Local Resident submissions to the Woking Borough Council electoral review

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Dear Sir/Madam

PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL

I hope you are well.

I have received a leaflet through the post from the local council informing me that you are looking at reviewing the boundaries for my area and that I have until 11/11/13 to make any comments. I am therefore pleased to make the following comments which I hope you will take into consideration when reaching your decision.

With the population growing every year, the need for elected representatives should also grow over time and in similar proportion. The number of councillors should therefore be increased and not decreased as some people are suggesting. However, there must also be a mechanism in place to ensure that the people coming forward for elections have basic standards of education and fulfil other criteria (I fully realise that the latter may not be in your remit, but I thought I should mention it anyway). We don’t want people who cannot speak or write in English as surely this must be a basic requirement, but because there is no filter in place, anyone and their dogs are putting themselves forward for such important positions for which they are really not qualified.

Where there are multiple member wards, these should be split up to make up as many single member wards as possible. In my opinion, multiple member wards give a chance to individual members to blame each other rather than get anything done (especially, if there are cross party members). In single member wards, no one can play the blame game and as such if they do not deliver up to the people’s requirements and expectation, they can be voted out the next time.

Boundaries reviews are infrequent and therefore this opportunity should be used to the fullest to ensure that maximum benefits are extracted from it without party politics coming in the way. I would therefore ask you to retain the current number (36) as sufficient for now but with a recommendation to increase in the future and linked with a percentage of the population. However, the boundaries of each ward should be reviewed more closely and broken up as necessary to take account of the foregone.
Finally, I take this opportunity to thank you for allowing me for this brief input and wish you a very successful outcome of this review.

Kind regards

Muzaffar Ali
Woking District

Personal Details:

Name: Simon Ashall

Organisation Name:

Comment text:

I strongly support the reduction of the number of councillors in Woking to 30. I have been observing Woking’s democratic process closely for more than a decade and during that time have attended more meetings in the council chamber than I can count; although I am neither a council employee nor an elected member. Over that decade, advances in communications have transformed councillors’ interaction with residents and the way the council does business. The Local Government Act 2000 established the precedent that a reduced number of councillors was able to make key decisions effectively and that the Executive system has brought great results in Woking. A reduction in the number of members not only brings efficiency savings to local taxpayers but would merely be an affirmation that a slimmed-down Executive operation can - and should - be complemented by a slimmed-down council. In my view, effective decision-making is achieved by using good evidence and balanced judgements to make decisions that are framed by statute and in the best interests of local people. The quest on of whether the council has 30 or 36 members - or any other number - is only relevant insofar as one hopes that within that number there will be members sufficiently availed of balanced judgement that they can weigh up good evidence for the better outcome. The focus should be on the quality, not quantity, of council members. And good evidence is the responsibility of the offerer contingent to supply to members and to brief them thoroughly and readily on its use and context. The processes which allow those decisions to be expedited - the committee support service and such things would not be affected by this proposal. Potentially a reduction to 30 members would create standard-sized wards that are generally slightly larger than current three-member wards. I live in a two-member ward and so once every four years, I am denied the opportunity to deliver a verdict on the council’s performance during the year at the same time as neighbours in Knaphill and Goldsworth East are afforded it. Worse still, neighbours in Mayford and Sutton Green are denied this opportunity twice in every four years. I would hope then that our councillors’ roles in our communities would change in two ways: firstly, that every councillor be given a similar number of residents to look after with similar support from other councillors in the ward and would therefore have a similar amount of time to devote to duties. Secondly, that every councillor would know that residents were holding them and their party accountable to exactly the same timetable and that there were no “free years” when a lack of activity could later be made up for. My view is that the role members play in the community is largely determined by the members themselves. Many are active, spending a lot of their time at residents’ meetings, holding surgeries and supporting social action. For these self-starting members, reducing the numbers on the council will not interrupt their commitment. Of the very few less active members, some may be encouraged by new boundaries and ward colleagues to become more so but again, the service that residents and communities receive from their elected members is more dependent on quality than quantity. I have heard the argument against reduction on that the potential effects on ward boundaries would create unduly large wards. This argument rather deflects when held up to the County Council divs ons that already happily exist - and with only one member each at that. It is also the case that some current wards are oversized and a reduction would allow those wards to remain intact under new electors per councillor figures. This is not an argument for 30 members in itself but sheds a little light on some of the arguments against. I do not believe that a reduction would have any impact on the ability of council committees to operate. There is no reason why 13 people need to seek a planning permission on a 14-unit development - and, in the case of 34 members, it could certainly be de jure whether 11 lay councillors can determine whether or not a 14-unit development should be granted planning permission. The overview and scrutiny committee also has 13 members and tends to employ a somewhat nebulous remit. A reduction in its numbers might well focus it more on council issues rather than issues of lesser social activity such as engaging with local regulated industries operators. The executive committee currently numbers seven; it has been six in the past as well as eight. It comprises the most committed of members, who are most willing to shoulder any extra burden. The final point that needs to be made is one of value for money. Woking councillors receive 7,115 per year flat rate in expenses and there is a small residual allowance for the council leader and leader of the opposition. During the past five or so years, the number of staff in the council has been reduced by around 40% and the wage bill has been considerably diminished. It is only right that councillors should play their part in this rationalisation, wh ch in my view has seen a better, not worse, council emerge. While I wouldn’t advocate a reduction in allowances - and this is in any case not the forum for that - it is reasonable for the public and council staff to hope that members will look at themselves in the same cool and business-like way they have looked at council staffing numbers. A reduction to 30 is not a 40% reduction and the “wage bill” of members will only go down by 60,000pa if this proposal goes ahead; but it is a statement that members of the council are not excluding themselves from attempts to make a leaner and more efficient council. I would ask that the Boundary Commission allow them to make this gesture because not only does it avoid any compromise on effectiveness but it will send out a positive message to Woking residents and encourage better relationships between the council and residents. While I support the 30 figure, I do believe that this hits a sweet spot between enough reduction to make a difference and not so much that council operate on does begin to become unbalanced. A further reduction to 27 or 28 would create workload issues for members at this stage. Likewise, remaining at 34 or 33 is not really enough of a change to be worth considering. A proposal for 34 members in particular seems to have an eye on how boundaries might be drawn and the significance of not being divisible by three rather than looking at council operations. There is no doubt in my mind that 30 members is the right choice for Woking and I would urge the Boundary Commission to allow this proposal to go forward.
Firstly, should we not be re-visiting the idea of amalgamated districts to make unitary authorities in Surrey. Kingston, as the county seat and too remote. If you wish to go to thirty councillors, then there should be six wards and equal numbers of councillors per ward. This would give a spread of workload in each ward. No doubt the present single member wards would complain about the loss of identity, but you have to check that against the greater good. Reducing by six councillors will mean a considerable saving, but an increased workload for those left. On the other hand, slacking councillors, on no committees will be exposed, as everybody will have to take their share of the work.
Woking District

Personal Details:

Name: Simon Bellord
Organisation Name: Individual freedom fighter and conservative

Comment text:

I feel that the council must be run much sharper and it should be clearer where councillors stand on matters facing the Borough. There is far too much time wasting pettiness about council business. This is because 36 councillors is far too excessive. Some councillors simply make totally unnecessary mischief as part of a plan to gain political advantage. There is a considerable amount of inaccurate often dishonest information put out by councillors in their party political literature about what is really happening and especially in social media that is never quest oned. Who is scrutinising the councillors? The councillors should be cut back to no more then 7 at most so that they can all play a main role, only paid an allowance to meet expenses say 2000 pounds to avoid t being seen as pa d work or a career by some. The savings should be spent on staff to field most public questions and better publ c communication or given back to the public in tax reduction. The public must understand that a councillor is a volunteer available for a limited time. The Planning Committee need only be the 7 councillors, decis ons should be made by Council and the Executive system and strong leader, currently a form of local dictator, must go. This would cut down on meetings and save off cer time. Electronic media is now available to be used freely to reveal publ c opinion although effort needs to be made to combat knee jerk populism and reactions. These changes would ensure each councillor is playing a proper lead role in Woking. Elections at present are boring and unhelpful, it is never clear what the issues are. Having elect ons every year has played into the hands of timewasters and political parties who plan their whole wider strategy in gaining electoral advantage the casualty of this is proper transparency and public contribution wh ch is usually what local polls tries to screen out. The vast majority of local people do not involve themselves in any way with the decs on making process and this only serves to strengthen the self importance of small ‘action groups’ and their narrow focus, planning being the main casualty here. There should be elections every three or four years for the whole council probably by a proport onal representation system to encourage people to vote for what they believe rather than tactically against what they dislike. Scrutiny at present is very poor in the council, it has been for several years as it is only serves as a knock around to indulge the egos of opposition pol t cians and achieves absolutely nothing. It should be a totally different forum, or just a review panel open to all interested people.
Woking District

Personal Details:

Name: David Battleston

Organisation Name: none

Comment text:

I consider that the proposal for 30 councillors to be a good one. There will be more than enough members to conduct the business and moving to 3 member wards will make it and fairer for Woking residents as each resident will have 3 representatives rather than the current system where residents are represented by 1 2 or 3 members.
From: Peter Booth
Sent: 28 September 2013 16:04
To: Reviews@
Subject: 36 Councillors is the right number for Woking

36 Councillors is the right number for Woking. First past the Post already distorts the way in which the views of the electorate are represented. A larger number of councillors helps to alleviate the problem caused by the retention of a medieval voting system.

Peter Booth
Woking District

Personal Details:

Name: Alison Clayton
Organisation Name:

Comment text:
I’m not sure how having fewer councillors would benefit residents, except for a direct saving of costs - if it means that ALL councillors would be up for re-elect on at the same time (I think I read about this possibility somewhere) then I think it is a bad idea, as it would adversely affect continuity of council business. My gut feeling is that the disrupt on to council projects of having all councillors up for re-elect on at the same time would cost much more than saving made on having fewer councillors.
Woking District

**Personal Details:**

- **Name:** John Cooke

**Comment text:**

I’m certainly in favour of reducing costs but I believe a reduction in the number of councillors will result in a less democratic system by giving the Conservative party a larger majority. Therefore we should continue with the 36 councillors or ensure any boundary changes reflect the overall mix of representation.
Dear Sir / Madam

You are asking whether Woking should be represented by 30 Borough Councillors in future.

I believe that this is 6 less Councillors than at present and I have to consider whether I believe that:

a. The existing 36 Councillors are fully employed (I appreciate that they are to a certain extent volunteers in that they take only a nominal salary), and

b. if so, whether the proposal to reduce the numbers by six would overload the remaining Councillors.

I do not believe that they are fully employed - unless they are senior in the Councillor heirarchy. They seem to enjoy the publicity offered by the local Press for street cleaning, etc etc ie a certain amount of self glorification. I therefore believe that the loss of 6 Councillors would not create a significantly heavier burden for those remaining.

Other business have had to cut back because of the current financial pressures and the remaining staff have taken on more work for the same pay. I believe that the Council must be seen to be taking steps to cut its costs - neither I nor my neighbours would want our Council Tax increased because the Council leaders do not bite the bullet.

However, what does concern me, and maybe outside your brief, is that the community boundaries are redrawn so that villages stay together - currently Goldsworth Park is split between two voting areas, as is Horsell. I believe that it is vital for the community spirit of our town that these splits are removed when you redraw the boundaries.

Yours faithfully

Mike Hopgood
Comment text:
I am in favour of proposed change to 30 councillors, including the balancing out of ward numbers to give equal numbers of councillors in each ward. The new number would enable the committees still to do their work efficiently and councillors still to be part of a ward in a manageable way. It would tidy up the current state of things and become a bit more streamlined but still cover the needs of the community well.
The number of councillors should reflect the population of Woking as a whole and also the population in its component districts. In that respect any changes in councillors per ward should be considered at the same time as changing the total number rather than afterwards. I doubt that reducing the total number by 6 would adversely affect the performance of the council but it depends on where the changes in the individual ward representations would be made. I reserve judgement until then.
Woking District

Personal Details:

Name: David Niven Reed

Organisation Name:

Comment text:
I have no view on the size of Woking Council, I am certain that I do not have sufficient information to be able to judge whether 30 or 35 councillors would be the right number. I do, however, have a firm view that there should be only one councillor per ward. The present situation where there are two councillors for my ward just leaves me confused as to which one I should contact when I have comments to make or a question or problem that needs a councillor’s attention.
Comment text:
I think to be truly representative of all residents the number of councillors should remain as it is at 36. This would be more representative than changing boundaries that may mean poorer communities being put into a richer community and their voices not being heard. To spread the workload across all the committees and boards and to facilitate good working practices for portfolio holders a reduction would be detrimental to the residents.
I fully support the proposed reduction in the number of councillors in Woking to 30.

I live in the Borough and run a business there.

Pauline Scott
Woking District

Personal Details:
Name: Adrian Smith

Comment text:
Woking has an expanding population and growing commercial occupation that will of itself create more work for our councillors. I believe that the number of councillors should remain at 36 to enable adequate oversight of the executive, something that is not being done very well at present and will only be made worse by a reduction to 30 councillors, as proposed by the current executive. Many of our Councillors are not retired meaning they have to juggle work life, home life and council business and with today’s unsettled work outlook, work is always going to come first leaving less time to adequately carry out all their Council obligations. Reducing the number would only add more pressure on them so the likelihood is that we will lose good people as Councillors. I am also cynical and believe that the current party in power are proposing this change in the expectation that the consequent change in boundaries will follow those recently imposed for the County Council wards which will further reduce the opposition’s chances of winning seats. We already have a Council that tends to ride roughshod over resident’s views and over the last few years has incurred tens of millions of pounds of debt repayable over 70 years and fewer Councillors, especially opposition ones, would enable them to continue in this way with even less control than exists now. In view of my comments I firmly believe that the number of Councillors should remain at 36.
Woking District

Personal Details:

Name: Colin Weeks
Organisation Name: 

Comment text:

a) None at all - most decisions are directed by the Chief Executive & Leader of the Council who basically have turned Woking BC into a Property Development Company ratcheting up more & more debt. 
b) What is required is a limit on the number of years that the Leader of the Council can stand; and the ability for Councillors in the Minority Parties to have a greater representation on the key issues. 
c) The major issue is that Councillors are no longer able to represent the wishes of their Constituents but appear to be forced to follow the "Party Line" d) It appears that in order for the CEO & Leader of the Council to get their way a negotiation takes place outside the Council Chamber of "if you scratch my back - I'll scratch yours" e) Within Woking we have a growing divide between the "Haves" and the "Have nots". I do not know the answer but basically we need a complete overhaul of the System whereby the Councillors have real teeth to challenge what they are being asked to do by the CEO; and are able to direct what the Council needs to do in line with their Ward Members wishes.