

9 August 2021

To: Review Officer (Tonbridge and Malling),
Local Government Boundary Commission for England,
PO Box 133,
Blyth,
NE24 9FE

reviews@lgbce.org.uk

Dear Sir/Madam

**Shipbourne Parish Council's response to LGBCE ward boundary review consultation
Tonbridge and Malling.**

Shipbourne Parish Council hopes that you will be able to consider this late consultation response. This is consequent on circumstances as set out in this letter which details the failure of Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council to provide open and transparent handling of the development of their consultation response and lack of consideration and consultation with Parishes and other unparished ward communities. This has led to Shipbourne Parish Council being unaware of the opportunity to respond direct to LGBCE and the deadline of 19th July.

Shipbourne Parish Council has the following comments:

- **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**
 - Shipbourne along with Plaxtol Parish are 2 small village communities served by the A227 leading north to Borough Green and South to Tonbridge. The 2 communities share many village facilities, and children from both Parishes attend either Plaxtol or Shipbourne school. We share the same offer of the medical practices in Hildenborough, Cage Green Tonbridge, and Borough Green. We share the same vicar serving the 2 churches. Shipbourne hosts the Shipbourne and Plaxtol tennis club on the Green and the 2 village halls offering different facilities are used by both communities. Activities such as WIs, Yoga, dog training, Pilates, Historical societies and Drama Socs. running out of these village halls are shared by both communities.
 - Plaxtol has a village store and post office used by Shipbourne villagers and Shipborne hosts a weekly Farmers Market in the church and grounds, enjoyed by Plaxtol and Shipbourne residents and those from further afield.

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- The major local landowner's land covers most of Shipbourne and Plaxtol Parishes and runs well into Hildenborough. The major landowner, Fairlawne 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.

Our first priority therefore is to stay in the same ward as Plaxtol and its affiliations with Crouch. We have more affiliation through these connections to Borough Green to the north than towards Tonbridge to the south or West Peckham and Hadlow to the east. Our affiliation, connections and shared facilities are poor towards the east and there are little historical connections with these communities that have traditionally looked north and east: West Malling with Mereworth and Hadlow with East Peckham. Shipbourne would feel very 'uncomfortable' with this connection not least due to the difficult rural roads between us.

For these reasons our first preference is to stay connected in the existing Borough Green and Long Mill ward.

If however this is not possible due to elector numbers throughout the Borough our second preference is to stay linked with Plaxtol and both join Hildenborough ward. There are good affiliations with Hildenborough through schools, Doctors and services. The rural connecting roads of Hildenborough Road and Riding Lane are much more direct and easier than connections to the east with West Malling and Hadlow, as mentioned above.

Tonbridge and Malling Consultation with local communities

Shipbourne accept that this was a LGBCE consultation and not a Borough led consultation, however it is clear from the LGBCE website and letter to the Chief Executive that LGBCE expected a high degree of consultation with local communities and Parishes to reach a proposal to send to LGBCE which reflected local connections and affiliations.

The Borough did not communicate with Shipbourne PC directly about the consultation and that it was open to all residents to respond direct to LGBCE. The Clerk was not sent any posters and did not receive the invitation to the webinar held on 9th June. Our Parish did not hear about this until 2nd August in an email from the Tonbridge and Malling branch of Kent Association of Local Councils (T&MKALC).

The Borough Parish Partnership Panel scheduled for 10th June would have been an ideal opportunity for the Borough to share ideas and options with the Parishes, and let them know that individuals and parishes could make their own suggestions direct to LGBCE, but this meeting was cancelled. No reasons were given.

It transpires that the T&MBC Electoral Review Working Group (ERWG) was held in private and the reports of their group meetings on 10th June and 28th June were restricted. Councillor members and officers of this group were restricted in talking about the emerging options outside of the group. The Parishes were not informed of possible changes. Therefore representation of the Parish communities through councillors was very restricted, and not every ward was represented on the working group (ERWG).

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The lack of initial consultation was compounded when the final recommendation went to the General Purposes Committee on 13th July the agenda item and reports of the 2 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 Leader that these items be unrestricted and available to councillors and the public from that point.

It was at this meeting that an amendment to the recommended option, which had been prepared by the Leader of Council, was brought by 'the Conservative Group'. Not all members of ERWG had been consulted. Electronic copies had been circulated by the Council that morning and paper copies made available as councillors walked into the General Purposes meeting. This meeting was followed immediately by full Council who agreed the amendment as the Council's formal responses to LGBCE.

The amendment is very complicated and changed nearly every ward boundary from the recommended option. Councillors would have had no time to digest these proposals. However several ward councillors had objections to some of the boundary changes especially the amendments made to the boundaries in the Tonbridge wards enlarging the Medway ward to become 'East Tonbridge' and the inclusion of part of Castle ward with Hildenborough. The motivation for these changes was inexplicable, and the reasons supporting the changes did not fit with the criteria set out by LGBCE. We question what the reason was for such secrecy through the whole process, what advantages the Leader of the Council sought to gain by the clandestine changes pushed through at the last moment, and whether party political advantage was a driving force.

The Parishes of course were not aware of any of the suggestions and could not have briefed their ward councillors on their preferences or views. The amendment was not published on the Council website until 30th July in the minutes of the meetings held on 13th July. (The meetings are recorded on YouTube.)

The benefit of carrying your communities with you on any proposal made to LGBCE is that there will be little objection to the final ward boundaries consulted on by LGBCE in October. Shipbourne Parish Council will certainly object to being put with West Peckham and Hadlow if the LGCBE were to accept T&M proposals.

Shipbourne Parish Council has grave concerns about the way in which Tonbridge and Malling have conducted their appraisal of the ward boundaries; the private nature of the ERWG and the short notice for consideration by the whole ERWG of the amendment brought by the Conservative Group before bringing to open council meetings before Councillors who were not party to the ERWG considerations. Parishes and Town forums are the obvious way of bringing such changes into the public domain but these avenues were not used. We understand now that things were put on social media – Twitter and Facebook, but most Parishes do not use these and were not kept informed in an open and transparent way.

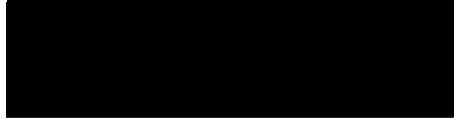
We hope you will accept this response to the consultation, in conclusion:

- Shipbourne is very closely affiliated with Plaxtol and would wish to remain in the existing ward of Borough Green and Long Mill.
- Shipbourne Parish would object strongly to being added to West Peckham and Hadlow.
- Shipbourne Parish would accept as a second option being added to Hildenborough ward provided this did not mean a split with Plaxtol or that Hildenborough was amalgamated with the Tonbridge town ward of Castle.

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SPC will respond direct to the LGBCE October consultation with a more considered response that looks at the consequences of our preferences on the rest of the ward boundaries.

Yours faithfully



Sarah Huseyin
Parish Clerk
(on behalf of Shipbourne Parish Council)