

Plaxtol Parish Council

  
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To:  
The Review Officer (Tonbridge and Malling)  
Local Government Boundary Commission for England,  
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Plaxtol Parish Council's response to the LGBCE ward boundary consultation for  
Tonbridge and Malling Borough.

Dear Review Officer,

You may already be aware of the considerable concern being voiced within parishes at the manner in which your recent consultation on Ward Boundaries has been handled by TMBC. Far from providing open and transparent consultation with its populous, the Borough's whole process has been marred by Review Group meetings in private with restrictions on publication of their reports; poor communication and consultation with residents, and a very dubious last-minute introduction of a completely unforeseen amended plan for Wards introduced by the 'Conservative Group' on the Borough Council.

All of this has resulted in Plaxtol Parish Council and its residents being unable to make their views known to yourself or to TMBC during the Consultation and now to find that we have missed the 19<sup>th</sup> of July deadline for submission of our comments.

We therefore respectfully ask you to accept the following response even though it is technically out of time.

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**1. Tonbridge and Malling's Consultation Process with local Communities.**

The first that Plaxtol Parish heard of the LGBCE consultation came to our Clerk in early June with an invitation to a Webinar on 9<sup>th</sup> of that month. Such was the wording of the invitation that it implied we were being invited to provide 'answers' and 'give information' regarding the Consultation. Our Clerk queried how this was appropriate as we knew nothing about it. In due course, TMBC replied apologising for the unfortunate wording but by then the date of the Webinar had passed.

P.T.O.

The ideal scenario to brief parishes would have come the following day at the scheduled Parish Partnership Panel- a quarterly meeting between Borough leaders and officers with representatives of most of the 27 parishes. This, however, was cancelled without explanation.

In the meantime, the Borough had set-up a small cross-party Electoral Review Working Group (ERWG) to come up with proposals to cut the number of councillors and consequently review Ward boundaries. They met in private on 10<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of June and reports of their meetings were restricted. Council members and TMBC officers within the Group were expressly forbidden to discuss their views/options and parishes were not informed of possible changes.

The lack of initial consultation continued when the final recommendation went to the General Purposes Committee on the evening of 13<sup>th</sup> July. The agenda item and reports of the two ERWG meetings were still restricted and in Part 2 (i.e. confidential to councillors). It was not until the meeting started that it was moved by the Borough's Leader elect that these items be derestricted and thenceforth available to councillors and the public. It was at this point that he suddenly produced an alternative set of options for ward changes which had been produced by the 'Conservative Group'. All the hard work of the ERWG was dismissed. Due to the complexity of the amended proposals, it is clear that they had been worked up over a period of some weeks, and thus at the same time as the appointed ERWG were carefully working their way through producing a series of six possible options. Immediately following the General Purposes Committee, the amended version went straight into Full Council and was it was agreed that this would be the version that would be submitted to LGBCE.

The amended version changes a large number of the options produced by the ERWG and it is clear that LBGCE will be receiving some strong objections when the October final consultation is launched, not only from ourselves but also particularly from those who will be affected by the plan to enlarge the Medway Ward to become East Tonbridge and the inclusion of part of the Castle Ward with Hildenborough.

The administration at TMBC have since July, sought to demonstrate that they did fully advertise their webinar on 9<sup>th</sup> June, including through social media and their website and have given every opportunity for parishes to engage with the new warding process. In response, the Kent Association of Local Council (Tonbridge and Malling Branch) have, this week, conducted a short survey to test this hypothesis. Although only 11 of the 27 parishes have replied thus far, it is surely significant that only one large parish was fully involved with the process, whilst 9 said they were not aware of the radical changes being discussed and 10 said they were unaware of the last minute proposals by the 'Conservative Group'.

2. Where do people in your area go to access local facilities, such as shops and leisure activities? • Which areas do you identify as your local community

3.

- Shipbourne and Plaxtol Parish are two small village communities served by the A227 leading north to Borough Green and South to Tonbridge. They share many village facilities, and children from both Parishes attend either Plaxtol or Shipbourne school.
- Both parishes are a shared benefice with the same vicar.
- We share the same medical practices in Hildenborough, Cage Green Tonbridge, and Borough Green.
- Shipbourne hosts the Shipbourne and Plaxtol tennis club on the Green and the two village halls offering different facilities are used by both communities.
- Plaxtol has a village store and post office used by Shipbourne villagers and Shipbourne hosts a weekly Farmers Market in the church and grounds, enjoyed by Plaxtol and Shipbourne residents and those from further afield.
- The major local landowner Fairlawne Estate, covers most of Shipbourne and Plaxtol Parishes and runs well into Hildenborough. The Estate, has a long history in both parishes.
- Both Shipbourne and Plaxtol have strong links along the A227 through Igtham to Borough Green and the small communities of Crouch and Platt are accessible through rural roads from Plaxtol village. The historical connections of all these areas are strong.

Under the amended proposals by TMBC, Plaxtol and Shipbourne would be amalgamated with Hadlow and West Peckham. Not only are these two parishes physically distant from ourselves, but we have no shared history or community activity. Apart from jointly attending formal meetings of TMBC's Parish Partnership Panel or of the Kent Association of Local Councils, inter parish contact is virtually non-existent with either. Conversely, our clerks and councillors regularly speak to their counterparts in Borough Green, Platt and Shipbourne. Indeed, we are all members of a Parish Alliance which has come together on a number of occasions when major cross parish issues have arisen.

For all of the above reasons, Plaxtol would wish to remain within the existing Borough Green and Long Mill Ward.

Were this not to be possible, for purely numerical reasons, we would reluctantly accept ourselves and Shipbourne being linked with Hildenborough, which was part of the favoured Option 1 produced by the ERWG.

With thanks,

  
Patrick Thomas  
Chair of Plaxtol Parish Council