

The Review Officer (Woking)  
Local Government Boundary Commission for England  
Layden House  
76-86 Turnmill Street  
LONDON  
EC1M 5LG



6 November 2013

Dear Sir,

**Re: Woking Borough Council, Council Size Consultation**

I write with reference to the above consultation. I **OBJECT** to the proposed Council size of 30 and instead **PROPOSE** a Council size of 33.

Introduction and Background

I am an elected member of Surrey County Council representing the Division of Woking South East, which lies within Woking Borough Council's (WBC) administrative area. I was elected in 2009 and re-elected in 2013.

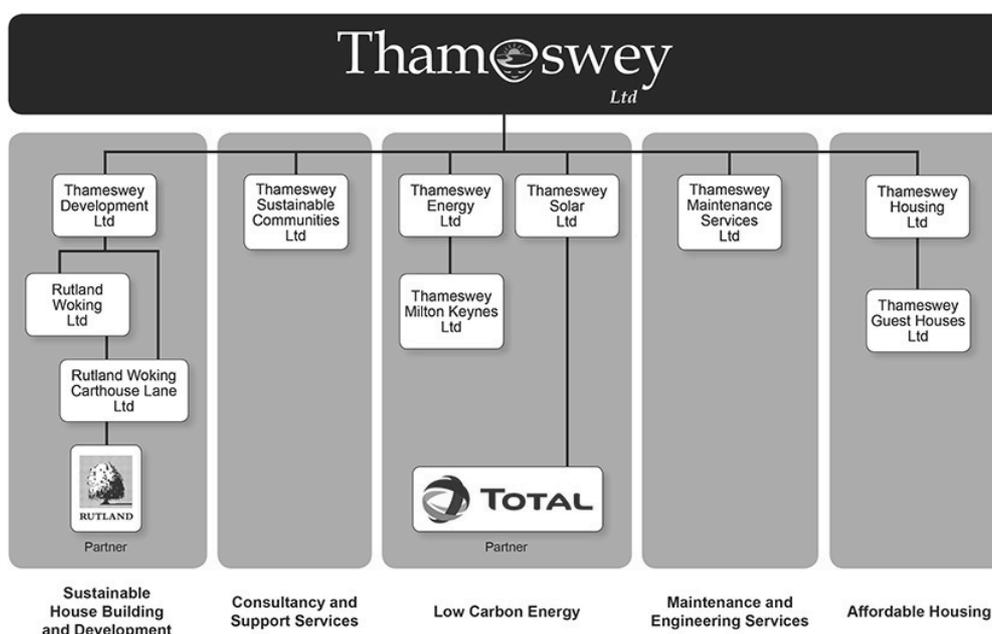
I am also Chairman of the Woking Local Committee, which is a joint committee of Surrey County Council established under s.101(5)(a) Local Government Act 1972. I have held that post since 2011. The Local Committee co-opts elected members of WBC and, by recent convention, the Leader of WBC is the vice-chairman of that Committee. The Committee is responsible for the discharge of a range of functions of both authorities and I therefore have a good understanding of the working of WBC. WBC are also lobbying the Leader of Surrey County Council to share further functions and have drafted a provisional constitution setting out how those functions would be arranged.

I have had regard to the *Electoral Reviews: Technical Guidance (2012)* document in considering the proposed reduction in Council size. In my view a reduction in council size to 30 members would adversely effect the convenient and effective administration of WBC in the following areas:

- (a) Administration of governance
- (b) Administration of scrutiny
- (c) Representative role of members
- (d) Promotion of representative local government

## 1. Administration of governance

1.1. WBC has established a range of companies under the parent company Thameswey Limited. The spread of companies is as follows:<sup>1</sup>



1.2. Presently four members of WBC serve as directors of these companies with consequential statutory duties to the company, together with a

<sup>1</sup> Sourced Thameswey Group Website: [www.thamesweygroup.co.uk](http://www.thamesweygroup.co.uk) accessed 29 October 2013.

reporting function to the Full Council. In particular, their role as directors of the various companies requires those members to attend board meetings and attend site visits in Woking and also to the development in Milton Keynes in which the Thamesway Group has a major interest.

- 1.3. It is of note that the legal advice and company secretariat of the Thamesway Group is not provided by the Council's officers, but rather by specialist solicitors Messers Clyde & Co. LLP of St Botolph Building, 138 Houndsditch, LONDON, EC3A 7AR. Further, the attendance of members of the Council at the meetings of the Thamesway Group of companies is conditional on signature of a confidentiality agreement.
- 1.4. The superintendence of the expanding Thamesway Group has been troublesome. For example, in 2011 Thamesway Developments Ltd acquired a large Greenfield site known as Rydens Way. It also entered into an agreement to fund a development on that site, which the Council as planning authority had previously refused and incurred expenditure defending at public inquiry. The acquisition and agreement were executed without a formal resolution of the Full Council or Council's Executive Committee. Following which, the Council established another governance arrangement for the Thamesway Group, in the form of the Ostensible Authority Panel. The Panel comprises three members of the Council and three substitutes who are to be available to approve major expenditure by the Thamesway Group of companies. The expansion of the Group with the recent creation of Thamesway Solar, together with a wide and varied business plan, will inevitably result in the need for greater member involvement.
- 1.5. The significant reduction of members of the Council to 30 will place considerable pressure on the superintendence of this large group of companies and, consequentially, would adversely effect the governance of Council functions.

## 2. Administration of scrutiny

- 2.1. WBC has resolved to discharge its scrutiny functions by a single Overview & Scrutiny Committee (O&S). The Committee comprises 13 members of the Council, of which three members also serve on the largest and most convened regulatory committee, the Planning Committee. Three members of the O&S Committee also serve on the only Council committee which has mandatory training, the Licensing Committee.
- 2.2. The scrutiny functions of WBC are placed in the hands of members who are already stretched discharging other demanding functions of the Council. A reduction in Council size to 30 will have a significant adverse effect on the efficacy of scrutiny functions of WBC.

## 3. Representative role of members

- 3.1. WBC in its submission places significant weight on its internal voluntary survey of members which it has conducted since 2004 [pp.14-18 WBC Council Size Submission Response].
- 3.2. The composite percentage decrease in hours spent over the period highlighted by WBC on p.17 of WBC's Response is unhelpful. When one considers the breakdown of hours at p.17 carefully, it reveals that the major reduction in hours is due to the category "other" reducing. The principle categories of work have remained broadly consistent or in some cases, such as preparing for meetings, have increased. Indeed, the rise of Council working groups has steadily increased over recent years.
- 3.3. The amendments to local government legislation enacted by the Localism Act 2011 have presented members with greater since the Act came into force. For example, the neighbourhood planning provisions

inserted into the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, have engaged a significant amount of member time in attending public meetings, explaining the process, engaging with residents and facilitating meetings with planning policy officers. The Council have designed one neighbourhood forum, covering Hook Heath within the ward of St John's & Hook Heath, and has received three other applications to designate neighbourhood forum and areas in the last year.

- 3.4. The assertion on p.26 of WBC's Response that the presence of email will "*continue to reduce the time demands of members*" is simply incorrect. In my experience, the presence of email has dramatically increased the time taken communicating directly with residents. It is not unusual for me to receive in excess of 100 emails per day from residents. This trend has increased during my time as an elected member and I can only see the time commitment increasing.
- 3.5. WBC has appointed a great many of its members to serve on a manifold number of bodies across the Borough in which the Council either funds directly by grant subsidy or is otherwise an interested party. In some instances, such as the Woking Citizens' Advice Bureau, those appointed members are registered as statutory directors of the company. In all cases, members have a challenging scrutiny and reporting function to perform.
- 3.6. WBC draw attention, at p.26 of their Response, to the 50% reduction in their directly employed workforce. However, this reduction in Council staff has not translated into a reduction in the oversight burden of elected members. The Council's functions continue to be discharged, albeit in some instances, by private companies on tendered contracts, and members continue to be contacted by their residents about the quality of those services undertaken in the name of the Council.
- 3.7. In my view therefore, the Survey when analysed properly, demonstrates an increase in time spent on key functions by members.

Further, the availability of electronic communication has increased drastically the time taken communicating with residents. A reduction in Council size to 30, with the attendant reduction in resident/member ratio, will have an adverse effect on the ability of those remaining elected members to effectively communicate and represent their residents.

#### 4. Promotion of representative local government

- 4.1. For the foregoing reasons a reduction in Council size to 30 members, will necessarily have an effect on the available pool of residents available to stand as councillors. The time commitments will increase, and necessarily a rise in meetings during working hours will follow.
- 4.2. Accordingly, the profile of elected members on WBC will necessarily be older, retired or of independent means and will necessarily be far less representative of Woking Borough's residents that the profile is now.

#### 5. Conclusions

- 5.1. In summary, a reduction in Council size to 30 would have a significant adverse effect on the discharge of convenient local government in Woking and should be refused accordingly. The Council's evidence base fails to demonstrate that would not be the case.
- 5.2. A reduction in elected members may be sustained to achieve a reduction in expenditure. I consider the minimum number of members WBC could operate upon, having regard to a major uplift in population over the next 20 years, would be 33.

Yours faithfully,

C/Clr Liz Bowes (Pyrford Division)  
Chairman of the Woking Local Committee