

# Goudhurst Parish Council

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## **RESPONSE OF GOUDHURST PARISH COUNCIL (GPC) TO THE DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND (LGBCE) FOR TUNBRIDGE WELLS BOROUGH COUNCIL (TWBC) DATED AUGUST 2022 (THE DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS)**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This response is by GPC on behalf of the residents of Goudhurst, Kilndown and Curtisden Green. GPC comprises 8 councillors from Goudhurst, 3 councillors from Kilndown and 1 councillor from Curtisden Green. GPC has existed as an administrative body for more than 100 years though as an ecclesiastical Parish we go back to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century and as, we refer to below, our origins as a cohesive community go back to Saxon times and before.

GPC notes with considerable concern and dismay the LGBCE's proposal to separate the historically and geographically linked communities of Goudhurst, Kilndown, and Curtisden Green and place Kilndown within a new ward comprising Hawkhurst, Benenden and "South Goudhurst" (HBSG) with which it has no discernible links and which will almost inevitably deprive the residents of Kilndown of effective representation. We would ask the LGBCE to note that the term "South Goudhurst" is unrecognisable to local residents.

We note the LGBCE's comments at para 4 of the Draft Recommendations that their three main considerations are:

- Improving electoral equality by equalising the number of electors that each councillor represents, and

- Ensuring that the recommendations reflect community identity, and
- Providing arrangements that support effective and convenient local government.

We also particularly note the LGBCE's comments that its task is to *"strike the best balance between these three considerations when making our recommendations."*

It is the view of GPC and its residents that the best balance between these three main considerations is for the Parish of Goudhurst to be kept together and that Goudhurst and Kilndown become a single member ward or Kilndown becomes part of the new Rural Tunbridge Wells (RTW) Ward. We do not accept that the proposal to jettison Kilndown off to the new HBSG ward *"best reflects communities while providing an acceptable level of electoral equality"* (para 51 of the Draft Recommendations) for the reasons set out below.

This is without prejudice to the argument which is being raised elsewhere that a system of "thirds election" as against "all out elections" deprives local communities of effective representation. GPC entirely support this view and would prefer a system of "all out elections" but the decision in this respect lies with TWBC and we can do no more than lobby for such a change, which we have been doing.

However we observe that the adverse impact of fixed 3 member wards is exposed most starkly in the case of Goudhurst and Kilndown, though there are other communities who are also adversely effected. The failure to recognise and champion our well established and cohesive communities within the context of this boundary review is of considerable concern given the importance of community focussed local government.

Our comments herein are confined to the Draft Recommendations in the context of TWBC maintaining its position as regards "thirds elections" though we understand that this may now be in doubt.

In accordance with the LGBCE's statutory function we will respond under each of the statutory categories.

## **2. ELECTORAL EQUALITY**

We note from the Draft Recommendations that the LGBCE are required to take account of projected elector numbers in 5 years' time (para 19) and that LGBCE regard a 10% variance as "*achieving good electoral equality*". We also note that electoral equality is only one factor that the LGBCE are required to take account of as part of an overarching balancing act.

GPC's alternative proposal to a single member ward, is to include Kilndown in the RTW Ward. We understand, based on projected numbers, that this would result in RTW elector numbers being increased from 6410 with the inclusion of 641 Kilndown electors, giving a total electorate of 7051. This would result in a + 15% variance.

We note from the Draft Recommendations that the LGBCE have rejected a + 18% variance at para 69, and a + 16% variance at para 105. There are also references in the Draft Recommendations to much higher variances which have also been rejected.

However at para 69 a +12% variance has been accepted and we particularly note that a -14% variance has been accepted in relation to the Cranbrook, Sissinghurst and Frittenden Ward.

We strongly contend that a + 15% variance should be acceptable in circumstances in which the community links Kilndown has with Goudhurst are so overwhelming as set out below and, as further set out below, to prevent the adverse impact on the effective representation of Kilndown residents if they are left as an isolated outpost of the HBSG ward.

## **3. COMMUNITY LINKS**

The historic and geographical links between Goudhurst and Kilndown are deep, immutable and continuing. We will refer below to the despair, concern and disappointment amongst residents that the LGBCE have proposed that our communities should be electorally split. There is disbelief within the Parish that such a proposal can have been made.

The Parish of Goudhurst has had a very stable population for hundreds of years. There has been and will continue to be little population movement which is a consequence of the limited scope for housing development in the Parish for a variety of reasons. Issues relating

to changing demographic patterns are not relevant in the case of Goudhurst and Kilndown. The stability of our population also reinforces the homogeneous nature of our community.

### **3.1 Historic Links**

We refer to the extract from Goudhurst and Kilndown Conservation Areas Appraisal (GKCAA) document published by TWBC in June 2006 (Appendix 1) which sets out in some detail the historic links between Goudhurst and Kilndown. We would ask the LGBCE to particularly note that Goudhurst and Kilndown are *“only 2 miles apart”* (para 3.1). We would ask the LGBCE to also note that Goudhurst and Kilndown are said to *“share an interconnected history and common evolution”* (para 3.1) and that *“Goudhurst and Kilndown are situated within the early Saxon administrative district of Scray Lathe and the later division of the Marden Hundred”*. (para 3.2).

The Parish Church of St Mary’s in Goudhurst is said to have been mentioned in the Domesday Book (para 3.6) and at para 3.7 the GKCAA document notes *“Kilndown ...[has] an early history allied to that of Goudhurst”*.

The GKCAA document refers at paras 3.13, 3.15, 3.16, and 3.23 to the links the Bedgebury Estate has to the communities of Goudhurst and Kilndown which continue to this day and we will comment on this aspect further below.

### **3.2 Geographical and Transport Links**

The GKCAA documents sets out at Section 4 the geographical connections between Goudhurst and Kilndown. We share a common environment and we have always worked together to preserve and enhance our environment. GPC’s Neighbourhood Development Plan which was supported by over 92 % of our residents in a recent referendum held in February 2022 was solely concerned with the future of the Parish comprising Goudhurst, Kilndown and Curtisden Green. If Kilndown was jettisoned off, as proposed, to the HBSG Ward the whole question of its *“development”* status would need to be revisited in the context of such re-warding.

### 3.3 Current Links

These deeply embedded and historic links going back to the earliest of times between Goudhurst and Kilndown have continued until today and lie at the heart of our community as we set out below:

- **Churches**

The local churches comprise the United Benefice St Mary, Goudhurst with Christ Church, Kilndown and the Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart, Goudhurst. In relation to St Mary's and Christ Church at Appendix 2 is the front page and first page of the Goudhurst and Kilndown Parish Magazine. Both communities share a monthly Parish Magazine. Please note the logo on the front page "*GKCHURCHGoudhurst&Kilndown*".

Until the 1840's there was one Church of England church serving both Goudhurst and Kilndown. Christ Church in Kilndown was built around this time and until the 1980's had its own vicar. Since then the two churches have become increasingly interconnected. Both churches share the same vicar and the congregations are interchangeable. At 9.15 a.m. on Sunday mornings Christ Church holds a traditional communion service which is attended by those from both Goudhurst and Kilndown who prefer that form of service. At 11.00 a.m. on Sunday mornings St Mary's holds a service which is more orientated towards family worship. This is attended by residents from both Goudhurst and Kilndown communities who prefer that form of service.

By way of another, and very recent, example of the interchangeable nature of the congregations following the sad death of the late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II St Mary's held a Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving on 18 September 2022. An extract from the Order of Service at Appendix 3 shows that the Anthem was sung by the choir of Christ Church, Kilndown.

The representatives of the Parochial Church Council comprise representatives from both Goudhurst and Kilndown. St Mary's and Christ Church run a number of

other facilities serving both communities such as Café Toddlers, for the little ones and their parents/carers, Blend which serves the older children and Café Connect which is an occasional lunch club for those in need. St Mary's also runs the Community Cupboard which is a foodbank serving those in need in our communities and also runs a clothing bank. The effectiveness of these facilities relies importantly on the local knowledge of those providing these of the needs of members of our communities. The breaking of these links could put support for our most vulnerable community members in jeopardy.

- **The Local Primary School**

Since the local school in Kilndown was closed in 1991 primary age children in Goudhurst and Kilndown have, subject to Kent County Council criteria, attended Goudhurst and Kilndown Church of England Primary School which is now located in Beaman Close, Goudhurst. On their website the School says "*we are at the heart of the community of the beautiful Wealden villages of Goudhurst and Kilndown*". The School community is a very important part of community life and in respect of our younger children Goudhurst and Kilndown are intertwined.

- **Bedgebury Estate**

The historic and continuing impact of the Bedgebury estate in linking the communities of Goudhurst and Kilndown cannot be understated. We have referred above to the references to the Bedgebury Estate in the GKCAA document. At Appendix 4 is an advert for a talk on Bedgebury, the Beresfords and their legacy on 29 September 2022. In this reference is made to "*the impact of the family on those who lived and worked in Kilndown, Goudhurst and the surrounding area*".

The Bedgebury estate was formerly owned by the Culpepper family. Their memorial in St Mary's Goudhurst is an important relic which the Friends of St Mary's Church charity is actively raising money for now to restore and preserve it.

Bedgebury remains an important part of the local community under the stewardship of the Forestry Commission. Many of our residents have membership

of Bedgebury so that we can fully participate in the extensive range of activities run for all ages.

- **Old Parsonage Doctors Surgery**

At Appendix 5 we attach the catchment area for the Old Parsonage Doctors surgery based in Goudhurst and as you can see it encompasses Goudhurst and Kilndown. The surgery's Patient Participation Group contains representatives from both Goudhurst and Kilndown.

- **Shops**

Other than the Quarry Centre which is a small "pop up shop" run by volunteers in Kilndown on Saturday mornings, the local shops serving Goudhurst and Kilndown comprising a food village store, post office, hairdressers, antique shop, gift shop, and dress shop are based in Goudhurst. Kilndown does not have any shops of its own.

- **Hostelries**

Other than a Michelin starred restaurant, The Small Holding, in Kilndown which serves a particular and limited client base, Kilndown has no pubs or other drinking or eating establishments. There are three pubs in Goudhurst, The Star and Eagle, The Vine and The Goudhurst Inn which serve both the Goudhurst and Kilndown communities. Goudhurst also has a bakery/tea shop serving both communities.

- **Community Groups**

A variety of community groups relating to a variety of interests serving both communities are run at the Goudhurst and Kilndown Village Halls and again the participation from Goudhurst and Kilndown residents is interchangeable. At Appendix 6 we attach a recent advert from U3a for a meeting on 21 September 2022. The advert expressly identifies the communities the Goudhurst and District U3a Branch serves including Goudhurst, Kilndown and Curtisden Green. At Appendix 7 is an advert for a recent meeting of the Goudhurst and Kilndown

History Society (the Society”). The Society also holds a number of historical artefacts from both Goudhurst and Kilndown and they are devastated at the thought that their collection will need to be broken up if these re-warding proposals proceed. For the younger ones the Goudhurst Dynamos is a football club which serves both communities as does the local scout group. The Goudhurst Club which was formerly the Ex-Serviceman’s club provides a variety of facilities and events serving both Goudhurst and Kilndown and is an important hub for our communities. The community group links between Goudhurst and Kilndown range from the very youngest to the oldest members of our community. The community groups referred to above are a small example of the many groups which serve our community.

We cannot emphasise strongly enough how closely entwined the Goudhurst and Kilndown communities are, the roots of which go back to pre-Saxon days and which still subsist today. We can see no proper basis at all for the strong community identity of our residents to be broken. We endorse the view that the LG BCE should create wards which reflect communities as it refers to in the Draft Recommendations at para 109 and we believe our community can only be properly reflected by keeping Goudhurst and Kilndown within the same electoral unit.

#### **4. IDENTIFIABLE BORDERS AND TRANSPORT LINKS**

At Appendix 8 we attach a series of maps which show the close road links between Goudhurst and Kilndown and the contrasting lack of road links between Kilndown and Hawkhurst, Sandhurst and Benenden. There are no transport links other than road links between the various communities in this area.

Within those maps we enclose a Parish Map which shows what we consider to be a clear and identifiable boundary encompassing the Goundhurst, Kilndown and Curtisden Green Boundaries. We believe any re-warding should reflect those boundaries.



## **5. PROVIDING ARRANGEMENTS THAT SUPPORT EFFECTIVE AND CONVENIENT LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

We cannot overstate our, and our residents' concerns, about the proposal to jettison Kilndown off to a ward comprising Hawkhurst, Sandhurst and Benenden and the adverse impact that this will have on our community and the effective representation of our Kilndown residents.

We have set above the deep and extensive links between Goudhurst and Kilndown. However this should in our view be balanced against the complete lack of any community links at all between Kilndown and Hawkhurst, Sandhurst and Benenden. At Appendix 6 is the U3a flyer referred to above. We would ask the LGBCE to note that the Goudhurst and District U3a area does not include Hawkhurst, Sandhurst, and Benenden. From our researches we are unaware of any community links at all between Kilndown, Hawkhurst, Sandhurst, and Benenden. We understand that our neighbours in Hawkhurst have also concluded from their researches that there are no community links at all between Kilndown, Hawkhurst, Sandhurst and Benenden.

We do not believe that Kilndown can be effectively represented as a community and geographical outpost of the HBSG Ward and we are concerned that the 600 or so Kilndown residents will be effectively disenfranchised by the current proposals.

However these are not just our fears. The Borough Councillors with whom we have spoken in Benenden, Hawkhurst and Sandhurst support our views. They recognise too that Kilndown cannot effectively be represented under their umbrella and that it should remain with Goudhurst in its electoral representation.

## **6. THE VOICE OF OUR RESIDENTS**

GPC Councillors who comprise Goudhurst and Kilndown based residents believe that the views set out above represent the overwhelming view of our residents. Many of us have had conversations with residents who have expressed their deep concerns and dismay that the Parish may be electorally split. Many of our residents are anxious about the effect this split

will have on them particularly where they rely on community support for their safety and well-being.

We are disappointed that the consultation period has taken place over August/September 2022. Being the summer period this has limited our ability to fully survey our residents. However at our recent Village Fete and at our Churches we have had a petition available which is at Appendix 9. We have also conducted an electronic survey and we have had some individual letters which are also at Appendix 9 we believe that other similar letters may have been directed to TWBC. In relation to our electronic survey we would ask the LGBCE to note that 98.62% of our 362 residents who responded did not want Goudhurst and Kilndown separated. Had there been more time available when summer holidays were not an impediment we believe the evidence of support from residents to keep Goudhurst and Kilndown together would be even more substantial.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

GPC believe that in balancing the considerations of electoral equality, the maintenance of community identity and in supporting effective and convenient local government the LGBCE can only meet its statutory duties by keeping the communities of Goudhurst and Kilndown together.

As we have said above GPC believe that this can be achieved in one of two possible ways. We observe that at para 23 of the Draft Recommendations the LGBCE comment that *“we will only move away from recommending this pattern of wards [uniform pattern of three councillor wards] should we receive compelling evidence during consultation that an alternative pattern of wards will better reflect our statutory criteria”*.

GPC ask the LGBCE to consider whether its statutory criteria will be best met by Goudhurst and Kilndown becoming a one-member ward to reflect the particular circumstances referred to above. We believe that the LGBCE’s statutory duties are best met by warding Goudhurst and Lamberhurst as a single member ward.

Alternatively and without prejudice to our primary argument above, GPC would strongly urge the LGBCE to include Kilndown in the RTW ward so that the communities of Goudhurst and

Kilndown can be kept together. It is our strong view that the resulting electoral equality tolerance being within 1% of tolerances accepted elsewhere, is fully justified to reflect the strong community identity of our residents and to ensure that the Kilndown residents are effectively represented at local government level.

If the LGBCE wish to undertake a site visit to verify the points we have made above we would be happy to facilitate this and we would be happy to address any queries which the LGBCE may have.

7 October 2022