

# Mole Valley District Council

Council Size Submission by

Mole Valley Conservative Association

Date 20<sup>th</sup> August 2021

# Contents

How to Make a Submission

About Mole Valley (taken from the Mole Valley District Council Submission with some alterations where the views differ)

For Review (Request Reviews Only)

Local Authority Profile

Council Size

Other Issues - Summary

## How to Make a Submission

1. It is recommended that submissions on council size follow the format provided below. Submissions should focus on the future needs of the council and not simply describe the current arrangements. Submissions should also demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been considered in drawing up the proposal and why you have discounted them.
2. The template allows respondents to enter comments directly under each heading. It is not recommended that responses be unduly long; as a guide, it is anticipated that a 15 to 20-page document using this template should suffice. Individual section length may vary depending on the issues to be explained. Where internal documents are referred to URLs should be provided, rather than the document itself. It is also recommended that a table is included that highlights the key paragraphs for the Commission's attention.

## About You

3. The respondent should use this space to provide the Commission with a little detail about who is making the submission, whether it is the full Council, Officers on behalf of the Council, a political party or group, or an individual. This response has been submitted on behalf of Mole Valley Conservative Association. The submission was prepared by the local Conservative Association and working with the local Conservative District Councillors, considering County Councillor comments and residents. Much of the format and basic background information is in line with the submission made by the District Council, but the fundamental way forward for the Council to become an effective and strong District for the benefit of residents is not in line with the Liberal Democrat Administration

## Reason for Review (Request Reviews Only)

4. Please explain the authority's reasons for requesting this electoral review; it is useful for the Commission to have context. NB/If the Commission has identified the authority for review under one of its published criteria, then you are not required to answer this question.

## Local Authority Profile

5. Please provide a short description of the authority and its setting. This should set the scene for the Commission and give it a greater understanding of any current issues. The description may cover all, or some of the following:
  - Brief outline of area - are there any notable geographic constraints for example that may affect the review?
  - Rural or urban - what are the characteristics of the authority?
  - Demographic pressures - such as distinctive age profiles, migrant or transient populations, is there any large growth anticipated?
  - Are there any other constraints, challenges, issues or changes ahead

### **About Mole Valley District**

Mole Valley covers 25,832 hectares, 16% of Surrey as a whole and is the third largest of the 11 districts in the county.

It has a population of 87,245 in 2019, 7% of Surrey's as a whole and is the ninth most populous district in the county. It comprises of 38,772 dwellings (as of 2020) 8% of Surrey's as a whole and is seventh in terms of districts with the most dwellings. The rural areas of Mole Valley account for over 90% of the District. 76% of the District being designated as Green Belt. 37% of the land is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and hosts 76 sites of Nature Conservation Importance.

There is a greater concentration of electors per hectare in the hub-towns of Dorking and Leatherhead, as well as in larger villages (which may be characterised as rural-related) of Ashted, Bookham and Fetcham.

In the more rural areas of the district, the electors who Councillors are tasked with representing are distributed amongst a greater area. For example, the ward of Leith Hill encompasses 4,366 hectares, with an elector density of 0.31 electors per hectare. Most population centres in Mole Valley are a mix of urban, suburban and rural conurbations, such as the Leatherhead and Ashted area in the North of the District.

Within Mole Valley there are 13 Parishes, mainly in the Southern rural areas of the District. In addition, there are several very active Resident Associations within the District. Unparished areas tend to be represented by Residents' Associations, such as Ashted, Bookham, Fetcham and Leatherhead. The exception is Dorking which has an active unelected town centre forum and businesses are represented by a Business Improvement District. Housing

The average house price was £505,000 in June 2020, making Mole Valley the second most expensive district in the county. The ratio of house prices to residents' salaries was 14:1 in March 2020, making Mole Valley the fifth most unaffordable district in the county. Between 2014/15 and 2018/19, 230 new affordable homes were completed, 6% of Surrey's total and ranking the Mole Valley ninth in terms of affordable housing completions. At the last census in 2011 there were 4,270 housing units in Mole Valley owned or managed by Registered Social Landlords, including the primary Housing Associations which operate in Mole Valley such as Clarion Housing (which, as of March 2021, managed 4200 units in Mole Valley). According to the most recent figures from the Regulator of Social Housing this total figure had risen to 4701 social housing units in Mole Valley as a whole. This data may not include the private lettings, facilitated by the Council's housing team which amounted to around 70 in the 2019/20 year, as well as the 31 households assisted through Rent Deposit Bond Schemes in that year in order to prevent homelessness.

The high cost of housing within the District and lack of affordable properties, is a significant issue within the area, especially the rural areas where housing is expensive and limited, creating boundaries for young families wishing to move into the area. Four wards within the District contain park homes: Beare Green, Box Hill, Headley and Newdigate. The ward of Box Hill and Headley has a significant proportion of such properties which makes up approximately 40% of the ward's electorate. Residents within these properties tend to be over 55 years old and have limited connectivity to the internet.

## Demographic

According to the most recent (2019/20) population estimates from ONS, around 23.7% of the population of Mole Valley is aged 65 and over, compared with the national average of 18.4% in England and 19.1% of Surrey. In 2019 the average age of residents was 47.5 years, making Mole Valley the district with the oldest residents in the county.

The 2011 Census recorded that 90.1% of the population of Mole Valley was White British, with 0.15% Gypsy or Irish from the Traveller community and 4.85% from other White backgrounds. 1.5% of residents were from Mixed-Race backgrounds and 0.5% of Mole Valley's population is of a Black, African, Caribbean or Black British background; both figures are 0.6% lower than Surrey as a whole. 2.5% of residents from Mole Valley were from an Asian or British Asian background, whereas this group constituted 5.7% of Surrey as a whole.

Social and economic deprivation in Mole Valley is often masked by proximity to areas of affluence and dispersed communities. There are pockets of deprivation within Mole Valley such as North Leatherhead and the Holmwoods.

## The Context for your proposal

Your submission gives you the opportunity to examine how you wish to organise and run the council for the next 15 years. The Commission expects you to challenge your current arrangements and determine the most appropriate arrangements going forward. In providing context for your submission below, please demonstrate that you have considered the following issues:

- When did your Council last change/reorganise its internal governance arrangements and what impact on effectiveness did that activity have?
- To what extent has transference of strategic and/or service functions impacted on the effectiveness of service delivery and the ability of the Council to focus on its remaining functions.
- Have any governance or capacity issues been raised by any Inspectorate or similar?
- What impact on the Council's effectiveness will your council size proposal have?

## **Council Size**

6. The Commission believes that councillors have three broad aspects to their role.

These are categorised as: Strategic Leadership, Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulation and Partnerships), and Community Leadership. Submissions should address each of these in turn and provide supporting evidence

## Strategic Leadership

7. Respondents should provide the Commission with details as to how elected members will provide strategic leadership for the authority. Responses should also indicate how many members will be required for this role and why this is justified.

## Governance Model

Mole Valley adopted the Leader and Cabinet Model of decision-making in November 2007, and this came into effect from 1st March 2008. In 2011 this was taken one step further with the adoption of a Strong Leader, providing continuity as the Leader is now effectively appointed for a four-year term of office. A formal governance review was undertaken between 2012 and 2013 when the decision was taken to retain the cabinet model. In 2019 the Council agreed to undertake a review to consider moving back to a full committee system, or a hybrid model of decision-making. A working group was established to undertake this work, and this had been nearing its conclusion at the time the pandemic hit in 2020 and this programme of work was paused. Whilst members are keen that this work is concluded, we do not believe that, should it be adopted, a return to a committee system would change the Council recommendation regarding to size. The early indications from that work were that any changes to the Councils governance model would not impact the number of members required to effectively manage the work. Workloads would be distributed differently between all members. Whilst the constitution allows flexibility as to the number of members on the Cabinet, the Cabinet currently consists of nine members.

Current political make up:

Conservative	12
Liberal Democrats	22
Informal Independents	7

The Council has 48 seats to allocated on its formal committees, this excludes Cabinet. These are allocated in accordance with the principles of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, to ensure that the number of seats held by a particular political group on the Council is reflected in the total number of seats held on the various committees.

Additionally, the Council appoints to several working groups – in May 2021 this equated to an additional 56 seats for members to fill. Again, these were allocated on a proportional basis. At present, this equates to approx. 2.5 seats per member, a move to 39 members would increase this to 2.7 seats per member, which would not have a significant impact on workloads.

### **Mole Valley Conservatives Association view**

Reducing the members number to an even lower 36 would increase the number of seats to just over 3 per member and it could be argued would provide a more robust and comprehensive councillors in all wards, with increased knowledge in many disciplines. The financial and cohesive efficiency would be strong and allow for a simple more direct problem solving with the Council officers rather than multiple members feeding into one or two officers and “clogging the system”.

What this figure does not show is the frequency of meetings for these groups; for example, the Planning Policy Working Group currently meets monthly in the lead into the submission of the Local Plan, whilst others, such as the Cabinet Aviation Working Group only meets when needed – the last meeting was held in 2019

### **Portfolios**

The Leader has currently appointed a Cabinet of nine members, which includes the Leader and Deputy Leader, together with the following Cabinet Portfolios:

- Leader (Council Strategy and Communication)
- Deputy Leader (Leisure and Tourism)
- Climate Change
- Community Services
- Finance
- Internal Services
- Planning
- Projects
- Sustainable Economy and Security

The current Leader and Administration of Mole Valley District Council have been in place since the local elections held in May 2019.

The Leader undertook a review of the membership of the Cabinet and concluded that, given current and anticipated workloads, nine cabinet members were required. Consideration was given to the key priorities set out in the Council’s Annual Plan, individual portfolios were reviewed, and it was determined that maintaining a nine-member Cabinet provided for key leadership in significant areas of work such as climate change, whilst helping ensure a fair distribution of workload and increased efficiency by close alignment to the senior officer structure of work.

Cabinet Members work closely with the Council’s Strategic Leadership team (SLT) as well as key partners throughout both the District and the County, representing the Council on several joint committees and shared service governance boards. The Cabinet meets formally 6 times a year;

it also meets informally on a monthly basis with SLT to consider upcoming programmes of work and, prior to each Cabinet cycle, to sign off the draft report recommendations. The Cabinet will also meet informally to address specific urgent issues.

Additionally Extraordinary meetings can be called when urgent business arises, or for significant pieces of work, such as the agreement of the Local Plan consultation documentation. The number of these is variable, with three taking place in 2019-20, one virtually in 2020-21 and, in 2021-22. one extraordinary meeting was held in late May, with a further two scheduled to consider Mole Valley's Local Plan submission.

The constitution allows for the Cabinet to establish several Working Groups. These are politically balanced cross-party groups; some are constituted groups such as the following:

- Aviation Working Group
- Hackney Carriage Consultative Group
- Pippbrook Working Group
- Planning Policy Working Group
- Thomas Flack Working Group

The Cabinet can also establish a small number of task and finish groups to consider time sensitive issues, or specific pieces of work. At present the Cabinet has two such groups:

- Boundary Review Working Group
- Car Parking Working Group

These groups are chaired by the relevant Cabinet member. The Cabinet member works closely with Officers to set the direction for the Working Group and agree agendas. The amount of work for the Cabinet Lead and Members of each working group can vary significantly dependant on frequency and topic. For example, the monthly Planning Policy Working Group (with an open invitation to all Members), whilst undertaking its focused work on the development of the Local Plan for Mole Valley, can often have lengthy agendas, with meetings often lasting in excess of three hours. Others, such as the Thomas Flack Working Group, which oversees the allocation of grants from the estate of the late Thomas Frederick Flack for the general benefit of the people of Leatherhead, Ashted, Bookham and Fetcham only meets once or twice a year to discuss grant applications prior to recommending those for formal approval by the Cabinet.

Cabinet members with reports on the agenda of the Scrutiny Committee are also expected to attend the Committee to present reports within their Portfolio and respond to questions. In the main, all Cabinet Members attend Scrutiny Committee meetings. Decision-making is taken collectively by the Cabinet, there is no delegation to individual cabinet members. Individually Cabinet members meet at least monthly with senior officers to discuss the service areas within their portfolios, including budget, key performance indicators and the delivery of the council strategy. The Council does not promote any cabinet role as a full-time post and this is reflected in the Special Responsibility Allowance for Cabinet Members (the



allowance scheme for Members is assessed by an Independent Remuneration Panel, with recommendations made to Full Council for adoption; the last full review was undertaken in 2017).

### **Delegated Responsibilities**

As noted above within the Cabinet decision making model operating at Mole Valley District Council, the Cabinet takes collective decisions. There is no delegation to individual Cabinet Members. Delegations to Committees are set out within the Council's Constitution and the Council has delegated several Local Choice functions to the Cabinet and other Committees. For example, the approval of the Council's final accounts and financial statement has been delegated to the Audit Committee.

### **Delegations to Officers**

The Council has agreed an extensive scheme of delegation to officers detailed in the Constitution and most decisions, particularly operational matters, are made by officers under delegated powers. The effective operation of the delegation scheme relies upon close co-operation and liaison between officers and Members.

### **Accountability**

8. Give the Commission details as to how the authority and its decision makers and partners will be held to account. The Commission is interested in both the internal and external dimensions of this role.

#### Internal Scrutiny

The scrutiny function of authorities has changed considerably. Some use theme or task-and-finish groups, for example, and others have a committee system. Scrutiny arrangements may also be affected by the officer support available.

### **Scrutiny Committee**

The Council has always maintained one Scrutiny Committee, which is exclusively responsible for scrutinising both external partners, and internal decision-makers. The Committee comprises of 11 Members and meets 6 times a year in advance of Cabinet meetings to scrutinise upcoming decisions, offering councillors the ability to make comments and provide feedback on Cabinet reports. It is common for Ward Councillors to attend the Committee to speak where items particularly affect their residents, thus allowing for Councillors from all political groups to add value to decision-making.

The Committee is not a formal decision-making body and contributes to the Council's decision-making process by scrutinising the actions of decision-making committees and officers. This allows for the Committee to draw attention to important issues, as well as formulating recommendations to improve practice.

In accordance with MVDC's Constitutional requirements, the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee are selected from a political group which is not represented in the Cabinet. There is a standing item on the agenda of all ordinary Cabinet Meetings which provides for the Chairman of Scrutiny to feedback the Committee's comments and suggestions directly to the Cabinet.

Since the Scrutiny Committee generally can review and comment on all reports before they are considered by the Cabinet, the call-in mechanism has in the past been used infrequently. However, since 2019 members have recalled or called in a Cabinet decision due the lack of any notice being taken by the Liberal Administration, this usually returns to the Scrutiny Committee to be heard.

In the 2020/21 Municipal year the Call-In function has been used twice to facilitate further discussion of items by the Committee, with further information having been provided by the responsible Cabinet Members. The Committee can also develop its own work plan to determine any specific areas of Council Policy it wishes to Scrutinise. In the past Scrutiny Panels, composed of between 5 and 7 Members, have undertaken task and finish work on topics such as: a review of Car Parking services and electrical vehicle charging points, as well as a thorough review of the Council's Planning service and its performance data.

Scrutiny Panels meet according to the needs of their work, for example, a Panel may meet regularly throughout the year, or it may meet frequently in a condensed period in order to complete a specific piece of work. There is also a Standing Budget Panel, which annually examines the Administration's budget proposals and meets with Cabinet Members to discuss their respective budgets; for the first time, interviews with Cabinet Members were held via public meetings in January 2021 (virtually via Zoom). The final 13 recommendations (all of which except one recommendation were ignored by the Administration) of the Panel were then presented to the Scrutiny Committee as part of the Committee's consideration of the 2021/22 Budget and Council Tax Resolution.

The procedures rules and guidelines for the Scrutiny Committee as set out in the Council's Constitution also enable the consideration of requests from Members for a review of matters affecting the District or its inhabitants including the reference of any local government matter relevant to the functions of the Committee.

In the early part of 2021, the Committee received its first request for such a review and the Planning Scrutiny Panel undertook a specific piece of work to relating to the Development Management Committee's approach to the granting of personal permissions and master plans for larger sites. The Committee also holds three external meetings a year to receive presentations from and scrutinise external organisations. The Committee's external meetings are typically well attended by non-committee members, encouraging a strong degree of Member engagement with these organisations. In the 2020/21 Municipal year this has included scrutinising the contractors responsible for the delivery of the Council's waste contract. The Committee also met with Clarion Housing who manage the social housing in Mole Valley, allowing Councillors to question officers

on service-delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic and examine key issues experienced by residents living in social housing. The Committee also heard from organisations to which the Council provides grant funding, receiving information in relation to service provision during the pandemic Covid-19, including the Mole Valley branch of the Citizens Advice Bureau and a local Domestic Abuse Charity in the area.

### **Statutory Functions**

This includes planning, licencing and any other regulatory responsibilities.

Consider under each of the headings the extent to which decisions will be delegated to officers. How many members will be required to fulfil the statutory requirements of the council?

### **Planning Development Management Committee (DMC)**

This comprises 19 Members to consider all planning applications not otherwise delegated to officers and, subject to many peer reviews, has been seen as too large. Members of the committee are expected to attend regular in-house training sessions and carry out site visits as needed. The DMC garners the most public interest, and members of the committee receive regular communications from applicants, residents and developers which they need to manage accordingly.

The Development Management Committee covers the whole of the district and meets 12 times a year (monthly) with proposed adjournment dates for each month should the committee not conclude its business at its scheduled meeting. All 19 Members (and 12 substitute members) are required to attend regular training which is delivered by officers within the Planning Service. Training is mandatory for new Members to the Committee and ongoing training throughout the year ensures Members are kept abreast of relevant legislative changes and local policy amendments. Members appointed to the committee acknowledge that there is a significant time commitment required.

The agendas can be lengthy, often ranging from 200 - 300 pages, furthermore members are required to be familiar with the location of the sites and regularly undertake site visits in their own time. The Chairman and Vice Chairman have a pre-briefing with the Planning Officers prior to the meeting and a representative from each political group is also entitled to attend. The constitution does not prohibit Cabinet members from sitting as members of the committee.

A Planning Peer Review was undertaken in 2019, and as result of this an informal Planning Improvement Board was established to consider the suggested recommendations arising from the review. A Scrutiny Planning Panel was also convened to formally consider the Peer Review suggestions and make recommendations to Council via Scrutiny. As a result of the peer review, the planning delegations to officers were reviewed and updated. The review also recommended that the size of the committee be revised (with a suggested reduction in the number of seats). Members have informally indicated their preference for 19 seats to remain available on the Committee. The level of delegation is comparable with other similar authorities with the Council seeking to comply with the National Planning Practice Guidance, which confirms that it is in the public

interest for the local planning authority to have effective delegation arrangements in place to ensure that decisions on planning applications that raise no significant planning issues are made quickly and that resources are appropriately concentrated on the applications of greatest significance to the local area. This is not to downplay the role of Members in the planning system and the determination of planning applications. Members are extensively involved in planning related cases, whether those are reported to a Committee or not.

Planning is a large part of Members' inboxes. The amount of planning case work they are involved in, irrespective of the delegation arrangements, is likely to rise as the emerging Local Plan has the potential to be a step-change in housing delivery.

### **Licensing Committee**

This comprises 11 Members, it meets twice a year to discharge all functions required under the Licensing Act 2003.

Through its twice-yearly meetings the Committee will set discretionary policies and, where appropriate, make recommendations to Full Council to adopt policies reserved to it by statute. For example, the Committee is in the process of reviewing the Statement of Licensing Policy, for the next 5 years and will then make recommendations on adoption of the policy to Council. In the past it has undertaken work in relation to taxi licensing and enforcement, principles under the Gambling Act 2005 and any of its obligations under the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

As required, Members of the Licensing Committee also sit on Licensing Sub-Committees to hear appeals relating to premises licences and Taxi licences. This has recently included determining appeals on pavement licences, as part of the Business and Planning Act 2020 which delegated this temporary power to district and borough councils as part of the government's response to Covid-19. In 2020/21, four Licensing Sub-Committees were convened to hear four appeals. Over the past five years, on average 4.2 appeals have been determined by the Sub-Committee.

All Members of the Licensing Committee are required to undertake training in relation to the licensing functions of the council, and this must be refreshed on a regular basis. Mole Valley District Council operates a shared Environment Health and Licensing Service with Tandridge District Council, and since early 2021, training is delivered to elected members of both district councils virtually, enabling Members to share knowledge on a wider scale. Training of Licensing Committee members is of particular importance given the quasi-judicial nature of the Sub-Committee and is mandatory before a Members can take part. Additional training is provided to those Members acting as the Chairman of the Sub-Committee.

The Constitutional requirement is for three members of the Licensing Committee to sit on a Licensing Sub-Committee. Given the ad-hoc nature of the timings of sub-committee hearings, the ability to draw from the existing membership of the parent Committee is critical to the effective operation of the Sub-Committees; the Sub-Committees can be convened at short notice to ensure compliance with statutory deadlines, and Members who are not the relevant ward members for the application/hearing may be called upon.

The procedure for Licensing appeals is set by the Council's Statement of Licensing Policy.

## **Other Regulatory Bodies**

### **Audit Committee**

This comprises seven councillors. It meets on average five times a year to consider the Council's governance and audit functions, including the signing off of the Statement of Accounts. Members of the Cabinet cannot sit on the Audit Committee and in accordance with the Constitution, the committee must be chaired by a member of an opposition party.

The Committee has the core Audit Committee responsibilities, as described by CIPFA, and has delegated responsibility from Full Council to approve the annual audited accounts and the Annual Governance Statement.

### **Standards Committee**

The Standards Committee comprises six District Councillors and two Parish Council Representatives (who are non-voting members of the Committee). Each year, Council formally waives the political balance requirements, thereby enabling two members from each of the main political groups to make up the six committee members.

The function of the committee is primarily to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by Members and to hear and determine misconduct allegations referred to it. Upcoming work for the Standards Committee includes a review of the Councils Member Code of Conduct.

### **External Partnerships**

Service delivery has changed for councils over time, and many authorities now have a range of delivery partners to work with and hold to account. Shared Services

In recent years, Mole Valley District Council has established a number of shared services with a range of Local Authorities within Surrey.

- Environmental Health and Licensing Shared Service –with Tandridge District Council (MVDC acts as the host authority)
- Joint Waste Solutions – with Surrey Heath, Elmbridge and Woking Borough Councils
- Southern Building Control Partnership – with Tandridge District Council (Tandridge acts as the host authority)

As part of the Governance arrangements for these shared services the relevant Cabinet Member is appointed to sit on the partnership board for the shared service, to ensure that the partnership is delivering its objectives effectively and efficiently. In the summer of 2020, Surrey County Council launched a bid for a single county-unitary council, which was declined by the Government.

### **Mole Valley Youth Council**

The Council has operated a Youth Council (Mole Valley Youth Voice) for several years. The number of schools participating in the Council has fallen in recent years, and it was agreed that a review of Youth Voice and how the Council engages with young people should be undertaken. The review is planned for 2021/22 and officers will be working closely with the relevant Cabinet Member to develop proposals for consideration.

Members across the chamber are very keen to further develop these partnerships as they recognise the importance of seeking and hearing the views of future electors, given the decisions they are taking will have significant impact on this generation, particularly in relation to the response to the Climate Change Emergency and the adoption of the Local Plan.

### **Mole Valley Local Committee**

The Local Committee consists of Mole Valley's six County Councillors alongside six, politically balanced, nominations of District Councillors who enjoy equal voting rights. This Committee works to make decisions on local services and functions, as well as managing a budget delegated to them by the County Council's Cabinet. This includes a vital role in engaging with residents about local issues and influence the County Council's work considering local needs and perspectives; the Committee also works to monitor the performance and, where appropriate, making recommendations about local improvements to services for young people, libraries, highways and transportation.

### **Outside Organisations**

The Council annually appoints Councillors from all political groups to a wide range of outside organisations, which allows Members to represent the Council and wider community through close engagement with these organisations. In some cases, the Lead Cabinet Member will be the appointment representative, or a local ward member, others are open to all members. The workload associated with an appointment varies, depending on the number of meetings and the expected workload from associated activities and preparation.

The full list of these bodies is below:

- Age Concern Mole Valley
- Member Armed Forces Champion
- Ashted Common Consultative Committee
- Ashted Peace Hall Memorial Committee
- Bookham Residents Association – Board of Directors
- Brockham Big Field Community Sports Ltd
- Central Surrey Council for Voluntary Service
- Mole Valley Citizens Advice

- Clarion Regional Scrutiny Committee
- Coast to Capital Strategic Joint Committee
- District Councils Network Assembly
- Dorking BID Board
- Dorking and District Town Twinning Association
- Dorking Residential Care Homes
- Dorking Town Centre Forum
- East Surrey Community Safety Partnership
- Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals – Local Representatives’ Panel
- Friends of Triel
- Gatwick Airport Consultative Committee
- Gatwick Diamond
- Gatwick Green Space Partnership
- Gatwick Joint Local Authorities Group
- Gatwick Noise Management Board Community Forum
- Local Government Association – General Assembly
- Lower Mole Partnership Liaison Group
- Health Liaison Panel
- Mole Valley Access Group
- Mole Valley Business Forum
- Plastic Free Bookham Steering Group
- Police and Crime Panel
- Redhill Aerodrome Consultative Committee
- South East England Councils (SEEC)
- Surrey Environment Partnership
- Surrey Countryside Partnership Board
- Surrey Playing Fields (otherwise known as Surrey County Playing Fields Association)
- Surrey Leaders’ Group
- Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Board

Historically the Council has appointed members to act as trustees (for a three-year term) to local charitable trusts, such as

- Dorking Charities
- Fetcham United Charities
- Leatherhead United Charities

- Mickleham Almshouses

The Council can also make nominations to Surrey Wide Outside Bodies when invited to do so by the Surrey Leaders Group. At present Mole Valley Councillors sit on the following Surrey wide organisations

- Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust
- Surrey Civilian-Military Partnership Board

### **Community Involvement**

9.The Commission understands that there is no single approach to community leadership and that members represent, and provide leadership to, their communities in different ways. The Commission wants to know how members are required to provide effective community leadership and what support the council offers them in this role.

For example, does the authority have a defined role and performance system for its elected members? And what support networks are available within the council to help members in their duties?

### **Community Leadership**

Councillors could be expected to undertake the following ward-based activities:

- Ward surgeries
- Newsletters
- Social media activity
- Participate in local community groups – such as Parish Council or Residents' Association Meetings

The disparate geographies throughout Mole Valley such as the differences in physical size of wards, and the difficulty of travelling within some scarcely populated rural wards, can mean Councillors representing rural wards spend more time travelling to meetings or events within their wards. Whereas some Councillors representing urban or densely populated wards could carry out their duties on foot, others may be required to travel significant distances to perform their duties and meet residents. This disparity, felt particularly in rural areas of the district, may impact upon Councillors' ability to commit to in-person events; this in turn may impact upon some residents' ability to access representation.

Whereas a surgery could be accessible to many residents in a more urban area, in a more rural ward, this may be fettered by transport links, together with a requirement for a greater number of surgeries across a larger geographical area. The introduction of greater access to technology has changed the way that members can work with communities. The recent pandemic has demonstrated how new technology, such as virtual meetings can be utilised to mitigate issues where access to members or communities is more challenging. Whilst it is recognised that sometimes



meetings, especially of a sensitive nature, are best held face to face, the last 15 months have provided an insight as to how technology can be utilised to maximise engagement. Of course, managing an ever-increasing inbox, phone calls and letters, together with a range of social media accounts, does require a significant time commitment from elected Members.

With the increase in the use of social media, a response which traditionally might have gone to one or two people, can now very easily be shared with a much wider audience. Members have had to learn to adapt to such changes, especially in the modern world where people expect swift and sometimes immediate responses to social media posts.

Conversely, the ability of ward councillors to keep each other informed and to present a unified approach to problems, concerns or issues presented by the residents and public in general is acknowledged as an on-going issue and has been made worse by the lack of face-to-face meetings in recent months

Within Mole Valley, Parish Councils are primarily located within the rural wards within the south of the District. Whilst not many District Councillors stand as Parish Councillors, they do have a standing invitation to attend the monthly Parish meetings in order to report on any local matters, or to hear local concerns which may impact upon their work as District Councillors. Attendance at these meetings can also impose a significant time commitment on Members, particularly where a Ward may encompass multiple parishes.

For example, the Brockham, Buckland, and Betchworth Ward includes 3 Parish Councils with Councillors regularly attending meetings for each Parish. In the more urban parts of the District there are several very active Residents' Associations and again local ward Members are expected to attend and contribute to these meetings. In some instances, Councillors may be required to collaborate with multiple Residents' Associations within their wards. In most cases, Parish Council and Residents' Association meetings are held in the evening and in addition to their MVDC commitments, it would not be uncommon for all councillors to attend on average three evening meetings a week.

A further requirement for Councillors throughout the District is working with, coordinating, and referring residents onto ad-hoc community groups which have been developed since the emergence of Covid-19. This has resulted in an additional pressure for Members to provide assistance and support, particularly to more vulnerable residents within their communities. Whilst set up to assist with the pandemic, several groups are now considering how they can adapt and continue to provide support to those residents and communities who need it.

Members will continue to engage with and work these groups, in addition to their existing case work.

## **Casework**

The local ward member is often seen as the community representative who can best assist with local issues, regardless of whether they are directly to the services delivered by the Council. In many cases the District Councillor will be approached for County services and the same is true for County Councillors receiving requests for District issues. Typically, issues raised relate to generic planning, individual planning applications

advice and issues, social housing, bin collections, benefits, bus services, train services and highways. The local member may act as the catalyst in resolving problems or helping to refer residents onto the appropriate organisations. Councillors have adapted to utilising Social Media and emails as a medium for communicating with residents, rather than face-to-face surgeries or using the phone.

As with many issues, as the age profile of Mole Valley is older than the rest of Surrey on average, residents may be less likely to utilise self-service options on the Council's website. This may lead to the need for greater intervention from Councillors, as they are required to ensure that residents can access these key services.

Since the last boundary review, the Council has transferred its housing stock to a housing association, whilst this reduced the specific housing questions being asked of members, the level of casework has remained steady and often takes more time as members are having to liaise with a range of housing associations as opposed to just speaking with Officers at the Council. Given the geography and rural / urban split of the district, the issues presented to members representing these wards can differ. Property issues and neighbour disputes are more commonplace within the urban areas, with footpaths and access issues creating more concern in rural areas. Whilst both the rural and urban areas have social housing, often, in the urban towns these are managed by local Housing Associations such as Clarion, Mount Green and Raven, whereas rural properties are served by national organisations such as the Rural Housing Association and the Poland Trust. There is often a covenant on such properties regarding local links and members are often asked to support the management of this process.

Community Events take place throughout Mole Valley, and Members are very engaged in these events, often supporting the planning and safe delivery of these, again this varies by ward but provides members with the opportunity to engage with their communities in a visible way.

The Council does not provide support to political groups and does not provide a case management system to support members in their ward work. Each member is expected to develop their own systems to manage this element of their role. Officers are available to members during office hours, should they need to discuss a particular issue. All members are provided with a Microsoft Office 365 Account, this enables them to access their Council emails through outlook, access the Members Extranet as well as providing access to software such as word and excel.

The Leader and Chairman of the Council have access to administrative support within the Democratic and Electoral Services Team.

### **Other Issues**

10. Respondent may use this space to bring any other issues of relevance to the attention of the Commission.  
All issues have been covered in the above text.

## **Summary**

11. In following this template respondents should have been able to provide the Commission with a robust and well-evidenced case for their proposed council size; one which gives a clear explanation as to the number of councillors required to represent the authority in the future.

Use this space to summarise the proposals and indicate any other options considered. Explain why these alternatives were not appropriate in terms of their ability to deliver effective Strategic Leadership, Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulation and Partnerships), and Community Leadership.

## **Mole Valley Conservative Association Summary**

Considering all the above points and reviewing the day-to-day workload, the Mole Valley Conservative Association would make the following recommendations to the Commission:

1 Elections should be every 4 years - so called "all out elections"

The logic is simple and based on the following:

- 1.1 There would a higher turnout of the electors;
- 1.2 Administration would have a mandate to deliver their manifesto and for the electors to judge their ability (the current arrangements do not allow for scrutiny of the Administration's actions);
- 1.3 Cost saving of elections 3 out of 4 years, *versus* 1 every 4 years - not a considerable financial saving but, nevertheless, allowing for financial prudence; and
- 1.4 Aligned with County Council Elections, making further financial savings;

2 District Council size of 36-39 members for the following reasons:

- 2.1 Allowing for more day-to-day involvement and wider knowledge of all services;
- 2.2 Streamlining of management lines within Council for speedy responses and conclusion of residents' problems; and
- 2.3 Higher recognition of local Councillors - in many wards the constant elections lead to confusion and who is the actual councillor versus the candidate (if they are active in the community)

### 3 Mixed Ward sizes

3.1 The Mole Valley District Council is a North (urban) and South (rural) area, to undertake a “one size fits all” approach would not be equitable or cohesive. Retaining the mixed size of wards would be helpful.

Backing the above views:

The countryside of Mole Valley is extensive and accounts for over 90% of the District’s area, making it a very desirable location for people to live, surrounded by beautiful countryside and landscapes. The District is well served with two market towns, 3 large villages. The countryside contains a variety of attractive villages, hamlets and scattered isolated dwellings and farms, containing about a quarter of the District’s population. The landscape of the countryside is also highly attractive. As a whole, Mole Valley is a relatively affluent area.

The 2015 Indices of Multiple Deprivation indicate that Mole Valley is the 305th least deprived local authority area out of a total of 326 local authorities. No part of the District is within the least deprived 10% nationally. However, when measured against the indices, there are parts of the District, including North Holmwood and parts of North Leatherhead, which experience relative levels of deprivation in comparison to other parts of the District. However, this does not mean that Mole Valley is without its challenges, housing being a big issue for both the lack of availability and affordability.