4 October 2013

Dear Sir/Madam,

Consultation Response – Woking Borough Council - October 2013

This response sets out the formal views of Woking Borough Council on the Council size consultation by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (from 24 September to 11 November 2013).

The consultation is based upon the Council size submission by Woking Borough Council in the first stage of the Borough Boundary Review and proposes that the Council size is reduced from 36 Councillors to 30 Councillors from May 2016.

Woking Borough Council would like to support formally the proposals within the Boundary Commission’s consultation exercise. The proposals are based on the work undertaken by the Authority to determine the appropriate size of the Council. A wide range of evidence was used to ensure that the proposals were robust, and that any risks to the ability of the Council to maintain its current level of service were minimised. A copy of the Council’s submission is available on the Commission’s website.

The three key areas of consideration were:

1. The Council’s governance and decision making processes

   The Council considered whether there was scope to reduce the number of Councillors by reviewing the workloads of Members, using the information gathered from three-yearly surveys conducted since 2004. Surveys of retiring Councillors revealed that the level of workload was manageable and met their expectations. Furthermore, it was noted that Councillors remained on average with the authority for over two terms of office, giving a good indication that the roles and responsibilities of a Councillor could be balanced with both home and work commitments.

   Changes to the governance arrangements will be necessary to reflect a smaller Council size, with the number of Members on the larger Committees to be reduced by a similar proportion (a Committee of 13, for example, would be reduced in size by, say, 4). The Council will look to ensure that the new structure would achieve streamlined but effective governance whilst maintaining fulfilling roles for all the Councillors.

2. The scrutiny functions of the Authority

   The Council has developed effective and efficient scrutiny arrangements, with the 13 Member Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its core. A large amount of responsibility is placed with a range of supporting Task Groups with varying lifespans and Member involvement. The
Council believes that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee can be reduced in size in line with the proposed reduction in Council size. The number and size of the Task Groups will continue to be carefully managed by the Committee, which takes into account the overall workload of the Committee and the availability of Councillors to sit on the Groups. It is through this close management of resources that the Council will ensure the scrutiny functions of the Council are kept at a high standard.

3. **The representational role of Councillors**

One of the most important duties of an elected Councillor is the representation of the electorate. To this end, the Council fully explored and debated the impact of a reduction in the Council size on the representational role. Central to the considerations was the changing way in which residents accessed information and services, with a far greater reliance on the Council’s website than had been the case at the time of the last review. Residents are no longer limited to contacting their local Councillor, and generally contact services directly through emails and phone calls by using the information available through the internet. Similarly, the new technology allows Councillors to engage with the local community more effectively and efficiently in a variety of ways, including email, blogs and websites.

The ease with which information can now be found has reduced the volume of enquiries received by Councillors, and the Council as a whole. The Council has sought to exploit any opportunities to improve or widen the interaction with the public, including the introduction of live webcasting of meetings. The Council has also sought to integrate its services with those of other agencies, such as Surrey Police and Surrey County Council, making it easier for residents to access a wide range of information and services.

Following its review the Council concluded that a reduction in the Council size by six would achieve its aims without impacting on its ability to deliver its services or adversely affecting the needs of the constituents and Councillors in terms of engagement. Indeed, as stated in the Council’s proposals, the review is seen as an opportunity to achieve a more streamlined approach to decision making and scrutiny, together with a cost saving for the Authority.

The Council would like to confirm its support for the proposal to change the size of the Council from 36 to 30 Councillors, and draw attention to the Authority’s original Council Size Submission document which sets out in detail the evidence and information used in reaching its conclusions.

Yours sincerely,

Ray Morgan  
Chief Executive

Councillor J Kingsbury  
Leader of the Council

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