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GOUDHURST PARISH COUNCIL (GPC) SUBMISSIONS IN RESPONSE TO THE TUNBRIDGE WELLS BOROUGH COUNCIL (TWBC) CONSULTATION AS TO THIRDS/ALL OUT ELECTIONS

A. INTRODUCTION

These are the submissions of GPC in response to TWBC's consultation as to the issue of thirds versus all out elections.

There are three principal and extremely important reasons why GPC strongly oppose elections by thirds. These are:

1. The democratic deficit which arises from thirds elections,
2. The cost of thirds elections,
3. Council continuity.

It follows from this, and has been expressed elsewhere, that GPC strongly support all out elections. We will comment on each of these points below.

B. THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

Local government represents the level of government which is closest to people and is highly valued as such. A survey by ComRes for the BBC cited by the Local Government Association in its briefing for the House of Lords debate on Local Democracy in January 2016 found that 80% of people support greater devolution to local areas and that they want decisions that affect their lives to be made by people who live and work among them.

Local democracy should ensure that local policies reflect the needs and preferences of local communities and elected local representatives should be the staunchest guardians of local democracy. The legislation relating to boundary reviews expressly recognises the need to respect the importance of local communities and need for community identity.

TWBC represents a mixture of communities and it should ensure that all of those communities are properly and equally represented. The most significant distinction which TWBC has to address is the distinction between the town and the parishes which each represent approximately 50% of the population. What is starkly exposed by the August 2022 Draft Recommendations of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) for TWBC (the Draft Recommendations) is the adverse consequences for local democracy and local communities if the decision to go for thirds elections is maintained. The inflexibility in ward size and the need for equal numbers of councillors to represent wards as a consequence of thirds elections deprives the parishes, in particular, of effective, fair and equal representation. As GPC has said elsewhere, one of the worst examples of the democratic deficit which third elections produce is in relation to the proposed splitting of Goudhurst and Kilndown, which have existed together as a single administrative unit since Saxon times, and even prior to that, and which have deep and extensive links which cannot and should not be so easily severed if the principle of local government democracy is to be properly observed and maintained.

Some communities may be pleased with the Draft Recommendations and some communities may be neutral about the Draft Recommendations, but that is not to the point. Whether there are winners or losers in the boundary review, every representative should be concerned to ensure that there is fair and equal representation across the whole of TWBC and should be prepared to not only support, but fight for this, irrespective of party political advantage. No representative who genuinely believes in the concept of community and the concept of electoral fairness should find it acceptable that some communities are being sacrificed to the advantage of others as an inevitable consequence of a decision to go for thirds elections.

Under the Draft Recommendations many of the parishes find themselves lumped together in large and geographically unwieldy conglomerates which have no links and no identity. No representative of these wards can hope to achieve any degree of success in properly representing such conglomerates and the electorates in these communities are effectively being disenfranchised.

The problems of the democratic deficit may not be so obvious in the town, but TWBC should not be prepared to, in effect, create a two-tier system where those living in the town have the benefit

of local and community based representation whereas those living in the parishes are left in an electoral black hole. There is an uncomfortably Orwellian aspect to such an outcome and it is not without good reason that other authorities have rejected thirds elections.

Wards should relate to geography and parish based communities and councillors should be known to and properly accountable to their communities.

There is also the issue of election fatigue. Despite peoples' commitment to local government this is not always reflected as well as it might be at the ballot box. The idea that residents are going to welcome the opportunity to vote every year is fanciful and there must be a real concern that one of the consequences of thirds elections is that of election fatigue, leading to lower electoral participation rates than are currently achieved.

By contrast the democratic benefits of all out elections are clear. Quite simply it is a fairer system of election and leads to fairer representation. The flexibility which all out elections offer means that ward sizes can be adapted to genuinely reflect communities and the system as is the case now, where wards are represented by a different number of councillors as is appropriate for their communities, can be maintained. Parishes like Goudhurst and its hamlets of Kilndown and Curtisden Green can be kept together, as can other communities, and the principle of electoral equality and fairness can be fully respected.

C. COST

At a time when TWBC finances are under extreme pressure and important services are under threat it cannot, on any proper view, be justified for elected representatives to expend taxpayers' money on unnecessary and undesirable elections at a cost of circa £100,000.00 per annum or circa £400,000.00 over a council term. No elector faced with a choice of delivering important services to vulnerable people would choose not to spend such a significant sum of money in such a way and instead divert it to unnecessary and paradoxically undemocratic elections and no elected representative should be prepared to make such a choice. Local government services are important and precious. They should not be so lightly squandered.

D. COUNCIL CONTINUITY

Council terms are based on a 4-year cycle. Political stability is important over such a period if meaningful and longer term plans as regards services are to be delivered. The political instability which is inherent in thirds elections will deprive TWBC of the opportunity to promote and deliver services in the longer term and risks reducing TWBC to an authority which goes for "quick fix"

solutions to gain short term electoral popularity, rather than an authority which focuses on providing sustainable and longer term solutions to the challenges which it faces. The damage that this could cause to local services and local stability is incalculable.

Local government services are by their very nature deliverable on wider horizon. They cannot properly be delivered on a narrow and time limited horizon and TWBC should not expose its electorate to compromising its services in such a way.

E. CONCLUSION

GPC believe for the reasons set out above that the arguments in favour of all out elections are overwhelming. GPC also believes that those who do not support this are failing their electorate. GPC understand if TWBC decide, on further reflection, and having further consulted the electorate, that all out elections should be adopted, that the LGBCE have indicated that they are minded to reconsider their Draft Recommendations. This gives us all an opportunity to rescue the communities that would be sacrificed by the Draft Recommendations and ensure that electoral fairness and equality is restored to TWBC for the good of the whole local electorate.

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