Review Officer (Sunderland) LGBCE  
1st Floor, Windsor House  
50 Victoria Street

London SW1H 0TL

28th February 2023

Dear XXX

**Boundary Commission Review – Future size of Sunderland City Council**

Please find enclosed the submission by Sunderland Labour Group relating to a review by the Boundary Commission of the number of councillors on Sunderland City Council.

Yours sincerely

Phil Tye

Chair

Sunderland Labour Group

**Sunderland City Council – Boundary Commission Review**

**Council Size – Submission by Sunderland Labour Group**

**Introduction**

This document expresses the position of the 42 members of Sunderland Labour Group who are supportive of the submission adopted by Council at its meeting on Wednesday 22nd February 2023[[1]](#footnote-1).

We believe that the evidence presented by the city council and expressed in this document fully justifies maintaining 25 wards elected by thirds, a total of 75 councillors.

The recent change in opinion expressed by the two main opposition parties to suggest a reduction in councillors is disappointing, especially without proposing any alternative number during consultation or providing evidence to justify their position.

**Sunderland Council Context**

The current Council has 75 councillors (25 wards elected by thirds) and this has remained unchanged since re-organisation in 1973 and subsequent all out elections in 1974.

The main centres are Sunderland itself, the former New Town of Washington which was established in the 1970s and the communities of Houghton-le-Spring and Hetton-le-Hole which are in the former Durham Coalfield.

We accept the contextual data provided in the Council within its submission that:

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| Population (Numbers) | While current population stands at 274,200 (2001 Census) it is forecast to rise to 287,000 by 2038.  We believe future projection over time will therefore be higher than at the time of the previous boundary review. |
| Population (age) | Sunderland’s population is also ageing, and it is our view that this will have a positive impact on the percentage of the population registered to vote.  Using the most recent data from the electoral commission[[2]](#footnote-2) (2018):   * 94% of people aged 65 are likely to register to vote (this group in Sunderland will increase by over 35% by 2033). * 74% of people between 20-24 are likely to register to vote (this group in Sunderland is due to decrease by more than 23% by 2033). |
| Population (Diversity) | Sunderland’s population is becoming more diverse with those identifying themselves as an ethnicity other than “White: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British” now accounting for 7.12%.  Data on predicted changes in diversity moving forward has not been presented and therefore any impact on registration patterns is unknown at this time. |
| Population (Deprivation) | Sunderland is currently ranked the 33rd (37th in 2015) most deprived Local Authority in England in the English Indices of Deprivation (IoD) 2019 Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD).  In most Wards deprivation is persistent (existing over one or more IoDs) with new pockets of deprivation emerging or expanding (across the 2015 and 2019 IoDs) in the St. Chad’s, Washington Central, East, North and West Wards.  The data presented by the council in their submission shows a clear increase in deprivation since 2010, with Sunderland now ranked 33rd most deprived LA in England (37th in 2015), though less that in 2004.  We are of the opinion that a consequence of the increased level of deprivation has been an increase in councillor workload within their communities (as evidenced within the council submission survey of councillors). |
| Councillor/Elector ratio | We accept the evidence base provided by Sunderland council in their submission that maintaining 75 councillors, while currently producing a councillor/elector ratio of 1:2760, will rise to 1:2955 by 2029.  We also make the following observations, based upon the briefing pack issued by the commission for councillors, consisting of data from CIPFA (2022) relating to group and councillor counts:   * The ratio proposed by the council by 2029 of 1:2955 is close to the current national median number of electors per councillor of 1:3045 * That of large authorities with 75 Councillors or more, the proposed ratio for Sunderland by 2029 will be substantially higher than the average for similar sized authorities as identified by CIPFA of 1:2759 |

In summary, we accept Sunderland council forecast both of an increasing population, and increasing aging population, also within a context of increased deprivation levels within that population. In addition, that the Councillor/Elector ratio is appropriate for the council, given the current number of councillors.

We therefore support the council’s proposals that its size remains at 75 councillors and reject the suggestion by opposition groups that a reduction should be considered.

**Strategic Leadership**

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| Governance Model | We support the comments made by Sunderland council in respect of their submission and in doing so endorse the increased workloads evidenced through a survey of councillors. |
| Portfolio’s | We support the comments made by Sunderland council in respect of their submission and in doing so endorse the increased workloads on members of the executive to fulfill the roles as currently outlined within the council constitution. |
| Delegated responsibilities | We support the comments made by Sunderland council in respect of their submission and endorse the closer partnership working and increased scrutiny and oversight expected of councillors and committees to ensure local people continue to receive the services they expect and deserve. |

In summary, we consider the current model of leadership to be the most effective model of governance for Sunderland. There is undoubted pressure on councillors (as evidenced within the councillor survey), but we believe this is manageable with the current 75 councillors.

We therefore support the council’s proposals that its size remains at 75 members and reject the suggestion by opposition groups that a reduction should be considered.

**Accountability**

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| Internal Scrutiny | We support the comments made by Sunderland council in respect of their submission and in doing so endorse the increased workloads evidenced through a survey of councillors. |
| Planning | We support the comments made by Sunderland council in respect of their submission and in doing so endorse the increased workloads evidenced through a survey of councillors. |
| Licencing | We support the comments made by Sunderland council in respect of their submission and in doing so endorse the increased workloads evidenced through a survey of councillors. |
| Other regulatory Bodies | We support the comments made by Sunderland council in respect of their submission and in doing so endorse the increased workloads evidenced through a survey of councillors. |
| Extremal Partnerships | We support the comments made by Sunderland council in respect of their submission and in doing so endorse the increased workloads evidenced through a survey of councillors. |

In summary, we consider the current model of accountability to be the most effective model of governance for Sunderland. There is undoubted pressure on councillors (as evidenced within the councillor survey), but we believe this is manageable with the current 75 councillors.

We therefore support the council’s proposals that its size remains at 75 members and reject the suggestion by opposition groups that a reduction should be considered.

**Community Leadership**

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| Community leadership | We support the comments made by Sunderland council in respect of their submission. In addition, we would make the following observations:   * That with the growth in use of social media there has been an increase in casework. * That councillors often take away issues and concerns from resident meetings and escalate through the Council * That such issues and concerns are becoming more complex due to increased depravation levels and requirement to deal with multiple external partners. * That councillors are increasingly being used as a means of reporting issues and campaigning within communities.   These points are endorsed by councillors through the survey undertaken by the council with 83% of respondents saying that since becoming a Councillor their workload had increased, with the predominant reason given being community engagement/working on residents’ issues . |

In summary, we accept Sunderland council account of the increased workload associate with being an elected member of the council.

We therefore support the council’s proposals that its size remains at 75 councillors and reject the suggestion by opposition groups that a reduction should be considered.

**Other issues – members survey**

We believe the members survey undertaken by Sunderland Council and contained within their submission, fully endorses the points made within this document relating to workload, which would significantly increase should the current number councillors be reduced.

* The current average hours per week for a councillor is 33.5 hours.
* 83% of councillors report an increase in workload and only 2% a reduction.
* 62% of councillors are employed for which 79% work over 30 hours per week.

A clear majority of councillors who responded are required to combine employment with an additional average of over 30 hours per week on councillor activities. We would argue that this current position is manageable within a framework of the current 75 councillors. Any reduction would likely impact on the wellbeing of existing councillors and pose a future barrier to residents in employment considering standing to become a councillor in Sunderland.

**Conclusions**

It is our view that the evidence indicates a population changes that will impact on the size of the electorate, justifying the status quo. In addition, the increased workload identified by councillors mast be considered when determining the number of councillors.

Sunderland Labour Group therefore recommends to the Boundary Commission that the Council size should be maintained at 75 Councillors to ensure that the inevitably increasing needs of constituents are met.

Sunderland Labour Group

28th February 2023

1. See Council submission 22/02/23 - <https://committees.sunderland.gov.uk/committees/cmis5/Meetings/tabid/73/ctl/ViewMeetingPublic/mid/410/Meeting/11023/Committee/1966/Default.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See electoral commission data - <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-is-registered> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)