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A Surrey Mayor is on the horizon

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Surrey is on the verge of getting its own elected mayor like those in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, according to plans announced in the Budget today.

Chancellor John Healey unveiled fresh devolution measures in the Budget – which set out the government's finances and fiscal policies for the coming year.

As part of this, the government is in the "final stages" of establishing several new mayoral combined authorities across the country – of which one would be Surrey.

Mayoral combined authorities – such as in Greater Manchester, the Tees Valley and the West of England – see several unitary councils pool resources on key strategic issues, overseen by a directly elected mayor.

The news was welcomed by Surrey County Council leader Tim Oliver (Conservative: Weybridge), who has long pushed for the creation of a Mayor of Surrey.

He said: "I absolutely welcome the government's intention to secure a mayor for Surrey and I hope the incoming leadership of East and West Surrey councils go full throttle in working with government to deliver it.

"Surrey needs to grab this opportunity with both hands to unlock the funding, infrastructure investments, and local decision-making powers that our residents deserve."

In the Budget, Mr Healey promised a "radical rewiring of the state" in a push for greater devolution of power to England's regions – which has been a key priority for Prime Minister Andy Burnham.

Other measures to this end included plans for regional government to keep 100 percent of business rates income by the decade's end and allowing strategic authorities to charge an overnight visitor levy – often known as a tourism tax.

From next April, Surrey County Council will be abolished along with the 11 district councils and replaced with the new West and East Surrey councils.

A mayor for Surrey would be elected separately to these two new councils, but work alongside them on any strategic issues on which they decided to collaborate.

East Surrey's council leader Steve Wotton (Liberal Democrats: Horley West , Salfords & Sidlow) said: "A Mayor of Surrey could mean more decisions closer to our communities and help secure the strategic leadership and investment they deserve. We'll engage with government to explore that potential.

"There are examples elsewhere in the UK of mayors helping improve public services and drive economic growth, and we'd like to secure similar opportunities to improve life for the people we represent."

And West Surrey's leader Paul Follows (Liberal Democrats: Godalming South, Milford & Witley) said: "We will work closely with Government, our partners across Surrey and local stakeholders to ensure that any future governance arrangements are designed in the best interests of West Surrey residents and businesses.

"However, it is essential that discussions about future structures do not distract from the key issue of resolving the significant financial and structural challenges that local government in Surrey continues to face."

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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