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R. Buck Esq.,  
Review Manager  
The Local Government Boundary Commission for England  
Layden House  
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London  
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**ELMBRIDGE BOROUGH COUNCIL BOUNDARY COMMISSION REVIEW**

Dear Mr Buck,

I have pleasure in enclosing the Residents Group submission to the Boundary Commission for the review of the number of Councillors on Elmbridge Borough Council.

I have also sent you a copy of this document by e-mail.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Stuart Selleck  
Leader of the Residents Group

## **ELMBRIDGE BOUNDARY COMMISSION REVIEW**

### **THE RESIDENTS' GROUP SUBMISSION**

This document expresses the views of the 21 Residents Group Councillors on Elmbridge Borough Council, who are the main opposition party to the Conservative-led Administration.

The paper seeks to address and challenge the proposals of the Administration, as shown through the Council's submission to the Commission. In addition, it seeks to highlight the effectiveness of councillors, their input into the local community, and the essential part they play in the democratic process. We believe that the current number of 60 councillors is the appropriate number, which has worked so effectively over a considerable number of years.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

From the outset it is important to note that the invitation to the Boundary Commission to review the number of councillors was by no means unanimous. At the Council Meeting, in April 2013, 26 members voted 'for', 23 'against', with 2 abstentions.

The last Boundary Commission Review - which took place 15 years ago - agreed that 60 was the correct number of councillors necessary to govern effectively, deliver services and provide the appropriate democratic representation.

The physical composition of Elmbridge is different from other Surrey districts, having five main towns, interspersed with eight village communities. All of which have their own distinct character. The Residents also have a strong allegiance to these distinctive communities, and look to their councillors to represent them effectively. We acknowledge that it may be necessary to have some boundary changes, even if we are to stay at 60 Councillors. However, we are cognisant that a major re-drawing of ward boundaries will be upsetting, and be resisted by many residents.

So what has changed in the intervening period?

The population and electorate have increased by over 10%, resulting in each councillor being responsible for more constituents. The current number of 60 comes with only a small amount of voter inequality, which could easily be addressed with minor ward boundary changes. The Administration, through a Working Group, has not been able to suggest a scheme for 48 councillors that fit the key criteria that the LGBCE work to, even though this has been worked on for nearly 18 months.

The Administration's proposals for 48 councillors would most probably result in 16 three member wards. Earlier this year examples of such a scheme were put to councillors across the borough and were considered unworkable because they would cut across present local authority identities and clear boundaries, particularly rivers and railway lines e.g. parts of Hersham into Esher across the River Mole. To propose a sizeable reduction in the number of councillors without an agreed proposal for implementing revised ward boundaries is in our view wholly unacceptable.

#### **GOVERNANCE**

Much has been said about how a reduction in councillors would make the Authority more efficient, and more effective, yet we have seen nothing substantive to demonstrate this presumption and statement. Reducing the number of councillors, in our opinion, does not necessarily mean – or guarantee - that the Council becomes more efficient. "Grit gets in the system" as officers would be inundated and struggle to cope with residents' problems which councillors have been able to address and resolve.

Elmbridge Borough Council has for many years been the recipient of awards for innovation, financial competence and member development. The current administration, and the Resident Group before them, administered the Council very effectively, resulting in awards for excellence on a regular basis. This was by no means due to a small number of councillors and officers, but a reflection of the input of all concerned. Why risk changing the current system and risk losing these hard-fought accolades?

All councillors, whether they choose to or not, have the opportunity to challenge the decisions of the Cabinet and officers over-and-above the regular Overview & Scrutiny meetings. This should be an ongoing function, particularly from Opposition councillors to ensure that there is value for money in the decision-making process, and that the concerns of the residents are effectively addressed by the Administration. A reduction in the number of councillors can only but reduce this very effective continuous scrutiny function.

While there is internal scrutiny the Council has taken on a far greater role in seeking to engage with many outside bodies, such as Network Rail, the Health Service, and the Utilities. These limited opportunities allow all councillors, on behalf of their residents, to hold these officials and policies, to account, and to push for changes. The current system on their Overview & Scrutiny Committee allows individual members to follow-up in more detail on specific issues. A lesser number of councillors may well not be able - or inclined - to push the in-depth scrutiny required, or follow up on particular problems. Members would simply not have time.

Whilst a reduction in the number of councillors would result in a lesser number on each individual committee, there is a concern that - with a lesser number - how would one be able to cope with substitutions, holidays and sickness? With a sufficient pool of councillors, irrespective of their political persuasion, generally the coverage is good. There are obviously exceptions but, with such a broad spectrum of expertise to draw upon, long-standing and ongoing issues, can be addressed. Currently, asking members to participate in task groups and working parties, has not been a problem, and many have achieved very positive outcomes for the Council in how it delivers its services, and support for the voluntary sector. A reduction in the number of councillors may well result in a difficulty in recruiting members who have the time for these tasks over and above their committee work. The allocation on committees, through the political make-up of the Council, may well result in inequality of members' representation, particularly from the Opposition groups. This clearly disadvantages the democratic process for all members, as we may well see only the same councillors willing and able to take on the additional tasks.

We believe that the argument that the reduction in Council staff numbers means - ipso facto - a reduction in councillors is flawed. Officers are accountable to elected members, while councillors are elected by - and accountable to - the residents. Whilst EBC officers are very supportive of members, an increased workload can raise problems at certain times, and relies on the goodwill and hard work of the Officers. Where there are difficult situations, this is where a councillor can assist officers in resolving problems with residents, which ultimately allows the Council to continue to be effective in its delivery of services. Again, a reduction in the number of councillors could diminish this assistance.

## **COUNCILLORS' WORK IN THE COMMUNITY**

Probably being a councillor will not be one's sole interaction with the community. Being a school governor, attached to outside bodies representing Elmbridge Borough Council, or other voluntary organisations, does put pressure on members' time and resources. Any reduction, therefore, is likely to have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the remaining councillors on these committees. They will simply be reluctant to put their names forward when they are faced with so many other duties which currently can be covered by the existing number of councillors.

It is quite right that we should be encouraging a younger and more diverse representation from the community in the Council Chamber. Yet a reduction in numbers will limit the

opportunities at election time and depend on when existing councillors stand down. The undoubted increased workload could easily discourage many from standing. Casework for residents will increase if there is a change, as each councillor would have to represent a 25% increase in the electorate.

Many residents are still unaware, and do not necessarily understand the difference between those services and functions provided by the County and those by the Borough. If one wishes to be an effective Borough Councillor, then it is likely that residents do ask for assistance on issues such as roads, parking, and schools, even though it is the responsibility of the County Council Division Member. In these areas Residents' Councillors do - and should – assist their residents. A common complaint of some councillors has been that residents' concerns are not being addressed, but merely passed on. A reduction in numbers can only put extra pressure on those who become involved in ALL Council issues, and may result in adverse feelings in the community as well as a poor reflection on the Council.

### COMPARISON WITH OTHER BOROUGHES IN SURREY

Authority Name	Total Electorate at 17/2/2014	Number of Wards/ Divisions	Council Size	Electors per Councillor	Parishes
Surrey	868,015	81	81	10,716	-
Guildford	106,319	22	48	2,215	23
Woking	73,848	17	36	2,051	-
Reigate & Banstead	102,487	19	51	2,010	2
Spelthorne	75,574	13	39	1,938	-
Mole Valley	68,484	21	41	1,670	13
Waverley	94,654	29	57	1,661	20
Surrey Heath	65,869	16	40	1,647	4
Elmbridge	97,994	22	60	1,633	1
Epsom & Ewell	57,954	13	38	1,525	-
Runnymede	63,471	14	42	1,511	-
Tandridge	60,141	20	42	1,432	21

As shown on the table above, if one ignores Guildford (because it has 23 Parish Councils) then it is only three authorities which would have a similar representation to that which is now being proposed by the Administration. A figure of just over 2,000 residents per councillor would push Elmbridge significantly above the other six districts. In fact, several in this number have parishes as well, which would dilute their figures by an even greater amount. Consequently, maintaining the current ratio would not be outside the range, as suggested by the LGBCE, with a large number of our neighbouring authorities.

Any comparison between the number of the electorate, and individual member representation on councils, should bear in mind how many parish or town councils exist in the other boroughs. Elmbridge has one parish council.

### COMPARISON WITH OTHER NON-METROPOLITAN DISTRICTS

Your guide for Councillors suggests that we should look at the comparison with our 15 “nearest neighbour” authorities as set out by CIPFA. Most of these are our neighbouring Surrey Boroughs and Districts ( only Tandridge is not in the 15 nearest neighbours group) and their key electoral data is shown below :-

Authority Name	Total Electorate at 17/2/14	Number of Wards	Council Size	Electors per Councillor
Guildford	106,319	22	48	2,215
Wycombe	129,997	28	60	2,167
Woking	73,848	17	36	2,051
Hertsmere	78,747	15	39	2,019
Reigate & Banstead	102,487	19	51	2,010
Spelthorne	75,574	13	39	1,938
St Albans	107,499	20	58	1,853
Chiltern	73,975	25	40	1,849
Mole Valley	68,484	21	41	1,670
Waverley	94,654	29	57	1,661
Surrey Heath	65,869	16	40	1,647
Elmbridge	97,994	22	60	1,633
Epsom and Ewell	57,954	13	38	1,525
Runnymede	63,471	14	42	1,511
Three Rivers	68,596	20	48	1,429
South Bucks	53,336	19	40	1,333

As can be seen there is a reasonably wide range of numbers of Electors per Councillor, with the arithmetic average of these 15 authorities coming out at 1,792. At present Elmbridge is 7% below this level. Were the number of Councillors to be reduced to 48, as has been proposed, then the number of Electors per Councillor would rise to 2,042, which would be 14% above the average. We are therefore closer to the middle of the range where we are now than if we were to reduce the Council size to 48. The comment has been made that at 60 the Council is the largest in Surrey. We note from the LGBCE's Electoral data that Elmbridge is not the largest Non-Metropolitan District in England, as Kings Lynn and West Norfolk has 62 Councillors and there are ten other Non-Metropolitan Districts which also have 60 Councillors, namely Basingstoke and Deane, Braintree, Colchester, East Lindsey, Lancaster, New Forest, Newcastle-under-Lyme, South Somerset, Tendring and Wycombe. We submit therefore that our current Council size does not fall well below the average of our statistical neighbours or other similar authorities across the country and of itself does not merit a change from the status quo.

## **COUNCILLOR WORKLOAD**

The Council's submission clearly shows that the workload of councillors is increasing. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence to confirm this assumption. As an example, it is wrong to presume that following the sale of the Council's housing stock off to Paragon, actually reduces councillors' workload in a material way. EBC still has to negotiate with Paragon on matters relating to affordable housing – e.g. "the perfect fit scheme", and such ideas would have been easier to implement had the housing stock not actually been sold. Similarly, when there are problems with the tenants of Paragon, it can be quite difficult to get hold of the right person to deal with the problem, and persuade them to address the issue. We do not have the same power and influence as we once did to the directly-employed council staff. Also, the fact that the Highways Agency Agreement no longer exists does not mean that councillors do not get involved in Highways' matters. We have a Surrey County Council Local Committee which, amongst other things, considers Highways issues and directly involves EBC councillors. An increasing amount of councillors' time will be required in supporting officers, and outside organisations, in the provision of services to an ageing population. Government has – and continues – to change how the welfare system is delivered locally. This will not change, particularly if more powers are granted to the County Council.

The simple representation of members' attendance at Council and committee meetings does not reflect the true picture. Work on task groups and working parties, as well as attending other important meetings, is not recorded. Borough members on the Local Committee are involved in the Youth Task Group. Many members, particularly Opposition Councillors, attend Cabinet meetings as part of the scrutiny process.

In addition, and perhaps the most important role a councillor has, which is not recorded, involves the participation in contentious planning issues and planning appeals. This has been clearly shown over the Pavilion site and Jolly Boatman site in Molesey, the Morrison's supermarket in Weybridge, and the campaign to stop an incinerator at Silvermere. This requires active engagement with the electorate, and consequently is very time-consuming.

An additional responsibility for all councillors has been the introduction of the new local CIL Boards. Whilst the amount of monies available to each area can be wildly different, meetings have to be attended – both formal and informal – and decisions made, and justified, in the allocation to worthy local projects. Again, councillors not only have to engage with local groups, but have to ensure that residents are comfortable with the outcomes.

Councillors are actively involved in the increasing problems within the community, such as trespassing by travellers/gypsies, fly-tipping, and of course Planning. All of which require time and effort in engaging with the officers and residents. As we are aware residents believe that all issues can be solved - and quickly - the reality is somewhat different. The potential reduction in councillors can only increase the delay in addressing and resolving these difficulties.

In this digital age there is a presumption that most residents will access Council services and information from the website. Clearly, over the last few years, as more and more information is available on line, the take-up has been increasing. However, that does assume that the Council's website is up to date and effective. This is not always the situation, as recently proved by the comments posted on the Council's Consultation Exercise on the potential change to the Electoral Cycle, where many were unhappy with the on-line arrangements. Many sections of the community do not use, or have access, to this form of communication and still prefer to talk to somebody. And if there is an issue it is to the local councillor they will refer. Even those who access the Council on line do become frustrated if they are having communication difficulties, and take their frustrations out on their local councillor. In fact, having an email address itself, creates more work as it is so much easier for residents to ask and complain. We as members cannot ignore - we have to answer. This simply increases the workload. I-Pad communication will NOT reduce Council's workload; SCC members have I-Pads and many County Council meetings are web-cast. This actually engages, quite rightly, with other councillors and residents, resulting in more enquiries and questions for members and officers. This is the unintended consequence of a communication revolution. (EBC is about to provide all its members with I-Pads).

Members, like Residents, are not that proficient in responding to questionnaires. The recent exercise undertaken by the Independent Remuneration Panel is as prime example. The lack of response across the whole Council is not conclusive proof that councillors do not have problems in devoting time and resources to Council matters.

## **THE FUTURE**

The Devolution Question in Scotland has had huge implications for the future of local government. We believe that any change in the number of councillors should be seen in the context of how local government manages itself, what fiscal powers it may be given, and how it delivers services. In addition, the continued pressure to provide housing – and therefore an increasing electorate – is an important consideration.

Central government is considering giving more power to the major cities, and Surrey is at the forefront of the English counties in seeking more political and financial independence. One

can easily imagine that Surrey – gaining more powers – would be required, quite rightly, by Central Government to deliver more services. Local government has a good track record in achieving positive outcomes on less money, but with much of it delivered by the boroughs and districts in the county. Inevitably members will have to be more ‘au fait’ with all these new responsibilities and, undoubtedly, have to cope with problems generated by the way in which these services are delivered. This extra burden, and increased engagement with more outside bodies, will be more diluted with fewer councillors.

An independent commission on local government finance has been set up and it is their early view that fiscal devolution should include powers to set council tax bands locally, revalue properties regularly, and raise additional revenue. They have said that policies around housing, welfare support, skills and training, should be developed together locally, as a single coherent framework. And it is clear that councils and members have an important role in co-ordinating and promoting these vital issues.

Future housing development, such as that being currently mooted of a thousand new homes at Drake’s Park, on Fieldcommon, is a prime example how voting demographics may change very quickly in one area. The government’s attitude to housing provision has resulted in the Council having to re-visit and have extensive consultation on its Local Plan, particularly in conjunction with development in the Green Belt. This sensitive issue – along with possible other major plans in the Borough – can only but put pressure on ward councillors’ workload.

## **SUBMISSION; RECOMMENDATION**

The views, observations and opinions in this document more than justify the retention of 60 councillors on Elmbridge Borough Council. The current approach of elections by thirds is understood, and well-appreciated, by the electorate. The democratic process via the existing number of councillors will be diminished and, in order to achieve the Administration’s target of a reduction of 20%, will result in many communities being split and disenfranchised.

As opposed to the Administration’s statement that a move to 48 members would create more capacity to focus on ward activities, we believe the opposite. There will be a greater need to continue the scrutiny process – not only of the Administration’s policies, but engagement with officers in the delivery of services. In our opinion this will reduce the time available to focus on ward activities, especially as there will be at least a 25% increase in the number of the electorate.

Despite the government putting pressure on the revenue budgets of councils, through the reduction of the RSG, Elmbridge Borough Council has – by and large – been able to absorb the cost savings required, and continue to deliver services. Credit should be given to the Administration, officers, and all members, in achieving this positive outcome. A change in government will not reduce the pressure on local government to deliver services at a lower cost. Any change to the number of councillors could well upset the Council’s ability to do so.

We do not believe that any cost savings justify, or outweigh, how the democratic process currently exists in the Council. It would also be wrong to assume that whatever number is decided on at the present time, that at a future date there could not be further moves, up or down. As we have said, local government is evolving and there may be a requirement at a future date to increase the number of councillors on Elmbridge, as has recently happened on Surrey County Council.

Stuart Selleck  
Leader of the Residents’ Group on Elmbridge Borough Council,

3<sup>rd</sup> December 2014

