

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

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Comment text:

Please see attached the submission from the Liberal Democrats, which we attach as a word document.

Uploaded Documents:

None Uploaded

TW Liberal Democrat LGBCE 2nd round consultation submission

Introduction

The Liberal Democrats are broadly supportive of the proposals given by the LGBCE, feeling that they generally meet the 3 assessment criteria as well as possible under the requirement to have uniform 3 member wards. There are three areas where we think the warding arrangements should be reconsidered, based on our understanding of the local context.

We recognise that there is considerable frustration and disappointment that has arisen as a result of the requirement to have 3 member wards, especially in the rural areas of the borough. However, we understand that, if a Local Authority elects in fractions then it must, except in exceptional circumstances, have wards of uniform size. It is beyond the scope of this submission to speculate on the warding arrangements we would propose under different rules. That being the case, we are broadly supportive of the proposals put forward.

One area where we do think definite improvements could be made is ward name. The names proposed do not closely reflect the community identity of the areas and we propose some alternatives that are more closely tied to communities in question. In addition to this, the current proposals are almost identical to names of Kent County Council divisions that cover very different areas, which will be unnecessarily confusing to local people.

We propose a change to the warding pattern of the RTW South and RTW Central (for the sake of ease in this document I will be using the names proposed by the LGBCE, not our name proposals), so that the entirety of the “the Village” local community sits within RTW South.

We propose that the exceptional circumstances of both Rusthall and Capel are recognised and that the LGBCE exercises its discretionary powers to formulate these into one-member wards.

Alternative names:

We propose the following alternative names for the proposed wards. The name proposed by the boundary commission is listed first, followed by our proposal and our reasoning is given underneath.

Cranbrook, Sissinghurst & Frittenden – Cranbrook & Sissinghurst

We felt generally that names that were limited to three words maximum would be easier to remember and write, so in this example we have selected the names of the two largest settlements as the name of the ward.

Hawkhurst, Benenden & South Goudhurst – Hawkhurst & Bedgebury

We have again tried to make this name shorter, so that it is easier to remember and write. We have included in the name the largest settlement (Hawkhurst) and also a very important local feature, Bedgebury Forest. This is a very popular local and tourist destination and is the home to the National Pinetum. We felt the importance of this local landmark should be reflected in the ward name.

Paddock Wood – No change

Pembury and Capel – Separate out into two wards “Capel” and “Pembury”

We believe that the exceptional circumstances in Capel mean that it should be separated out into its own ward, with a name that reflects that identity. See below.

Royal Tunbridge Wells Central - Park

We believe that this ward should retain the name of its (roughly) predecessor, Park. The ward contains many of the most notable parks of Tunbridge Wells (e.g Calverley Grounds, Dunorlan Park, Camden Park) and this unique and memorable feature of the ward should be reflected in the name, as it has been previously.

RTW Grosvenor and Hilbert – Camden

The name proposed uses the park as the basis for the name, as it is a focus of the community. Whilst this is true, it is also a focus of the RTW North Woods community, the neighbouring ward. A more distinctive feature of this community is Camden road, a stretch of independent businesses and community groups that cater to the diverse local community. This diversity is one of the hallmarks of the ward and we think it should be reflected in a distinctive ward name.

RTW North – High Brooms and St Johns

We propose this name because the ward is largely in these two areas. However, we recognise that the ward is longer than desirable, so an alternative name may be preferred.

RTW North Woods – Sherwood

We believe that this ward should retain the name of its predecessor, Sherwood. The ward largely covers the Sherwood community, the name very clearly identifies the areas covered and is already memorable and distinctive in the minds of local people.

RTW South - Spa

We propose the name Spa for this ward because of two key local features. Firstly, the Spa Valley Railway, which is one of the most popular tourist attractions in the local area, and secondly the Chalybeate Spring, the natural spring waters from which Tunbridge Wells developed as a spa-town. They are a very important part of our local history. We feel it is appropriate to celebrate these two important historical and tourist sites in the name of the ward that houses them both.

RTW West – Culverden and Common

We propose this ward name, which includes the area of town that largely makes up the ward (Culverden) and the ward's most distinctive feature (TW Common). We feel that this name would be easy to remember, and it would be easy to identify from it the area that is covered. The addition to the name would also distinguish it from the old Culverden ward, which did not include the Common, so the name change quickly explains that addition and the addition of surrounding roads.

Rural Tunbridge Wells – Weald Villages

We felt that the area was sufficiently far from TW for the name TW Rural to be quite confusing, and unclear on what area was covered. The difficulty with proposing the name for this ward is that there are a number of villages of fairly similar size here, and so it was not obvious which ones to include in the name. We decided on Weald Villages, because most of the villages are in the High Weald AONB, however we recognise that a better, more distinctive name could be found.

Rusthall & Speldhurst - Separate out into two wards "Rusthall" and "Speldhurst"

We believe that the exceptional circumstances in Rusthall mean that it should be separated out into its own ward, with a name that reflects that identity. See below.

Southborough & Bidborough – No change

Changes to warding arrangements:

RTW South and RTW Central

We propose that the following wards be moved from RTW Central and included in RTW South:

- Farmcombe Close,
- Banner Farm Road
- Delves Avenue
- Cavendish Way
- Sussex Close
- Claremont Road
- Buckingham Road
- Grecian Road
- Arundel Road
- Norfolk Road
- Claremont Gardens

These roads, form part of an area (along with roads such as Mount Sion and Little Mount Sion, the roads leading off of them and the surrounding area) known as “the Village” which currently sits entirely within the Pantiles St Marks ward.

This is clearly identifiable community is linked by use of Grove park, a popular local spot for the roads that surround it and Claremont school, whose catchment area sits within this community. Many of the residents in this area have close bonds that arise from their mutual connections to both of these important local sites. The area is recognised as being a distinct community by local estate agents and has its own Facebook group where local people can discuss things that affect their community. We believe there is a strong case for this area’s community identity.

There is also a Residents Association that covers this area. By keeping the community together, the LGBCE would be ensuring a greater level of effective and convenient local government, as the RA would be able to address their concerns to and work with one set of councillors, rather than two.

We believe that including the entirety of the village in the TW South Ward would be a sensible change. We understand that the requirement of electoral equality must still be kept, so we would propose that some of the areas of the ward furthest east (including Forest Road) Could be included in TW Central ward.

Rusthall

We propose that the LGBCE exercise their discretionary powers to create a single member ward containing Rusthall Parish, the remainder of the Speldhurst and Rusthall ward forming a two member ward. We understand that this would not mean a warding pattern of 13 wards of 3 members each, but we believe the circumstances here warrant an exception to the rule.

We believe that the strength of Rusthall's community identity warrants consideration. As a village it is distinct even from neighbouring Langton Green and has a history stretching back to the Domesday Book. It has its own local businesses in the centre of the village, along with a number of community groups and clubs that cater almost exclusively to local people. There is very little interaction between Rusthall and the other proposed parts of the ward (limited by a lack of public transport), but a very great deal of interaction between the community within Rusthall. We feel that this suggests the best way to maintain a strong community identity is to separate Rusthall Parish as its own ward.

Rusthall also has a very strong resident associations, in the form of Rusthall Village Association and a strong parish council. These groups work very well with the current Borough Councillors for the ward. By having their areas entirely overlapping the ward councillors, their focus can be the same as that of the most important local bodies. If the area the councillors covered was increased then they would by necessity cease to have this close relationship with local stakeholders, which would damage their ability to provide effective and convenient local government.

Furthermore, the proposed ward has no convenient public transport to travel around the area, and it is also not easily or safely navigable by foot or by bike. Rusthall Parish, on the other hand, is. This means that any councillor elected in a single-member Rusthall ward is going to find it much easier to travel around the ward to meet with their residents and work on their behalf, particularly if they do not have a car or their mobility is impaired. In turn this means that having Rusthall as a single member ward would provide a much better deal for local people, in terms of effective and convenient local government.

Capel

We propose that the LGBCE exercise their discretionary powers to create a single member ward containing Capel parish and Paddock Wood South, and a two member ward in Pembury, exactly as detailed in the LGBCE submission from Capel Parish Council. We understand that this would not mean a warding pattern of 13 wards of 3 members each, but we believe the circumstances here warrant an exception to the rule.

Pembury is geographically very close to Tunbridge Wells town and the two enjoy a close relationship and good transport links. The largest settlements in Capel, Tudely and Five Oak Green, on the other hand are much closer to Tonbridge and Paddock Wood respectively than they are to Pembury and there is little that links them Pembury as a community. The A228 which runs south from Capel towards Tunbridge Wells bypasses Pembury and there are limited public transport links, so the settlement is not a destination for shopping, churches, or sports clubs for Capel residents. This impacts the ability of the LGBCE proposed ward to have a strong community identity.

Capel's interests are much less likely to be well represented by councillors who live in a community that is unconnected to theirs. As much smaller settlements, it may be the case that the concerns and issues of Capel are less obvious to elected representatives than those of Pembury, which would take up a much bigger percentage of their "patch". This problem would be exacerbated by having three councillors from Pembury, as highlighted in the Capel Parish submission. This imbalance is a risk to providing effective and convenient local government.

Finally, there is no public transport between the two parishes. Pembury is navigable without the use of private transport, which would be impossible in a ward shared with Capel, given its size and rural nature. For example, a councillor based in Pembury would not be able to represent constituents in Tudeley, six miles away in the middle of the Low Weald. One could not represent the LGBCE proposed ward without access to a car and this again is a barrier to convenient and effective local

government. This could be avoided by splitting the ward as both we and Capel Parish Council have proposed.

Conclusion

We broadly agree with the proposals put forward by the LGBCE, operating under the constraints that you are. That said, we believe that some of the arrangements do not meet the three criteria as well as they could, and have provided information on the three we are most familiar with, in Capel, Rusthall and Tunbridge Wells South. We recognise that other groups and individuals more familiar with other areas will have other views. Finally, we have proposed names that are easier to remember and more connected to the areas they cover.

Tunbridge Wells Liberal Democrats