

David Owen  
Review Officer  
LGBCE  
14<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Millbank Tower  
London  
SW1P 4QP

The Others Group  
Surrey Heath House  
Surrey Heath Borough Council  
Camberley  
Surrey

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Dear David

### **Submission on Surrey Heath Cllr numbers**

I am writing to advise you of the joint submission regarding the Surrey Heath councillor numbers on behalf of the Independent, Labour and Liberal Democrat Cllrs. Although we have different views on a variety of local issues, this is a joint submission representing three of the four political viewpoints within Surrey Heath Borough Council. We did have informal discussions with the Conservative Group to try and put forward an overall joint submission but it was not possible to resolve our differences. As such, it is important to note that the "Council" submission for 34 Cllrs that you will also receive is in fact only supported by the Conservatives and has no cross party support.

Our joint submission is that Surrey Heath should reduce their number of Councillors from 40 to 39.

Our reasoning is on the following grounds:

#### **(1) Governance structure**

Our starting position was to review the current governance structure within Surrey Heath including the statutory functions that need to be undertaken by Councillors. These are detailed below:-

(a) Licensing Committee – This must form a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 15 Cllrs as decided by legislation. The Governance Working Party and Full Council have just reviewed the numbers of this committee and unanimously agreed that Surrey Heath needs to have 15 Cllrs on this committee and that no substitutes are allowed for legal reasons. This is to ensure that there are enough members

to participate in licensing sub-committees that are often arranged at short notice and during the day.

(b) Planning Applications Committee – This works well with the current 16 Cllrs. This means that there is a wide variety of members and that difficult and often very contentious decisions are made by a reasonable number of people. This also negates the risk of undue pressure being placed on a small number of people as applications would generally need the support of at least 8 Cllrs. We are not aware of any plans to reduce this number by the Council within their submission. Therefore, 16 Cllrs are needed for this role.

(c) Scrutiny Committees – The statutory minimum is for one scrutiny committee although Surrey Heath is fairly common in having two. These currently have 15 members on each but in our view, the numbers should be reduced to 11 members on one of these committees (external partnerships). This is because this committee is more of a presentation and questions style (scrutinising our role with external partners) whilst the other is inward looking (scrutinising our performance and finances). We therefore believe this to be a very important function to which the current number of Cllrs should remain to ensure depth and local knowledge. Therefore we would recommend reducing the overall number of scrutiny roles from the current 30 to 26.

(d) Appointments Committee – This is again a statutory committee where members appoint very senior officers. This currently has 5 members but in our view should be increased to 7 recognising that whilst this group should be small, it must also ensure appointees have the confidence of more than 15% of the councillors. However, we have assumed that the current level of 5 Cllrs for the purposes of this response.

(e) Audit/Standards – It is again a statutory function that the Council must have a standards committee and Surrey Heath have decided to combine this with their audit function (we agree). This committee was set up last year and therefore it makes sense to keep the current membership of 7 Cllrs which also gives a reasonable number to deal with any standards issues involving Cllrs.

(f) Joint staff – Surrey Heath have a staff/member liaison group in which matters such as pay and policies are resolved. This has a current membership of 8 staff reps and 8 Cllrs. There has been no proposal to change this number which in any case could only be done with full consultation not only with Cllrs but with staff representatives as well. A boundary review is not the mechanism for reviewing this and therefore the current level of 8 Cllrs should remain.

(g) Civic roles – Like all Councils, Surrey Heath has a clear civic function and 2 Cllrs are needed to undertake the roles of Mayor and Deputy Mayor each year.

(h) Executive Committee – Clearly there must be a Leader of the Council and then it is the decision of the individual Leader to decide on the size of their Executive although it must be between 3 and 10 members in total including a deputy. At present, Surrey Heath have 7 members of the Executive.

(i) In addition to the above formal committees, the Council have also established a number of separate subgroups to look in detail at specific areas of importance to the Council. The current structure involves Governance Working Group (5), Digital Services Working Group (7 Cllrs), Equalities (7), Camberley Theatre (7), Camberley Town Centre (7) This does not include any task and finish groups that may be set up on an adhoc basis during the year for example by a scrutiny committee.

This therefore produces the following governance list:-

Licensing 15 Cllrs

Planning 16

External Partnerships Scrutiny 11

Performance and Finance 15

Governance Working Group 5

Appointments 5

Audit 7

Joint staff 8

Mayor and deputy 2

Executive 3 to 10 (the current Executive is 7) – actual number decided by the Leader

Our overall total is therefore a minimum of 87 and a maximum of 94 Cllr roles. This compares with the current 91 to 98 and neither of these include substitutes which operate for every committee except licensing. In addition, there is a further 28 roles for the four Exec subgroups (agreed again tonight) again ignoring substitutes.

Therefore assuming that each Cllr has an average of 2 governance roles (ignoring subgroups and substitutes) plus their community duties in each ward, that would mean a total of 43.5 to 47 Cllrs were currently needed. If we include current subgroups (but not substitutes) and assume an average of 3 roles per Cllr, we then end up with 115 to 122 roles which means a need of 38 to 41 Cllrs. Assuming that the current Executive remains at either 6 or 7 members, this gives 118 or 119 Cllr roles (39.4 to 39.7 Cllrs) which we would round down to 39 Cllrs. This is based on current need as it is not possible to predict whether the overall duties of local government will increase or decline by 2019.

We believe that an average of 3 governance roles per Cllr (plus substituting for others) is a reasonable expectation giving breadth but not over burdening Cllrs. Clearly some Councillors may take up more roles than others but that is a decision for the political groups and Councillors themselves and not for the Boundary Commission who merely need to clarify the overall governance roles. There would also be a minimum of 5 Full Council meetings a year regardless of the final membership.

It is important to note that the governance role does not just involve attending meetings but preparation in terms of reading documents, attending briefing meetings with officers, e-mail correspondence and discussing agenda items with residents, our political parties and other Councillors before the meeting. This generally takes the same amount of time as the meeting itself (i.e. 2 hours of preparation for a 2 hr meeting obviously depending on how controversial or otherwise the items may be)

In addition to internal governance, Cllrs are also the contact point for our constituents for a range of issues via email and phone. Within our group for example, the Chobham Cllrs will have very regular contact from residents about planning issues as it is a rural community whereas in my area of Old Dean, it tends to be housing and roads related. The Bagshot Cllr undertakes a regular surgery for residents within a local pub. Looking specifically at resident contacts over the last week, I have been personally contacted by people wishing to discuss a barking dog, enquiring why they have not received neighbour notification of a planning application and a residential home for the elderly concerned about parking enforcement. I have also done a walking tour of the ward with other Cllrs to check for pavement repairs.

We will also attend community meetings and events within our area such as visiting our local schools, churches, charities and sports groups and this generally takes at least 1 or 2 hrs each week. Councillors also have a wide range of external bodies where they represent the Council and in Surrey Heath we have a current list of around 35 bodies that wish to have a Council rep. This further adds to the demands of Cllr time as such meetings are generally held at least quarterly plus any further preparation and visits. Most Cllrs would also have political commitments such as party meetings, events or reports that they are expected to attend.

Within Surrey Heath, there are 4 parish councils covering the areas of Bisley, Windlesham, West End and Chobham. Borough Councillors within those parished areas (just under half) would also be expected to attend and liaise closely with the Parish in order to jointly address community concerns. This would also involve attending meetings with the Parish specifically their Clerks and Cllrs as well as dealing with the correspondence that this involves.

## **2. Comparisons with other similar authorities**

We have been advised by Surrey Heath officers that the population and electorate will go up slightly in the period to 2020 as follows:-

“Based on ONS estimates the current population is 87,533 and the electorate is 65,457. The population forecast for 2020 is 89,300 and based on the same percentage the electorate would be 66,082”

This means that there will not be a significant difference in the population during this time to affect the Councillor numbers.

We have also looked at the current Councillor numbers at the other 10 Surrey authorities as well as our neighbours at both Hart and Rushmoor using figures provided by Surrey Heath officers.

These show that Cllr numbers in those areas range from 30 (in Woking) to 51 (Reigate and Banstead) and that the current level of 40 Cllrs in Surrey Heath is in the middle namely the 6<sup>th</sup> lowest of 13.

In addition, the number of electors per Councillor ranges from 1403 (Runnymede) to 2409 (Woking) and that the current level of 1610 within Surrey Heath is the 4<sup>th</sup> lowest of 13. However, this is within a very close grouping namely Elmbridge (1633), Mole Valley (1642), Waverley (1616) and our immediate neighbours in Rushmoor (1676) who have recently undertaken a review. In fact, if we immediately reduced to 39 Cllrs, this would rank us as 8<sup>th</sup> of 13 which again shows that either 39 or 40 Cllrs is the best figure.

## **3. The reasons given by the Conservative/Council submission for their numbers are flawed**

There are 5 reasons that were put forward by the Conservative Group (in italics) and we comment on these as follows:-

### *(a) The Strong Leader and Executive arrangement introduced since the last review*

The previous structure from many years ago involved 6 service committees instead of the current Executive, Planning Applications, Audit and scrutiny functions (5 committees). However, as the Executive meets more regularly, the total number of meetings is actually very similar to the historic

model. There has always been a Leader of the Council throughout this time and the only difference is that meeting length has generally reduced with fewer agenda items for each meeting. It has not reduced the need to hold governance meetings or the number of meetings as a whole. In addition, every Council has similar Leader/Executive arrangements including most notably our neighbours at Rushmoor who have just completed a review and decided on 39 Cllrs.

*(b) The extensive scheme of delegation of functions to officers extended since the last review*

We do not accept that this argument is valid. It is correct that the delegation of officers has been reviewed and in some areas extended for example in areas of planning. However, local government has also received many new functions from the government for example scrutinising our local Police to which we have to designate a particular committee (External Partnerships). There have also been changes to licensing and standards and new duties added such as around public health. As such, this makes no difference to the number of Councillors needed within Surrey Heath as we have already demonstrated within the current structure.

*(c) The technological advancements in communications and the changing way in which residents accessed information and services.*

This point is completely irrelevant to how many councillors are needed for governance arrangements within Surrey Heath. This is an issue relating to service delivery by officers and it is the role of Cllrs to continue to monitor communications and customer service regardless of whether it is via paper or electronic systems. The only difference is that residents may contact us via e-mail rather than a letter through the post and there has been no noticeable reduction in resident contact by our group.

*(d) Reduction in the committee structure and frequency of meetings including the way in which the Council fulfils its scrutiny functions.*

We have already addressed this point by showing that under our proposal, every Cllr would have an average of 3 governance roles in addition to any substitute duties and Full Council. Our proposal also includes a reduction in the number of Cllr roles involved in scrutiny from 30 to 26. It also fully addresses our legislative requirements in quasi judicial areas. We repeat our point that it is the role of political groups and their leaders to decide on their appointments to these roles and not for the Boundary Commission.

As we have already said, there has actually been no reduction in the frequency or number of meetings at all since the change from the old committee structure as the Executive meets more regularly (around once per month) than the previous service committees. We used to have 6 service committees but now have 5 committees namely Executive, 2 x Scrutiny, Planning Applications and

Audit and Standards. The only change relates to the length of each meeting which is generally now around 90 minutes to 2 hours instead of the previous 2 to 3 hours. This is however a positive change avoiding decision making at 10pm when Cllrs are generally tired and want to go home having in many cases, also done a full day's professional work.

*(e) The financial position of the Council and the Country as a whole.*

This is again a wholly irrelevant argument to this decision which merely relates to the number of Cllrs within Surrey Heath. It is the role of the Independent Panel to make recommendations on Member allowances and this will be undertaken after the Boundary Commission review is completed. This review is merely to consider the viability of governance structure and the overall numbers required and not to make any comment about the allowances for individual Councillor roles. Similarly, it is ludicrous to suggest that the Commission should take into account the financial position of "the Country as a whole" as this is completely outside their remit or indeed the Council as a whole.

**Additional comment**

There is one final issue within this review which has been informally agreed with the Conservative group and that is to encourage the Commission to consider a wide range of 1,2 and 3 member wards. This is because Surrey Heath has a number of distinct villages and settled communities and therefore an artificial decision that every ward must have (for example) 2 or 3 Councillors is not appropriate. We would therefore urge the Commission (regardless of their final decision on Cllr numbers) to be flexible on the size of each ward which maintaining a similar number of voters per Councillor. This is exactly the same arrangement as our neighbours in Guildford that operate a number of 1,2 and 3 member wards.

In summary, we respectfully submit our joint view that 39 Councillors are the appropriate number for Surrey Heath and would be happy to answer any questions you may have regarding this.

Yours sincerely

Cllr Rodney Bates (Lab)

Cllr Ruth Hutchinson

Cllr Pat Tedder Cllr Victoria Wheeler

Leader of the Others Group

Liberal Democrat

Independent

Independent