

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: 20 March 2021 13:40
To: reviews
Subject: Electoral Review of Tonbridge and Malling Borough Wards (Kent)

Categories: Submissions

Dear Sir or Madam,

I wish to make this submission on behalf of the 9 strong Liberal Democrats Group on Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council. I am the Deputy Group Leader.

I am sorry this is on the last day but although there were consultations at Group Leader level the first formal meeting was of the Electoral Review Working Group on 10th March which met in private and then followed a General Purposes Committee and Extraordinary Council Meeting on Wednesday 17th March so time has been rather short to prepare this and consult other members of the Group.

In making this submission I have taken into account the Report of the Chief Executive to the Electoral Review Working Group which is now in the public domain; the Councils Evidence Base document dated March 2021; and the Guide for Councillors document produced by yourselves.

Background About the Group.

Of the 9 members of the Group two represent a Tonbridge Ward (Vauxhall) and the others represent wards in the Medway Gap area of the borough. All of those 7 are also parish councillors. Three of us have more than 20years service on the borough council and the Group Leader is also a past Mayor.

Apart from a gap of 8 years I have been a borough councillor since the council was formed in 1974 from the amalgamation of the old Malling Rural District Council plus Tonbridge (then an UDC) and Hadlow and Hildenbrough from the old Tonbridge RDC. I was a Rural District Councillor for Larkfield for the last two years of the Malling RDC. I have also been Vice Chair and Chair of the Area 3 Planning Committee and was Council Leader from 1995 to 2003 of a Liberal led Council with Labour support. So Chair of what was Policy and Resources Committee. My Leadership therefore covered the period when the Council was required to move from a Committee system to a cabinet system. I am Chair of East Malling and Larkfield Parish Council and one other member is Chair of West Malling Parish Council. I am also a Freeman of the Borough.

I think there is therefore a range of experience in the Group as to how the council has operated and how it has adapted to the changes which have taken place as well as what we regard as the importance of the relationships between the council and its parishes and residents.

The Need for a Review.

As the Guide for Councillors clearly shows some of the wards do have significant variances with Burham and Wouldham on the East Bank of the River Medway within the Medway Gap area topping the list at -32. We therefore accept the need for a review.

We would also point to the significant development of new housing proposed in the borough especially in the Medway Gap parishes which are outside the Green Belt area that covers the rest of the District. Although the draft Local Plan is shortly likely to be rejected by the Planning Inspectorate for lack of what they regard as co-operation with Sevenoaks several of the sites in that plan have recently been given planning permission which will impact on the electoral figures to be forecast for the period up to 2027 which I understand is the date the Commission is

looking at for this review. In my own parish permission has been given for just over 100 new houses at Parkside, East Malling and in Aylesford South Ward over 800 at White Post Field as examples.

We understand that the borough is forecasting an electorate of 110,000 by 2027 compared with 89,894 at the time of the last Review in 2011. This is a significant increase and will no doubt impact of the detailed statistics for the wards concerned.

This increase does not appear to be mentioned in the borough documents...though I have not seen any covering letter....and we also look forward to seeing the detailed calculations for scrutiny. This is particularly important to us as there has been considerable discussion about projected house number in the local plan process and at recent planning appeals with differing conclusions. In passing it maybe that the rate of completions of new houses at Peters Village within Wouldham parish has not been as predicted at the last Review but may have recovered?

Borough Council Position.

We understand the first stage of the process is for the Council to propose a council size and that groups within the council may also submit representations hence this submission. At its meeting on 17th March the council decided by a majority vote to reduce the future size of the council from the current 54 councillors to “in the region” of 43 councillors.

Voting on that proposals was 32 For; 13 Against; and 3 Abstentions. With 54 councillors it seems 6 councillors were not present at this virtual meeting. The 9 strong Liberal Democrat Group were amongst those voting against plus the two Green councillors and the one Labour councillor. Whilst we understand the Commission cannot be involved in party considerations we would just record there was a lack of support across the Council for a reduction and which included some members of the controlling group.

In broad terms the Liberal Democrat Group felt among other issues that insufficient weight was given to the representational role of councillors; their casework; that too much weight was given to the attendance at meetings; and the involvement of councillors in outside bodies including parish councils. We felt, all things considered based on your three considerations, the council size should remain “in the region” of the current number at 54.

“In the Region”

We do support whatever figure emerges from this Part 1 process that saying “in the region” is the right way forward as it means when one comes to look at the pattern of wards it gives some flexibility and can allow one to achieve a better fit to meet local loyalties and ties which are particularly an issue outside of Tonbridge. I have been involved in all the reviews since the council was formed and in my view it is a mistake to box ones self into a fixed unalterable number.

The Nature of Tonbridge and Malling Council and its Area.

I think it is a crucial to understand the nature of the area covered by the Borough and how this has impacted on council structures. This feeds into the question of the representational role that borough councillors perform.

In my view although the council works reasonably well it is not an amalgam that easily represents community interests and ties. It was said back in 1974 it was putting together the “bits no one else wanted”. This was because when the Kent districts were formed adding say Malling to Maidstone or Tonbridge to Tunbridge Wells would have made in the view of those then applying their own numbers rules would have made those districts too big. And Malling and Tonbridge did not want to join their near neighbours fearing domination by the larger town. There were also “pulls” on the peripheries such as Blue Bell Hill in Aylesford looking to Medway. So Tonbridge and Malling came about. It was also the case unlike other towns such as nearby Sevenoaks Tonbridge did not get a continuing local council with Town Council status as under other “rules” it was considered too big. But of course the rest of the district was parished and that pattern has continued to date with the exception of the new parish of Kings Hill being formed to cover the now developed area of the former West Malling Airfield.

So a district was created with the main town in the SW corner with a large rural area up to the Medway Gap parishes close to Maidstone where there had been a lot of building and which continues to this day with more

planned. These Medway Gap parishes see Maidstone as their centre with Blue Bell Hill/Walderslade and arguably Wouldham looking to Medway Towns. People do not look to Tonbridge and I think do not go there any more than any of the Kent Towns. In my experience people in the Malling area except those near to Tonbridge have little interest in what happens in the town and vice versa. And people in Tonbridge relate as is often the case in smaller towns to the whole town and of course it is easier to draw ward boundaries to achieve electoral equality. Outside of Tonbridge people relate to the villages and parishes and even in the built up area a significant proportion of the population refer to the places as “villages” still.

The Council Organisation.

The most obvious effect of this pattern of interests with little of common interest across the borough as a whole was the early establishment of a system of Area Planning Committees representing what were seen as the main geographic areas namely:

Area 1 Tonbridge, Hadlow and Hildenborough (Meeting in Tonbridge)

Area 3 The Medway Gap parishes near to Maidstone of Aylesford, Burham Ditton, East Malling and Larkfield, Snodland and Wouldham.

Area 2 The mainly rural parishes in between the above area but including the local centre of Borough Green which relates to the parishes around it.

I should note at this stage as there is often a wrong assumption that East Malling and Larkfield is not two parishes joined together at some time in the past. In fact the parish has existed since at least Norman times and was just renamed from East Malling to East Malling and Larkfield in 1962.

Reverting to these committees they comprise ALL the members of the wards concerned so all councillors have a say and a VOTE in the reported planning applications. And this has continued despite from time to time officers suggesting a single committee and it has been clear members would not like say Tonbridge members deciding applications in Wouldham or Larkfield or vice versa. It is a very strong example of the diversity of the borough and the lack of common ties across it which we think means the present number of councillors needs to be maintained.

The Hybrid Cabinet/Committee System.

I think a further example of the wish of members to be involved in all decisions because of the emphasis on representing individual communities is the what happened when the Local Government Act 2000 came into force. There was within the council resistance to this change and as Leader I well recall people saw the Cabinet as getting all the power with “back benchers” having little say in decisions BEFORE they were made. As running the Council with Labour at the time we adopted the model put forward by the Government with Scrutiny arrangements. There was consideration what else could be done but the legal position to me was uncertain.

However after the following elections the council on across party basis brought in the system we currently have of committees...boards....having virtually all the business previously reported to committees reported to them and they making proposals to Cabinet which are invariably adopted as was pointed out at the recent Council meeting.

This has allowed all members to have a say and this is underlined by the fact any member can attend these meetings and speak with the Chairmans permission though in reality this is a formality. It again underlines that ward members want to have a say about matters affecting their individual wards especially outside Tonbridge where it is easier to have a common “town” view.

Overview and Scrutiny

The above has meant there is just a single “Overview and Scrutiny” body and which tends to deal with issues referred to it for detailed investigation and report. I can hardly recall any decisions “called in”. This facility is just not used as I think members feel they have had their say at the advisory boards. When I have looked at in the last few

days at other submissions I note many councils have really complicated scrutiny functions and often several committees based on topics.

Tonbridge Borough Councillors.

There being no successor Town Council the Tonbridge councillors (and no ward straddles the Town boundary) in effect act as parish councillors because the Borough carries out parish functions in the town such as those relating to the extensive open spaces and playing fields; allotments and the cemetery as examples. This as our two reps say does increase their workload. And I can say from my experience that a good proportion of what I do comes to me as a parish councillor rather than a borough councillor as there is a tendency for people to relate to that role as being "local". Though many just refer to "the Council" regardless of our three tier system. I would note this double role of borough councillors in Tonbridge is not mentioned in the council submission.

I submit all the above indicates that the current numbers of councillors means that the individual parishes, villages, and Tonbridge Town have a good level of local representation which helps underpin the above systems and this would be weakened if the councillor numbers were cut as proposed. And of course this does not take into account the big increase of electorates likely to be taking place when the forecast figures are agreed.

Borough Meetings.

The borough submission places I feel too much emphasis on council meetings which although an important part of the a councillors role they do not take into account meetings outside the council members attend or all the casework, reading, investigating and so on which a councillor is involved.

The officers at the Council meeting accepted they had little evidence of the time spent by councillors outside of meetings and of course this will vary between councillors. I spend more time on it now I am retired than I did at work except when I was The Leader and I had to have time off. We think by cutting the numbers the work load increases and puts people off who are employed so those elected are not representative of the community as a whole.

Turning to "outside" meetings I would say parish councils expect borough members to attend their monthly meetings and in accordance with National Association of Local Councils advice have an agenda item for borough and county councillors to report back. This needs to be taken into account. And these meetings will be in the evening and if there are fewer councillors the pattern of wards is likely to mean combining parishes so a member(s) would end up with more parish meetings to attend in the rural area areas especially.

Given it is hard to produce hard evidence as we are not employees keeping time sheets/computer records as I did at work I would personally estimate I get contacted by 2 Or 3 people a day on borough matters by phone; 5 to 10 by email; and overall spend 2 hours a day on borough matters. This includes reading reports issued by the borough. And also advice, up-dates on national things affecting local govt from the Association of Libral Cllrs of which all the Group are members.

I also attend as do the other Lib Dem councillors Group Meetings and I am sure the Conservtives Group meet to especially before full Council again in the evening.

I am also a member of several local social media sites such as Next Door Larkfield and two closed ones of local residents associations which I monitor and respond as required. My colleagues similarly.

With the other three local Larkfield members we produce a local newsletter issued about every two months and help deliver it. It concentrates on council matters of all three tiers. But is very local. That is what people are interested in. To make the point it hardly ever mentions Tonbridge matters or things outside the immediate parishes.

I also attend from time to time the local Community Rail Partnership as New Hythe station is in my ward.

And with my ward member in normal times we have a monthly surgery for people wishing to see us. This in addition to those contacting us direct who we may see separately (outside Covid times)

Council "Reductions"

The council papers correctly record the reductions in local council spending that has taken place and forecast. They also point to some services being farmed out such as public toilets and the country park that is actually in my ward

I would record both these examples have resulted in more work for me as a councillor in liaising with the Trust that is due to take over the country park and the parish council to take over the toilets in Martin Square. And both these community assets will still exist and though the borough officers will have either no or less of a role the public will still bring issues to councillors about these facilities. And I envisage having to take up with the Trust issues that are always arising in the country park. So the work load for councillors will not be reduced just who we go to about problems.

And it is considered this is a valid general point as my experience is that "cut backs" in the council have not reduced the contacts by residents who still expect the same level of service that have been used to receiving and contact us when that is not being delivered. And the reductions in service led to more complaints to councillors as people tend to get in contact when things go wrong for them.

And this is also reflected in the contact via social media. When I was first elected contact was by letter; phone and in person. Now we have added by email and social media. And those who use these expect a quicker response. For example when we have a controversial planning application coming to committee one can get many emails as has been happening because of the applications for new housing sites mentioned earlier. And in answering residents questions we to some extent, and I would say more than in the past, deflect questions that would otherwise go to officers.

Attracting People to stand.

This issue of workload per councillor is felt by our Group to be important and it is already difficult to attract a wide range of people due to work and family commitments. If reducing the number of councillors increases the work load of those elected it is likely to put them off standing or standing again as they are stretched in too many directions. And if they cannot meet residents expectations it brings the whole council reputation into question. And this is an especial issue in wards where there are pockets of deprivation.

Fewer Councillors May Break Local Ties

Lastly we have a strong concern that having fewer councillors is likely to break local ties and put together wards which have little in common. We think this is an especial concern in such a diverse borough as Tonbridge and Malling with no central town and a pattern of very distinct communities. We gather at one stage the Conservative controlling Group considered an even lower number as they said at the council meeting but one of the reasons for not adopting that was such a result would occur. Having with the information available looked at possible patterns of wards we think that was right and it still applies to 43 councillors. We feel a number of around 54 will create a warding system with a better fit.

Conclusions.

In the short time since the council met I hope this provides our case as to why we should keep about the same number of councillors so we can properly represent our electors and residents.

Please acknowledge safe receipt.

David Thornewell
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Tonbridge and Malling Council.

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