

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

Personal Details:

Name: Linda Hall

E-mail: [REDACTED]

Postcode: [REDACTED]

Organisation Name: Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

Comment text:

Please see my comments below in the uploaded file. As a member of the Planning Cttee and the Planning Policy Working Party for the last 20 years, and because I have served as a borough cllr for both Cranbrook and Benenden for 17 years and now Goudhurst and Lamberhurst for three years, I have much to say, as my experience is wide. As Heritage Champion for the whole TWBC area I am also well acquainted with the town of TWells, which is why I have made comments involving some of the new wards in TW town.

Uploaded Documents:

None Uploaded

Boundary Commission (B.C.)1. Draft proposals for redrawing the boundaries of TWBC wards (August 2022)

<https://www.lgbce.org.uk/all-reviews/south-east/kent/tunbridge-wells>

As a resident of, and TWBC cllr for, Goudhurst and Lamberhurst, I shall address their concerns first. Then I shall take a look at the BC's draft proposals for the town of TWells.

1. The Boundary Commission plan for Goudhurst in TWBC has distressed and even incensed the residents of Kilndown who are to be hived off to three other parishes (Hawkhurst, Sandhurst and Benenden) with whom they have no ties of any kind, historic, social or otherwise. Currently, the close link between Kilndown & Goudhurst is shown by the fact that 3 Kilndown (as well as one Curtisden G) residents serve on the Goudhurst Parish Council.
2. The Boundary Commission draft proposals seem to run counter to what Cllrs were told in the two briefings last year, which is that the B.C. never divides genuine communities with a distinct identity and community cohesion. It seems we are to be destroyed on the rack of mere arithmetic. Furthermore, to change our name to 'T. Wells Rural' denies our identity, because we are distinct and different, not just from T.Wells town but from all the surrounding villages. Goudhurst dates at least from Saxon times.
3. Goudhurst is a cohesive, integrated community with a distinctive identity to match. It has a small village centre and two satellite hamlets, Curtisden Green to the north and Kilndown to the south. We are linked geographically, historically and socially through community events, local shops, the pharmacy, bakery, GP surgery, nursery school, newsagents, village store, hairdressers, 3 pubs and a parish hall, three churches, to name but a few. Additionally, there are a large number of clubs and societies such as the Goudhurst & Kilndown History Soc., the G & K Horticultural Soc., G & K Amateur Dramatic Soc., G & K scouts, tennis club, junior football club, etc. The church (Christchurch) at Kilndown is linked to Goudhurst St Mary's in a joint benefice, while educationally the primary school in G is called the G & K PS. Kilndown, like Curtisden Green, no longer has any shops of its own nor a pub, so that residents are required to visit G for their needs. Moreover, to lump Kilndown and Bedgebury with HH, S and B **will actually reduce the effectiveness of electoral representation**, as the time it would take Cllrs to oversee this enormous ward would exceed any Cllr work in towns like Cranbrook or T Wells, because our rural settlements are so widely scattered. Additionally, Cranbrook and T.Wells have pavements.(I will define their importance later.)
4. Cllrs were assured in the briefings last year that 'equality' of arithmetical size (number of residents per Cllr) would not trump the connections of a local community. This current draft is an inappropriate and unnecessary response to a mere arithmetical problem. The draft also talks of 'good road links' which locals think do not exist for Kilndown to get to Benenden or even HH or S.
5. I presume that the few extra voters from Kilndown and Bedgeberry that justify adding K to HH, S & B are deemed to be necessary to make up the ideal number of

residents that each councillor must represent. Except that in the town of T. Wells the majority of the wards will not reach the straitjacket of 2,335 even by 2028! A town is where the ideal number is more easily obtainable, as the removal and addition of a few extra local streets will do little to upset the townspeople's sense of identity, as they see themselves as members of Royal TW town instead of, for example, St John's ward. T. Wells town has a Town Forum which includes volunteers from all parts of the town. I notice from the B.C. maps that there is a small ward in the very centre of T. Wells town, to be called RTW-Grosvenor /Hilbert, the streets of which could be reallocated to the adjacent wards of which there are at least five. That would save 3 extra cllrs, which could then be allocated to the rural wards, so that they could be kept smaller in geographical size and so that Goudhurst would not have to lose Kilndown. In fact, looking closely at the T. Wells numbers, it seems the B.C. are being much more lenient to the urban areas than to the rural ones. There are six wards in the centre of T. Wells, four of which do not attain your required number, two of which fall very far from it even by 2028. Those are RTW-Grosvenor/Hilbert at -10% and North Woods at -9%. Surely their streets could be allocated to the adjacent wards. That would free up six cllrs for the rural wards. Pembury which you have merged with Capel, which is due to have a 5000 house garden village in the new Local Plan(and was featured on 7.10.22 in the World at One, BBC Radio 4) will be the largest in TWBC and yet have only three Cllrs.

6. In addition to this, according to the draft plan, the rest of the parish of Goudhurst will be lumped together with 4 other villages--Horsmonden, Brenchley, Matfield and Lamberhurst. All these villages are more ancient than TW town. This huge combination will mean we shall more than satisfy the numbers rack on which we are being stretched. Also, there will be 5 Parish Councils for Cllrs to have to keep informed of what TWBC is doing in their name. Although attending PCs is a courtesy, it will mean that rural Cllrs will be very seriously over-stretched, which the urban areas in TW will not be subject to, as luckily they do not have PCs. In addition, Cllrs would not be able to attend PC meetings as Goudhurst, Benenden and Hawkhurst, to name only 3, as all meet on the second Monday of each month.
7. In your public comments section, I notice that Garry Pethurst of Cranbrook and Sissinghurst PC made an excellent suggestion which you do not appear to have considered. He suggested the Boundary Commission **could indicate the need to level up**. To achieve that, Paddock Wood and Southborough should have fewer Cllrs on the TWBC, because they have their own town councils and their own budgets. Isn't that what the B.C. is doing with the Parliamentary constituencies, especially in Wales and Scotland, which now both have their own parliaments/assemblies and therefore do not need as many representatives in the Commons as hitherto?
8. Currently Goudhurst and Lamberhurst ward is geographically the largest in the borough, each with a huge hinterland, partly because their residents are scattered throughout the two parishes, down far-flung country lanes, not just in, or close to, the two main villages; indeed, some lanes in Lamberhurst are located in East Sussex's postal district! While many of the actual roads, as opposed to lanes, are major thoroughfares like the A21 and A262 with torrents of traffic at all times of the

day, while they have no pavements yet many houses along them. All this makes canvassing and visiting constituents very difficult. This is one reason why the villages' clubs and societies regularly organise events to bring residents together, like a cinema club, which uses the parish hall. Also the 7 pubs in these two villages act as meeting places for the residents.

9. By 2028, however, the new ward of Goudhurst, Brenchley, Matfield, Horsmonden and Lamberhurst will be the third largest in the borough in relation to the number of residents per Cllr(2470), exceeded only by Rusthall(2600) and Southborough and Bidborough (2500). The great advantage for R and S&B is that they are more compact and tightly knit with the benefit of pavements.
10. I should like to suggest that, as part of Bedgebury is already within Cranbrook's boundary, the part that is in Goudhurst could effectively be added to Cranbrook, because a -14 variance for Cranbrook, Frit and Siss is excessive. Matfield is adjacent to Pembury along its eastern edge and would make a better bedfellow than Capel/Five Oak Green which is a long way to the north and being rural could be linked to Bidborough and Southborough.

Numbers

There are two lots of numbers involved in these proposals: the first is the reduction of the number of Cllrs from 48 to 39 and the requirement that each Cllr represents 2,330 ward members by 2028.

1. TWBC Cllrs took the decision at a Full Council meeting that we should retain our current number of Cllrs. This was supported by the public consultation, some of whom actually thought that given the huge number of houses we are committed to in the new local plan (17,000+), we should actually **increase** the number of cllrs. Previous to this vote, the officers decided we should reduce to 39 which was then endorsed by cabinet and as a result has since been picked up by the Boundary Commission. This magic number is divisible by three so that each ward can be given 3 cllrs. This is to make a fetish of numbers and of 'equality'. Most importantly, it is not democratic for an unelected body like the B.C. to over-rule a democratic decision of the Full Council. Currently we have some wards with 3 Cllrs, some with 2 (as in G&L) and four with one Cllr each. No resident has complained about this disparity. We also voted at Full Council to retain elections by thirds rather than adopting all-out every fourth year. We have since been informed that, if we opt for all-out elections, then we could have some wards with 3 cllrs, some with 2, and some with 1 Cllr or even all with one. **This sounds as if someone is trying to force us into a corner.** Is it legal for the B.C. to ignore the democratic vote of Full Council?
2. As far as the numbers go, I would remind the B.C. that in Parliamentary constituencies compensation has always been given to remote rural areas, which required much travelling time in seeking constituents out, such as Charles Kennedy's constituency in north west Scotland, which had a mere 24,000, while the Surrey Heath MP represented at least 70,000. It seems to me that the B.C. is going to crucify us on the altar of 'equality' which does not equate with 'equity'. Surely the

two must be held in balance, because fairness requires compensation for the much larger distances that rural areas cover with no aid from urban pavements, which means we have to take to our cars, even though parking and passing places are rare, and bikes are not safe. When I was TWBC Cllr for the town of Cranbrook, whenever I ventured out to shop, to go to church, or to visit the library, I would be stopped by residents to tell me what they approved of, or not, that the Council was doing. **By their very nature, urban areas provide greater opportunity for engagement with our public.** Rural areas do not. It appears you have made no allowances for this. In fact, their scattered nature militates against that. Pavements are an excellent conduit for feeling the public pulse. We don't have that advantage in the rural wards so that, again, compensation should be given.

3. Within the next few years we will have at least another 35-40,000 residents. Why cut the number of Cllrs now? It doesn't make sense. The B.C. needs greater flexibility, not tying us into a numerical straitjacket.
4. Full Council also voted for the thirds system of elections, as it is more democratic than all out every 4 years. This is because **it gives the voters a greater influence in decision making.** We would, in fact, be a bankrupt council now, if we had converted to all-out elections some time ago, since the decision in 2015 to build a new Town Hall/Office block and Theatre was finally voted down in 2019 at Riba stage 4, thanks to the many cllrs in the three main parties changing their minds. Because of this decision, the ruling Cons. party lost over 30 Cllrs in only 4 years, with the result that it no longer holds power. The voters were able to succeed in their objections to this excessively expensive and unnecessary project, only thanks to elections by thirds. Riba stage 4 was the last stage before all contracts were due to be signed.
5. Finally, three cllrs per ward of c7000 residents might be acceptable, if they were all of the same party, as they could then divide the responsibilities among each other to service the numbers, but this is not possible when one or two of the three represent different parties, which could mean each cllr would have to service the whole 7000, largely because politics has become more party political in the last ten years. This would make serving one's community exceptionally difficult for each individual cllr and actually reduce electoral representation.