

Consultation over proposed Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) Ward boundary changes

The UK Electoral Commission is in the process of reallocating the electoral wards according to the voting system chosen by local Borough Councils. “So what?” may be the response of some but this is important and directly affects that way our villages are represented on TWBC in the future.

TWBC, which includes Brenchley and Matfield, chose to retain the “By Thirds” voting system (meaning one third of councillors being elected each year). The retention of “By Thirds” at the same time as reducing the total number of Borough Councillors would result in our parish being merged into a vast four-parish ward, stretching from Goudhurst and Lamberhurst all the way to Matfield, thereby losing the great advantage of truly local representation.

But this does not need to happen - it could still be changed. So we are campaigning to reverse this decision.

Despite much resistance, at an **Extraordinary Meeting** of the Borough Council, Councillors and Lib Dem leader Ben Chapelard finally U-turned. By a massive 33 -10 vote, Councillors, across all the parties, agreed to a re-Consultation with the public on the voting system. Thank you all those who took the trouble to write in with your objections to the vast non-community wards that were being proposed for our rural communities. Your letters worked; even the Boundary Commission noticed and is now expected to pause the finalising of the TW voting and warding to allow the public, us, to have our say.

What is this “All Out” versus “Thirds” all about?

“Thirds” mean that one third of councillors are elected each year, allowing electors to vote (and thereby comment on issues) each year. The problem with that seemingly good idea is that it is more costly (an extra £200,000 over the three year cycle, at a time when the Council may need to make huge cuts to services and raise parking charges) **and**, most importantly, as all Wards would be voting each year there would need to be three members per Ward which would, in many cases, have to be three times their present size because the Electoral Commission has decided to reduce the number of Councillors and the number of Wards to match.

Thus in rural areas Wards would become much larger, multi parish, non-community based entities, with, in our case, five villages from four different parishes added together. The residents lose the community link with their Councillor and the Councillors themselves are likely to become elected along party political lines rather than being a local representative.

Moving to voting **All-Out** every four years, which is what your PC recommend, could enable Wards to be kept much smaller according to geography and historic parishes, with Councillors known and accountable to their community (not just party affiliation).

Now that electors across the borough have fully understood the implications of the supposedly simple question of whether to vote by “Thirds” annually or “All-Out” every four years, Borough Councillors have agreed to a re-consultation with the public on which voting system to use. It starts now. To achieve this change we need as many as possible from the parish to respond (again) in the next few weeks to the new borough consultation **which is a short questionnaire** using the link or by email. If you agree with your parish council, then click on the link below and tick the box in the questionnaire to **vote “All-Out”**.

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

Some have suggested that we may be wasting our time, as the Commission were unlikely to change the warding proposals so late in the process. We are advised however that the Commission will take note of the results of the questionnaire. So you can make a difference – please respond to the Consultation if you possibly can and encourage your friends and neighbours to do likewise. It only takes a moment with just a couple of questions to answer.