

The Council's Consultation

I was disappointed that, after the October Full Council vote on further consultation on changing to all-out elections, the Council should have put out the same reasons for changing to all-out elections that were used for the consultation early in the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) review. At that time, having been directly involved in contributing to the LGBCE review, I fully understood that the decision to remain with elections by thirds would mean very significant changes to the present wards because of the LGBCE requirement that councils electing by thirds must have 3-member wards throughout the Borough. Presently of the 20 wards in the Tunbridge Wells Borough, 10 are single or 2-member wards. The requirement that councils electing by thirds must have 3-member wards throughout the Borough, however, was not fully appreciated by many Parish and Town Councils or many residents.

I felt that the debate has moved on from that earlier consultation and was now about how appropriate the LGBCE draft warding arrangements were and whether a change to all-out elections would provide the necessary flexibility to determine a better warding pattern leading to Councillors being more representative of and accountable to their community/communities. It was that concern being voiced by many rural parishes directly to me and through KALC that encouraged me to seek to have the matter reconsidered. Ultimately the only way to achieve this re-consideration was through calling an Extraordinary Full Council meeting.

At that Extraordinary Full Council meeting, we heard directly from speakers from Parish and Town Councils expressing concerns about the LGBCE warding proposals and especially how these did not recognise historic boundaries, how these split some communities and bundled other communities together simply to achieve necessary electoral numbers. I was particularly struck by comments made on behalf of Southborough Town Council. Southborough has a mayor and historic town boundaries and needs 4 Councillors to meet the electoral average. That cannot be achieved with 3-member wards. Instead parts of the town are proposed to be placed in other 3-member wards. All-out elections would enable Southborough to be represented by 4 Councillors, perhaps in two 2-member wards.

Some of the rural wards were identified to be 14 miles across made up of several communities some unrelated to each other and with few connections. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council needs representation from homogenised communities. I would envisage difficulty in attracting local community representation from parishes bundled together; smaller communities too may become unrepresentative (because there are more electors in the larger communities). We heard too from a former Independent Borough Councillor for Cranbrook whose ward had been merged into a 3-member ward; the enlarged ward then returned a member on a Party-ticket. We must try to have warding arrangements which encourage people to put themselves forward to represent their communities.

Finally we have not fully explained to residents that increasingly Tunbridge Wells Borough Council is the outlier in opting to elect by thirds. All-out elections are the way we elect the National Government, Metropolitan Mayors, County Councils, Police & Crime Commissioners, Parish Councils, all other Borough and District Councils in Kent (and most in the south-east) and all London Boroughs. Changing to all-out elections will save significant money - at least £200k (and increasing) over the election cycle which can be used to safeguard other council services in these inflationary times. The results of all consultations on the Council's finances show that the priority of residents is that the Council should seek to reduce its cost and safeguard services.

All-out Elections

Since the Extraordinary Full Council meeting, the LGBCE has agreed that the review in TWBC will be paused and more flexible warding arrangements will be possible if TWBC opts to change to all-out elections. [In my opinion this was not in doubt but some Councillors identified this as a risk at the Extraordinary Full Council meeting.]

The main reasons I support all-out elections are:

1. It is the norm and the way we elect the Government, Metropolitan Mayors, County Councils, Police & Crime Commissioners, most Borough Councils (all other Boroughs/Districts in Kent) and Parish & Town Councils. There is no reason for TWBC to be an outlier.
2. Large 3-member wards are only required to create electoral balance in boroughs/districts opting to elect by thirds. With all-out elections, single and 2-member as well as 3-member wards are permitted.
3. More single and 2-member wards will make Councillors more representative of and more accountable to their community/communities. More than that I think it would encourage residents to put themselves forward to represent their community/communities. All-out elections will enable warding arrangements to be determined that will encourage that. The risk in large 3-member wards is that this representation only comes from residents better known in the larger communities and the smaller communities lose their voice. Arguably too it would help Independent candidates against candidates just standing on a Partly ticket.
4. All-out elections should lead to groups putting forward positive plans in manifestos and not electioneering against a particular development. [Major development schemes by the Council will take a longer time to work up than can be achieved a 4-year term and so only ought to be planned with wide cross-party support.]
5. All-out elections will save significant costs (over £200k in the electoral cycle) which in difficult economic time will help preserve Council services.

I hope the consultation undertaken will show residents support the change to all-out elections and Councillors in turn will support the change at the next Full Council meeting.

Tom Dawlings