

Electoral System Consultation - Results

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Background

Following the decision of Full Council on Wednesday 5 October, a consultation on our electoral system ran for six weeks from 13th October to 23rd November 2022. In addition to a representative 10,000 households invited by post or email to respond, we encouraged residents across the borough to take part through general messaging on social media channels and our weekly e-mail newsletter to 13,000 subscribers.

What is an electoral system?

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council currently has 48 councillors who are each elected for a four-year term. The borough area is divided into 20 roughly equal 'wards'. The councillors are elected to, and represent, their local ward.

The Council is considering moving to 'all out' elections (also known as 'whole council' elections) or to remain with elections 'by thirds'.

The Council currently uses a 'by thirds' electoral system. This means that over four years, elections are held in years one, two and three for a third of the Council each year (16 councillors). In the fourth year County Council elections are held.

Moving to 'All out elections' means that over the four-year term, elections would only be held in year one for all councillors at the same time.

Voting by thirds

If your council votes by thirds, a third of councillors are elected every year over a four-year period. There are no elections in the fourth year. This is the system currently in place for the borough of Tunbridge Wells.

The benefits of this system have been stated as providing greater stability for the Council in terms of its membership. Electing by thirds reduces the risk of wholesale change within the Council and allows for succession planning because there is always a mixture of new and experienced councillors on the Council.

Additionally, electing by thirds provides the electorate a greater opportunity to be involved in decision making at the Council, and arguments have been put forward that this makes councillors more democratically accountable.

Lastly, it has been stated that some smaller political parties would find it difficult to field enough candidates to contest all seats at an all-out election. However, electing by thirds does not, in and of itself, create a greater availability of candidates for any party, but those candidates who are willing to stand have more frequent opportunities to do so.

Electing by thirds is the current electoral system of the Council, and so there would be no saving or additional costs associated with retaining this system of electing.

Voting every four years, or "all out" elections

Some councils, including all of the London boroughs, have local elections every four years, and elect all councillors at the same time. This is the system which Tunbridge Wells Borough Council may adopt.

Research from the Electoral Commission in 2003 suggests that 'all out' elections are fairer and more equitable to the electorate, and that the electoral system is clearer and easier to understand.

Currently, electors in areas of the borough where there are three councillors to elect in their ward (the area they represent), get to vote three times over the course of four years. Electors in areas where there is only one councillor representing the area only get to vote once. This means that some electors in the borough have more influence on the political make-up of the Council than others.

All out elections would make an approximate saving of over £200,000 over four years by reducing the number of elections held from three to one.

Communications Plan

Stakeholder/ Stakeholder Group	Objectives (Desired Actions)	Message Content	Delivery Methods/Venue	By When (Frequency)
Research and Insight Officer	Create survey	What do you think of these options?	Talking Point	10 th October
Digital Services	Invite participants by post and email	Please take part in our consultation.	Post. Email	14 th October
Communications	Promote survey via social media	Tell us what you think of our electoral system	Facebook, Twitter, Nextdoor	Every 4-5 days, increasing to daily in the last week of the consultation period
Research and Insight Officer	Promote survey with community groups	Please can you ask your members to share their views	Email	Targeting groups whose demographics are missing each week of the consultation period.
Communications	Promote the consultation via the e-newsletter	Take part in the consultation	Email	Every other week during the consultation period.
Communications	Promote the consultations with Parish Councils	Please take this survey	Email	At the start of the consultation period.

Draft Social Media Posts

Selected posts were scheduled by the Senior Media and Communications Officer:

How do you want to vote? It's time to vote on voting! Vote-ception. Find out more about our electoral system consultation on Talking Point:

<https://talkingpointtunbridgewells.uk.engagementhq.com/a-consultation-on-our-electoral-system>

We're considering changing our electoral system, and we need you to tell us what you think! Take part in our consultation page here:

<https://talkingpointtunbridgewells.uk.engagementhq.com/a-consultation-on-our-electoral-system>

Autumn is a season of change; we're thinking about changing our electoral system. To tell us what you think, take part in our consultation:

<https://talkingpointtunbridgewells.uk.engagementhq.com/a-consultation-on-our-electoral-system>

For democracy to work, voting is kind of a big deal, but how often do you want to vote? Have your say here: <https://talkingpointtunbridgewells.uk.engagementhq.com/a-consultation-on-our-electoral-system>

It's the season for apple bobbing, crisp walks and taking part in consultations. Tell us what you think about potential changes to our electoral system here:

<https://talkingpointtunbridgewells.uk.engagementhq.com/a-consultation-on-our-electoral-system>

For rainy days

It's tipping it down! Why not cosy up with a cuppa and a consultation? We're asking residents what you think about our Electoral System. Have your say here:

<https://talkingpointtunbridgewells.uk.engagementhq.com/a-consultation-on-our-electoral-system>

For 16 October

Why not take a break from listening to the new Taylor Swift album to give us your opinion on potential changes to our Electoral System?

<https://talkingpointtunbridgewells.uk.engagementhq.com/a-consultation-on-our-electoral-system>

For Saturday evenings

Have you voted online for your favourite #Strictly couple? While you're in the mood for online forms, why not tell us what you think of our electoral system?

<https://talkingpointtunbridgewells.uk.engagementhq.com/a-consultation-on-our-electoral-system>

For late November

Holidays are coming! And so is the deadline for our electoral system consultation, share your thoughts now: <https://talkingpointtunbridgewells.uk.engagementhq.com/a-consultation-on-our-electoral-system>

Methodology

This survey was delivered online (via Talking Point) and by post. 10,000 residents were contacted by post or email and provided with a unique code which they used to complete the consultation. Unique codes were linked to postcodes to assess the number of responses received from each ward. This approach helps mitigate the risk that wards may be over- or under-represented in the results and ensures the views of residents in all wards are equally heard. In our results, these are the ‘invited participants’.

Residents not given an invitation letter were able to complete the consultation by registering via the Talking Point consultation portal. In our results, these are the ‘registered participants’.

Survey questions for invited participants

What electoral system should the council have?

- By thirds (where a third of Councillors are elected three years out of four)
- All out (where Councillors are elected once every four years)

Please enter the unique code from your invitation letter / email:

We have some optional questions for you to tell us a bit more about yourself, is this okay?

- Yes
- No

Should the user respond “Yes” to the final question, they will be asked to complete the same demographic questions which they would be asked on registration.

Survey questions for registered participants

What electoral system should the council have?

- By thirds (where a third of Councillors are elected three years out of four)
- All out (where Councillors are elected once every four years)

Where did you hear about this consultation?*

- Weekly email newsletter
- Social Media
- Word of Mouth
- Invitation Letter

- Other (please specify)

Are you completing this survey on behalf of an organisation or town/parish council?

- Yes
- No

Please enter the name of your organisation:

Participant Demographics

We received a total of 1067 responses. The borough has a population of 115,311 according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The responses we received represent 0.93% of residents. For this sample size, there is a confidence level of 95% that the real value is within $\pm 3\%$ of the measured/surveyed value.

We invited 10,000 residents by post and email. We received 749 responses from users with invitation codes. 7.4% of invited participants responded.

We also received 318 responses from participants who were not invited by post or email. 33% of these participants heard about the consultation via our email newsletter.

Demographic information optionally provided by participants has been matched with ONS mid-year population estimates to establish how representative the respondents were of the Borough's population, by age, sex and ethnicity.

Age

The sample response is not representative of the Borough's population by age range. The chart below illustrates that age groups of 46 and older were over-represented within the responses, whilst those 45 and younger were under-represented.

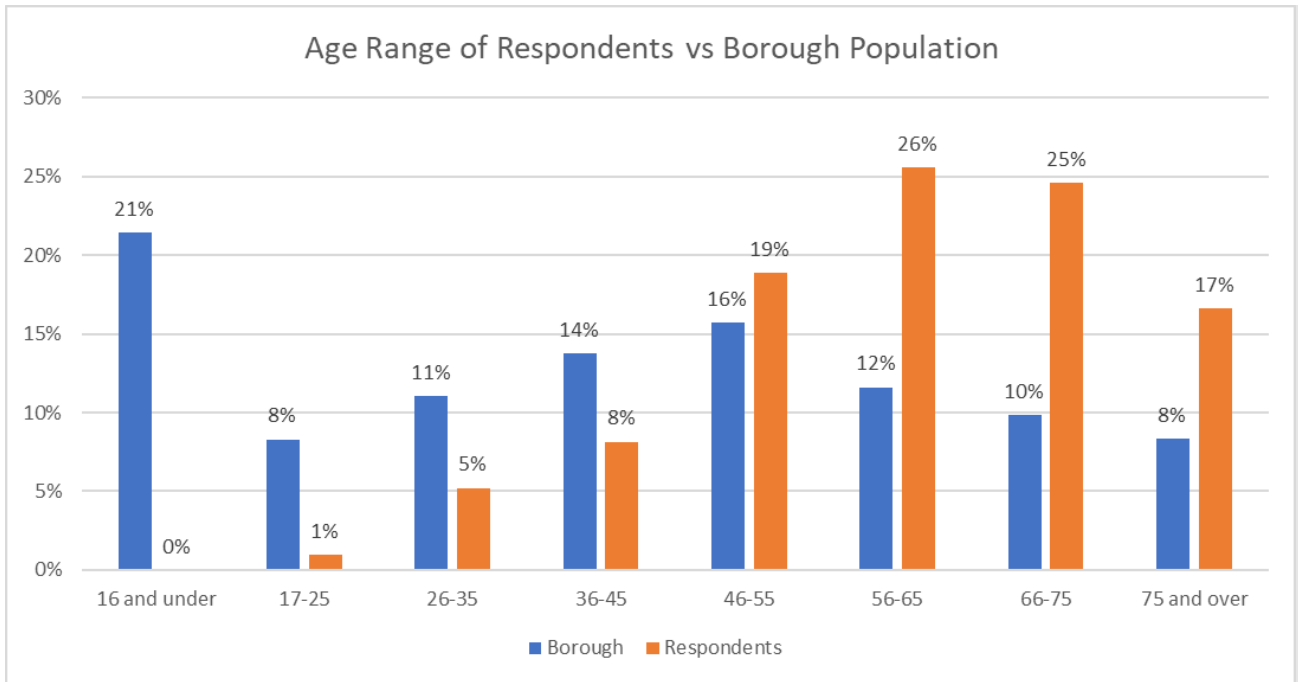


Figure 1 Age range of respondents vs Borough population

Sex

The sex of respondents is not representative of the Borough population. Males are over-represented in the sample size, whereas females are under-represented.

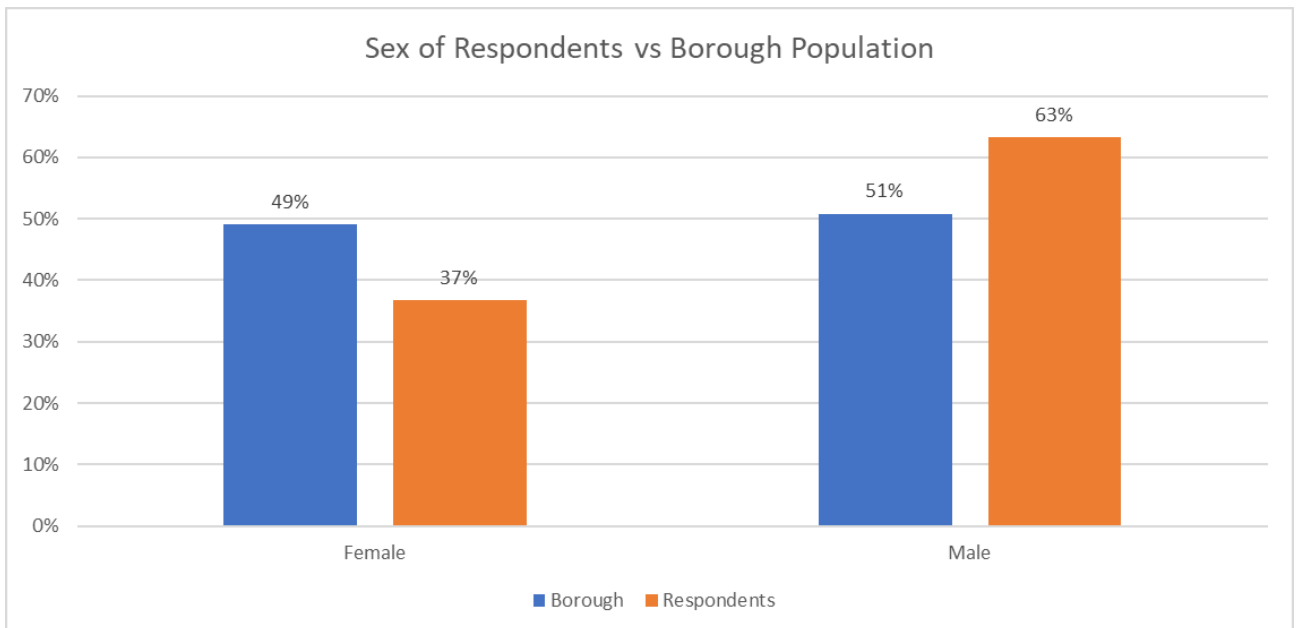


Figure 2 Sex of respondents vs Borough population

Ethnicity

The ethnic split of participants was broadly representative of the split in the borough according to ONS data, with minority ethnic groups slightly over-represented.

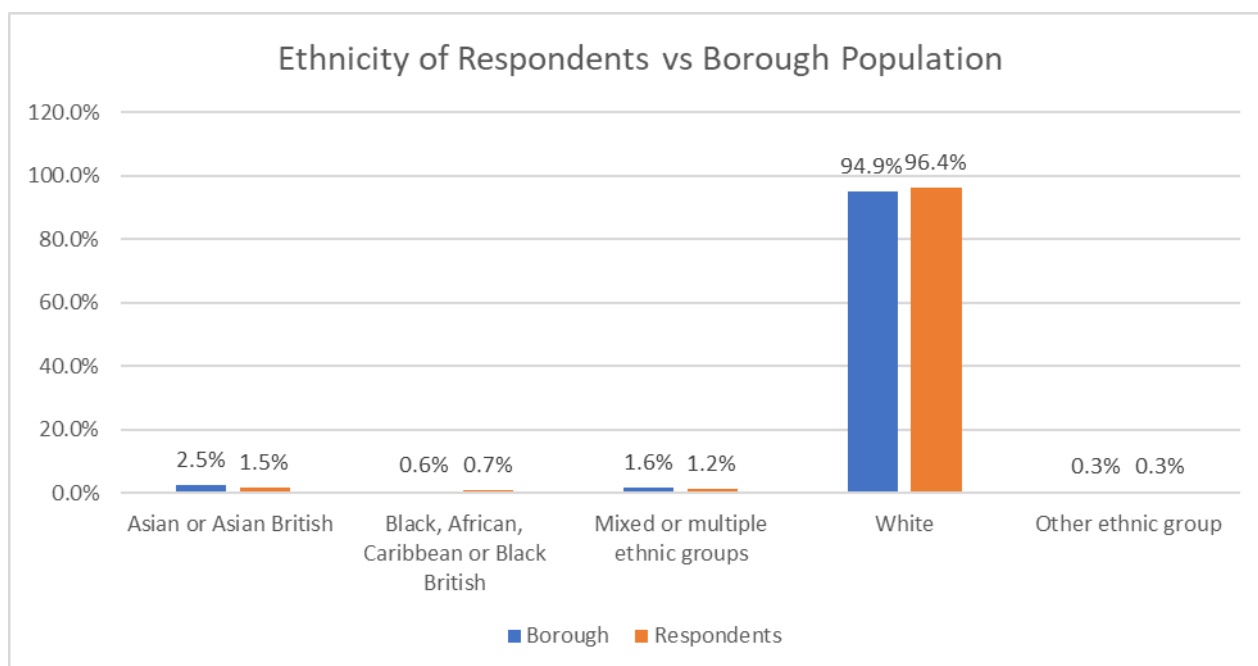


Figure 3 Ethnicity of Respondents vs Borough Population

Disability

6.6% of respondents defined themselves as having a ‘physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on that person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’.

Although not directly comparable, in the 2011 Census 6.06% of Tunbridge Wells residents declared themselves to have a disability that limited their day-to-day activities ‘a lot’.

Results

686 response were in favour of all out elections, 381 responses were in favour of election by thirds.

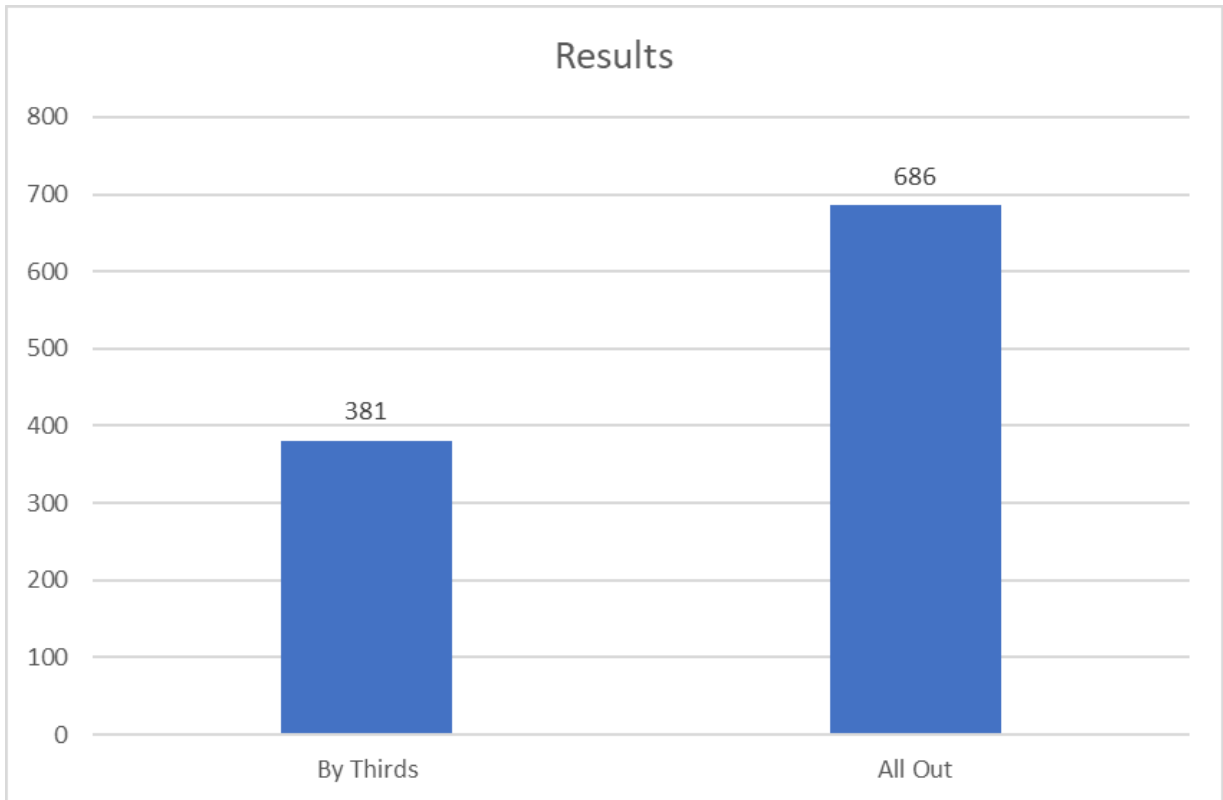


Figure 4 Overall results

Results by Ward

The 10,000 invited respondents were selected evenly by ward, according to the proportion of households in each ward.

In the table and chart below, we see fair representation from each ward in the borough within the responses. Some wards are slightly over-represented (Goudhurst & Lamberhurst, Pantiles & St Marks) and some under-represented (Paddock Wood East, Sherwood) but overall, we can have confidence that views from all wards in the Borough have been received.

Ward	Households in Ward	Proportion of Borough Responses	Proportion of Responses
Benenden & Cranbrook	3289	6%	52
Brenchley & Horsmonden	2293	4%	38
Broadwater	2063	4%	25
Capel	973	2%	16
Culverden	4543	9%	88
Frittenden & Sissinghurst	1015	2%	30
Goudhurst & Lamberhurst	2053	4%	67
Hawkhurst & Sandhurst	3004	6%	49
Paddock Wood East	1979	4%	21
Paddock Wood West	1620	3%	22
Pantiles & St Marks	3371	6%	86
Park	3883	7%	75
Pembury	2528	5%	46
Rusthall	2233	4%	38
Sherwood	3658	7%	44
Southborough & High Brooms	3247	6%	45
Southborough North	2003	4%	39
Speldhurst & Bidborough	2478	5%	49
St James	2972	6%	43
St Johns	2970	6%	53
Total	52175		926

Figure 5 Table of households by ward vs responses

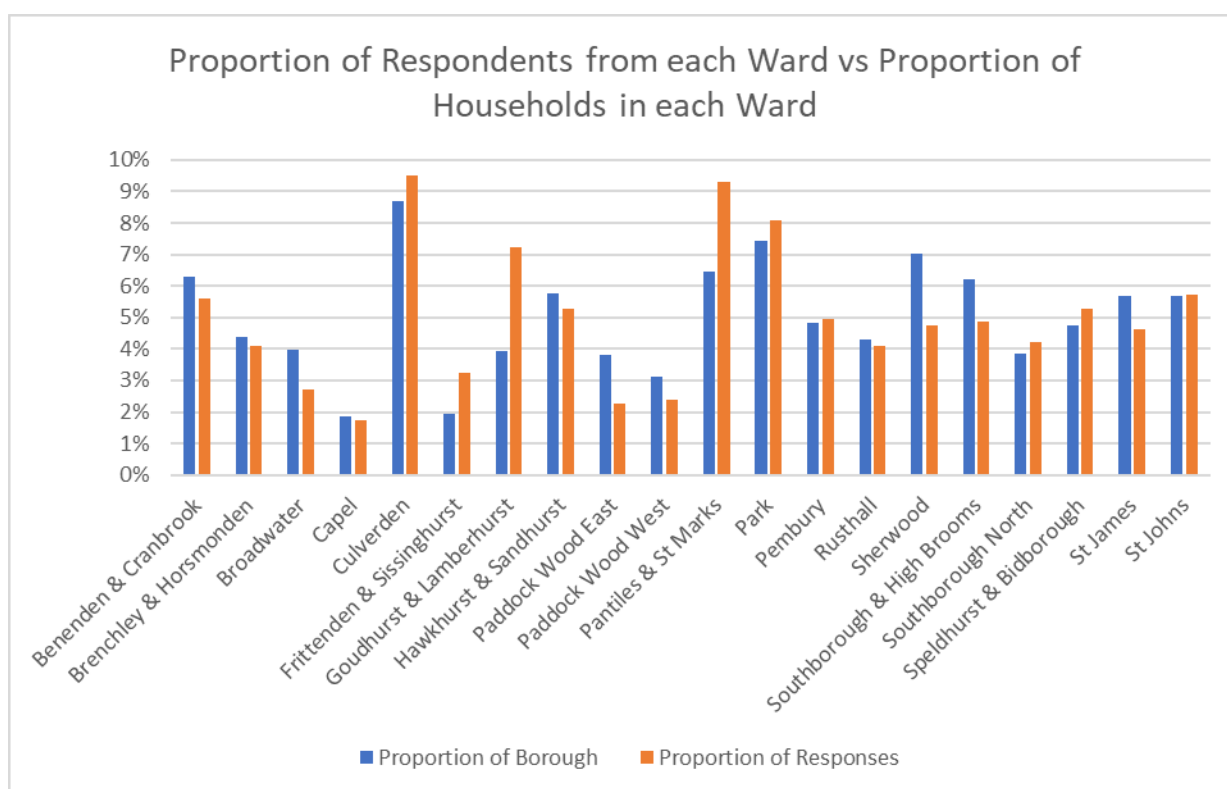


Figure 6 Bar chart of households by ward vs responses

The table below details the proportion of responses within each ward in favour of election By Thirds or All Out.

All wards, except Broadwater and Park, returned in favour of All Out elections.

This table was added on 6th December 2023, after General Purposes Committee.

Wards (or no ward)	By Thirds		All Out	
	Responses	Percent	Responses	Percent
No Ward	56	39.7%	85	60.3%
Benenden & Cranbrook	19	36.5%	33	63.5%
Brenchley & Horsmonden	15	39.5%	23	60.5%
Broadwater	14	56.0%	11	44.0%
Capel	5	31.3%	11	68.8%
Culverden	32	36.4%	56	63.6%
Frittenden & Sissinghurst	7	23.3%	23	76.7%
Goudhurst & Lamberhurst	17	25.4%	50	74.6%
Hawkhurst & Sandhurst	12	24.5%	37	75.5%
Paddock Wood East	7	33.3%	14	66.7%
Paddock Wood West	10	45.5%	12	54.5%
Pantiles & St Marks	29	33.7%	57	66.3%
Park	39	52.0%	36	48.0%
Pembury	17	37.0%	29	63.0%
Rusthall	12	31.6%	26	68.4%
Sherwood	13	29.5%	31	70.5%
Southborough & High Brooms	12	26.7%	33	73.3%
Southborough North	11	28.2%	28	71.8%
Speldhurst & Bidborough	16	32.7%	33	67.3%
St James	14	32.6%	29	67.4%
St Johns	24	45.3%	29	54.7%
Grand Total	381	35.7%	686	64.3%

Figure 7 Table of results by ward

Results by Participant Type

Overall, there was little difference in the results depending on whether the participant was invited as part of the 10,000 random sample or participated in response to general messaging about the consultation. For both sets of participants, almost 2/3rds of respondents were in favour of all-out elections.

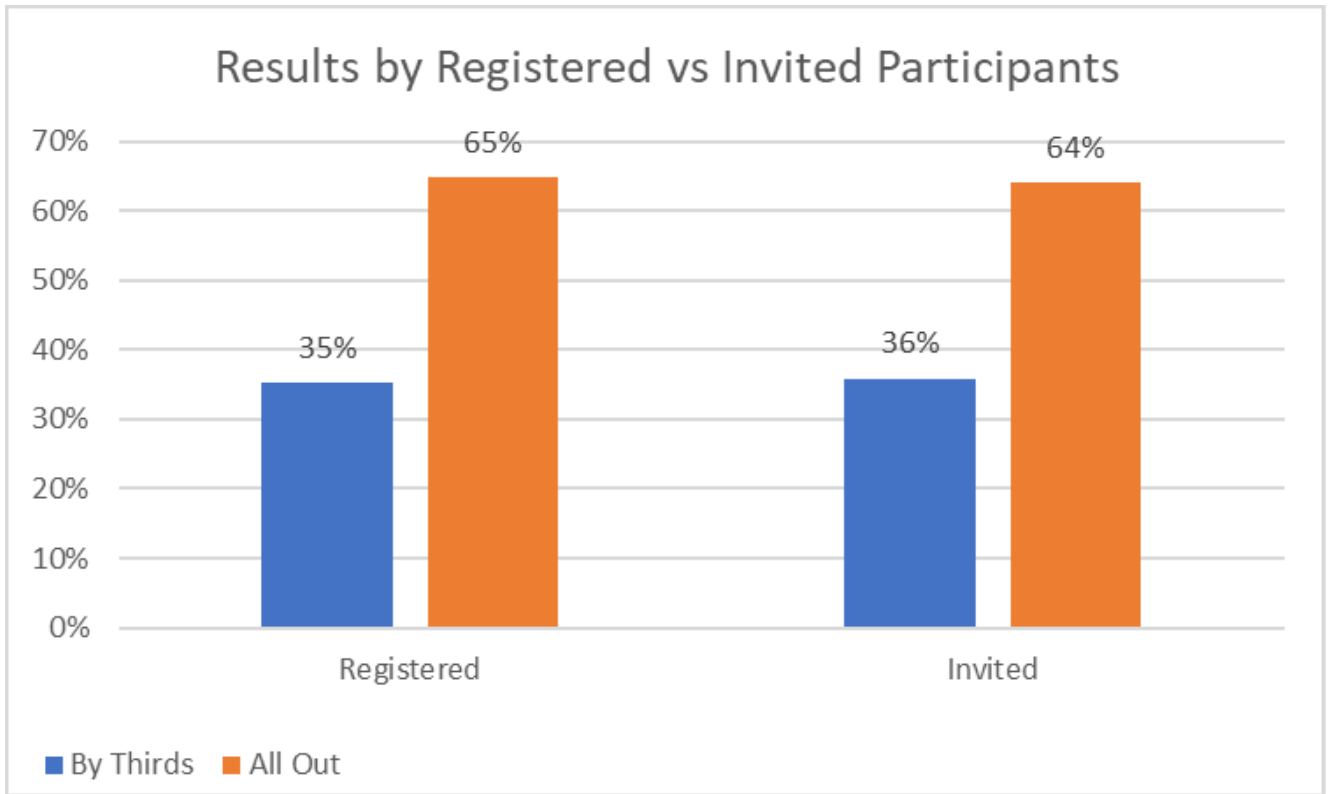


Figure 8 Results by registered vs invited participants