

Goudhurst Parish Council

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05 July 2022

Councillor Ben Chapelard

Leader of the Council
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
Town Hall
Mount Pleasant Road
Royal Tunbridge Wells
Kent, TN1 1RS

Dear Ben,

Proposed Tunbridge Wells Borough Council boundary changes

Goudhurst Parish Council (GPC) has asked me to write to you to register its concern relating to the current boundary proposals for Tunbridge Wells Borough and request that, while there is still time, borough councillors modify the proposals to make them more appropriate. The current proposals produce unsatisfactory consequences for the rural parishes. Accordingly, Goudhurst Parish Council registers an OBJECTION to the current proposals and requests that TWBC takes immediate steps to reconsider the decision made by the council in 2021 and make alternative proposals to the Boundary Commission. GPC understands that this is possible by a 2/3 vote in council and trust such a vote may be achievable.

1. GPC recognises the reduction of the number of Borough Councillors from 48 to 39 (a decision by the Commission).
2. On the basis of 39 councillors, with a voting regime of one third changing every year, Tunbridge Wells will be split into 13 wards of 7,050 electors in each, providing each ward has 3 councillors. Goudhurst Parish Council understands that it is still theoretically possible to retain some 1 and 2 member wards not voting each time (as now). If TWBC decides to change their proposal, we request that this is done to reflect "community" reality.
3. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, voted in 2021 for each new equal-sized ward to vote annually (3 out of 4 years). We request flexibility so that wards can be of different sizes, thus more transparently representing their communities.

Background.

- The current ward structure in rural areas tends to be 1 or 2 member wards which pays very close respect to civil parishes and communities.
- The proposed equal sized 7,050 elector non-community wards may require combining 2, 3 or even 4 different parishes to reach the voter requirement. This would break the very close link between councillors and their parish, cutting across historic communities.
- Goudhurst Parish Council is concerned that, contrary to Commission Guidelines, it may be impossible to meet the required new ward numbers without splitting some parishes into different borough wards.
- Most rural Parish and Town Councils are apolitical. It is probable that only the large political parties that will have election capabilities for contesting 7,050 voter, multi parish rural wards. This would significantly reduce the opportunity for worthy local individuals to be recognised and elected as borough councillors.
- It will also be difficult for individual councillors (without private offices like MP's) to be known and personally represent 7,050 electors across several different rural parishes. Three-member representation reduces individual accountability to the parish or community.
- Goudhurst Parish Council also has concerns over likely turnout in annual elections for large wards, in some cases 15 miles across, with unknown candidates to represent artificially created non-community wards. These proposals disadvantage smaller parties and independent candidates.

In the rural areas community matters. None of this was anticipated at the first consultation, which is why many voted to maintain the status quo of voting by thirds.

GPC requests

Goudhurst Parish Council is asking the borough council to review the previous decision and seek a consensus across the parties to change the proposed voting system and negotiate with the Commission to secure either different member wards (1, 2 or 3 councillor) or 'all out' elections every 4 years to better reflect the democratic choices available to the rural communities.

The Parish Council has no objection if towns wish to continue with three member wards. This change is to ensure, wherever appropriate, that more rural wards can have one councillor with c.2,350 electors, or maximum two. Thus very large non-community rural wards of 7050 electors, can be avoided. GPC does acknowledge even then this may require some boundary changes to equalise numbers.

Summary:

- GPC believes that a ward arrangement that merges a number of rural parishes into large multi-parish wards, is wrong.
- The Parish Council believes that parishes, localities, and communities should take precedence over party expedience and bureaucratic convenience.

- GPC does not agree that one size fits all. The current proposals are inappropriate for the rural areas.
- GPC does not agree that these changes should be imposed on communities where local people and local candidates are often known and will not be known in this new large-ward construction
- The Parish Council understands the Party-Political argument for the proposed warding and the greater convenience of finding 13 candidates each year but party convenience should not trump communities.
- Parishes were not briefed by the Commission. We only became properly aware of the implications recently and are now told it is “too late”.

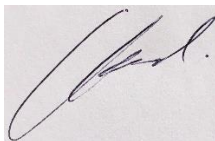
When Goudhurst Parish Council and KALC raised this in recent months, both were advised to wait until after the May election. This now appears to have been bad advice as it seems it is too late. The Parish Council has been advised to wait; “you will have the opportunity to input at the next stage” although Councillors have serious doubts that they will be given the opportunity to engage in the process and that change is unlikely.

Conclusion and Request

Goudhurst Parish Council requests that the borough council negotiate with the Local Government Boundary Commission to achieve flexibility in the warding of rural areas to allow for 1 or 2 member wards, (not voting at every occasion, just as is the case at present).

GPC requests that you and other party leaders take urgent steps at cabinet and in council to amend the current proposals to better reflect the wishes of the parishes and their communities in the warding of their area.

Yours sincerely



Claire Reed (Mrs)
Clerk and Proper Officer to Goudhurst Parish Council

Copy to:

Cllr Tom Dawlings
Cllr David Hayward
Cllr Hugo Pound
Cllr Nancy Warne
William Benson
Jane Clarke

Cllr Antony Harris, Goudhurst Parish Council