

Debate Opens on the Future Shape of Surrey's Local Government

17 June 2025



Residents across Surrey are being asked to help shape the future of local government in what is being described as the most significant shake-up in over half a century. A government consultation launched this week invites public views on two competing proposals to reorganise Surrey's local councils into unitary authorities.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) is offering two options for reorganisation:

- A **two-unitary model** (East and West Surrey), proposed by Surrey County Council and supported by Elmbridge and Mole Valley.
- A **three-unitary model** (East, West and North Surrey), backed by a majority of Surrey's borough and district councils, including Epsom & Ewell.

Councillor Hannah Dalton, Leader of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council and Chair of the Surrey Leaders Group, is urging residents to take part:

"Residents have consistently told us that they want decisions made by people who know and understand their communities," she said. "Over 60% of respondents to our April survey preferred a three-unitary model. We believe it delivers better services, stronger accountability, and a future that works for every part of Surrey."

The government consultation runs until **5 August**, and is the only opportunity for the public to influence which of the two options is pursued. Dalton emphasised the importance of local voices in the process:

"We've been assured by the government that every response will be treated equally. This is your only chance to shape how your area is governed for future decades."

The consultation follows the rejection of a third submission from Reigate & Banstead and Crawley Boroughs, which will not proceed.

Financial Concerns and Woking's Shadow

Both proposals are said to be financially viable, according to Councillor Dalton, but depend on government action to address what she described as "**unrecoverable debt**"—most notably in Woking.

"We welcome the Government's recognition that this debt cannot be managed locally. But we await details on what support will follow after 2026/27," she said.

The issue of Woking's financial crisis looms large in the background, with some viewing reorganisation as an opportunity to draw a line under past mismanagement—but others fear it could result in spreading liabilities more broadly across the county.

Streamlining—or Complicating?

While the proposals are framed as streamlining governance—abolishing the two-tier system of borough/district and county councils—there is growing concern that new layers may be introduced in their place.

The two-unitary model envisages an **elected Mayor** and a **Strategic Authority** overseeing countywide functions. At the same time, **Neighbourhood Area Committees** (formerly "Community Boards") are being piloted to handle hyper-local matters. In towns like Epsom, where no town council currently exists, discussions have begun around establishing new local councils to fill the vacuum left by a dissolved borough council.

Some commentators have questioned whether the term "unitary" has become misleading in this context—raising the possibility that what was intended as simplification may, in practice, become a **reconfiguration of complexity**.

Clash of Visions

Surrey County Council's Leader, Cllr Tim Oliver, argues the two-unitary model provides the best platform for efficient services and future prosperity:

"Two unitary councils will simplify services, save money and strengthen communities."

In contrast, EEBC and its allies believe three smaller authorities would be more responsive and rooted in local identity. They also point to stronger alignment with community geography, opportunities for targeted infrastructure growth, and

better democratic accountability.

How to Take Part

The government consultation is open until **Tuesday 5 August 2025**. Residents, businesses, community organisations, and parish councils are all invited to contribute their views.

Ways to respond:

- Online: [surrey-local-government-reorganisation](https://surrey-local-government-reorganisation.com)
- Email: lgreorganisation@communities.gov.uk
- Post: LGR Consultation, Fry Building 2NE, MHCLG, 2 Marsham Street, London SW1P 4DF
- Paper forms: Available at all 52 libraries across Surrey

Further details and background on each proposal can be found at the **Surrey Local Government Reorganisation Hub**: www.surreylgr.co.uk

Related reports:

[Surrey's partner organisations support county council plans for local government reorganisation](#)

[Surrey Councils launch Local Government Reorganisation engagement](#)

[Surrey's BIG debt question in local government reorganisation](#)

[Local Government Reorganisation in Surrey: Key Proposals](#)

Interview with the New Mayor of Epsom and Ewell - Cllr Robert Leach

17 June 2025



Cllr **Robert Leach** (RA Nonsuch) was elected Mayor of the Borough of Epsom and Ewell at the Council meeting on 13th May 2025. The *Epsom and Ewell Times* put some questions to the new Mayor about his plans, priorities, and personal reflections as he embarks on his year of office.

EET: You are championing three charities during your Mayoral year. Could you tell us why you chose these particular charities?

Mayor Robert Leach: As my role relates solely to the borough of Epsom and Ewell, I focused on charities that primarily operate here. I was looking for organisations with the capacity to actively participate in fundraising, and which support those less fortunate in our community.

I've chosen:

- **Good Company**, which runs the foodbank, Epsom Pantry and other services that provide basic food provisions.
- **Citizens Advice Bureau**, which offers vital help with financial, legal, family and administrative issues—often stepping in when people have no one else to turn to.
- **PHAB**, which promotes physical and mental activity for all ages and abilities.

I believe three is the maximum I can support properly, though I recognise that there are many other excellent charities locally. I hope to support them in other ways, such as by attending their fundraising events.

EET: What are your priorities for the year ahead?

Mayor Robert Leach: My main priority is to build a stronger sense of cohesion across the borough and foster a feeling of self-worth among its residents. I'm the Mayor for all—regardless of politics, religion or beliefs.

I'm also launching a "*Friend of the Mayor*" scheme, aimed primarily at children (though adults are welcome too). The idea is simple: a Friend of the Mayor promises not to hate anyone—or at least to try not to. Disagreement is fine, disapproval

too, but hatred fuels everything from petty disputes to international conflict. This is just a small, local step to push back against that.

EET: What do you think could be improved about the Borough?

Mayor Robert Leach: Overall, I believe the borough is well run and well-resourced. There are, of course, a few minor housekeeping matters that could be improved. And I do miss the old Rolls-Royce mayoral car with the crest!

EET: What are you most looking forward to in your new role?

Mayor Robert Leach: Meeting people. I hope I can encourage and thank the vast army of volunteers who work so hard for their neighbours. I'm especially keen to spend time with children and young people. Encouraging and engaging with the next generation will be a special part of this year.

EET: What hobbies might have to take a back seat during your Mayoral year?

Mayor Robert Leach: Music is my main hobby. I play in a 15-piece dance band and often deputise in another. I've already had to excuse myself from at least one gig, but I've promised the bandleaders it's only for a year!

As a pensioner with diabetes, I've also been working to get match fit for the job. I've lost over three stone and am trying to reduce my intake of cake and wine!

EET: Any final message for our readers?

Mayor Robert Leach: I want to be a residents' Mayor. I encourage all local organisations to consider inviting me to their events—there is no charge. You might even like to host a "Meet the Mayor" evening.

Becoming Mayor is a great honour, and I look forward to carrying out my duties with enthusiasm and commitment.

Image credit: Epsom and Ewell Borough Council.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council out - Community Council's in?

17 June 2025



Earlier this month, at a meeting of the full Council, Epsom & Ewell Borough Council (EEBC) agreed new strategic priorities for 2025-2027, with the number one priority being to explore future local governance in Epsom & Ewell. This week, Councillors will attend a briefing on Community Governance Review (CGR) and will, with the Mayor's agreement, schedule an extraordinary full Council meeting on Thursday 26 June 2025. At the extraordinary Council meeting, Councillors would agree whether to commence with a CGR in Epsom & Ewell, that could eventually lead to the creation of new community councils.

Community councils provide a vital link between residents and larger unitary authorities, which will be critical as a result of imminent local government reorganisation in Surrey. They aim to enhance local representation by providing a direct route for the essential voices of residents and local communities, ensuring that residents are aware of local issues, and are involved in decision-making they are affected by.

Councillor Hannah Dalton, Leader of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, said "We are navigating the biggest change in local democracy for more than 50 years. As a priority we are working to ensure that, whatever the outcome of local government reorganisation, the voices of our residents and local communities continue to be heard in years to come - this is a vital element of local democracy. We will keep residents informed and updated throughout this process."

In the coming days, Councillors will be briefed on the CGR process and possible geographies for establishing community councils in Epsom & Ewell:

Should full Council decide to commence with the CGR, the process will include a public consultation which would take place summer 2025, with any final proposal being consulted on in early 2026.

EEBC council meetings, including extraordinary full Council meetings, are open to the public to observe and are also live streamed: details on how to watch meetings can be found on the council's website: [Epsom and Ewell Democracy](#)

In light of the plans for local government reorganisation, which will see the formation of new unitary councils and the dissolution of all current district, borough and county councils in Surrey; EEBC approved an amendment to the Council's Four-Year Plan earlier this month, replacing it with strategic priorities for 2025-2027. Prior to the 9 May final submission deadline, Epsom & Ewell with nine of the eleven Surrey district and borough councils submitted a proposal to government to create three unitary councils in north, east and west Surrey. The county council and two other district and borough councils favour a two unitary model. Council leaders ruled out the creation of one unitary council for Surrey in February this year.

No release from LGR releases

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Surrey district and borough councils submit proposal to government outlining vision for future governance in the county

Today, district and borough councils in Surrey have submitted proposals to government outlining their vision for the future of local government in Surrey.

Nine district and borough councils support the formation of three unitary councils (Epsom & Ewell, Guildford, Reigate & Banstead, Runnymede, Spelthorne, Surrey Heath, Tandridge, Waverley and Woking) while two district and borough councils (Elmbridge and Mole Valley) and the county council favour two. Both proposals are published on council websites.

The proposal submitted by district and borough councils supporting three unitary councils is underpinned by the following priorities:

- supporting economic growth
- housing and infrastructure delivery
- unlocking devolution
- valuing and advocating for Surrey's unique local identities and places
- providing strong democratic accountability, representation and community empowerment
- securing financial efficiency, resilience and the ability to withstand financial shocks
- delivering high-quality, innovative and sustainable public services that are responsive to local need and that enable wider public sector reform.

Speaking about the proposal for three unitaries, Councillor Hannah Dalton, Chair of the Surrey Leaders Group and Leader of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, said: "Today, district and borough councils have submitted a proposal for local government reorganisation in Surrey, a proposal rooted in what local government is all about: local identity, representation and economic alignment.

This is a once in a generation opportunity to shape Surrey's future, to improve outcomes and opportunities for our residents, businesses and people across the county who rely on us most. We look forward to the government's response to our proposal.

The government set out proposals for local government reform in the English Devolution White Paper. This outlines their plans to move away from the current two-tier system of district and county councils.

Residents can keep up-to-date with plans for local government reorganisation on the Surrey Local Government Hub.

Proposals can be read here: [Epsom and Ewell Democracy](#) and on all Surrey council websites.

Surrey district and borough councils submit proposal to government

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Surrey's partner organisations support county council plans for local government reorganisation

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Epsom and Ewell Times is bringing you all positions being taken on local government reorganisation. We believe in providing you as much information as possible, even if statements are repeated across the stream of reports and press releases. Here is the latest unedited press release from Surrey County Council that favours two unitary authorities to replace itself.

Yesterday, Surrey County Council's Cabinet approved a plan for local government reorganisation in the county. The plan will be sent to government on 9 May, and proposes two councils, East and West Surrey, to replace the existing 12 councils. The creation of the two councils will unlock further devolution through the election of a Mayor for Surrey.

The plan will be jointly submitted with Elmbridge Borough Council and Mole Valley District Council, and includes letters of support from key local partners, including health, police, fire, business and community leaders.

Ian Smith, Chair of NHS Surrey Heartlands ICB said: "As a key partner, NHS Surrey Heartlands is supportive of Surrey County Council's proposal to move to two unitary authorities for Surrey. Recognising the value and importance of strong community engagement - particularly as the NHS looks to focus more on neighbourhood health with local partners - we very much support the proposed creation of community-level boards across Surrey to help strengthen engagement at local level."

Police and Crime Commissioner Lisa Townsend said: "I believe a two unitary structure is the right model for Surrey that will unlock the exciting opportunities that exist through devolution.

"The most important part of my role is to represent our residents and ensure we provide value for money and the very best policing service to keep our communities safe. In any future model of governance, it is crucial that links to the Surrey public at a very local level are retained.

"By getting this right, we can ensure that we continue to deliver an effective and resilient service that will fight crime and protect our county for the next decade."

Dan Quin, Chief Fire Officer, said: "I am pleased that the proposal to move Surrey Fire and Rescue Service to the Mayoral Strategic Authority aligns to the national Fire Reform White Paper in terms of governance for our service. However, in addition to this, this could also allow better collaboration, greater control over funding and regulatory requirements and closer integration with local health and safety initiatives - ensuring a holistic approach to community safety."

The Chair to the Board of Trustees at Surrey Minority Ethnic Forum said: "We fully support the proposed local government reorganisation in Surrey, specifically the recommendation consisting of two unitary authorities. This proposal provides the best opportunity for greater efficiencies in the delivery of services, with reduced duplication and clearer accountability as well as improved financial sustainability. It would allow for more coherent planning and integrated service delivery while preserving the distinctiveness of Surrey's diverse communities. This is a once in lifetime opportunity to strengthen and align public services in the county and we welcome the inclusion of police and health partners in developing this proposal. The inclusion of community boards in the proposal will help to strengthen connectivity with local communities, and SMEF can play a vital role in connecting local diverse communities into these boards."

Councillor Stephen Cooksey, Leader of Mole Valley District Council (MVDC) said: *‘Making the right decision is not always easy, but as elected representatives, our responsibility is to act in the best interests of our residents and businesses. This is especially important during a process as significant as local government reorganisation.*

“Initially, we felt that more time and information were needed to determine whether two or three unitary authorities would best serve Mole Valley. However, following a thorough review of both proposals and a full Council debate, we have voted to support the proposal for two unitary authorities and look forward to having further detailed discussions with our partners, Ministers and others regarding how this can best be implemented.

“We believe this approach offers the best opportunity to establish a new authority that is financially sustainable, supports economic growth, protects our environment, and meets the needs of both our rural and urban communities.’

Cllr Mike Rollings, Leader of Elmbridge Borough Council, believes that financial stability and protecting the interests of residents are best achieved by a 2 unitary approach.

“Although we didn’t ask for government to reorganise the structure of councils in Surrey, we are none-the-less committed to ensuring long-term financial sustainability and delivering value for our residents. I believe these priorities can be achieved through the establishment of two unitary authorities, one for East Surrey and one for West Surrey. Throughout this process we will maintain accountability and actively engage with our residents to ensure successful local government reorganisation in Surrey.”

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council said: *“Our analysis shows that two unitary councils would bring the greatest benefit to Surrey’s residents, and we’ve received significant backing from key partners to support this. 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.”

The county council plan was also discussed with all county councillors at a Full Council meeting and a majority were in favour of submitting the final LGR plan.

Two unitary proposal confirmed

17 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.