

Response to Local Government Boundary Commission on the proposed Pembury and Capel Ward by Capel Parish Council and Councillor Hugh Patterson Borough member for Capel

1. Introduction

While the Commission has paid due attention to the issue of electoral equality the recommendations for these parishes do not pay sufficient attention to community identity nor do they provide efficient community representation. On the Commission's own observations: *"We acknowledge that Capel and Pembury parishes each have their own different characteristics and we recognise the strong views made that these communities should each be in wards of their own...We recognise that Pembury and Capel parish may not have strong community links together...."*

However, the recommendations do not act on these observations. The goal of reflecting strong community identity has in this case been trumped by the requirement for electoral uniformity, and we believe this should be reconsidered and an exception to the general pattern of warding should be made in this case.

2. Community Identity:

- i) Pembury is a suburb of Tunbridge Wells (albeit a parished one) with which it has a close relationship and good transport links. On the other hand, Capel looks more to Tonbridge, Paddock Wood and to an extent Maidstone, as well as beyond Pembury (which has limited retail facilities) to Tunbridge Wells. The A228 which runs south from Capel towards Tunbridge Wells bypasses Pembury, so the settlement is not a destination for shopping, churches, or sports clubs for Capel residents, with which it has no public transport links.
- ii) It seems perverse to link Capel's representation to Pembury at a time when the submission local plan envisages expansion of Paddock Wood into East Capel, a process that the submission Local Plan sees as starting well before 2028. A link with Paddock Wood would be thus more logical if Capel were to lose its own single representative. It is worth noting that Capel's representation on Kent County Council is in a division with Paddock Wood and the rural villages to the east and not with Pembury. That decision was based partly on a community of identity. The vast bulk of the population of Capel Parish is in Five Oak Green and the surrounding settlements, whereas the south of the ward adjoining Pembury is geographically large but very sparsely populated, and community links with Pembury are minimal.
- iii) Furthermore, at a time of uncertainty in Capel parish arising from the TW Local Plan proposals in both East Capel and Tudeley (which have the potential to transform life in the parish and affect peoples' lives for years) residents will need a councillor who understands the community's needs and aspirations to be able to communicate their view to Tunbridge Wells Borough and other authorities. The issues arising from the new developments may not be the highest priority for councillors who are based 4-6 miles away in Pembury and elected largely on votes cast in Pembury. The level of political engagement in Capel is historically the highest in the Borough with a 53% turnout in the last election in 2021. Every Capel Councillor since the 1974 reorganisation has been a local resident (with one brief exception), politics in the ward are local and personal as the councillor represents a community with a quite different focus from other parts of the Borough, whose historic links lie with Tonbridge and to an extent with Paddock Wood but not with the communities south of the Medway Valley.
- iv) Capel's interests are unlikely to be well represented by councillors whose electorate would be voters who live in another completely different parish. There would be no incentive for political parties to select candidates living in Capel being smaller and more remote from Tunbridge Wells. It is likely that under the present electoral system that all three councillors would eventually come from the largest settlement (Pembury). There is no guarantee under this

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system of election that at least one councillor in this three member ward will have close ties to or any understanding of the issues in Capel.

3. Effective and Convenient Representation:

- i) The last bus service serving both Capel Parish and Pembury was withdrawn in April 2022 and there is no public transport linking the two parishes. While it is possible to represent electors in Pembury without access to private transport (as has happened in the past) it would be impossible in Capel given the size and the rural nature of the ward. For example, how would a councillor based in Pembury without their own transport be able to represent constituents in Tudeley, six miles away in the middle of the Low Weald (or indeed vice versa)?
- ii) It is geographically a huge ward. This would also make effective representation difficult as it stretches from an industrial estate on the edge of Tonbridge to the county boundary on the far side of the A21, and includes part of Paddock Wood. The addition of district of Paddock Wood means an already large ward will be even bigger and will require councillors to manage relationships not only with two very different parish councils but also with Paddock Wood Town Council. It will be challenging and surely unrealistic to expect councillors to effectively represent a suburb of Tunbridge Wells, a rural parish and a part of a fast growing town all in one ward.

4. An Alternative Solution

We suggest an alternative solution of two wards splitting three councillors:

- i) **Capel and Paddock Wood South Ward** (taking in the area from Paddock Wood proposed by the commission in this draft as well as the civil parish of Capel). There would be 2400 electors by 2028, (not all the houses are built yet in 2022) electing one Councillor – so would fit the Commission's figure of 2334 per councillor almost exactly. This would better fit community identity especially as the proposed East Capel development lies across the road from 'south Paddock Wood.'
- ii) **Pembury Ward** on the present parish boundaries which would be a two member ward. This would allow the Commission to keep its figure of thirty nine councillors and would achieve equality of representation albeit spread over two wards.

Elections would take place in the same years as Parish Council elections in the respective wards with an election in Pembury in the third year. This would ensure effective and convenient representation.

5. Summary:

In summary the need to maintain strong community identity and effective and efficient local community representation means these communities would be more effectively represented separately and there are good reasons to adopt an exception to the general warding pattern in this case. **We believe the issue of strong community representation trumps the need for a uniform pattern in this case.**

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

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Comment text:

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