

## Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

### Personal Details:

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### Comment text:

We write to express our grave concerns about the proposed changes to the number of Councillors within Tunbridge Wells Borough and also to the related changes to Ward boundaries. The proposed voting (annually by thirds), on a reduced number of councillors (13 wards with 3 members) requires the creation of large wards. In several cases, these are 14 miles across and comprising in one case 4 different village communities. Further, existing towns and Parishes are split in two, with for example, 1/3rd of Goudhurst placed in the Hawkhurst ward and Southborough split in two down its High Street, initiated to achieve equal numbers. These new wards are NOT community based; they cut across and ignore communities. Under these proposals for the restructuring of the borough electoral wards, from 2024 onwards, close community connection in the parished areas will be severed. With the number of borough councillors is being reduced from 48 to 39, fewer councillors will represent more voters. Further, as fewer councillors represent more voters, and TW is growing by tens of thousands, representation will become more remote, less community focussed and probably more political. We will also be voting, every year, to elect one of three councillors in 13 equal size 7,000+ voter borough wards. To be democratic, everything must be equal we are told, even if this results in towns chopped apart or, wherever deemed expedient, villages glued to towns producing wards up to 15 miles across. Kilndown and Sandhurst have been appended to the Hawkhurst ward and the remainder of Goudhurst stuck together with Lamberhurst, Horsmonden, Brenchley and Matfield to create the ward of Rural Tunbridge Wells. Voter numbers might be roughly similar but of community identity - little. This will make it very difficult in future for individual communities to be represented by locally known individuals. The party label will be the decider. The majority of local Parish councils affected think this is a step backwards - it's just about numbers, thus missing the other, perhaps more important, criteria for districting which are subsumed by it. The voting system matters. Whilst the Borough and Parish councils just seem to get on with things and most people get on with their lives, except when a bus does not run, there is a hole in the road, or a planning application offends us but there is more to it than that. If one ignores it all till crisis arises, it is often too late which is probably why so many people - hundreds - took part in the creation of Neighbourhood Development Plans across our Towns and rural areas, including here in Brenchley and Matfield. We could do something about our future, we took notice, and we prepared our Plans. If these proposals are supposed to be more efficient and will save public money, we would suggest the contrary. Annual elections triple the cost of holding elections, plus councillors' expenses and allowances will need to be increased to compensate for the significantly increased cost of serving large areas, attending 3 or 4 times as many council meetings etc even if candidates can be found willing to make the hugely increased commitment required to serve unfamiliar territory and communities. The boundary proposals will affect our local communities in many ways; these proposals seriously affect us. We wish to preserve both the democracy and character of our communities. All the Tunbridge Wells rural parishes will be lumped together into three large non-community Borough Council wards, voting each year. These proposed new wards, 14 miles across, will no longer have representatives elected by their local parish and local communities but instead by large 7,000 voter, impersonal units. To achieve equality of numbers, most local communities will be added to several others and/or split into different wards thus: Kilndown is split from Goudhurst and added to Hawkhurst, Benenden and Sandhurst; and the rest of Goudhurst added to Lamberhurst, Horsmonden, Brenchley and Matfield, Speldhurst will be split into two different wards That may achieve nearly equal sizes but certainly loses the sense and identity of individual village communities There will be little net saving from the overall reduction in councillor numbers when balanced by the additional cost of annual elections and increased councillors' allowances. So, unless it is changed, we are heading for large rural non-community wards, where locally recognised individuals will be submerged by party labels and with every village being asked to vote every year, at much greater annual cost. Will this really improve locally representative

democracy or indeed stable long-term planning, when councillors and their parties are in perpetual election mode? We sense that a number of Borough Councillors and indeed many others who initially supported some aspects of the initial proposals are now have serious second thoughts. What has transpired was not thought through properly and therefore not anticipated. We realise that changes at this late date may delay implementation of new warding proposals but believe the primary objective of elections is democracy and reconsideration of the proposed changes would significantly improve it. On behalf of Brenchley and Matfield, we wish to request these proposals are suspended, reviewed and changed.

**Uploaded Documents:**

None Uploaded