible with local authority boundaries is in the best interests of our electors. Taking the whole of the borough of Tonbridge & Malling, excluding Aylesford North & Walderslade, Aylesford South, Burham & Wouldham and Ditton gives an electorate of 76,132 which is just 1.82% off the target and well within the acceptable range for new constituencies.
- 3.5 We consider that to be served by three different MPs would cause confusion for electors. The link between council areas and MPs would be lost, with no easy reconciliation for electors. In addition, if our residents were represented by three MPs, our residents would form only a small part of each MPs overall constituency. This would mean the needs of our residents would be diluted amongst the needs of the rest of the constituents, and the needs of Tonbridge & Malling residents would be lost. We have noted that the needs and expectations of residents in neighbouring communities differ greatly from those of our own residents; for example the economic needs of communities in Tonbridge & Malling differ from those of Sevenoaks communities and can at times oppose one another. It is therefore not appropriate for one MP to try to serve and adequately represent these two community needs.
- 3.6 A number of existing communities within the Borough have been moved between a large number of Parliamentary Constituencies through previous reviews. We do not consider this results in convenient and effective governance, and it does not support attempts to build communities.
- 3.7 A number of our Councillors have discussed the BCE proposals with their residents and have, almost without exception, been met with confusion. The BCE proposals sever longstanding links between communities, and force together communities that have no links whatsoever. Our residents have expressed that this makes no sense, is confusing, and is unnecessary.
- 3.8 The administration and conduct of Parliamentary elections will become considerably more complex, particularly in terms of postal voting. At the 2015 Parliamentary election, the Electoral Services team in Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council provided data to Medway council for Chatham & Aylesford electors, and received it from Sevenoaks for Tonbridge & Malling electors. This sharing of data was complex, time-consuming and created risks for the election, particularly where timescales being followed locally differ between authorities and Acting Returning Officers have no authority of Direction over neighbouring authorities. The proposals indicate TMBC may provide data to two different authorities and receive it from another; this creates an additional level of complexity to the process. We believe that this additional complexity, particularly as the 2015 elections will be combined with local polls, will result in an unmanageable situation. This will lead to democratic difficulties and disenfranchisement of electors.
- 3.9 The next part of the TMBC response is split between each of these constituencies below.

#### **4 BCE proposed new constituency: Chatham and The Mallings**

- 4.1 This new constituency largely reflects the existing Chatham & Aylesford constituency, albeit more wards from the Borough of Tonbridge & Malling are included and fewer from Medway. The constituency includes some densely populated areas in Chatham, and a number of less densely populated areas (Snodland, Aylesford, Kings Hill and so on), separated by a belt of rural communities (Burham, Wouldham, Eccles).
- 4.2 The main difference between the initial proposal and the existing constituency is the removal of one ward from Medway, and the inclusion of four wards from the Borough of Tonbridge & Malling. TMBC are disappointed that the BCE proposal does not represent the communities within the Borough of Tonbridge & Malling. We strongly believe that communities that are affiliated with each other, and which have long-standing associations with one another, should continue to be linked and in the same Parliamentary constituency.
- 4.3 The communities of Watringbury, Kings Hill, East Malling, West Malling and Leybourne have no affiliations with the rest of the proposed Chatham and The Mallings constituency.
- 4.4 TMBC **support** the proposal to include the entire East Malling & Larkfield parish (as served by East Malling, Larkfield North and Larkfield South Borough wards) in the same constituency. This reflects local interests and identities.
- 4.5 TMBC **do not support** the proposed name as it reflects both the Chatham town identity, and the identity of the more rural East and West Mallings and surrounding communities.

#### **5 BCE proposed new constituency: Sevenoaks**

- 5.1 This new constituency includes a large proportion of the existing Sevenoaks constituency, adding three wards from the Borough of Tonbridge & Malling. The constituency includes Sevenoaks as the major town, fairly centrally located within the constituency and surrounded by a wide area of less densely populated areas, with Hextable in the north, Westerham in the west and Mereworth in the east.
- 5.2 This is a geographically large area. Residents in the western part of the constituency, such as Westerham, have little in common with those in the east in Mereworth.
- 5.3 Electors in the western part of the Borough, principally Shipbourne and Plaxtol, communities in Downs & Mereworth ward, and Wrotham, Ightham and Stansted have a closer affiliation with Tonbridge than with any other large community. As a result, we believe that the wards of Borough Green & Long Mill, Downs & Mereworth, and Wrotham, Ightham & Stansted should be included within a Tonbridge constituency.
- 5.4 The communities of Wrotham, Ightham and Stansted, for example, have much stronger affiliations with the parishes to their east, and have no association with the communities in Sevenoaks to the west.

Residents of large parts of the borough of Tonbridge & Malling have become accustomed to the Tonbridge & Malling constituency. Although the 'Malling' and 'Tonbridge' parts of the borough have their own characteristics, they are currently served by the same MP and by the same Council. We believe this is in the best interests of the local communities and would wish for the Tonbridge & Malling links to be retained. This includes Wrotham, Ightham and Stansted; and Downs & Mereworth wards.

## 6 BCE proposed new constituency: Tonbridge & The Weald

- 6.1 The proposed constituency of Tonbridge and The Weald is comprised of part of the existing Tonbridge & Malling constituency, part of the Faversham and Mid Kent constituency, and part of the Maidstone and The Weald constituency. The constituency is shared with Maidstone Borough Council.
- 6.2 This constituency includes Tonbridge as the major town, and extends from Hildenborough in the west, cutting a swathe to the south of Maidstone then extending up as far as Stockbury in the north east and as far east as Lenham. This is a very large constituency geographically with a large sprawl of rural communities that are distinct and very different from Tonbridge.
- 6.3 Geographically this is a very large area. In terms of communities, it is very diverse. The interests and affiliations in Hildenborough are very different from those in Stockbury.
- 6.4 The proposed Tonbridge constituency is a very large geographical area, bringing some of the more remote parts of Maidstone Borough into the same constituency as Tonbridge. There are no direct major transport links through this area, and a resident from Stockbury (for example) would have to travel through at least three other constituencies to reach Tonbridge by road. The communities in Tonbridge have no association with those proposed in the new constituency in Maidstone borough.
- 6.5 We note that the existing Tonbridge & Malling constituency has been “significantly reconfigured due to changes elsewhere” (as noted in the BCE report) and the implication that this means changes to the constituency arrangements are not necessarily by design.
- 6.6 There are clear links between communities within the Borough of Tonbridge & Malling, which are not mirrored in the proposed constituency.
- 6.7 The BCE proposed constituency does not reflect the community affiliations within the Borough of Tonbridge & Malling. The proposal groups together communities which have no affiliation with one another. There are very limited transport links across the proposed constituency – such that the MP would have to travel across single-track bridges to traverse the constituency, whereas there are considerable transport links within the Borough of Tonbridge & Malling.
- 6.8 In summary, therefore, TMBC do **not support** the creation of a Tonbridge and The Weald constituency.
- 6.9 TMBC also do **not support** the name of the constituency. To the west of the proposed constituency is ‘Sevenoaks Weald’. The wards in the north-east of the proposed constituency are also not in the Low Weald area.
- 6.10 Administratively, running an election across such a broad geographical area with very limited transport links would be difficult and would increase the risk of delivery of the election.

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