Two unitary proposal confirmed

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.

Residents Association group on two unitaries

The county council's plan to split Surrey in two is "flawed, inconsistent, incomplete and will doom the west to fail", say opposition members.

Surrey as we know it will come to an end as sweeping changes to local government come into effect over the next two years.

The Government wants to get rid of the half-century-old system of 11 boroughs, districts, together with a county council, and replace them with a single mayor sitting atop either two or three large unitary authorities.

How that is achieved is still to be determined but the Residents Association group at Surrey has challenged the county's plan saying that "in almost all" cases the county council's own evidence goes against what it is trying to push through.

The county council wants to split Surrey in two in such a way that the most heavily indebted boroughs, Woking, Spelthorne, Runnymede and Surrey Heath, would all be merged together - creating a massive financial imbalance from the get go.

The residents group says that "worse still" the council's impact assessment flip flopped between where to stick Spelthorne.

Leader of the Residents' Association and Independents Group, Councillor Catherine Powell, said papers published ahead of Surrey's decision showed that a budget imbalance between the two new councils would be created with those living in the west facing higher costs.

Tax collection, she added, was another serious issue, because a new East Surrey would have two councils with the highest number of Band G and H properties while West Surrey would have, in Spelthorne, and Woking, two with the greatest percentage of lower tax band homes.

Cllr Powell said: "Surrey County Council says the proposals are robust and evidence based, and that (having Spelthorne in the west) creates authorities that are best placed to deliver high quality services. But the "data" on which (that) has been selected, except it doesn't.

"It very clearly shows in almost all categories that Spelthorne in the east is more equitable than with Spelthorne in the west."

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council: "The recommended geography for a two unitary split of Surrey is based on evidence, with a huge number of factors taken into account. It is also important to note local support and feedback from partners agencies - including other councils - in the final proposal."

He said that detailed evidence showed very similar benefits and challenges between both options but that, when wider factors were considered, putting Spelthorne into West Surrey was considered the preferred option.

He added: "The harmonisation of council tax is a very real and practical challenge within any reorganisation, with different councils in Surrey currently charging different rates.

"Decisions about how to harmonise council tax band D rates will be for the new unitaries to make, but modelling has been undertaken as part of preparing the County Council's LGR Final Plan, and will continue to be progressed to help inform future decision-making so that it is fair and balanced across all Surrey residents, while ensuring any new councils would be in the best possible financial position to provide high quality, sustainable services."

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council agrees to submit proposal recommending three unitary councils for Surrey

Yesterday, at a meeting of the full Council, Epsom & Ewell Councillors voted to submit a final proposal for three unitary councils to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, by 9 May 2025. At the same meeting, Councillors approved an amendment to the Council's Four-Year Plan, replacing it with strategic priorities for 2025-2027 and aligning resources by setting up a new local government reorganisation (LGR) reserve.

Councillors agreed that strategic priorities will no longer include a proposed office move from the current Town Hall, instead

relocating to the new Town Hall building and completing works to make the newer building fit for purpose for the next two to three years.

Strategic priorities agreed by the Council are:

- 1. Explore future local governance e.g., a Community Council
- 2. Move the old Town Hall into the existing new Town Hall
- 3. Investigate future options for the existing Town Hall site and 70 East Street
- 4. Carry out a review of major assets
- 5. Create an Epsom Town Centre Car Park Strategy / Deliver the Hook Road (Utilities site) Car Park re-development
- 6. Strategic CIL Projects
- 7. Consider options for the future of Bourne Hall Museum.

Speaking after the meeting, Councillor Hannah Dalton, the Leader of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, said: "While we work towards local government reorganisation, the Council will prioritise strategic projects that can be delivered in the time available and that offer best value for our residents. Our goal is to meet the ambitious deadlines set by Government to transition to a new era of local government, whilst protecting the best interests of our local communities for the future."

The amendment to the Council's approved Four-Year Plan follows the directive from Government to reorganise local government across the UK, abolishing two-tier councils and replacing them with single-tier, unitary authorities. New unitary councils in Surrey will likely come into effect in April or May 2027, at which time Epsom & Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) will be dissolved.

EEBC and seven other district and borough councils in Surrey believe that the best option for residents and local businesses is to reorganise local government in Surrey into three unitary councils. This model would see Epsom & Ewell become part of an east Surrey unitary council along with Tandridge District Council, Reigate & Banstead Borough Council and Mole Valley District Council. Surrey County Council and some district and borough councils are proposing a two unitary model.

Councillor Hannah Dalton said: "Reorganising local government in Surrey into three unitary councils would emphasise alignment with established economic areas, as well as prioritising local identity and community empowerment.

Unitary councils in north, west and east Surrey would be the right sizes to improve efficiency and capacity to deliver high quality and sustainable public services, whilst meeting local needs informed by local views.

"The proposal is rooted in what local government is all about: local identity, representation and economic alignment."

Three Unitary Authorities Proposal for Surrey

Final devolution and merger plans that promise to be one of the biggest political shake ups in Surrey will be formally put forward this week ahead of the Government set May 9 deadline.

While the county council and a few boroughs and districts, notably Elmbridge, favour splitting Surrey in two – arguing it delivers the best combination of cost savings and devolved powers – the majority are set to back reorganising into three unitary authorities.

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.

Sitting atop all three would be a directly elected mayor.

Those in favour of three councils argue it "delivers the best outcome for the people and businesses of Surrey" by looking beyond what saves the most money to focus on natural geographic divisions within the county.

Papers presented to councils this week read: "These new councils, East Surrey, West Surrey and North Surrey, are more than just lines on a map.

"They reflect the county's real economic and human geography. They reflect the lived reality of our residents, and the practical considerations of our businesses."

It added: "When we examined the evidence, we found that two unitary authorities would be remote from the communities they serve, disconnected from residents and partners, reactive in service delivery, and reliant on outdated means of engagement to overcome a significant democratic deficit."

"But the impact is greater than just identity.

"There are no two unitary options for Surrey that would not divide and fragment the county's recognised three functional economic areas, baking in strategic inconsistency and economic incoherence from the start, and so significantly hindering economic growth."

Councils will begin voting on their formal plans to create new authorities this week with Elmbridge, Spelthorne, Epsom and Ewell, Waverley, Surrey Heath, Mole Valley, and Tandridge all set to vote through their final submissions to the Government on Tuesday night (May 6).

They will be followed by Surrey County Council, Guildford Borough Council, Reigate and Banstead, and Runnymede on Wednesday while Woking will wait until Thursday May 8.

Any proposed reorganisation is still extremely reliant of Government assistance in dealing with the £5.5billion of debt Surrey's councils have amassed.

"To be clear, the decision between two or three unitary authorities is far more than one of mere administrative convenience or numbers on a spreadsheet – it represents a choice between a system of local government that actively fosters and encourages community empowerment, local decision making and strong place leadership, and one that while certainly aspiring to it, will lack the institutional and strategic clarity to drive growth and embrace truly local decision making.

"A two unitary authority model, lacking alignment with Surrey's functional economic areas, places and identities will embed economic incoherence and conflicting growth incentives, and cannot meaningfully empower local people due to its democratic distance and disconnection of residents from the levers of power.

"We have considered whether systems like community boards would help, and concluded that, as demonstrated by the experience of Wiltshire, that these will not resolve the fundamental issues," the report added.

County elections were cancelled this year to allow council staff the time to focus on devolution If everything goes smoothly the Government expects elections for the newly formed councils to go ahead in 2026 and in 2027 for a mayor.

Devolution plans for Surrey

Surrey County Council has set out how and why it wants merge with the 11 boroughs and districts to create two mega authorities as the deadline to submit local government reorganisation plans approaches.

The county council believes the best way forward is to split Surrey into eastern and western divisions.

On one side would be Woking, Spelthorne, Runnymede, Surrey Heath, Waverley and Guildford the other with Elmbridge, Mole Valley, Epsom & Ewell, Reigate & Banstead, and Tandridge.

The two new mega councils would have an overarching mayor responsible for, among other things, policing and fire services.

If the plans do go ahead, elections for the new shadow unitary councils would likely be held in May 2026, and a mayoral election most likely in 2027.

The county council argues its plan would "help ensure the future of local government in Surrey" was "cost effective, simplified and strengthened" while "unlocking further devolution for the county".

It would, by their own figures, create the single largest combine authority ranked by gross domestic product per capita. Surrey County Council favours sticking to current boundaries because this would help unify public services, many of which are already shared.

It has rejected the idea of creating a single merged body despite it financially being the most beneficial.

Not only that, but forming a single mega council also comes with the "least amount of risk to vital social care services currently

delivered countywide", according to papers published ahead of the May 7 meeting.

The council has dismissed this because it would miss out on any devolved powers from central government given when two or more top tier authorities join forces. Instead, it is looking at what it calls the "two unitary model".

Surrey County Council said this would be "the right size to achieve efficiencies, have better alignment between key areas of service expenditure and funding and therefore better able to withstand financial shocks, as well as better prioritise the delivery of high quality sustainable public services."

Splitting into three, it suggests, "offers less financial resilience when needing to manage key areas of demand, in particular social care."

Smaller authorities are less able to absorb the inherited debt, are likely to spend a greater proportion of revenue on debt servicing costs, and have less agility to redeploy resources in response to growing service demands, the council continued.

There would also be higher costs associated with the need to disaggregate services across three new authorities.

Beyond the financial risks, Surrey's analysis of the three unitary model showed there would be greater disparity between the authorities across population, housing, flood risk, homelessness, and road maintenance backlogs.

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council said: "Our analysis shows that two unitary councils would bring the greatest benefit to Surrey's residents.

Two councils, in partnership with a mayor for Surrey, would save money, strengthen and simplify local government and with an east and west arrangement both councils would be in a strong position to continue to deliver high quality services to all Surrey residents.

"Of course, consideration must be given to the differing levels of debt that the authorities would potentially inherit, and we're in talks with government about our request that the stranded debt be written off as well as providing financial support to those borough councils that need it.

"Most importantly, this proposal strengthens local community engagement.

"We know that residents want high quality services that are easy to access, and they want a real say in services and decisions that affect them. That's why we're proposing the creation of community-level boards across Surrey.

"These community boards will be locally determined but we would expect them to include representation from health partners, Surrey Police, voluntary groups, councillors, council staff, local town and parish councils and residents associations. We plan to pilot these boards over the coming months, and residents will have a say in how they are set up and delivered.

"We're in a strong position as a county council, with good quality services and an excellent track record of stable finances after years of successful transformation. And working together with our residents and partners, we are well placed to deliver this important reorganisation.

"Ultimately, this work will unlock further devolution, meaning Surrey can elect a mayor which will bring more power, flexibility and funding closer to communities."

Surrey County Council is expected to vote its plan through on May 7 before formally submitting it for consideration by the May 9 deadline

Will Surrey's Debts Force Us to Have a Unitary Authority?

Billions of pounds in crushing debt could force Surrey and its boroughs and districts to become a single mega council – potentially merged with a neighbour, following government feedback on its devolution and reorganisation plans.

Two plans were submitted in March over how to dissolve local government in the county and create a new streamlined system.

The county council and a handful of the boroughs favoured splitting Surrey into two authorities with Elmbridge worried about being 'punished' if it is grouped with debt-ridden neighbours – while the majority of the districts favoured three. Both would have an overarching and directly elected mayor.

Now, those plans could all be for nothing if they are unable to demonstrate how to deal with the more than £5 billion of debt owed - and in particular £2.6billion from bankrupt Woking Borough Council and £1billion at Spelthorne where government commissioners have recently been appointed to take over.

The letter from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government was sent to all chief executives of Surrey's boroughs, districts and county council, in reply to the councils' plans.

It read: "The county and district co-authored plan shows that greater efficiencies are available where there is less disaggregation, with the single unitary enabling the greatest efficiency that could benefit the management of local debt.

"Given the scale of the financial challenges facing Surrey, we would welcome further detail on how the ability to manage debt compares in each of the different options.

"As the long-term financial sustainability of the three unitary option seems most challenging in this context, we will need more information on how you will manage the risks of disaggregation to meet the financial sustainability criteria as well as the approach to debt management."

"We suggest meeting to discuss in more detail local proposals for managing debt."

The ministry said that if Surrey was to shift towards a single unitary model, unlocking devolution would mean partnering up with neighbouring authorities or joining a neighbouring mayoral authority. "

To achieve this, the area will need to ensure the proposed devolution geography meets the criteria set out in the English Devolution White Paper.

A Surrey-only devolution would only work, it added, under the two or three unitary council proposals "subject to achieving sensible population ratios between unitaries".

The ministry also specifically asked for evidence on how any new merged authority "would enable financially viable councils, including identifying which option best delivers value for money for council tax payers".

It added; "We note the desire for clarity and further discussions around the area's debt position and your preferred option for Government to write off the current estimated debt of £1.5bn."

Woking Borough Council is short £1.5billion - once all its assets are accounted for.

It continues: "The default position is that assets and liabilities remain locally managed by councils, but we acknowledge that there are exceptional circumstances where there has been failure linked to capital practices.

"Where that is the case, proposals should reflect the extent to which the implications of this can be managed locally, including as part of efficiencies possible through reorganisation.

"Commissioners should be engaged in these discussions.

"It would be helpful to see further detail in proposals on the projected financial sustainability of proposed unitaries and how they could manage debt locally."

ENDS

Press statement from the Leaders of Surrey's District and Borough Councils

Today, district and borough councils have published proposals for local government reorganisation on their websites, to be debated at Council meetings across the county in the coming days. Final proposals will be submitted to Government by 9 May 2025.

Eight of the eleven district and borough councils are proposing a three unitary council

model for Surrey. They believe that this is the best way to preserve local democracy and accountability, and would ensure that new councils align with Surrey's existing economic and community identities – creating the foundation for more responsive governance and stronger local economies. There is also a proposal for two unitary

councils being submitted by Surrey County Council. Those councils that have been undecided so far will make a final decision between the 6 and 8 May.

The new structure for local government will replace the current two-tier system of district, borough and county councils.

Councillor Hannah Dalton, Chair of the Surrey Leaders Group and Chair of the Epsom & Ewell Borough Council Residents' Association (Majority Group) said:

"This is a significant achievement and the culmination of much collaboration and hard work by council leaders and officers across the county.

"There are still issues to be resolved, including how debt will be managed. Over the coming weeks and months, we will continue to work at pace towards a vision for the county that delivers for our residents and communities, that enables us to unlock the wider benefits that devolution can ultimately bring.

"I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who took part in the recent resident engagement which sought opinion on shaping Surrey's future, the results of which indicated clear public support for a three unitary model of local government. "We also appreciate the time given to us by representatives from charities, parish and town councils, residents forums, health services, community groups and others across the county in our stakeholder engagement exercise and roundtable group sessions. It was really important to make sure as many voices as possible were heard in this journey about the risks and opportunities of changes that will impact local services and Communities."

Government is expected to decide on proposals by the end of the year. If approved, legislation will be passed to allow the changes, and elections for new shadow unitary councils will be held in May 2026, with a view to the new unitaries going live in May 2027.

Proposals are published on council websites:

- Elmbridge Borough Council
- Epsom and Ewell Borough Council
- Guildford Borough Council
- Mole Valley District Council
- Reigate and Banstead Borough Council
- Runnymede Borough Council
- Spelthorne Borough Council
- Surrey Heath Borough Council
- Waverley Borough Council
- Woking Borough Council

- Ends -

County council set to propose two unitary councils for

Surrey

Subject to Cabinet approval, Surrey County Council plans to submit to government a proposal for two unitary councils for local government reorganisation in the county. These two councils, arranged by East and West, would replace the existing 12 councils and unlock further devolution in Surrey.

In council papers published today, the county council outlines detailed analysis to evidence that two councils would be the most beneficial model for Surrey's future. The proposal, which sets out a robust plan for local community engagement, also includes letters of support from key partners, business and community leaders, as well as Elmbridge Borough Council.

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council said: "Our analysis shows that two unitary councils would bring the greatest benefit to Surrey's residents. Two councils, in partnership with a Mayor for Surrey, would save money, strengthen and simplify local government and with an East and West arrangement both councils would be in a strong position to continue to deliver high quality services to all Surrey residents. Of course, consideration must be given to the differing levels of debt that the authorities would potentially inherit, and we're in talks with government about our request that the stranded debt be written off as well as providing financial support to those borough councils that need it.

"Most importantly, this proposal strengthens local community engagement. We know that residents want high quality services that are easy to access, and they want a real say in services and decisions that affect them. That's why we're proposing the creation of community-level boards across Surrey.

"These community boards will be locally determined but we would expect them to include representation from health partners, Surrey Police, voluntary groups, councillors, council staff, local Town and Parish Councils and Residents Associations. We plan to pilot these boards over the coming months, and residents will have a say in how they are set up and delivered.

"We're in a strong position as a county council, with good quality services and an excellent track record of stable finances after years of successful transformation. And working together with our residents and partners, we are well placed to deliver this important reorganisation. Ultimately, this work will unlock further devolution, meaning Surrey can elect a mayor which will bring more power, flexibility and funding closer to communities."

Cllr Mike Rollings, Leader of Elmbridge Borough Council said: "While Elmbridge, like other districts and boroughs, is not overly enamoured with the government's local government reorganisation, throughout this process, we have maintained an open-minded stance regarding the optimal number of new unitary authorities. Our primary goal is to ensure the best interests of Elmbridge, as well as Surrey as a whole. We have always said that our decision will be grounded in robust evidence and data and we will continue to analyse, research, and scrutinise all options until we are confident that the best solution for unitarisation in Surrey has been identified.

"Based on the proposals we have seen, we think an East/West split could make the most sense for Elmbridge both in terms of financial stability, increased flexibility to meet housing needs and the potential to minimise the impact on the character and appearance of Elmbridge.

"We will continue to work across the county to support the development of proposals that lead to the best results for our residents, and we will debate these at extraordinary meetings of our Council and Cabinet on 6 May."

The proposal includes a recommended geographical model for the two councils, by East and West, using current District Council geographies with Spelthorne, Surrey Heath, Runnymede, Woking, Guildford and Waverley residents in the West of Surrey, and Elmbridge, Mole Valley, Epsom & Ewell, Reigate & Banstead and Tandridge residents in the East.

This model has similar levels of population, land area, total household numbers, homelessness, house building targets, waste collection, business activity, pupil distribution, number of birth and death registrations, and total miles of public highways. Demand and budget requirements would also be similar for Adult Social Care and Children Social Services across both councils and this geography makes use of the neighbouring economic benefits of London, Heathrow airport, and Gatwick airport, with a similar mix of the urban and rural landscape that makes Surrey a fantastic place to live and work.

The overall populations of each new council would exceed the government's minimum size of 500.000 residents.



Notes:

- In February, government asked Surrey to submit plans for local government reorganisation. Once this proposal has been approved by Surrey County Council's Cabinet on 7th May, it will be submitted to government by the 9th May deadline. A final decision is expected from government in the Autumn. The full council paper can be accessed here: https://mycouncil.surreycc.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=121&MId=9715&Ver=4
- District and borough councils in Surrey are also discussing options for reorganisation at respective council meetings.
- Details of an online resident engagement event, due to be held in May, will be shared soon

Look to your own party's dictatorship

Sir,

I reply to Cllr Ames' letter attacking Residents Association councillors in general and me in particular.

It is a pity that he chose to quote me selectively. I did say that the RA Group could put through anything it wished - that is a simple fact as we hold 25 of the 35 seats. However I went on to say that we value the contributions of members from other parties. .

A council may use either the cabinet or committee system of government. We use the committee system under which all councillors may partake in all decision making, as Cllr Ames has done. Unlike many other councils, all councillors are involved.

It is also a pity that Cllr Ames did not mention the subsequent meeting of the Standards and Constitution Committee on 16 April of which he is a member. This was a long but amicable meeting where much of the two and half hours was spent dealing with suggestions from Liberal Democrat leader Cllr James Lawrence. Some of his proposals were accepted. On all the motions, James was congratulated on the effort he had put in to serve the council and the constructive way he worked with RA members. This is hardly the attitude of a dictatorial ruling group.

In contrast, let us look at the Labour government of his party. Last year in the general election it got about a third of votes on a 60% turnout. This means that only one in five electors voted Labour. Another two voted for other parties, and the remaining two did not vote at all. Subsequent opinion polls suggest that Labour has lost support since the election.

On the basis of getting just 20% support from the electorate, the Labour government has dictatorially decreed that the borough should provide more than 800 new homes each year building on Green Belt, and that the borough council should be abolished in 2027. On neither of these issues has the government consulted anyone to ask if they want all this extra housing or if they want the council abolished. I have yet to meet any resident who supports either policy. The Labour government does not listen to any voices other than its own, and sometimes does not even listen to its own voices.

I like Cllr Ames as a person, and I respect his right to criticise me and RA councillors. However I believe that this should be done fairly, and not by selective quotation wrapped up in bluster. If Cllr Ames does not like dictatorial government, he would be better advised to direct such views to his own party.

Cllr Robert Leach RA councillor

Nonsuch Ward

Labour decries Residents' Associations' unfettered power on Epsom & Ewell Council

Dear Editor,

Thank you for your excellent reporting of last week's meeting of Epsom and Ewell Council's Standards and Constitution Committee, which highlighted some important and contentious issues about how councillors represent our residents.

Your analysis that public trust and democratic scrutiny hang in the balance is spot-on. In my two years so far as a councillor, I have frequently sought to highlight these issues, often in conjunction with other opposition councillors and sometimes with the support of more independent-minded Residents Association (RA) councillors.

In this light, I would like to highlight Cllr Robert Leach's comment concerning the committees that decide the bulk of what the council does, that "The RA group can put through anything it likes".

This shocking comment goes to the heart of issues of democratic scrutiny and appears to reflect the approach of the ruling party and many RA councillors to a situation where it has two-thirds of councillors. Despite its councillors purporting to represent residents at a very local level, the RA can often operate as a monolithic block.

One major change that the RA administration has attempted to implement is to neuter the Audit and Scrutiny Committee, of which I am also a member, which should play a key role in scrutinising what the council does in the name of residents.

Despite, or perhaps because of this, the administration has proposed to remove the committee's scrutiny function, on the grounds that scrutiny should take place on the committees that make policy and spending decisions.

Cllr Leach's blunt assessment that "The RA group can put through anything it likes" on such committees should represent the death knell for this proposal, which the administration has already had to "pause" in the face of fierce opposition.

While Cllr Leach's words represent the numerical reality, they neglect the role that opposition councillors can play in raising questions and challenges and, on occasion, influencing how other committee members vote.

Last month, for the second year running, the Audit and Scrutiny Committee amended its own annual report, as drafted by the administration, to record that it had carried out "limited scrutiny" over the past year.

While this is an unfortunate situation, to say the least, it does show that some RA councillors have an appetite for a stronger scrutiny role and, despite what Cllr Leach says, can vote according to their own individual judgement.

Democratic scrutiny of what the council does in the name of residents is essential to maintain the public's trust in it. We need more of it – and less of a ruling party that thinks it can put through anything it likes.

Councillor Chris Ames - Labour - Court Ward