

Helen Whately, MP for Faversham and Mid Kent

Statement to the Boundary Commission

4 November 2016

- 1.1. I support the principles behind the reforms to make sure that all constituencies are the same size, and that each person's vote carries the same weight.

- 1.2. I appreciate the great challenges in drawing up boundaries which meet the requirement for all constituencies to have between 71,031 and 78,507 electors.

- 1.3. I am understandably disappointed that the Boundary Commission's proposal splits up my constituency, but I am not here to protect my own job – rather to make sure that in future, my constituents will be part of constituencies which make sense to them and give them an effective voice in Parliament.

- 1.4. I know the challenge of representing a relatively large and diverse constituency – in Faversham and Mid Kent I have around 93,000 constituents, living in a largely rural area extending from Faversham and across the North Downs to the rural villages around Maidstone, and also into the suburbs of Maidstone itself. There are distinct communities within my constituency, I work with two Borough Councils, and it takes about 40 minutes to drive from one side to the

other. Whilst I believe you can do a good job all the same (I hope I am proving that) – it does present challenges.

1.5. The more strung out and disconnected a constituency, the harder it can be for the MP to represent all communities and interests effectively. It is harder to be abreast of the local issues, to have good relationships with communities and organisations, and it's harder for the MP to communicate to the electorate what they are doing. Local newspapers, for instance, are centred on the local town. The village on the edge of the town will read what the MP for the town is up to; if their MP is someone different, they are less likely to know what he or she is doing. All of this risks contributing to the scepticism and sense of disconnect between MP and voters, which we know is already present; that is damaging to democracy, and means that some people may disengage leading to their interests being overlooked.

1.6. Rightly, the Boundary Commission may take these sorts of factors into account, specifically;

- Geographical considerations including accessibility
- Local government boundaries
- Boundaries of existing constituencies
- Local ties

1.7. *I am keen for the boundary commission to make sure that the future electoral map gives us connected and coherent constituencies. I am making this representation in part because I think the Commission could and should do better, and should take greater account of those factors.*

Turning to the proposals themselves:

Firstly, Canterbury & Faversham

1.8. Faversham (Priory, Abbey, St Anne's and Watling wards) and the surrounding wards of East Downs & Boughton and Courtenay, are to become part of a new Canterbury and Faversham constituency.

1.9. There are strong connections between Faversham and Canterbury; geographically, there are good transport links, economically - Faversham residents work and shop in Canterbury, and socially - with many Faversham residents using services there, such as the hospital and secondary schools.

1.10. Local Councillors and other residents I have spoken to from Faversham and the surrounding villages are broadly supportive of the proposals.

1.11. I appreciate that the proposed name of the constituency includes Faversham, as I know this was a great concern in the previous iteration of these boundary changes. This is right and must stay.

Secondly, Maidstone

- 1.12. Bearsted, Detling and Thurnham, Boxley, Shepway North, Shepway South and Downwood and Otham Wards are proposed to be incorporated into a Maidstone constituency. I support the prospect of one constituency for Maidstone. I know some of my constituents are confused by current boundaries. While the villages themselves have distinct identities, Maidstone is their local town and they naturally look to it for many of their services and facilities. They are also represented by Maidstone Borough Councillors.
- 1.13. That said, I think some wards currently not proposed to be in this Maidstone constituency **should** be, which I will now come to.

[Finally] Tonbridge and the Weald constituency

- 1.14. North Downs, Parkwood, Leeds, Harrietsham and Lenham, Boughton Monchelsea and Chart Sutton, Sutton Valence and Langley and Headcorn Wards are due to become part of a new Tonbridge and the Weald Constituency. I am concerned about this proposed new constituency. Referring back to the factors the Commission may take into account:
- 1.15. Accessibility: there are some long journey times between parts of this constituency, almost an hour by car from one side to the other and often longer with traffic. Clearly there are very rural constituencies (e.g., Scotland) with longer journey times, but this is not helpful. [these are longer and further journeys than my current constituency]
- 1.16. Local ties: most of these wards have ties with Maidstone, particularly those closer to the town. They don't tend to have links with Tonbridge and won't generally use the same services - schools and hospitals for instance. There is little sense of being common communities with common interests across the span of this proposed constituency. For instance, if someone in Hollingbourne sees their MP campaigning on an issue in Tonbridge, I doubt they would think "oh good, my MP is doing something which will make a difference to my life." Over time there is a risk they might think their MP doesn't really represent them, especially given the lion's share of the population is concentrated to the west. The newspaper point I mentioned earlier is relevant here.

1.17. These wards are represented by Maidstone Borough Councillors

1.18. I should emphasise, again, this isn't insurmountable – a hard-working MP would be able to get around the area, and would be able to work on issues across it and get to know all the organisations etc. but the proposed boundaries will make that quite a challenge.

1.19. I would therefore like the commission to look again at their proposal for this constituency. I particularly disagree with the inclusion of North Downs and Leeds in a constituency centred on Tonbridge. Both look to Maidstone as the local town and more or less tend to use Maidstone services. There are strong local ties. They are served by Maidstone councillors. And geographically they are not at all connected with Tonbridge. In fact, Maidstone is physically in between, so you would have to either go through the town or round it when travelling from one side of the constituency to the other.

1.20. There are similar issues with Parkwood and Lenham & Harrietsham's inclusion in a Tonbridge constituency. My experience is that – for the most part – Parkwood residents feel they are part of Maidstone, and with significant deprivation in parts of the ward, draw heavily on the support services of the town. That said, Parkwood is to the south rather than east of Maidstone, so at least not so far away from Tonbridge as Leeds and North Downs.

1.21. Lenham & Harrietsham wards are significantly further to the east and it too looks to Maidstone. However, it is a distinct, rural community separate from the town.

1.22. I am also concerned about the inclusion of Headcorn, Sutton Valence & Langley and Boughton Monchelsea and Chart Sutton in the Tonbridge and the Weald constituency, and have heard from residents in those areas who are unhappy. However, I recognise parts of these wards have characteristics in common with places like Staplehurst and Yalding in that Constituency - and I appreciate that remodelling the constituency map in a way that meets the electorate sizes required is difficult. The boundary has to fall somewhere.

To sum up:

1.23. While it is right to move to constituencies which are more evenly sized, I do not support the current proposals.

1.24. I would like the commission to look again at the proposals for Maidstone and Tonbridge & the Weald. Wards to the east and south of Maidstone should go into the Maidstone constituency. I realise this affects the electorate sizes, however it would be possible to make up the numbers for Tonbridge by bringing in wards from other areas – as proposed in the official Conservative Party submission.

1.25. I also think that there is an absolute **need for more public communication on this process as a whole** – I'm not convinced that many people know there may be boundary changes and what the implications might be for them.

1.26. On behalf of my constituents in these areas, I urge the commission to review and amend the proposals before the next phase of consultation.