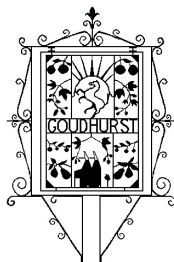


Goudhurst Parish Council

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03 November 2021

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England
35 Great Smith St
LONDON
SW1P 3BQ

Numbers of Elected Councillors and the Size of Wards

The Principal Authority for the Parish of Goudhurst is Tunbridge Wells Borough Council.

This matter was an Item discussed at our recent Parish Council meeting and Council has asked me to write to you to express our concerns regarding the current **Commission Review** by the commission of councillor numbers and ward boundaries.

This Parish Council is concerned that there is clearly a misunderstanding by many in the community regarding the options available and the subsequent interpretation given to their submissions.

- Much of the public response and press coverage has been driven by the rather one-side Borough Council briefings to the public. These appear to us to be very clearly written to show the cost of the present arrangements (councillors, wards and frequency) against the serious financial position of the Borough Council. Our view is that Officers and Cabinet are attempting to drive the conclusion that we have too many costly elections and councillors. It is a heavily **biased message**.
- This has been reinforced by the Borough Council and the local media coverage suggesting that the majority of electors prefer a change in the arrangements. We believe this is a gross misrepresentation of the public consultation. Despite this pressure most people want councillor numbers **to stay the same** or additional councillors. Only a minority c45% wanted a reduction.
- A majority of the public would like the ward system to remain the same. What they meant was **“don’t change it”** and keep wards and the frequency of elections the same thus acknowledging that in some wards with one or two councillors there would not always be elections each time (just as now). Few of us understood that if the Commission policy imbeds identical sized wards all voting at the same frequency then the Commission would impose significant changes to ward size and amalgamation of wards. That is not what most people thought they were voting for when rejecting ‘all out’ elections.

- An outcome that results in a significant adjustment to ward boundaries and a reduced number of councillors, shoe-horned in, would be the exact opposite of what the public wants. (This is substantiated in conversations with electors when implications were properly explained). Strangely, it would appear to suit the Borough officers promoting it (concerned about their deficit, in reality savings on election costs would be a very minor help and anyway that is the price of **democracy – it costs**), and the major parties who would clearly expect to benefit most.

This Parish Council wishes to suggest that the Boundary Commission should be mindful that:

- The Borough of Royal Tunbridge Wells splits into **two significant parts**. The town of Royal Tunbridge Wells currently represents c55% of the total population and the rural communities c45% including the smaller towns of Paddock Wood and Cranbrook. A solution that may suit the former is completely contrary to the needs of the latter. Consequently, a **“one solution fits all”** would ignore the complex nature of this mixed town and country Borough and therefore contrary to natural justice.
- The smaller towns and especially the villages are communities, people, leaders and councillors are “known” to many in their communities. Many are voted for as known individuals. Party labels are less meaningful. Individuals count. This is much less so in the towns where voting is largely party and not person.
- The bundling of wards to produce large wards (and perhaps fewer councillor numbers in fewer large wards voting by a third) would at a stroke eliminate the **community basis of current rural representation**. This is neither what the communities understood or thought they were voting for, nor what most people want.
- What **we want** is either the retention of the present wards and voting system, or a hybrid allowing the villages to retain their identities possibly single or dual member every 2 to 4 years. This should be perfectly possible with an intelligent and creative implementation of the rules.
- What we **do not want** is:
 1. A bureaucratically predetermined solution undemocratically imposed:
 2. Dilution of Councillor community identity. This is more important than blindly implemented ward populations:
 3. Large wards that achieve equality of numbers but bundles separate and different communities together, disconnecting with individuals and reinforcing a party-political determination of representation.

We suggest that these views also reflect those of several of our neighbouring parishes, expressed by their chairmen at a recent meeting of the Tunbridge Wells Area Committee of the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC).

We look forward to your comments or perhaps a discussion.

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Anthony Harris,

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