

Two unitaries will save money says Surrey leader

27 June 2025



Splitting Surrey into two could fill the ever-widening gap for council funding, County Council leader Tim Oliver claims. In a cabinet meeting yesterday (June 26), the Surrey leader and councillor said he hoped local government reorganisation will provide a new opportunity to re-hash the old services onto new council bodies, but innovate how they are delivered to residents. He said: “Looking at reorganisation, looking at what savings can be delivered, will be really important to hopefully completely fill the gap we’re likely to see as a result of the Fair Funding Review.”

Last week, the government launched its consultation across Surrey for the two competing submissions for changing councils structures: one option is to divide Surrey into East and West unitary authorities, and the other is to split the county into three, North, East and West. The leader claimed that splitting Surrey into three mega councils, as promoted by the opposition, would break even and make no savings, whereas the two-authority model could generate ongoing yearly benefits around £25m. But ‘Team Three’ councils have argued the separation would be more evenly balanced financially in terms of delivering services like adult social care, SEND provision and collecting tax. Documents reveal, according to the District and Borough council calculations, the three-divisional plan would save £22.5m annually four years in.

Cllr Oliver clarified saving money is by no means the only drive in reorganisation, but was a significant consideration for keeping local councils afloat with income funding changes from central government. Surrey has a high council tax base meaning it has more band H houses, paying at least £3,692.70 amount in 2025, than many other parts of the country. Cllr Oliver said it will mean the county will lose the equivalent round of government grants or funding allocations, leaving a net reduction in Surrey’s income. The central government has launched a review into looking at how local councils are funded across the country, called the fair funding review. Documents reveal the government is considering an “equaliser” for local government income, directing funding towards places that are less able to meet their needs through locally raised income using council tax with others.

Cllr Oliver added: “We will be even more reliant upon council taxes as the source of financing and it’s already something in the region of 80-85 per cent. So that is not going to be good news. Any new money coming into local government over the next three years, 76 per cent of that will be funded on the assumption that every council increases its council tax by 5 per cent each year, for the next three years.” Local authorities have the power to raise the tax by up to 5 per cent every year, although some choose lower increases. Legally, increasing council tax more than 5 per cent requires a local referendum. Bin collections, libraries, public toilets, fire services, parks, SEND provision and social care are all funded by council tax. If councils are unable to make ends meet with the money raised, services will have to be cut or streamlined to balance the books. The leader said: “It is therefore hugely important for every reason that if we are to continue to deliver the services at the level that we wish to, we find areas of savings or efficiencies. We have a very good track record of delivery efficiencies year on year but this will be significant.”

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Tim Oliver Surrey County Council leader - Surrey Live

Oxshott High Street redeveloping?

27 June 2025



Plans to redevelop part of a Surrey high street have been put forward.

Oxshott village store and post office and a former takeaway spot could be knocked down and transformed into a whole new high street development. The proposal features two large commercial spaces on the ground floor for residents, and nine apartments spread over the first and second floors.

“This is a significant opportunity to improve the character and appearance of this part of the High Street,” planning documents state. Details reveal the new building design will be traditional and reference the neo-classical/Georgian style houses which match the surrounding character of Oxshott.

For market sale, the property could consist of 6 one-bed and 3 two-bed flats in the heart of the high street. This reflects the most critical type of housing needed in Elmbridge borough and will help fill the gap between the existing shortfall, according to the planning statement.

Planning permission was previously granted on the site in October 2023 for a similar scheme to create five apartments. The new proposal seeks four extra homes to be added, as well as including additional land from The Victoria pub to the back of the site for an extra eight parking spaces.

Oxshott village store and post office, (No. 50 on the high street) is currently a two-story building at 8.52m. But under the proposed development plans the height would scale up to 12m tall rather than the 9.65m previously approved.

Only one person has objected to the scheme so far, claiming the new design is “overbearing and will adversely dominate the high street”. Concerns were also raised by residents in the comments’ section that the path would be obstructed during the demolition and development of the buildings and how construction would operate on the site.

Not the only part of the village’s high street to get a new look, the Heath buildings opposite to the village store and post office will also be redeveloped after planning permission was agreed in October 2024. The new Heath buildings will be 13.2m tall from the ridge.

Comments on the application are welcome on Elmbridge Borough Council’s website until July 4, with a target decision date for July 17.

Surrey examines a plea for a 20mph road

27 June 2025



A campaigner says a Surrey council is “missing the point” about safety as hopes for a 20mph speed limit on a rural road have been scuppered.

Surrey County Council (SCC) claim the traffic measures on Ford Road in Bisley would be too costly.

Dr Ayres started a petition for a 20mph speed limit, arguing residents should be able to get to the shops without “such fear and intimidation that they experienced when confronted by coaches and HGVs at 30mph”.

He presented his campaign at a SCC Highways, Transport and Economic Growth meeting on June 3.

Over 120 people signed the petition calling for the current 30mph speed limit to be lowered to protect pedestrians, cyclists, horse riders and other road users from the increase in traffic, particularly HGVs.

Several large commercial premises are located on Lucas Green Road. Often HGVs will come off the A322 Guildford Road, drive through Ford Road to get to their destination.

Matt Furniss, cabinet member for Highways, Transport and Economic Growth Decisions, said he recognises the concerns raised but said that drivers generally comply with the 30mph speed limit on the narrow rural road and that it has a relatively good safety record.

But Dr Ayres slammed the council’s response for “missing the fundamental point of this petition” by focusing on the HGVs and drivers on the road. He said it was about “the safety and wellbeing of the vulnerable road users who frequent Ford Road”.

He said: “I do not accept commercial interests in Lucas Green Road should dictate what happens in Ford Road.”

The road has a “relatively good safety record”, according to a report, with only one personal injury collision in 2021 in the 10 year period between November 2014- October 2024.

As the current speed limit is 30mph, and the existing average speed is over 28mph, council documents state the road would need more than just a sign to reduce the speed successfully.

These measures could consist of road humps, raised road tables, road narrowing, chicanes and priority give way pinch points.

The report read: “The cost of introducing traffic calming measures over such a length of road (approximately 2km) would be substantial, especially since significant improvements to the existing street lighting are likely to be required to comply with the appropriate design standards for the installation of traffic calming measures.”

Council officers also warned the additional features could have negative effects; for instance, traffic tables could cause noise and vibration from the HGVs or that speed cushions could even lead to road damage.

Concerns were also raised that if the speed limit changed to 20mph on Ford Road, residents on Lucas Green Road would also want a reduced speed limit.

The report said, given the roads are interlinking and are similar in character and measures introduced in one road are likely to have impacts on the other road, introducing traffic measurements would likely create “significant concern” for those residents on the other road.

A traffic engineer said: “We’re aware of the issues and hopefully we can in the future change the speed limit.” She added the council will include the road on a list for schemes that need funding in the future.

Surrey schools shorter Summers?

27 June 2025



Summer holidays could be shortened in Surrey in favour of a longer October half-term break, after a county council decision. The change by Surrey County Council (SCC) means the October half term will now be two weeks long instead of the normal one week, with five days taken off the usual summer holiday period in July 2027 instead.

A public opinion survey carried out from December 2024 received 3,775 responses. Approximately 56 per cent of people agreed with having a two week autumn half term, while 36 per cent opposed the idea. Clare Curran, SCC Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning, said the results from recent public consultations with schools and residents show “there is a clear appetite for change”. She said 60 per cent of schools that responded were in favour of a two week autumn half term, 30 per cent were against, and a further 10 per cent were undecided.

The two week autumn half-term break for community and voluntary controlled schools will begin in the 2026/27 academic year. Cllr Curran added: “This work is in response to the national conversation regarding school term times, and the feedback received by the council from schools, school staff, and families regarding the challenges of differing term dates. It is our intent to facilitate the council, schools and multi academy trusts working in partnership to set term dates that are consistent across the county.” The school year will still have 195 days, including five INSET days, the council said.

Related reports:

Surrey schools not out for so long in summer?

Thames Island Festival given go-ahead

27 June 2025



The show will go on for an exclusive summer concert on a private island in the Thames. D’Oyly Carte Island has been given the go-ahead to host three days of music and entertainment as part of the Weybridge Festival over July 4-6, 2025.

The private island, inaccessible to the public for part of the year, opened its grounds last year for Weybridge Festival and celebrated music ranging from Motown and Soul to 70s’ and 80s’ soft rock.

In January 2025, the festival plans were put on hold as Elmbridge Borough Council decided to stop the event going ahead due to “serious health and safety concerns”. After four months of working on risk assessment and escape plans, the weekend concert can now go ahead.

A unique location, only one bridge serves as the connection from the mainland to D’Oyly Carte Island. Officers raised the alarm that the evacuation routes in the event of a fire or an emergency were not enough for the requirements.

Owner of the Island and event organiser Mr Andy Hill said: “It’s an island, it’s surrounded by water, it’s 50 yards from the mainland. My experience of human beings, if confronted with burning to death or taking on 50 yards of the Thames—I know what I would do. People that are confronted with death will do a lot of things to avoid it.”

Mr Hill explained people can evacuate via the bridge in 5 minutes and 3 seconds—just 3 seconds over the legal time. He also added there will be a ferry that is available for the “odd straggler who can’t get on”.

The environmental officer said she is “still concerned about Mr Hill’s attitude and competency to health and safety, and fire safety”. Officers stressed their key concern was the evacuation plan as they were not satisfied proper emergency routes and exits were in place. The environmental officer said the barge is not licensed to carry people.

Councillors recognised Mr Hill had put plans in place like an evacuation plan and alternative routes. But Cllr Paul Hughes, chairman of the licensing committee, said: “I really encourage you to carry on working as there are clear issues that need to be resolved.”

Mr Hill said after the meeting: “We have worked very closely with the Fire, Police and Health & Safety for the last four months to ensure the events in 2025 are as safe and enjoyable as they were in 2024 and we very much thank these services for their valuable input. We are very grateful to the three Councillors at the TENS hearing who listened to the points made by all parties and concluded that the extensive safety measures that have been put in place will result in a safe and fabulous event with some sensational performers.”

Related reports:

Surrey’s D’Oyly Carte Island concerts cancelled.

Bridge to private D\’Oyly Carte Island, Weybridge. (Credit: Google Street View)

Surrey sent on a U-turn on SEND by MPs?

27 June 2025



Surrey County Council has made an apparent U-turn on MPs’ engagement with SEND cases. The leader of Surrey County Council has pleaded with MPs to not “talk down” children services but work constructively and the council denied it was closing down channels of communication.

Liberal Democrat and Conservative MPs wrote separate letters to Clare Curran, the councillor in charge of children’s services, after she sent an email saying the department would respond to fewer constituent SEND cases raised by members.

MPs had expressed their shock and concern in respective letters over Cllr Curran’s statement that the service “will no longer provide a response to individual cases where a more appropriate alternative route is available”.

But at a full council meeting on May 20, Cllr Curran said she is “not closing down any channels of communication”. The cabinet member said: “I set aside any impression that I may have given that I don’t want to hear from MPs or that any lines of communication are being cut back, closed or shut down which is absolutely not the case.”

Cllr Curran said she just wanted to reiterate and remind MPs that in some cases where a final decision has been taken, the appropriate route for the family to follow without delay, is to use a formal appeals panel.

Cllr Eber Kington, from the Residents’ Association and Independents group, raised the issue at the meeting. He argued it was important that councillors and MPs did not have “communication barriers put in place by children’s services” if their input was “not deemed appropriate or convenient”.

At the meeting, Woking’s MP Will Forster, who is also a county councillor, asked if Cllr Curran thinks the policy fits with the council’s “leave no one behind” approach. The Lib Dem MP said he had about 40 active SEND cases.

The leader of Surrey County Council, Tim Oliver, explained that Surrey has over 16,000 children with education, health and care plans (EHCPs), one of the highest in the country.

In a speech to full council, Cllr Oliver urged MPs to “not talk down” Surrey’s SEND service and “wilfully mislead the public”. He encouraged MPs to “use your position to speak up for Surrey in Parliament, not to talk down a service that needs urgent national reform and support this council and government to implement reforms that work for our children, their families, and for all councils across the country.”

Surrey MPs unite against County on SEND silence

27 June 2025



Surrey MPs have slammed the council for apparently closing down discussions on constituent SEND cases. In a rare case of unity between parties, both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives have written separate letters to Surrey County Council criticising its decision.

The letter comes after MPs were advised last week that Surrey County Council “will no longer provide a response to individual cases where a more appropriate alternative route is available”. But a council spokesperson said the most suitable route for parents wanting to challenge a decision is by a formal appeal.

Posting on X, formerly Twitter, Zöe Franklin, Lib Dem MP for Guildford said: “This latest correspondence is further proof of the council’s contempt for children with SEND requirements across our county.” Lincoln Jopp, the Conservative MP for Spelthorne, wrote on Facebook: “It is deeply troubling that Cllr Curran has written to all Surrey MPs seeking to restrict the level of engagement Surrey County Council will have with us on SEND matters. This decision risks families not getting the real help they need.”

Surrey County Council has come under fire in recent years for having one of the highest SEND tribunal appeal rates in England. Around 198 SEND-related complaints have also been upheld against it by the Local Government Ombudsman since the start of 2022.

The county council’s most recent Ofsted SEND area inspection found that children with SEND had “inconsistent experiences and outcomes”. But the Surrey authority would say it is on an improvement programme and is significantly investing in supporting SEND children both inside school and out.

The Lib Dem MPs claim many parents come to them with their case “only after they have exhausted all routes or have been unable to receive a reply”. Liberal Democrat MPs Al Pinkerton, Chris Coghlan, Helen Maguire, Monica Harding, Will Forster and Zöe Franklin have written to Surrey County Council’s Cllr Clare Curran to express serious concerns over the council’s new policy on Special Educational Needs (SEND) casework.

The Lib Dem letter read: “The decision to sever communication between our offices and the Council contradicts the principles [of improving outcomes and processes] and ultimately harms the very people we are all here to serve: the residents of Surrey.”

The Lib Dem MPs claim the council did not contact the group in advance to discuss her concerns before making this decision which effectively closes a vital avenue through which desperate families have previously sought help. They urged Cllr Curran to change her mind and continue a constructive relationship.

Conservative MPs Dr Ben Spencer, Rebecca Paul, Lincoln Jopp, Greg Stafford, Jack Rankin, The Rt. Hon. Claire Coutinho and The Rt. Hon. Sir. Jeremy Hunt have also penned a letter to the cabinet member to voice their concerns. The Conservative politicians said that “limiting engagement with MPs who advocate for constituents in this way is likely to be concerning for the public”.

Similar to their Liberal counterparts, the Tories explained consistent complaints raised by their residents were based on communication in sharing updates, following legal time frames and chasing up consultation responses. Claire Coutinho MP said she spent “around a third of my constituency surgeries helping parents dealing with SEND and EHCP cases.”

The Tory MPs’ letter noted that Dame Kate Dethridge, the DfE’s regional director, saw MPs’ inboxes as a “useful weathervane” on whether the council’s system is working.

The MPs wrote: “Where these issues arise, and particularly there appears to be a pattern or repeated concerns being raised, we must be able to advocate and engage, both on individual cases and on policy and service delivery issues.” But, the Tories added that if the decision stands, they would like further clarity on the scope of future engagement with MPs.

Cllr Clare Curran, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning said: “We know and appreciate the important role MPs play for their constituents, and value strong relationships with our MPs, both about council services and policies, and their advocacy on behalf of Surrey to the national government. We have clear channels of communication between all Surrey MPs and the council.

“The recent communication sent to all MPs was to remind them that the correct process for families who are dissatisfied with a final council decision is to challenge it by way of a formal appeal. This is the appropriate and most effective route for families, and information on how to do this is always included when families are notified in writing of the council’s decision.”

Surrey’s children services improve

27 June 2025



After a seven-year improvement process, Surrey County Council’s children’s services spun its ‘Inadequate’ Ofsted rating to ‘Good’ on May 9.

Inspectors looking at the council’s performance in March found “services have improved substantially since the last inspection”. In 2018 Surrey was slammed with an ‘inadequate’ rating for their children’s services, which include supporting children and families’ welfare and protecting vulnerable kids. This picked up slightly in 2022 but Ofsted inspectors still said they still “required improvement”.

But the new Ofsted report finds “most children and families in Surrey now receive the help, protection and care that they need”. The report read: “A model of strengths-based practice has become embedded since the previous inspection. In particular, the quality and consistency of relationship-based practice, direct work with children and families, and written records have significantly improved.”

The inspection focussed on the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection, those of children in care, and those of care leavers, as well as the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families. Each of these focus areas were also judged to be ‘good’, alongside the overall effectiveness.

Inspectors said: “Given the size and geography of Surrey, this is impressive and means that most children in Surrey receive effective help and support that improves their lives.”

The report detailed social workers use creative life-story work to help children understand why they are in care. It read: “The impact of this was evident in the words of one child, who, after completing life-story work, said, ‘Considering everything that has happened to me, and everything I have been through, I am pretty amazing.’ “

Clare Curran, cabinet member for children, families and life-long learning, said the services have been on an “amazing improvement journey”. She explained a lot of hard work from the council’s staff and partners has gone into “tirelessly supporting Surrey’s children in often very difficult circumstances”.

Speaking to the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS), the Conservative councillor said the Ofsted report put the new authorities under local government reorganisation in the “strongest position”. Cllr Curran said: “It will really empower the new shadow authorities to take services for children and young people to the next level.”

A model of strengths-based practice has become embedded since the previous inspection. In particular, the quality and consistency of relationship-based practice, direct work with children and families, and written records have significantly improved.

Recruitment, especially in senior and experienced professionals, has been flagged as an issue in the past for Surrey as part of a wider national problem. Inspectors said the county has improved its staffing since the last inspection which has partly been tackled by the council’s training and development programme.

Some inconsistencies and room for improvement were highlighted on children’s safety plans- which outline specific safeguarding risks in the present and future. Inspectors found their safety plans did not always clearly show the immediate actions a family should take for child protection, or what to do if risk increased.

Inspectors also highlighted the county council is inconsistent in providing support and services to children placed outside of Surrey. These kids, who are born in Surrey, may have to live outside the county because that is the best home for them currently. But Ofsted found children living outside of Surrey do not always get timely health inspection or get the protective responses needed if they go missing or are at risk of exploitation.

Inspectors noted that some care leavers (18-year-olds who are leaving foster or residential care) are not studying, working a job or in training, the report noted. Although the numbers are reported to be reducing, leaders recognise there is more to do.

“We’re redoubling efforts to make sure that every young person, particularly those who have care experience, is really supported to be able to fulfil their potential and achieve their goals,” said Cllr Curran. She explained not every one will want to go to university, but it is ensuring people have the right career pathway, training or volunteering opportunities open to them.

Care leavers remain living with their foster carers when this is possible, and most live in suitable homes that meet their needs. However, a small number of care leavers do not obtain suitable permanent accommodation at the right time for them. The disparity in banding across 11 district councils is a perennial factor in a minority of care leavers not securing the right accommodation at the right time.

Cllr Curran said: “It’s showing the really good relationships our workers are developing with children and young people that they support, and putting children at the heart of their work. I was really pleased to see that the inspectors noted that our social workers work in a kind, sensitive, motivational, and respectful way. We’re striving for all children to reach their full potential.

“I want to extend my personal thanks to the leaders of the service and also all of the staff for the tireless and determined way that they have worked with children and driven this marvellous improvement through.

“We know there is still more to do to ensure that every single child in Surrey gets the positive experiences and outcomes that they deserve. We are now focused on our areas for development and are united in our determination to continue to provide even better care for children and young people in Surrey.”

Surrey County Council headquarters. Credit: Emily Coady-Stemp

Epsom and Ewell PSPO

27 June 2025



Anyone arrested for behaving badly on Epsom Derby day could be stuck with a £100 fine, a Surrey council says.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has green-lit a public space protection order (PSPO) ahead of this year’s Epsom Derby on June 7. Members voted through the new rules at a full council meeting, which could last up to three years, on Tuesday May 6.

The order applies to anyone harassing or threatening others, or continuing to drink alcohol after being ordered to stop by a police officer, community support officer or council officer. People wearing a piece of clothing with the intent to hide their identity to commit crime or behave anti-socially could also be at risk of large fines.

“There is an escalating amount of antisocial behaviour in the borough,” said Councillor Shanice Goldman, Chair of the Crime and Disorder Committee. She said: “The PSPO is a new tool specifically for the Epsom & Ewell area which will allow police and appropriate council staff to address antisocial behaviour effectively, without immediately resorting to arrests.”

Cllr Bernie Muir exclaimed: “Some residents are actually actively thinking of leaving the borough.” She said people have told her they do not like walking through an “intimidating” bunch of people to get into a restaurant or Epsom playhouse. Cllr Muir said: “Just having to put up with what is bad enough in itself the fear and uncertainty of antisocial behaviour but it’s going to impact economic life as well.”

Members spoke up in support of the order and hoped it would bring positive change to Epsom and Ewell. Cllr Goldman said: “I hope this order will ensure a more enjoyable experience for everyone on the day, as well as a safer environment in the borough going forward.”

Report: <https://democracy.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/documents/s35629/Adoption%20of%20a%20Public%20Spaces%20Protection%20Order.pdf>

Press release: <https://www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/news/epsom-ewell-borough-council-put-measures-place-combat-anti-social-%C2%A0behaviour-borough-ahead>

Two unitary proposal confirmed

27 June 2025



Plans for Surrey’s various district and borough councils to be devolved have been finalised. Surrey county councillors voted on how all 648 square miles of Surrey should be carved into two during a cabinet meeting on Wednesday, May 7.

Surrey County Council’s plans, supported by Elmbridge Borough Council and Mole Valley District Council, propose two new councils are created, splitting Surrey into East and West. But devolutions plans supported by the majority of the borough and district councils support splitting Surrey into three.

The Labour government outlined colossal structural changes to councils in December, aiming to give local authorities more power. Surrey’s 12 unitary authorities- district and borough councils- were told to submit their proposals for one a single-tier council would like across Surrey.

At rapid speed, the county council has drawn up plans for Surrey to be split in two: making up West Surrey would be Woking, Spelthorne, Runnymede, Surrey Heath, Guildford and Waverley; on the East would be Elmbridge, Epsom and Ewell, Reigate and Banstead, Mole Valley and Tandridge.

Leader of the county council, Tim Oliver said: “The decision was always going to be based on the evidence, not on political lines or emotional lines.

“This is about what is in the best interest for residents... how can we establish unitaries that are going to be financially secure going forward.”

The leader emphasised the “evidence” only supports a two unitary authority is fair, even and best value for residents.

Cllr Catherine Powell, leader of the Residents’ Association and Independents Group, said having three councils is the “most balanced option” and claimed the East and West division is “financially unsustainable”.

“It will include all three areas with the highest need for children’s services and the three areas with the lowest council tax band base, which also happen to be the same three areas with the highest levels of debt,” she said.

She claimed that SCC’s own analysis showed it would be better for Spelthorne to join the East Surrey side, both in terms of financial and service distribution.

Cllr Powell urged the potentially crippling debt from the councils needs to be solved before any final decision is made. Conversations continue between the government and Woking on how to manage their debt, while Runnymede’s financial situation is still struggling and Spelthorne now has government commissioners in to manage the debt.

The three-council plan would put Epsom & Ewell, Mole Valley, Reigate & Banstead and Tandridge into East Surrey. Elmbridge, Runnymede and Spelthorne would become North Surrey, and Guildford, Surrey Heath, Waverley and Woking in West Surrey.

But Cllr Oliver slammed the arguments as “weaponising” the debt across Surrey. He labelled the claim as “inconsistent”, as those in favour of three unitaries would lump struggling councils Spelthorne and Runnymede together with Elmbridge. He said: “How can it possibly be better than splitting them across two unitaries?”

Cllr George Potter slammed the Conservative councillors for supporting the idea of two mega councils based on their report. He said the council was merely “making the figures fit the pre-determined conclusions”.

However, Cllr Edward Hawkins said residents he has spoken to are “not bothered about changes but want the reduction of administration”. He said people just “want the bins emptied and the roads repaired”.

Despite the mudslinging, none of the councillors will decide what ultimately Surrey will look like in years to come. Timelines show the government will consult and interrogate the various proposals put forward, and decide how Surrey shall be carved up in the autumn.

Options for Surrey to be split into two and three unitaries will both be put on the table and submitted to government ministers on May 9.