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All change! Epsom and Ewell Borough Council approaching its final stop?

8 January 2025

Surrey is changing “whether we like it” or not and county council leader **Tim Oliver** says it’s better to be at the forefront of that change.

The Government wants to introduce new mayoral authorities across the country in a bid to streamline councils and shift power away from Westminster.

For Surrey, that means scrapping the 11 boroughs and districts as well as the county council, and replacing them with either a single, or what seems more likely, two authorities with a Strategic Mayor.

The question is how will it be done? The answer; it will either be imposed on Surrey, or the councils can create their own plans to merge under devolved powers.

County Council leader, Councillor Tim Oliver, favours playing a central role, arguing that change is inevitable, and it’s best to be part of the conversation in order to shape the future, rather than sit on the sidelines waiting to be told what to do.

The Government wrote to the county council in December outlining how it planned to “transfer power out of Westminster through devolution and to fix the foundations of local government.” It wants a simpler structure that is “clearer for residents” and said it would even pass new laws to postpone the May 2025 elections “to help manage” the once in a lifetime opportunity to restructure.

Writing to Surrey, Jim McMahon, minister of state for local government and English devolution, said: “We are under no illusion about the scale of issues facing local government. It is in all our interests to make sure we are avoiding unnecessary spend at a time when budgets are already tight.”

He added: “I have heard from some areas that the timing of elections affects their planning for devolution, particularly alongside reorganisation. To help manage these demands, alongside our objectives on devolution, and subject to meeting the timetable outlined in this letter, I am minded-to lay secondary legislation to postpone local council elections from May 2025 to May 2026. However, I will only do this where this will help the area to deliver both reorganisation and devolution to the most ambitious timeframe – either through the Devolution Priority Programme or where reorganisation is necessary to unlock devolution or open up new devolution options.”

Cllr Tim Oliver is already minded to take up the offer of pushing back the elections for a year to get devolution done. Holding the elections this year would cost about £1million, he says, and would take time away from officers already working to a tight five-month deadline to get devolution over the line.

“The Labour Government has set up their agenda in the white paper and that is to create Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) across England. They have a strong majority and we can assume they will pass the legislation,” Cllr Oliver said. “If you don’t reach an agreement locally, then they will legislate. It’s going to happen. It’s better that we try to control or have some influence over what happens rather than have it imposed on us down the line.”

“The primary focus should be ‘what is in the best interests of the residents of Surrey?’ Whether we like the model or not it is going to happen in Surrey and the reason for getting in early as we are, is that we are slightly unique here in that there are councils in Surrey that have significant debt levels.”

This, he says, gives the Government a huge stick, to push councils to get on board. Councils such as Woking are bankrupt and need Government intervention. Merging the councils would pile its £2billion debt on to others.

Similarly, though not bankrupt, Spelthorne Borough Council has debts of more than a billion and Runnymede has debts of more than £600m. Surrey County Council, albeit with significantly larger spending power as a top tier authority, is also heavily indebted.

Cllr Oliver said: “The longer we leave it, the less likely we will get any support from the Government. That’s what’s driving me.”

Historically, Surrey councils have not benefited as greatly as other local authorities from Government funding reviews and have to raise more money locally. Areas that can raise taxes will continue to be required to. Removing tiers of local government will be an efficiency driver and help stave off service cuts, or lead to more investment.

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He said: “We have to divide up the county to create a minimum of two strategic authorities, and then we get a mayor. If we don’t get on with that reorganisation, we will be years away from the benefits of a mayor, compounded with almost certainly reduced funding to Surrey councils.”

Papers published ahead of the January 10 deadline to respond suggest the council leader will take up the Government’s offer to hold off on this year’s elections “to give time to consult.”

Cllr Oliver said: “If we go ahead with elections in May, and I’m fine with that, I wasn’t going to run again. But, ignoring who wins, you end up with an election in May that will cost over a million pounds, which they do, and then you will have a bunch of new councillors who have to find their feet, only to be out in two years when the council disappears. The next five months should be about the negotiation with the Government about what the future looks like.”

“Every political party, and all the existing councillors who know the county better, will have the opportunity to input. I can’t see what the Liberals, if they got a majority, would do differently? This way, we will get a bit of goodwill from the Labour Government by engaging with them now.”

“Hampshire, Essex, and Hertfordshire are already getting on with their own plans for devolution, and if Surrey County Council just puts its head in the sand and gets on with the elections we will miss the opportunity to have the conversation with the Government about the debt levels.”

“We’ve got five months to consider it, the key thing is to do an intensive piece of work now. We’re not at the point where we’ve had the conversation about how it’s split, but we’ve got five months to do this either the Government’s way or our way. Yes, the timetable is much shorter than anybody would want particularly putting a letter in by January 10 but we have to respect the fact that this Government has an agenda and it can deliver because it has the mandate.”

Later this month the Government will set out which areas will be included in its Devolution Priority Programme with a view to inaugural mayoral elections in May 2026. They are looking at creating new unitary councils with populations of 500,000 or more. Surrey has a population of about 1.2 million. Exceptions will be made to ensure new structures make sense for an area.

An extraordinary meeting of Surrey County Council is set to go ahead on Wednesday January 8 where the council will be “asked to note” that the leader intends to express interest in pursuing devolution and local government reorganisation.

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Tim Oliver Surrey County Council leader – Surrey Live

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