



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

Julie Fisher
By email

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**Department for Levelling Up,
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Dear Ms. Fisher,

In May 2023, the Secretary of State intervened in Woking Borough Council, following an external assurance review. As part of this, the three reviewers were appointed as Commissioners, given powers over a broad range of functions and tasked with overseeing the necessary improvement. The Secretary of State committed to consider the skills and experience required to support Woking on their improvement journey within six months, following the receipt of two reports from the Commissioners.

In those first six months, your Authority has worked collaboratively and cooperatively with the Commissioners. That being said, the situation remains grave. The first report, published on 19 October, made it clear that the scale of the challenge at your Authority 'should not be underestimated'. In their second report, published today, the Commissioners continue to paint a stark picture of the challenges, noting that the Authority "remains in an extremely vulnerable position due to its overhanging debt and historical lack of rigour in its commercial activity." In the short-term, tough decisions need to be made, requiring clear leadership across the Authority, and a steady hand at the wheel. In the longer term, innovative solutions need to be developed to tackle Woking's financial position and organisational model. With this in mind, coupled with your resignation as Chief Executive, the Secretary of State deems that any corporate leadership gap in Woking poses too great a risk to the integrity of the Authority. The Secretary of State has therefore made the decision to increase the capacity of the Commissioner team to enable focus on the long-term challenges the Authority faces and has appointed a Managing Director Commissioner to join the Commissioner team.

Having served as Lead Commissioner for the first six months, Jim Taylor has decided to step down from his role for personal reasons. Jim has demonstrated clear leadership and real dedication to his roles both as Lead Reviewer and Commissioner, as I am sure you also appreciate. As part of the expansion to the Commissioner team, the Secretary of State has appointed Sir Tony Redmond as Lead Commissioner. Sir Tony is a respected figure with a long career in Local Government, with his most recent appointment being as the Chair of the Nottingham Improvement and Assurance Board. The Lead Commissioner will focus on finding longer-term solutions for Woking and promote a clear strategic direction for the Authority.

Alongside this, the Secretary of State has appointed Richard Carr as Managing Director Commissioner. He will be responsible for day-to-day operations of the Council

and will provide strategic direction and leadership, and implement efficiencies throughout the Authority, until such time as a permanent appointment to the post of Chief Executive can be made. The Secretary of State expects the Council to appoint Richard as Head of Paid Service on your departure, to enable the Commissioners to work efficiently within the Authority, and for Commissioners to work with the Council to determine the right time to appoint a permanent Chief Executive.

It is important to note that these changes will not result in a change of the powers that the Commissioners hold, or any changes in the Directions that were issued on 25 May 2023. Commissioners will be equal in their power with oversight and authority over their portfolio areas. The Secretary of State continues to expect Commissioners to provide strong oversight over the finances and operations of the Authority.

As you are aware the Directions require your Authority to pay Commissioners reasonable expenses and such fees as the Secretary of State determines to be paid to them. The Secretary of State is mindful of the need for Commissioner remuneration to represent value for money for local taxpayers. In relation to the Managing Director Commissioner, he has determined fees of £1,100 per day for a maximum of 260 days per annum. The Secretary of State also expects Commissioners to be paid reasonable expenses in accordance with the rules for senior officers set out in your Authority's staff handbook.

It remains clear that, although progress has been made, the most difficult phases of the Authority's recovery are still yet to begin, and there is still much work to be done to ensure Woking Borough Council can again meet its best value duty independently. The second report states that "gaps within the finance function means that it is still 'not fit for purpose' and 'not equipped to deliver the volume and complexity of the work required.' It is reiterated throughout the report that this capacity gap is now hampering progress and has become a 'barrier to greater progress being made'."

I would like to acknowledge the work that you have undertaken as Chief Executive over recent years. You have worked alongside Commissioners to face the serious challenges that the Authority faces. We ask that you continue this work alongside the Commissioners to make the transition as smooth as possible. I am copying this letter to the Section 151 Officer and the Monitoring Officer.

Yours Sincerely,

Max Soule