

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

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Comment text:

I attach my comment as a Word file. Councillor Mrs Dariel Francis,

Uploaded Documents:

Download (https://consultation.lgbce.org.uk/download_document?file=draft%2F1665157489_DF+personal+submission+to+LGBCE.docx).

I write as a resident of High Brooms for over twenty years, and currently a Councillor for the High Brooms ward of Southborough Town Council. Residents of High Brooms and Southborough alike have expressed themselves bewildered and dismayed by the LGBCE's proposal to sever High Brooms from Southborough, and annexe it to an unparished part of Tunbridge Wells, in a new Borough ward to be called 'Tunbridge Wells North'. They see it as something which could only have been put forward by those who have never lived here and do not understand the place.

High Brooms grew up as a company town in the last 20 years of the nineteenth century, when Frank Weare, the Methodist owner of the High Brooms Brickworks, started building houses and a chapel for his workers around the works. The railway station, originally for transport of bricks, raw materials etc, was called **Southborough** Station at the time, only being renamed High Brooms in 1925. It has always formed a distinct community within Southborough, itself a Saxon settlement originally administered from Tonbridge, not Tunbridge Wells. The latter's existence separate from either Tonbridge or Tunbridge Wells is jealously guarded and protected. In this connection I would draw the Commissioners' attention to the lively debate at Tunbridge Wells Borough Council's Extraordinary Meeting on 5 October, see webcast at:

<https://democracy.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=134&MId=5348>

where the considered views of Councillors, following consultation with their own residents, are vividly expressed.

I suggest that this is better evidence than the impression gained by LGBCE personnel which has resulted in the misconception that there is some ambiguity about '*where Southborough [or, more accurately, High Brooms] ends and RTW starts*'. In fact, residents actually perceive High Brooms as including the triangle of roads bounded by Southview Road, Woodland Road and the north end of Silverdale Road, despite their having been assigned to make up numbers for St John's ward in some previous ward boundary scheme. (See many entries on the High Brooms Society's website such as <https://highbroomssociety.wordpress.com/2013/09/26/high-brooms-village-green/> and a recent news report about the Toc H Hall on Cambrian Road: <https://www.inyourarea.co.uk/news/community-anger-at-plans-to-demolish-toc-h-hall-in-high-brooms/>). Residents do not see High Brooms as merging into Tunbridge Wells, but rather that Tunbridge Wells does not start until beyond the railway bridge roundabout branching into Silverdale Road.

The Civic Centre

It would be a tragic irony if, no sooner had the new £13M Civic Centre for Southborough & High Brooms, toiled for by generations of Councillors since the 1980's, been completed (September 2021), than a large number of its High Brooms citizens were to be hived off into a different borough ward. The buildings comprise the STC offices, the community hall, 3 meeting rooms, the library, the local GPs' 'state of the art' medical centre, a chemist's shop and a new sports pavilion, and the opening ceremonies naturally featured speeches from schoolchildren and the elderly from both High Brooms and Southborough. I know that everyone is relieved that the long wait is over, and proud of the new facilities - they regard all of these as 'their' town amenities. All local amenities, from the playgrounds in High Brooms to the cemetery and Common in Southborough, are of course administered by STC, and the residents of High Brooms pay the parish precept for the upkeep and maintenance of the entire parish. High Brooms families belong to the football clubs using the pitches and the new sports pavilion; they rent STC's allotments, which under LGBCE proposals are to be separated off in 'new Southborough'; and may choose to be buried in Southborough cemetery.

LGBCE officers may also be unaware of the town twinning of Southborough and High Brooms with Lambersart in France. This bond of friendship is overseen and encouraged by the Southborough and High Brooms District Overseas Friendship Association (SHDOFA) who organise regular visits to Lambersart. Exchanges involve members from both Southborough and High Brooms. In short, the Lambersartois regard their friends from Southborough & High Brooms as coming from one single community.

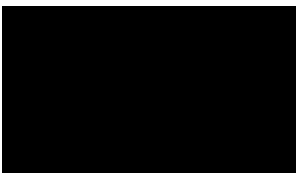
One of the roads on Barnett's Wood housing estate (also slated, in the LGBCE draft, to be removed and annexed to TW North), was named Lambersart Close in 1997, to celebrate five years of the town twinning, and two rooms in the Civic Centre are named the Brickworks and Lambersart rooms, in honour of this and the town's industrial history. It should be recognised that the history and geography of Southborough and High Brooms have been intertwined from the beginning, and it is wrong to attempt to disengage them in pursuit of 'electoral equality'.

Councillor representation

Under the draft proposals, nearly 1/3 (5) of STC's 18 councillors would be from the High Brooms part of the parish, which for borough ward 'electoral equality' purposes alone it is proposed to park in the new 'Tunbridge Wells North'. High Brooms is the fourth most deprived ward in the borough, and its residents are disproportionately elderly, on benefits, disabled and users of the Friday 'community larder' at the Chapel on High Brooms Road. They may travel less outside the ward than residents of Southborough; and it is therefore of rather more concern to them that they should have a Borough councillor who is primarily interested in their concerns, their financial struggles, their access to services and amenities. These residents will continue to pay the parish precept, but will start to question why they do so, if their Borough councillor has at least one foot in more affluent Tunbridge Wells and may have less interest in, for example, promoting public transport links with their GPs in Southborough Civic Centre. They are not and never have been anything other than part of the parish of Southborough; and they do not deserve to be stripped out to artificially make up the numbers for some new 'Tunbridge Wells North', as proposed by the LGBCE.

For all of the above reasons, I applaud STC's request that Southborough and High Brooms should remain a single entity, within the existing parish boundary. STC's proposal for 2 X two-member wards of approximately 4,600 electors each, to be named Southborough North and Southborough and High Brooms, makes perfect sense. I observe that neighbouring Speldhurst/Bidborough/Langton Green is also of a size (4914) to benefit from a 2-member ward solution, and wish them well if, as a distinct and more rural community, they choose to pursue that option.

Councillor Mrs Dariel Francis



7 October 2022