

Tonbridge & Malling Green Group

Council Size Submission:

Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council

Contents

How to Make a Submission.....	2
About You	2
Reason for Review (Request Reviews Only).....	2
Local Authority Profile	4
Council Size	5
Other Issues.....	17

How to Make a Submission

It is recommended that submissions on future governance arrangements and council size follow the guidance provided and use the format below as a template. Submissions should be treated as an opportunity to focus on the future needs of the council and not simply describe the current arrangements. **Submissions should also demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been considered in drawing up the proposal and why you have discounted them.**

The template allows respondents to enter comments directly under each heading. It is not recommended that responses be unduly long; as a guide, it is anticipated that a 15 to 20-page document using this template should suffice. Individual section length may vary depending on the issues to be explained. Where internal documents are referred to URLs should be provided, rather than the document itself. It is also recommended that a table is included that highlights the key paragraphs for the Commission's attention.

'Good' submissions, i.e. those that are considered to be most robust and persuasive, combine the following *key success components* (as set out in the guidance that accompanies this template):

- Clarity on objectives
- A straightforward and evidence-led style
- An understanding of local place and communities
- An understanding of councillors' roles and responsibilities

About You

The respondent should use this space to provide the Commission with a little detail about who is making the submission, whether it is the full Council, Officers on behalf of the Council, a political party or group, a resident group, or an individual.

This submission has been authored by the Green Party Group of Members of Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council, and is supported by the Tonbridge & Malling branch of the Green Party of England and Wales.

Reason for Review (Request Reviews Only)

Please explain the authority's reasons for requesting this electoral review; it is useful for the Commission to have context. *NB/ If the Commission has identified the authority for review under one of its published criteria, then you are not required to answer this question.*

N/A

The Context for your proposal

Your submission gives you the opportunity to examine how you wish to organise and run the council for the next 15 - 20 years. **The consideration of future governance**

arrangements and council size should be set in the wider local and national policy context. The Commission expects you to challenge your current arrangements and determine the most appropriate arrangements going forward. In providing context for your submission below, please demonstrate that you have considered the following issues.

- When did your Council last change/reorganise its internal governance arrangements and what impact on effectiveness did that activity have?
- To what extent has transference of strategic and/or service functions impacted on the effectiveness of service delivery and the ability of the Council to focus on its remaining functions?
- Have any governance or capacity issues been raised by any Inspectorate or similar?
- What influence will local and national policy trends likely have on the Council as an institution?
- What impact on the Council's effectiveness will your council size proposal have?

Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council last reviewed its internal governance arrangements in 2011/12 as part of a Local Government Boundary Review, when it increased the number of Councillors from 53 to 54, and the number of Wards was reduced from 26 to 24.

Since then, the most significant transfer of strategic responsibility has been the set up of the Tonbridge and Malling Leisure Trust in 2013, a not-for-profit organisation that is responsible for the delivery of sport and leisure facilities on behalf of Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council. The Council has been gradually transferring assets (such as swimming pools and leisure centres, golf course, and more recently catering facilities at the Country Parks) to the Trust for them to manage. While this has reduced significantly the assets for which the Council is directly responsible, as well as the number of employees of the Council (who transferred to the Trust), the partnership between the Trust and the Council means that there is still a significant requirement for governance by the Council, for example there are two Borough Councillors to serve as Trustees of the Trust, and matters relating to the Council's relationship with the trust frequently come to Advisory Boards for consideration. As illustrated by **Table 1** (which can be found at the end of this document), there has been no substantial change in the Council's expenditure or FTE headcount since the divestiture – in 2019/20 there was less than 1% variance from the average since then.

We are concerned that the continuing trend of overall reduction in central government grants to local authorities will result in the Council needing to become more financially sustainable in its own right. After more than 10 years of consecutive cuts to the central government grants to the Council, in conjunction with the continual spending down of financial reserves over the same period, the Council urgently needs to identify additional sources of income in order to provide statutory services as well as meet the needs and expectations of our residents and businesses. So far, it has taken a conservative approach to financial investment, which has yet to yield significant results. More recently the Council has begun to explore options in relation to selling or developing its own property assets, and investing in more property assets within the Borough (for example, to provide temporary housing to reduce homelessness). These kinds of activities will necessarily increase the amount of governance required, as decision-making on how and where to invest and how to manage investments and property will require more scrutiny than simply receiving and allocating grants.

The Council has also recently declared a Climate Emergency, and expressed a goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2030. The Council is just at the beginning of this piece of work, but already the external consultants engaged to review current state and provide a baseline for measuring progress have indicated that significant changes in how the Council operates will be required – including, for example, potentially moving / rationalising property and facilities, reviewing partnerships and putting in place new criteria to ensure partners support and contribute to our goals (e.g. housing associations, building control, etc.), changes to how we engage with applicants for planning permission etc. At this stage the activity related to this commitment is being governed by one of five ‘Advisory Boards’ to the Cabinet (Street Scene and Environment Services), but with the amount of decision-making and scrutiny required, we anticipate that a separate Cabinet post and Advisory Board will be required in future, following the example of many other comparable Councils (including Vale of White Horse and North Hertfordshire from the CIPFA group).

We are aware that the Council itself has presented a proposal to reduce the Council size by 11 or around 20% (from 54 to 43 members), primarily based on a series of calculations that average out the reduction in various metrics ranging from 6% to 48%. We find this algorithmic approach to be imprecise and illogical, and argue that it is a blunt instrument that fails to take into consideration the context of the changes illustrated by these figures. We are especially concerned that this proposal was only supported by the Conservative Group (who currently hold the balance of power), and was not supported by any members of the other political parties or groups.

Our proposal of reducing the number of Councillors by 4 or around 7% (from 54 to 50) has been carefully considered in order to enable appropriate governance arrangements, even taking into consideration the factors outlined above that we believe will increase the burden on Councillors in the next 10 years. Scrutiny functions will be unaffected. This proposal will protect and enhance the representational role that Councillors play in the local community, especially how they engage with people and work together across Ward boundaries.

Local Authority Profile

Please provide a short description of the authority and its setting, in particular the local geography, demographics and community characteristics. This should set the scene for the Commission and give it a greater understanding of any current issues. The description should cover all of the following:

- Brief outline of area - are there any notable geographic constraints for example that may affect the review?
- Rural or urban - what are the characteristics of the authority?
- Demographic pressures - such as distinctive age profiles, migrant or transient populations, is there any large growth anticipated?
- Community characteristics – is there presence of “hidden” or otherwise complex deprivation?
- Are there any other constraints, challenges, issues or changes ahead?

Further to providing a description, the Commission will be looking for a submission that demonstrates an understanding of place and communities by putting forth arguments on council size based upon local evidence and insight. For example, how does local geography, demographics and community characteristics impact on councillor casework, workload and community engagement?

The Borough of Tonbridge and Malling is situated in the heart of Kent, covering an area of around 93 square miles from the North Downs at Burham and Snodland in the north to the town of Tonbridge in the south. It is largely rural, with a few large settlements. Tonbridge town is the largest settlement and is home to around 40,000 residents (around 30% of the population of the Borough).

As Tonbridge town is situated at the very south of the Borough, in practice many of the residents in the rural areas, especially in the north of the Borough, do not relate to Tonbridge as their nearest big town but instead look to Maidstone or the Medway Towns (for example for work, shopping and socialising). The other main difference between Tonbridge and the rest of the Borough is that Tonbridge is not served by a Town Council, while all other areas of the Borough are parished. In practice this democratic deficit means that the Councillors representing the Tonbridge town wards have their workload (in terms of governance and scrutiny) magnified significantly as they are effectively fulfilling the equivalent governance role that parish councils fill presently. There is a Council-run 'Tonbridge Forum', made up of one Member from each of the Tonbridge Town wards, but this is an information-sharing body – not a decision-making or consultation body – and so does not function to influence and input specifically into issues impacting the town. In turn, there is also a time burden on Members representing the rural wards which in some cases span two or three parishes, and are expected to attend Parish Council meetings as well as Parish Partnership Panel meetings in order to provide a representational link.

The Borough is generally affluent, with comparatively low levels of unemployment and good household income levels. There are several areas of relative deprivation. The Borough has not been especially diverse in terms of ethnic backgrounds (the most recent data relates to the 2011 census which showed 92.4% of residents describing themselves as White British and 3.5% as another White ethnic group), however over the last 10 years there has been a marked increase in the number of people moving to the Borough from London, especially Tonbridge town with its frequent and reliable train service into London serving commuters, and as a result ethnic diversity has improved. There are slightly more female residents (51.1%) than male, and an average age of 40.7 years (slightly lower than the Kent average of 41.2 years). These demographics are not reflected in the Council, which is currently made up of 33% female Members, and an average age of 60 years.

Forecasts indicate that the population of Tonbridge and Malling is expected to grow to around 142,900 by 2028, a significant increase of around 8%. In addition, the Borough is currently undergoing a Local Plan process which we now expect will result in an increase to housing targets of 23%, which is likely to further exacerbate population growth.

Council Size

The Commission believes that councillors have three broad aspects to their role. These are categorised as: **Strategic Leadership, Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulatory and Partnerships), and Community Leadership**. Submissions should address each of these in turn and provide supporting evidence. Prompts in the boxes below should help shape responses.

Strategic Leadership

Respondents should provide the Commission with details as to how elected members will provide strategic leadership for the authority. Responses should also indicate how many members will be required for this role and why this is justified. **Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic		
Governance Model	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>What governance model will your authority operate? e.g. Committee System, Executive or other?</i> ➤ <i>The Cabinet model, for example, usually requires 6 to 10 members. How many members will you require?</i> ➤ <i>If the authority runs a Committee system, we want to understand why the number and size of the committees you propose represents the most appropriate for the authority.</i> ➤ <i>By what process does the council aim to formulate strategic and operational policies? How will members in executive, executive support and/or scrutiny positions be involved? What particular demands will this make of them?</i> ➤ <i>Whichever governance model you currently operate, a simple assertion that you want to keep the current structure does not in itself, provide an explanation of why that structure best meets the needs of the council and your communities.</i>
	Analysis	<p>Currently Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council operates a Cabinet system with the bare minimum of 6 members (including the Leader, who is also a portfolio holder). Given the significant challenges the Council faces, in our view the size and scope of the portfolios of the Cabinet Members is not sustainable, and that at the very least an additional portfolio must be established within the next year with specific responsibility for tackling the climate emergency and ensuring the Council meets its carbon neutral goal by 2030.</p> <p>Ideally, we would propose moving away from the Cabinet system which concentrates decision-making power in the hands of a small, politically unbalanced group, to a Committee system. However, we understand that this change is not within the scope of this review.</p> <p>Councillors' overriding duty is to the whole community, but they are democratically accountable to all the residents of their ward, whether they voted for them or not. Their role is to represent the residents of their ward, share in the policy and budgetary decisions of</p>

		<p>the Full Council, suggest policy improvements, and scrutinise the Cabinet’s policy proposals and their implementation. However, our experience is that policy development is delegated to officers, and that Member engagement in this process and interaction with Officers is discouraged. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over the past year, Judd Ward Members have repeatedly asked to be included in regular meetings between Officers, Tonbridge Town Team and the business community covering COVID response and management, and on every occasion this has been refused despite the fact that the central commercial area of Tonbridge High Street includes part of Judd Ward. We were informed by the Leader that there was not time or capacity for Ward Members to be involved in these meetings, and as such Tonbridge residents’ views were unrepresented. If the Leader (who is also the Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration) does not have the capacity to meet or consult with Ward Members representing Tonbridge High Street, this would suggest the scope of their portfolio needs to be reduced to allow for proper consultation. In addition, significant further reduction in Council size would likely result in further delegation to Officers, which we also believe would be unacceptable to residents. During the development of the Council’s Climate Change Strategy, Judd Ward Members provided detailed inputs and expertise by email but were repeatedly refused a meeting with the Cabinet Member responsible or the Officer lead. Their inputs were taken into consideration with no greater weight or influence than any other as part of the public consultation on the Strategy, and indeed this consultation had no perceptible influence on the final Strategy that was produced. Establishment of a separate portfolio for Climate Change would help ensure that the portfolio holder has time and capacity to fully engage with Members to take on board their feedback and contributions on behalf of residents.
<p>Portfolios</p>	<p><i>Key lines of explanation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>How many portfolios will there be?</i> ➤ <i>What will the role of a portfolio holder be?</i> ➤ <i>Will this be a full-time position?</i> ➤ <i>Will decisions be delegated to portfolio holders? Or will the executive/mayor take decisions?</i>
	<p>Analysis</p>	<p>We propose the addition of one new portfolio, with responsibility for accomplishment of the Climate Change Strategy, including the significant changes</p>

		<p>required in order for the Borough to meet our ambitious goal of carbon neutrality by 2030. This would also necessitate the establishment of an additional Advisory Board, to consist of 14 members and be politically balanced (broadly in line with the existing Advisory Boards aligned to other portfolios), and to meet at least 4 times per year in order to facilitate timely decision-making and advancement of the required program of change.</p>
Delegated Responsibilities	Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>What responsibilities will be delegated to officers or committees?</i> ➤ <i>How many councillors will be involved in taking major decisions?</i>
	Analysis	<p>Currently the Council is led by a Conservative Group with a significant majority, which has a strong influence on the culture and behaviour of the Membership. An example of this is that strategy and policy discussion often takes place in advance of public meetings, at private Group meetings. This has the effect of stifling transparency and debate, and discouraging individual Members of the majority group from voicing their views (and the views and desires of their residents) at public meetings in order to avoid contradicting the Group position. As a result, in the 12 years leading up to the most recent Borough elections in May 2019 when the majority of the leading Group was reduced, not a single motion was brought to a full Council meeting. Between May 2019 and March 2021 when there were seven meetings of the Full Council held, there have been four motions, all initiated by Members from outside the leading Group.</p> <p>We are already concerned that with the current size of the Council, the culture and Cabinet governance model means that Members are not able to adequately represent their residents for the reasons outlined above, and reducing the Council size significantly would mean these problems would be further exacerbated as decision making could be further concentrated in an increasingly exclusive leading Group.</p>

Accountability

Give the Commission details as to how the authority and its decision makers and partners will be held to account. The Commission is interested in both the internal and external dimensions of this role. **Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic	
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<p>Internal Scrutiny</p>	<p>The scrutiny function of authorities has changed considerably. Some use theme or task-and-finish groups, for example, and others have a committee system. Scrutiny arrangements may also be affected by the officer support available.</p>
<p><i>Key lines of explanation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>How will decision makers be held to account?</i> ➤ <i>How many committees will be required? And what will their functions be?</i> ➤ <i>How many task and finish groups will there be? And what will their functions be? What time commitment will be involved for members? And how often will meetings take place?</i> ➤ <i>How many members will be required to fulfil these positions?</i> ➤ <i>Explain why you have increased, decreased, or not changed the number of scrutiny committees in the authority.</i> ➤ <i>Explain the reasoning behind the number of members per committee in terms of adding value.</i>
<p>Analysis</p>	<p>Out of 54 members, only 12 have less than 75% attendance at meetings in the last year. Overall there is an average of around 80% attendance across all meetings (as illustrated in Table 2), which could lead to a conclusion that Committees and Advisory Boards could function just as effectively with fewer members. However, there is no evidence that reducing Councillor numbers would increase attendance, and so if Councillor numbers were reduced significantly the likely outcome is that Committees and Advisory Boards would be forced to function with even lower numbers as a result, impacting their ability to effectively scrutinise decisions.</p> <p>In fact, many Members attend additional meetings that they are not required to in order to speak on behalf of their residents, as well as keep up to date with Council business. It is striking to note that online meetings held over the past year (since the pandemic stopped physical meetings) have seen significantly increased attendance, as well as participation, from Members across the board. The Green Group advocates that virtual meetings (where possible in line with legal requirements) as well as online streaming of meetings should continue permanently. This can only further encourage Member engagement and indeed improving the diversity of the Membership, allowing Members from all backgrounds, including those who do not or cannot drive, those with caring responsibilities, those with underlying health conditions or disabilities, etc. to fully and safely participate in the business of the Council.</p> <p>While it is true that sometimes meetings are cancelled as illustrated by Table 3, it is not possible to draw any consistent conclusions about the reasons for this given the small sample size and widely varying range of possible justifications based</p>

on the purpose and agenda of each Committee or Advisory Board. Indeed, we argue that on many occasions meetings are cancelled for unjustifiable reasons. Some examples include:

- Some meetings are cancelled for the given reason of 'lack of business' – e.g. the Economic Regeneration Advisory Board, which was cancelled in February 2020 for this reason and not rescheduled. As a result, this Board did not meet for almost a full year (from November 2019 to September 2020). Judd Ward Members pointed out that when the Council is holding fortnightly meetings with business groups during a period of unprecedented economic pressure on our local economy but excluding local Members when they ask to be able to attend (see 'governance model' above), it cannot also make a case that there is not enough substantive business to enable this Board to meet and function as it should.
- Joint Transportation Board (Kent County Council & TMBC). This Board fails to represent the Borough geographically in terms of membership. In the past year, it has been poorly Chaired resulting in numerous complaints being made to KCC and despite a number of outstanding issues subsequent meetings have been cancelled and not rescheduled. Given the urgent challenges we face in transitioning to a greener economy through Active Travel, and the rapidly approaching deadlines for relevant grant schemes, there is no excuse for these meeting to be cancelled.

Over the course of the past 20 months, the Green Group have been asking for subcommittees or working groups to be set up to address specific geographical issues such as increasing biodiversity, flooding and transportation, to actively and positively engage Tonbridge town Members on geographically, but the leading Group have failed to engage with these requests, arguing that the existing Advisory Boards are a sufficient forum – the examples outlined in the section 'Community Leadership' illustrate why we strongly disagree. Reducing the Council size to no fewer than 50 members would still allow Members the time to form subcommittees or working groups to alleviate these issues.

We are already concerned that with the current size of the Council, delegated decision-making and lack of transparency over meeting scheduling and agendas mean that Members are not able to adequately represent their residents for the reasons outlined above, and by significantly reducing the Council size these problems will be further exacerbated as decision making will be further delegated due to a reduced number of meetings.

	<p>However, we do feel that it would be possible to make a reduction of up to 4 Councillors (from 54 to 50, around 7%), justified by the reduction in overall internal appointments over the last 10 years as illustrated by Table 4 (number of meetings down by around 6%, minimum projected meetings down by around 5%), and by a reduction the overall number of meetings and other regulatory committees illustrated in Table 5 (3, or around 6%).</p>
<p>Statutory Function</p>	<p>This includes planning, licencing and any other regulatory responsibilities. Consider under each of the headings the extent to which decisions will be delegated to officers. How many members will be required to fulfil the statutory requirements of the council?</p>
	<p><i>Key lines of explanation</i></p>
<p>Planning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>What proportion of planning applications will be determined by members?</i> ➤ <i>Has this changed in the last few years? And are further changes anticipated?</i> ➤ <i>Will there be area planning committees? Or a single council-wide committee?</i> ➤ <i>Will executive members serve on the planning committees?</i> ➤ <i>What will be the time commitment to the planning committee for members?</i> <p>The Council currently operates three Area Planning Committees which consider applications in three corresponding geographical areas, and each aim to meet 9 times per year. Every Councillor is a member of the Area Planning Committee that corresponds to their Ward location.</p> <p>In practice, meetings may be cancelled for lack of substantive business due to the extremely low proportion of applications received which are called in for consideration by any of the Committees (see Table 6) – on average around 2% of applications are called in. Some Area Planning Meetings which are cancelled because of lack of business one month, then take place the next month for an extra-long duration of over 3 hours in some cases due to a resulting backlog of applications for consideration. During Area Planning meetings with a crowded agenda, on occasion the Chair has felt the need to move to a vote before all the Members who wish to speak have had the opportunity to do so because of time constraints. We therefore suggest that the flow of applications be managed so that each application can be discussed in a way that allows every speaker and Member to have their say.</p> <p>The high proportion of decision making on planning applications to Officer is at risk of undermining residents' faith in the decision-making process. On multiple occasions members have asked for applications to be called in and they</p>

		aren't – for example, a recent issue has arisen in relation to the application of a Tree Preservation Order which Members requested to be called in for consideration by the Area 1 Planning Committee following numerous residents getting in touch to suggest the scope of the order be widened to include additional trees, but this was refused and the application was decided by officers without consultation with Ward Members. This has resulted in significant disenfranchisement and dissatisfaction of the residents concerned with the decision-making process. We suggest that the rules for calling in applications (which can currently only be done by the Ward Member for the location of the application site) be changed to allow other members to call in applications that would benefit from review – especially where these relate to developments that would impact neighbouring Wards with regards to availability of amenities etc.
Licensing	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>How many licencing panels will the council have in the average year?</i> ➤ <i>And what will be the time commitment for members?</i> ➤ <i>Will there be standing licencing panels, or will they be ad-hoc?</i> ➤ <i>Will there be core members and regular attendees, or will different members serve on them?</i>
	Analysis	We do not propose any changes to the arrangements regarding licensing.
Other Regulatory Bodies	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>What will they be, and how many members will they require?</i> ➤ <i>Explain the number and membership of your Regulatory Committees with respect to greater delegation to officers.</i>
	Analysis	We do not propose any changes to the arrangements regarding other regulatory bodies.
External Partnerships		Service delivery has changed for councils over time, and many authorities now have a range of delivery partners to work with and hold to account.
	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Will council members serve on decision-making partnerships, sub-regional, regional or national bodies? In doing so, are they able to take decisions/make commitments on behalf of the council?</i> ➤ <i>How many councillors will be involved in this activity? And what is their expected workload? What proportion of this work is undertaken by portfolio holders?</i> ➤ <i>What other external bodies will members be involved in? And what is the anticipated workload?</i>
	Analysis	We do not propose any changes to the arrangements regarding external partnerships.

Community Leadership

The Commission understands that there is no single approach to community leadership and that members represent, and provide leadership to, their communities in different ways. The

Commission wants to know how members are required to provide effective community leadership and what support the council offers them in this role. For example, does the authority have a defined role and performance system for its elected members? And what support networks are available within the council to help members in their duties? The Commission also wants to see a consideration of **how the use of technology and social media by the council as a whole, and by councillors individually, will affect casework, community engagement and local democratic representation. Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic		Description
Community Leadership	Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>In general terms how do councillors carry out their representational role with electors?</i> ➤ <i>Does the council have area committees and what are their powers?</i> ➤ <i>How do councillors seek to engage with their constituents? Do they hold surgeries, send newsletters, hold public meetings or maintain blogs?</i> ➤ <i>Are there any mechanisms in place that help councillors interact with young people, those not on the electoral register, and/or other minority groups and their representative bodies?</i> ➤ <i>Are councillors expected to attend community meetings, such as parish or resident's association meetings? If so, what is their level of involvement and what roles do they play?</i> ➤ <i>Explain your approach to the Area Governance structure. Is your Area Governance a decision-making forum or an advisory board? What is their relationship with locally elected members and Community bodies such as Town and Parish Councils? Looking forward how could they be improved to enhance decision-making?</i>
	Analysis	<p>One impact of the absence of a Town Council equivalent to the Parish and Town Councils covering the entire rest of the Borough is that Members representing Tonbridge town wards are having to fill the gap themselves. For example, in the past two years Ward members for Judd Ward located in Tonbridge Town have undertaken a number of highly involved projects that they might normally have sought the support of Parish Councillors to fulfil, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responding to detailed aspects of the Local Plan and to detailed Planning Applications many of which have been either in Judd Ward or in adjacent Wards, such as analysing every aspect of the Local Plan as 480 homes are destined for two sites including one Greenbelt site • Engaged in applications to designate a threatened local open space as a Village Green • Supporting the designation of a threatened local open space and also a Public House as Assets of Community Value • Registering footpaths as Rights of Way

- Applying for Tree Preservation Orders

These activities have been carried out by current and previous Members for Judd Ward from across the political spectrum, with limited or no support from TMBC officers, to prevent long-term irreversible damage to the Green Belt, open spaces and the natural environment.

Another significant impact of the democratic deficit in Tonbridge town is a serious lack of area governance in relation to the town. Important issues impacting the biggest town in the Borough, representing around 30% of all residents in the Borough, are currently recommended via Advisory Boards made up of a majority of Members who do not have democratic responsibility to town residents, and decided on by the 6 Cabinet members, only one of whom represents a Tonbridge town ward. There are several recent examples of decisions being made directly impacting Tonbridge town residents which failed to take into consideration considerable strength of feeling on the part of residents and the strong views and recommendations of the local Members:

- Example 1: Sale of River Lawn. This is a well-used town centre green space, which sold to developers in order to build a new medical centre, despite very significant opposition (expressed via a petition with over 3,200 signatures and a protest march with over 400 attendees which stopped traffic in the town centre, among other activities).
- Example 2: Live CCTV provision. A recent decision to review whether CCTV provision should remain live-manned or move to a lower cost, passive option (mainly impacting Tonbridge town residents and businesses) was passed by a vote which supported by a majority made up exclusively of Councillors representing Wards outside of the town, and opposed by every Councillor representing Tonbridge Town Wards.
- Example 3: Sale of public toilets. A recent exercise disposing of Public Toilets owned by the Council has resulted in consultation with Parish Councils outside of Tonbridge about taking on these facilities for a nominal sum, but no such consultation was available for Tonbridge residents who are not represented by a Town Council.

Substantially reducing the number of Councillors in Tonbridge town while they are expected and required to carry out the additional burden of plugging the democratic deficit is unacceptable. Balancing this with the need to retain equal representation for all wards (i.e. we cannot expect that

wards in Tonbridge town should have proportionally more Members to represent them than other parts of the Borough), we cannot see that a significant reduction in Members can be achieved. Until Tonbridge has its own Town Council (which we appreciate is out of scope for this review), this anomaly cannot be overcome.

Cross-working across Ward boundaries

There are a number of examples of issues where cross-working across ward boundaries is required in order to deliver efficient and optimal outcomes for residents, but where this is not taking place currently:

- Example 1: Creating a joined-up walking and cycling strategy connecting Hildenborough and North Tonbridge to the train station in South Tonbridge. Over several years we have seen a failure of Members to invest time and energy in supporting the design of a joined-up strategy for walking and cycling, which local residents are crying out for. Most recently this has resulted in significant lost opportunity to gain funding as part of the Government's Active Travel scheme.
- Example 2: Improving drainage infrastructure at our open spaces, to enable them to be accessible to the public as much as possible as well as save the Council money spent on regular flood clean-up operations.
- Example 3: Identification of sites for Climate Change Strategy activities such as wild verges to improve biodiversity, where this activity has been done in a piecemeal fashion by individual Wards without the benefit of oversight that would help with assessment and prioritisation of sites.

Any reduction in the overall number of Members, will certainly exacerbate the issues of the democratic deficit in Tonbridge town, as it will at best result in proportionally fewer (and at worst, numerically fewer) Members to represent the town's residents. It will also make the additional cross-working across ward boundaries required to deliver optimal outcomes for residents even less likely to take place, as fewer Members will have less available time to devote to this while attending more meetings and attending to a greater caseload.

Keeping the number of Members the same as current levels, or making a slight reduction to no fewer than 50 members, would allow Members the time to form subcommittees or working groups to alleviate these issues.

Casework load

		<p>The population of the Borough is expected to grow to around 142,900 by 2028. If the Council size were reduced by 20% to 43 Councillor, they would each represent an average of 3,323 electors – an increase of 25% from the 2,646 that they would represent if the Council size remained the same at 54 Councillors. If, however, the Council size was reduced to 50, the increase would only be around 8% (an average of 2,858 electors per Councillor). While we recognise that an increase the number of electors represented alone does not necessarily correspond to an increase in casework load, we believe an increase of 25% is too great to bear, but that 8% would be potentially possible due to the efficiencies provided by electronic meetings and papers, for example.</p> <p>Representative role of Councillors</p> <p>In order to best serve our Borough, we need a diverse range of Councillors – reflecting the age, gender, experience and background of our residents – so that we can understand and represent the full range of their experiences. Reducing Councillor numbers significantly will increase the workload in terms of meetings to attend, decisions to take and scrutinise, and casework load will make the role significantly harder for those who are also working full time or part-time to take up. Already the Council has a disproportionate number of older, retired Members (the average age of Members is 60 years old) and this lack of diversity is likely to get worse if the size of the Council is significantly reduced.</p>
Casework	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>How do councillors deal with their casework? Do they pass it on to council officers? Or do they take a more in-depth approach to resolving issues?</i> ➤ <i>What support do members receive?</i> ➤ <i>How has technology influenced the way in which councillors work? And interact with their electorate?</i> ➤ <i>In what ways does the council promote service users' engagement/dispute resolution with service providers and managers rather than through councillors?</i>
	Analysis	<p>Councillors each deal with casework in a variety of ways, using a range of interaction methods (email, phone calls, letters and face to face meetings with Residents and Officers). Some Councillors take a very hands-on approach to casework and work closely with Residents and Officers to resolve issues, while others pass most issues on to Officers. In the experience of the Green Group, our Officers operate as part of a very lean organization, and are often extremely busy, so on some complex issues it can take weeks or even months to resolve with current levels of Officer capacity. This has been further exacerbated by the pandemic, when Officer time and resources were redirected to COVID</p>

		response. This places a greater burden on Councillors to maintain involvement in issues and pursue resolution.
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Other Issues

Respondent may use this space to bring any other issues of relevance to the attention of the Commission.

Please find below tables referred to in the text above:

Table 1: Council size - expenditure and staffing 2010/11 - 2019/20		
Financial year	Total expenditure	Staffing (FTE)
2010/11	£73.075m	353
2011/12	£71.953m	346
2012/13	£70.348m	340
2013/14	£63.036m	324
2014/15	£59.784m	238
2015/16	£61.569m	231
2016/17	£60.481m	218
2017/18	£60.143m	213
2018/19	£60.732m	220
2019/20	£60.459m	223
Average total expenditure since divestiture of Leisure Services:		£60.886m
Difference between average and 2019/20 figures:		0.71%
Average FTE since divestiture of Leisure Services:		224
Difference between average and 2019/20 figures:		0.45%

Table 2: Summary of Member Attendance at Meetings 2019/20			
Attendance of Members 2019/20	Meetings 2019/20 (members x mtgs)	Attended 2019/20	Attendance (%)
<u>Core meetings</u>			
Cabinet	30	30	100%
Council	324	266	82%
Overview and Scrutiny Panel	72	53	74%
Area 1 Planning Committee	60	55	92%
Area 2 Planning Committee	102	79	77%
Area 3 Planning Committee	120	99	83%
Licensing and Appeals Committee	45	32	71%
Licensing and Appeals Panel	25	16	64%
Totals	778	630	81%
<u>Advisory Boards to the Cabinet</u>			
CHAB	64	44	69%
ERAB	48	37	77%
FIPAB	64	48	75%
PTAB	64	52	81%
SSESAB	80	61	76%
Totals	320	242	76%
<u>Other Committees / Partnerships</u>			
Audit Committee	36	26	72%
General Purposes Committee	42	35	83%
Joint Standards Committee	13	8	62%
Tonbridge Forum	39	36	92%
Parish Partnership Panel	52	46	88%
Joint Transportation Board	28	23	82%
Standards Hearings Panel	-	-	-
Totals	210	174	83%
Grand totals	1308	1046	80%

Table 3: Meeting cancellation breakdown 2015/16 to 2019/20			
Body	Meetings scheduled 2015/16 - 2019/20	Meetings cancelled 2015/16 - 2019/20	% cancelled
<u>Core meetings</u>			
Cabinet	35	6	17%
Council	31	0	0%
Overview and Scrutiny Panel	24	5	21%
Licensing and Appeals Committee	24	3	13%
Licensing and Appeals Panel	47	1	2%
Totals	161	15	9%
<u>Advisory Boards to the Cabinet</u>			
CHAB (goes back to June 2016)	16	2	13%
ERAB	21	6	29%
FIPAB	21	3	14%
PTAB	25	7	28%
SSESAB (established May 2016)	17	3	18%
Totals	100	21	21%
<u>Other Committees / Partnerships</u>			
Audit Committee	20	0	0%
General Purposes Committee	16	1	6%
Tonbridge Forum	12	1	8%
Joint Transportation Board	19	2	11%
Parish Partnership Panel	19	1	5%
Totals	86	5	6%
<u>Committees / Panels with limited control over agendas (e.g. planning applications, disciplinaries, etc.)</u>			
Area 1 Planning Committee	46	25	54%
Area 2 Planning Committee	45	5	11%
Area 3 Planning Committee	45	18	40%
Joint Standards Committee	20	15	75%
Standards Hearing Panel	6	1	17%
Totals	162	64	40%

Table 4: Summary of Internal Appointments 2011 vs 2020									
	No. of appointments			Meetings per year			Minimum projected		
	2011	2020	Trend	2011	2020	Trend	2011	2020	Trend
Committees	215	191	-11.2%	79	70	-11.4%	1267	1218	-3.9%
Advisory Boards and Panels	134	137	2.2%	38	32	-15.8%	486	449	-7.6%
Total	349	328	-6.0%	117	102	-12.8%	1753	1667	-4.9%

Table 5: Summary of Number of Meetings of Regulatory and other Committees 2011 to 2020

Committees	2011	2020
Area Planning Committees	Three separate APCs covering sub-regions of the Borough - each Committee meets 9 times per year (27 meetings)	No change - still 9 x 3 = 27 meetings per year
Overview and Scrutiny Committee	Meets 5 times a year	Meets 5 times a year
Community Safety Scrutiny Sub-Committee	Meets 3 times a year	N/A
Audit Committee	Meets 4 times a year	Meets 4 times a year
Standards Committee	Meets 4 times a year	Meets 4 times a year
Licensing and Appeals Committee	Meets 5 times a year	Meets 5 times a year
General Purposes Committee	Meets 3 times a year	Meets 3 times a year
Minimum meetings per year	51	48

Table 6: Proportion of Planning Decisions considered by Area Planning Committees 2019 - 2021

	Decided	Called in to Area Planning Committee 1	Called in to Area Planning Committee 2	Called in to Area Planning Committee 3	No. Total considered at Area Committees	% Total considered at Area Committees
Jan-19	196	3	3	2	8	4%
Feb-19	164	4	2		6	4%
Mar-19	139				0	0%
Apr-19	205		3	2	5	2%
May-19	172	1	3		4	2%
Jun-19	165			2	2	1%
Jul-19	212		2	2	4	2%
Aug-19	153	2	4		6	4%
Sep-19	163	1			1	1%
Oct-19	170			3	3	2%
Nov-19	186		2	3	5	3%
Dec-19	153				0	0%
Annual totals	2078	11	19	14	44	2%
Jan-20	165		2	1	3	2%
Feb-20	135				0	0%
Mar-20	135				0	0%
Apr-20	170				0	0%
May-20	140	1	1		2	1%
Jun-20	166	2		2	4	2%
Jul-20	153			4	4	3%
Aug-20	177	4		5	9	5%
Sep-20	195	1			1	1%
Oct-20	146	1		1	2	1%
Nov-20	233		1	1	2	1%
Dec-20	199				0	0%
Annual totals	2014	9	4	14	27	1%
Jan-21	207			1	1	0%
Feb-21	179		2		2	1%
Mar-21	133			3	3	2%

Summary

In following this template respondents should have been able to provide the Commission with a robust and well-evidenced case for their proposed council size; one which gives a

clear explanation as to the governance arrangements and number of councillors required to represent the authority in the future.

Use this space to summarise the proposals and indicate other options considered. Explain why these alternatives were not appropriate in terms of their ability to deliver effective Strategic Leadership, Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulation and Partnerships), and Community Leadership.

In principle we support a modest decrease in Council size, justified by the need to provide an efficient, effective and value-for-money service for electors.

In considering the appropriate future size of the Council, a number of areas have been highlighted in this submission where the current structure and functioning of the Council requires change in order to effectively deliver strategic leadership, accountability and community leadership:

- Portfolios of the Cabinet need to be reviewed, and an additional portfolio added to reflect the significant increase in governance and scrutiny required to tackle the climate emergency and achieve carbon neutrality by 2030
- Members need to be afforded more opportunity to input into and collaborate on policy development (rather than this being fully delegated to officers), and to form working groups to address the lack of Area Governance in Tonbridge town
- The flow and number of planning applications that are considered by Area Planning Committees needs to be better managed, to meet the expectations of residents and requirements of applicants on scrutiny and decision-making
- The lack of diversity of the current Councillors needs to be addressed, by encouraging more younger people, women, and ethnically diverse candidates to stand in future elections, with the goal of bringing the demographic mix of the Council closer to the proportions found in our general population.
- The challenge of balancing a lean Officer team with the capacity of Councillors to manage casework load, supporting the resolution of complex issues.

We considered the potential to decrease the Council size by up to 20%, based on the average decrease across a range of variables – including size of cabinet, scheduled Council meetings, Regulatory and Other Committees, Advisory Boards and Panels, meeting cancellation rates, non-attendance at meetings, annual appointments and budget and staffing. Ultimately, a number of these factors (size of cabinet, scheduled Council meetings, Advisory Boards and Panels, cancellation rates and non-attendance) have been discounted as not being indicative of a reduction in the scope of strategic leadership, accountability and community leadership required.

The core factors that have driven our conclusion that a reduction of 4 Councillors (from 54 to 50, or 7%) are:

- Council appointments to all Council meetings (which have reduced by around 6%)
- Number of meetings of Regulatory and Other Committees *which have reduced by around 6%)
- Annual appointments (which have reduced by around 7%)
-

Each of these factors represents a real numeric reduction in the number of Councillors required to make up the Committees and Advisory Boards required to deliver effective scrutiny.