

Proposed Maidstone Borough Council Response

Maidstone Borough Council objects to the proposals as put forward. There is merit to consider parts of Maidstone with an extension to the urban area to the west along the A20, but the objections are set out below along with suggested principles to be considered for any alternative constituencies and a specific proposal built on those principles.

In considering our proposed principles and the feedback to the existing proposals Maidstone has considered four main areas of feedback:

- Election Complexities
- Community Identities
- Political Engagement
- Ward Boundary Review

Election complexities

The proposals set out three constituencies covering the Borough of Maidstone:

Constituency	Authority with Greatest % of Electorate (Lead)	Authorities Covered
Faversham and Mid-Kent	Maidstone	Ashford, Maidstone, Swale
Maidstone and Malling	Maidstone	Maidstone, Tonbridge and Malling
Weald of Kent	Maidstone	Ashford, Maidstone, Tunbridge Wells

This represents a significant increase in the complexities of running a Parliamentary Election in Maidstone. Currently Maidstone has two constituencies each shared with one other authority (one with Swale and one with Tunbridge Wells).

Parliamentary elections are the largest single elections that the Council runs. Increasing the number of constituencies is a matter of resourcing but increasing the number of constituencies and the complexity of each constituency through working with multiple authorities increases risks around delivery. The sharing of data, the timings of counting, the management of multiple types of ballot box and equipment, postal vote complexities, polling staff provided different training in different areas, to name but a few of the potential risks.

Maidstone Borough Council is well used to running elections, with elections by thirds, and has just delivered Covid secure elections for Police and Crime Commissioner, County, Borough, Parish and Neighbourhood Referendums at the same time. However, risks associated with elections should not be increased without good reason to do so. To reiterate this is not simply a matter of scale (Maidstone would be handling 220,000 electorate at traditionally high turnout elections) for which additional resourcing can be provided, but of complexity in sharing those 220,000 electorate across five local government areas.

Community identities

There are concerns over the identities of the new constituencies. Whilst the inclusion of the Malling areas with Maidstone makes sense on the ground, with Maidstone having a physical and cultural link to areas along the A20 to the West (as set out in our own suggested principles), the split of some parts of the town towards Faversham and Mid Kent, now including parts of the Ashford district, exacerbates an already existing identity issue for the constituency. It is hard to identify a link between residents in urban parts of Maidstone, such as Shepway North and South and Park Wood with residents along the A249 and out towards Faversham.

Furthermore, the Weald of Kent, represents a large geographic area crossing three districts' boundaries containing some distinctive places and identities.

If the Borough of Maidstone does need to split into three (which is arguable given the commission's own mathematical calculation of the number of constituencies required, based on the electorate, at 1.64 constituencies) then it would seem to make sense to use the flexibility afforded to try to create areas of common identity.

This is a concern not just for residents but surely also a consideration for the prospective MPs for those areas who would no doubt wish to ensure they are representing all residents equally regardless of which part of their constituency they are from. It is also crucial that residents identify with their MP as their democratic representative. Additionally, MPs in two of the three constituencies will be working with three separate local authorities.

We are therefore proposing principles and an alternative that maximise place based identity and would allow governance in a coherent way across our geography.

Political engagement

Maidstone currently has two MPs and feedback has been received from Members and officers on difficulties that can arise on the handling of cross Borough matters with two MPs, especially when existing constituencies split across Borough boundaries and areas that aren't linked (see Community Identities above). This is likely to be exacerbated with the Maidstone town split in two and the Borough further split into three and shared across five council areas. This creates significant work for the relevant MPs and makes crucial communication and engagement on strategic issues between the Council and MPs, even harder.

Ward Boundaries

It is understood that there had to be a cut off point for Ward Boundaries and Local Government Boundary reviews as a matter of practicality in any such boundary review. However, Maidstone would like to highlight that we are at the start of a boundary review which, given the length of time since our last review, the electorate disparities in wards and the growth projections, is likely to result in significant changes. The review will report in 2023, to be implemented for the first time in 2024. Especially with three constituencies proposed across our Borough this may well result in wards being split across constituency lines, something we know the commission is keen to avoid.

Alternative Proposal

_The alternative proposal is in two parts:

1. **A non-specific one**, as we appreciate there will be significant knock on impacts of what we are proposing that we do not have the knowledge to understand in detail, but consider that the **following principles should be followed to create a 2 constituency area for Maidstone**:
 - i. Is as close to the BCE's own mathematical calculation of 1.64 constituencies being appropriate for Maidstone Borough (i.e. 2 constituencies) as possible
 - ii. That the urban area be kept as whole as possible given the community identity it represents and the benefit this would bring to a single MP for the Town
 - iii. That the rural areas of Maidstone be kept as close to a whole as possible given their linkages locally, whilst recognising their differences, and the benefit this would bring for a single MP for the rural parts of the Borough
 - iv. That these constituencies be supplemented as required from interconnected areas – i.e. practical urban extensions to Maidstone to the West and North West for the Urban area, and Southern/South Western parts of the Weald and areas with connections for the Rural area.
2. **A specific proposal**, we appreciate that whilst we cannot factor in all the knock on impacts it would be useful to see a demonstration of the principles applied in practice and an application of local areas. Both these constituencies meet the electorate criteria.

The specific proposal defines an 'urban area' for Maidstone, bringing in key parts of the area in Shepway North, Shepway South and Park Wood from the current Faversham and Mid Kent constituency. This resolves the community identity issue of being linked up the A249 to Faversham, an area they have no linkages with.

This Maidstone area is then supplemented with areas of linked relevance to the Maidstone Town. Inevitably given Maidstone itself abuts its own Borough boundary to the West and North West this involves those areas, namely the area beyond the Maidstone Hospital and includes a retail area that is intrinsically linked to Maidstone (Aylesford South). We have also included Aylesford North and Walderslade, areas with close connections with the Town and includes Bluebell Hill an area that has practical linkages (i.e. traffic issues that impact closely on the Town), and would benefit from having a single MP covering the area. This constituency could simply be 'Maidstone'.

The second constituency has been labelled as 'Maidstone Rural' to indicate its nature as the parliamentary constituency naming conventions are unknown. This constituency takes the existing Faversham and Mid-Kent areas in Maidstone Borough and adds the rural elements of Maidstone and the Weald as well as adding Paddock Wood West and Paddock Wood East. Again, Paddock Wood has practical linkages to Maidstone on the ground, and it also adds Wateringbury (from Tonbridge and Malling). This choice was made to bring up the necessary electorate despite the trade-off of introducing another Borough as Wateringbury is a more natural extension of the boundary along the A26. Whilst this would mean the 'Maidstone Rural' election would involve three authorities, it would not increase the overall total number of authorities involved and this would help manage election complexities.

We hope this demonstrates the application of the principles and concerns raised in creating two constituencies that would work for create cohesive community identities, the running of effective elections, the Council's working relationship with its MPs, the MPs themselves, and above all for the residents of Maidstone Borough and beyond.

