

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council**Personal Details:**

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Comment text:

Please find attached the response from Hawkhurst Parish Council on the proposed warding arrangements. I would be grateful if you could acknowledge receipt of our comments. Many thanks, Clare Escombe Chairman, Hawkhurst Parish Council

Uploaded Documents:

Download (https://consultation.lgbce.org.uk/download_document?file=draft%2F1665321592_Hawkhurst+Parish+Council+Response+to+LGBCE+Draft+Recommendations+Report+for+TWBC.pdf)

Hawkhurst Parish Council Response to LGBCE Draft Recommendations Report for TWBC

Hawkhurst Parish Council (HPC) is grateful for the opportunity to comment on these proposals. We appreciate that the Commission has taken account of our response at the first stage of the consultation. However, we do not feel that the current proposals work for the eastern area of the borough, where the wards are geographically very large.

We recognise that TWBC's decision to retain its existing system of election by thirds means that there is a presumption in legislation that there will be a uniform pattern of three-member wards. HPC strongly believes that were TWBC to move to all-out elections, the flexibility to have a mix of one, two and three-member wards would result in better local representation. We appreciate that this is not within the Commission's remit at this time.

However, on Wednesday 5th October 2022, Tunbridge Wells Borough Councillors voted in favour of consulting on a change to all-out elections. In light of this, we request that the Commission can pause its review of warding arrangements to allow time for any changes to the electoral system to be taken into account. We feel that without the constraints of three-member wards, it should be possible to identify a ward pattern that takes far more account of local community identity and is a better basis for local democracy.

Recognising that the Commission might decide against pausing the process, the following comments relate to the current proposals on the assumption that three-member wards will be required.

We note that the aim is to deliver a good pattern of wards which

- provides good electoral equality
- reflects community identity and interests of local communities
- is based on strong, easily identifiable boundaries
- helps the council deliver effective and convenient local government.

We would like to suggest an alternative pattern of wards that better reflects the community identity of our parishes.

The current proposal is for a large ward comprising Hawkhurst, Sandhurst, Benenden and South Goudhurst. We are concerned that this is too large a geographical area to be effectively represented by three councillors, especially given the contrasting nature of the settlements.

However, our main concern is that there is no link between "South Goudhurst" and the parishes of Hawkhurst, Sandhurst and Benenden. From a local perspective, it makes no sense to include "South Goudhurst" in this ward. We do not share facilities, and the road network does not encourage movement between "South Goudhurst" and the three other parishes in the ward.

Kilndown/Bedgebury Cross currently form part of Goudhurst Parish. Therefore, residents in this area are represented by Goudhurst Parish Council. The local primary school is Goudhurst and Kilndown CE of Primary School. We are aware that parishioners from Goudhurst are unhappy that the proposals split their parish between two wards.

Hawkhurst residents have also raised concerns about the geographical extent of the proposed ward.

On paper, it may appear that the A21/A268 provides a convenient road link between "South Goudhurst" and Hawkhurst. However, both the Flimwell crossroads (junction of the A21 and A268) and Hawkhurst crossroads (junction of the A268 and A269) are operating well beyond their capacity and suffer from severe congestion.

Consequently, Hawkhurst would not be a natural choice for residents of "South Goudhurst" to access facilities. Cranbrook is considerably easier to access. In practice, typical levels of congestion mean that it will often be quicker for residents in "South Goudhurst" to drive to Tunbridge Wells itself than to drive into Hawkhurst, particularly in the summer months when both the A21 and the A268 have long tailbacks, being the main routes to Hastings and Rye respectively. It is often far easier to travel between these areas via Goudhurst, rather than using the A21.

More generally, the A21 is not a popular choice for local journeys. A couple of years ago, there was a great deal of local concern because the Forestry Commission closed the Park Lane car park on the east side of Bedgebury (off the A229). Residents from Hawkhurst objected to the proposal that would have required them to drive out to the Flimwell Crossroads and along the A21. This proved to be such a controversial issue that the Forestry Commission agreed to reinstate the Park Lane car park.

At present, Bedgebury acts as boundary between the parishes of Hawkhurst and Goudhurst. This is a strong natural boundary.

We believe that whilst the proposed Hawkhurst, Benenden and South Goudhurst ward results in good electoral equality, it is far less successful in meeting the other aims of a good pattern of wards.

Therefore, we suggest the following pattern of wards for this area:

- Hawkhurst, Benenden & Sandhurst - three-member ward
- Goudhurst - single-member ward
- Rural Tunbridge Wells (comprising Lamberhurst, Brenchley & Matfield and Horsmonden) - three-member ward.

This would require one additional borough councillor, bringing the total to 40 councillors for the borough as a whole.

Both the Hawkhurst, Benenden & Sandhurst ward and the Goudhurst ward would have good electoral equality. However, the Rural Tunbridge Wells ward would have a forecast variance of -20%. Whilst recognising this is not desirable, we would argue that this could be justified based on the geographical spread of this rural ward, the lack of public transport within it, and the fact that the revised pattern of wards would reflect community identity to a much greater extent.

Regardless of the decision on the wards, HPC's suggestion for the name of the ward including Hawkhurst is Weald or Tunbridge Wells Weald, reflecting the ward's location in the High Weald AONB.