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The cost of saving the cost of local government

11 April 2025



As of April 2025, Epsom and Ewell is actively engaged in Surrey's significant local government reorganisation, aiming to transition from the existing two-tier system to a unitary authority model.

The UK government initiated a directive for Surrey to be part of the first wave of local government reorganisation, inviting all 12 councils in the county to submit proposals for restructuring. The current two-tier system, comprising Surrey County Council and 11 district and borough councils, including Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, is set to be replaced by unitary authorities responsible for all local services.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, led by the Residents Associations of Epsom and Ewell, has expressed a preference for establishing three unitary councils within Surrey. This stance aims to balance efficiency with maintaining strong local connections. Councillor Hannah Dalton, Chair of the Surrey Leaders Group and leader of the Residents' Association, has emphasized the importance of serving communities effectively and preserving local democracy.

Surrey County Council Leader Tim Oliver advocates for the creation of 'community-level boards' to ensure local voices are heard within the new governance structure. These boards would include representatives from various sectors, such as health, police, voluntary groups, and local councils, facilitating tailored public services and stronger community engagement.

While proponents of the reorganisation, such as Surrey County Council, argue that a streamlined unitary model will lead to long-term savings through the reduction of duplicated services and administrative overheads, there are also significant upfront costs involved. These include expenses related to restructuring staff, merging IT systems, rebranding, and establishing new governance frameworks. Early estimates suggest the transition could cost tens of millions of pounds, with potential savings only materialising over several years. Critics warn that these financial pressures could strain local services during the transition period and reduce the funds available for frontline delivery.

The Local Government Information Unit states: "A range of options for potential new unitaries were included from 27 to 67 different unitaries. And, across 18 regions (with the information publicly available), the average population size of options was 544,837. Across the 27 proposals analysed, £38.4m has been set aside for preparing LGR proposals. And, current financial analysis averages the estimated transition cost for each region's reorganisation as £31.1m."

A public consultation has been launched to gather feedback from residents and businesses on the proposed reorganisation. This initiative seeks to involve the community in shaping the future governance of Surrey, ensuring that the new structures reflect the needs and preferences of local populations.

- **Final Proposal Submission**: The final proposals for the new unitary structures are to be submitted to the government by 9 May 2025.
- **Government Decision**: A decision from the government is expected in the autumn of 2025.
- **Elections**: Local elections, initially scheduled for May 2025, have been postponed to May 2026 to accommodate the reorganisation process.

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Surrey's BIG debt question in local government reorganisation

Local Government Reorganisation in Surrey: Key Proposals

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RA councillor replaces Independent member as scrutiny row erupts at Epsom Town Hall

11 April 2025

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A stormy Audit and Scrutiny Committee meeting at Epsom and Ewell Borough Council on Thursday 27 March has ignited a political row, as Councillor **Robert Leach** (RA Nonsuch) controversially replaced Councillor **Alex Coley** (Independent Ruxley) on the committee. The change, made by the ruling Residents Association group, prompted accusations of "gerrymandering" and "Trumpian politics" from opposition members, particularly Labour Councillor **Chris Ames** (Labour).

The chair of the committee, Cllr **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodocte and Langley), presided over what quickly became a fractious meeting, with procedural disputes dominating its early minutes. The substitution of Cllr Coley – a former Residents Association member who resigned from the group and now sits as part of a two-member independent group – triggered a fierce exchange over the legality and transparency of the move.

"Nonsense on stilts": Labour mounts strong objection

Rising on a point of order almost immediately, Cllr Chris Ames condemned the replacement as illegitimate:

"A member of the committee who was appointed by full council last year… has been excluded from attendance by diktat from the Residents Association… It's a gross example of gerrymandering by the administration, by a Residents Association clique that will sink to any depths to gain revenge on the former member."

Cllr Ames declared that no constitutional rule allowed for such a substitution, emphasising that committee membership was determined by full council, not party whips. He went on to challenge the very presence of Cllr Leach at the meeting, describing it as: "The worst kind of gerrymandering… resorting to Trumpian politics… shocking, absolutely shocking."

Chair defends decision with constitutional reference

Cllr McCormick responded by reading from Appendix 5 of the Council Procedure Rules (CPR 15.4), arguing that: "A member of a committee… may designate as their substitute another councillor… The substitution happened by the leader of the RA group earlier today." He added: "This is not to be debated… If you want to take it up with the monitoring officer, then please do."

Despite Cllr Ames's repeated interventions, the chair refused further discussion, insisting that proper constitutional advice had been followed.

Legal officer backs the administration

Cllr **James Lawrence** (Lib Dem College) attempted to elicit further legal clarity, but the deputy monitoring officer succinctly backed the chair: "I've got nothing further to add to what the monitoring officer has provided today."

That led Cllr Ames to vent: "You have no explanation as to why a member of this committee who was appointed by council has been excluded from this committee." He warned that the substitution would "nullify the whole proceedings"

Despite the protest, the meeting proceeded with Cllr Leach continuing in place.

Epsom and Ewell Times contacted Cllr Coley after the meeting and he said: "I did not request a substitute for either the meeting of S&R [strategy and resources committee] on the 25th March or A&S [Audit and Scrutiny committee] on the 27th March. Neither was I told that I would be substituted. I was however provided with a legal steer by the Council's Monitoring Officer in which it was anticipated that the RA Group Leader might substitute me as the seat was allocated to that political group."

"My reflection is that there seems to be a fear of robust scrutiny happening in committee meetings. Training on committee procedure is almost non-existent, with a lack of confidence and understanding creating a fait accompli when reports are brought to committee. It is my understanding that smaller opposition groups will be blocked from oversight of strategic financial decisions in the near future." He added: "This bodes very poorly for the governance of the Council at such a critical time, with Local Government Reorganisation, a multi-million pound Town Hall move and an expected deficit in the Council's finances in 2026."

The relevant words of the rule are: "A member of a committee may…… designate as their substitute another councillor. ……. The nominating member, Leader / Chair of their Group, or Deputy Leader / Chair of their Group, shall inform the Democratic Services Manager of the substitute in writing prior to the meeting in question."

There appears to be no rule allowing for any person other than the councillor himself or herself to designate a substitute.

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Cllr Alex Coley and recently resigned group leader of the Liberal Democrats, Cllr **Julie Morris** (College), have formed a new 2 member Independent Group. The new Group pledges to allow its members freedom to vote and speak at Council independently from any “group position”.

Complaints report:

Following the dramatic opening, the committee did manage to turn to the rest of its business, including a review of council complaints between April and December 2024.

Members noted the learning from complaints data. Operational Services were responsible for 57% of complaints, mainly about refuse collection, although this was a 19.5% decrease compared to the previous year.

Treasury and transparency

The committee also received the Financial Strategy Advisory Group’s report on treasury management. There were no contentious issues here, and the recommendation to note the annual report passed unanimously.

But concerns over transparency re-emerged during discussion of previous minutes, particularly relating to responses to the external audit. Lib Dem Cllr James Lawrence criticised omissions in how verbal statements were recorded:

“If I’m looking at the minutes and I didn’t sit at the committee… that doesn’t tell me anything that adds to the debate.”

He also challenged the failure to record examples he had raised regarding “a failure to be transparent” in council decisions.

Cllr Ames returned to the theme, questioning why statements by officers in a previous meeting were vague or misrepresented. He called for: “An accurate description of what was said last time… because that is quite an important thing.”

Director of Corporate Services acknowledged this and promised to amend the minutes for accuracy.

RIPA and policy clarity

In the RIPA (Regulatory and Investigatory Powers Act) annual report the officer was candid:

“This is a report we’re obliged to bring to you every year to tell you about any covert surveillance… and we haven’t done any.”

The Council had nonetheless updated its surveillance policy after external inspection. The chair added that the report would be shared with community safety stakeholders to ensure open oversight.

Cllr Lawrence pointed out that a senior officer’s name in the report was “to be confirmed,” and officers clarified it was awaiting the arrival of a successor to Mr Sebastian.

Closing with caution

The meeting concluded with a subdued atmosphere after its turbulent beginning. No public questions had been submitted, and most agenda items passed without dissent.

But the confrontation over Cllr Coley’s removal – and the unresolved questions about process, transparency, and political fairness – are unlikely to fade quietly.

Commentary

The drama surrounding Cllr Coley’s substitution is more than a procedural quibble. It raises fundamental concerns about how power is exercised by the ruling RA group. When committee appointments, made by full council, are seemingly overridden without transparent explanation, the spectre of executive overreach looms.

Cllr McCormick’s constitutional cover seemed dubious at best and the tone and timing of the move – coming after Coley’s defection from the RA – understandably fuel suspicions of retaliation. The refusal to debate or justify the decision in open session further deepens the sense of opacity.

This episode may yet prompt a broader review of how Epsom and Ewell’s committees are constituted, and how scrutiny can be safeguarded from political manipulation.

Until then, the Audit and Scrutiny Committee risks becoming the subject of its own audit.

Image: Audit and Scrutiny Committee – Epsom and Ewell Borough Council YouTube channel.

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Surrey Councils launch Local Government Reorganisation engagement

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Surrey residents can have their say on the future of local government in the county, in a new survey launched by eight of Surrey's district and borough councils.

An initial proposal for Local Government Reorganisation, which would see the county divided into two or three unitary councils, was published by district and borough councils last week, and they are now asking for the initial views of residents and local businesses.

Given that the current system of local government has been in place for the last 50 years, this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to change things for the better. Eight district and borough councils are therefore offering local people the opportunity to give their feedback on plans for the future governance of the county, to influence the next phase of the process.

Most district and borough leaders in Surrey support a move to three unitary authorities. They believe this would strike the best balance between efficiency and maintaining genuine local accountability, as well as maximising opportunities to support economic growth by ensuring that unitary authorities reflect the economic geography of the county. But regardless of any stated preferences, all district and borough leaders are keen that local people should have the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

The new unitary authorities would assume responsibility for the services currently delivered by Surrey County Council and the 11 district and boroughs. This transition would pave the way for the creation of a new strategic authority covering the county.

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

"This is a pivotal moment for local government in Surrey. There are a number of compelling advantages to unitary councils – and cost savings is only one of them. We also need to ensure we create new organisations that can manage economic growth more effectively, and which recognise the importance of community, identity, and local democracy.

"Local Government Reorganisation provides us with an important opportunity to secure Surrey's future prosperity, safeguard high-quality public services and ensure that decisions continue to be made close to the people they impact.

"The voice of our residents is what really matters. We want to hear what you think about the future of your local councils. Please get involved in the survey and give us your views."

The survey is open for comments until Sunday 20 April.

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Plans for what Surrey could look like in local government reorganisation have been agreed but questions remain over looming debt. Councillors demanded to know how debt would be managed before the county is divided up.

The government outlined plans for a major reorganisation of local government in December. Two tier councils will be dissolved into unitary authorities which will carry out all local government functions like planning, bin collections as well as education and social care.

Members of the County Council have agreed on March 18 two proposals for how Surrey could be carved up in the most dramatic reorganisation of local services in 50 years. Serving 1.2m people, Surrey's current matrix – consisting of 12 borough and district councils and one county council – could be split into two or three new local authorities.

Leader of Surrey County Council, Tim Oliver, said he believes reorganisation is the "opportunity to turbo charge localism". He said: "Single councils are clearer for residents, have greater accountability, are more efficient and effective for delivery and strip out unnecessary bureaucracy and duplication."

Option 1, and the Conservative-run cabinet's preference, is to cut Surrey in half to create an east and west, or north and south. Exactly which councils will be included in the new authority are still yet to be determined, for instance whether Spelthorne borough is either on the east or west side.

Option 2, put forward by the majority of district and borough councils, consists of three new local authorities in the form of north-west, south-west and south-east Surrey. Again, full details of which councils would be included is still in the draft stages.

The two outline plans will be submitted to the central government on Friday March 21, who will ultimately have the deciding power on the new face of Surrey. Meanwhile, the local authorities will keep working to produce a final proposal by May 9.

With over £5.5bn worth of crushing debt across the county, members publicly urged the government to solve Surrey's financial issues before reorganisation. Cllr Catherine Powell said there needs to be "a clear path on the £5.5bn of debt" as it could create "significant imbalances" leading one council "more likely to fail". The Residents' Association and Independent Group Leader said she does not feel Surrey can propose new authorities without a solution.

Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, Cllr Paul Follows, said the councils' debt is "so toxic it will pollute the rest of this county". He lamented that reorganisation will not be about what is best for residents but about how money will be spent.

Speaking to the council, the leader said the government has "made it clear it does not intend to write off all of Woking's debt". Cllr Oliver said he will be having detailed conversations and Surrey will "have to come up with plan B".

Creating two councils in Surrey could save £27m after five years but three authorities could potentially make a loss of £8m, according to the county council's report. But the district and borough councils argue three unitary authorities would only save slightly less money than two and not be in a deficit.

However, Cllr Oliver said they have not taken into account the cost of reorganising services, such as adult social care, which could add substantial added costs. The leader claimed splitting into two is the best value for money for residents.

"There is no desire for Ashford to sink in with Godstone should the boundaries be cut [one] way," said Cllr Robert Evans OBE. He explained slicing Surrey into two would only reveal some towns would have little in common with villages they may have not even heard of.

Creating two unitary councils with a population of around 600,000 each, opponents slammed the proposal as bad for local democracy and eroding distinctive community identities. Members also flagged there would be significantly less councillors looking after greater areas.

But those batting for a dual council-led Surrey said few residents even identify with the council and local identity would be strengthened by working with community groups and local healthcare networks.

Questions about services like adult social care as well as children and education services were raised as major issues. Cllr Sinead Mooney said splitting the adult social care beyond two units would complicate the service and people could "fall through the gaps". Cllr Clare Curran highlighted the potential difficulties in retaining and splitting staff to more than two councils, meaning experienced teams could leave.

Cllr Fiona Davidson called for a need to assess how many children homes, specialist school places and demand for foster children to ensure Surrey is covered with the right services. Members agreed it was not just about making services cheaper and simpler- they had to be run better than currently.

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Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Divided Over Local Government Reorganisation

An extraordinary meeting of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council was held on **18th March 2025**, where councillors engaged in an extensive and, at times, heated debate over the future structure of local government in Surrey. The meeting, convened in response to the Government's **English Devolution White Paper**, saw councillors grapple with the contentious question of whether Surrey should be reorganised into **two or three unitary authorities**.

Abolition of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council Inevitable

Councillor **Hannah Dalton**, (RA Stoneleigh) Chair of the Standards and Constitution Committee and ruling Residents Association leader, acknowledging the gravity of the decision before the Council. "Tonight, colleagues, you have before you a report which will undo 50 years of local government," she said. She stressed that while she would not have chosen this path, reorganisation was now unavoidable due to central government's ambitions for devolution.

Dalton proposed a motion advocating for the creation of **three unitary authorities** in Surrey, arguing that this model would better maintain local democracy and ensure decision-making remained close to residents. She cited concerns that larger unitary councils could become remote and unresponsive, particularly to distinct local needs such as those of urban Epsom versus rural areas further south.

The Case for Two Unitaries

However, opposition to the three-unitary model came swiftly. Councillor **Bernie Muir** (Conservative Horton) raised concerns that splitting Surrey into three could strain service delivery, particularly for essential areas like **adult social care and children's services**. "It's not just about population size, but the nature and needs of our communities," she stated, highlighting the complexities of recruiting skilled staff across multiple authorities and the risks of disrupting services that are already under strain.

Echoing these concerns, Councillor **Julian Freeman** (Liberal Democrat College), who served Sutton Council for several years, warned against prioritising political considerations over operational efficiency. "Dividing an already overstretched county into three is not going to fix its problems," he said. Freeman pointed to **Surrey County Council's existing financial difficulties**, suggesting that smaller councils might lack the resources to deliver critical services effectively.

Democracy and Accountability at Stake

Others, including **Councillor James Lawrence** (LibDem College), pushed back, advocating for three unitaries as a way to preserve **local democratic accountability**. He cautioned against forming excessively large authorities, citing the example of North Yorkshire's unitary council, which has struggled to maintain strong community ties. "If we follow Surrey County's preference for two unitaries, we risk creating councils that are simply too large for residents to engage with effectively," he argued.

Meanwhile, Councillor **Alan Williamson** (RA West Ewell) expressed frustration with the process, describing the reorganisation as being "**railroaded through**" by the Government. "This is not about efficiency or saving money; it's about centralising power," he said. Nevertheless, he reluctantly backed the three-unitary model as the closest approximation to Epsom and Ewell's current system.

Cllr **John Beckett** (RA Auriol) said "Money is driving this. You look at all of the reports that support whether it's a two unitary or a three unitary. It's down to pounds, Shilling and pence. I personally feel that our residents will lose out it."

Cllr **Christine Cleveland** (RA Ewell Village) said "We're Residents Association. I'm proud to be a residents association councillor, because I think that brings me right smack back into the local people where we live, and that's who I care about, and that's who I'm hoping to represent. I think the bigger you do these authorities, the less that voice is heard."

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Cllr **Clive Woodbridge** (RA Ewell Village) said "I am sceptical that local government reorganisation will bring many benefits for our residents. The savings won't be as much as predicted, the costs will be far higher, and we will end up with a local government structure that is far less local than before. What is being proposed is not devolution, but to a large extent the reverse, taking many decisions about the services that local government delivers further away from residents and more towards the centre".

Labour councillors also contributed to the debate, with **Councillor Chris Ames** (Court) raising concerns about transparency and the accessibility of council discussions. "This is a public meeting. We shouldn't be putting things in code that are baffling to the public, that we're asking to engage in our democracy," he said, urging fellow councillors to ensure their discussions remained comprehensible to residents.

Councillor **Kate Chinn** (Labour Court) added that while the reorganisation was inevitable, it was vital to ensure that it worked for all residents. "The Labour Party tried to make the districts and boroughs fit better, and it's quite difficult because of the different socio-economic differences in different boroughs and districts," she remarked. She praised the efforts made in the proposal, stating, "They've done the best we can do, and I don't see why we're noting it and not voting to approve it"

What Happens Next?

With emotions running high, the meeting, following an amendment of Cllr **Alex Coley** (RA Ruxley) to approve not merely note, ultimately saw councillors **vote to approve** the submission of the interim proposal to Government, with a majority supporting the three-unitary preference. This recommendation will now be submitted as part of Surrey's interim plan for reorganisation, though the final decision will rest with the Government.

Local residents are encouraged to follow developments closely, as the reorganisation will have a profound impact on how services are delivered in Epsom and Ewell in the years to come. The debate may be over in the council chamber, but the future of local government in Surrey remains uncertain.

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Local Government Reorganisation in Surrey: Key Proposals

11 April 2025



The leaders of all 12 Surrey councils have reached an agreement on the fundamental principles for an interim proposal concerning local government reorganisation (LGR) within the county. The proposal, which follows a government directive issued in February, outlines the potential restructuring of Surrey's local government into either two or three unitary authorities.

Dividing Surrey: Two or Three Unitaries?

While Surrey County Council has advocated for the creation of two unitary councils, the majority of the district and borough councils favour a three-unitary model. The proposal has now been submitted to the government, which will decide whether to pursue one of these options further before a final business case is due in May. A government decision on the restructuring is anticipated in the autumn.

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council, expressed his confidence in the two-unitary approach, stating:

"I am clear that two unitary councils would bring the most benefits for Surrey's residents. It would create a simpler model of local government that is more efficient, offers better value for money and improved outcomes for all."

He also highlighted the potential for devolution under this model, allowing for the election of a mayor who could secure additional powers and funding for Surrey.

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However, the vast majority of district and borough councils, including Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, have shown strong support for a three-unitary model. Hannah Dalton, Chair of Surrey Leaders Group and Leader of the Residents Association ruling group in Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, remarked:

“The leaders of Surrey’s councils have been meeting weekly to discuss how local government will be structured here in Surrey. Later today, district and borough councils will publish a report outlining potential options on what form local government reorganisation may take, which will include scenarios for two and three unitary councils. The vast majority of the 11 districts and boroughs are supporting three unitaries.”

Dalton emphasised the importance of securing the best possible outcome for Surrey’s residents, reaffirming the commitment of local councils to work collaboratively in developing the final proposal.

Financial and Structural Implications

The recently released **Interim Plan – Part B** provides a high-level analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of each proposal.

Two Unitary Councils:

- Would create larger, more financially sustainable authorities (populations between 500,000 and 600,000 each).
- Would align with government criteria for devolution and financial sustainability.
- Risks include potential disruption in service delivery and the challenge of balancing financial stability between the two authorities.

Three Unitary Councils:

- Would offer more localised governance, aligning with existing borough and district identities.
- Could weaken financial resilience due to smaller council tax bases and greater complexity in disaggregating existing services.
- Risks include higher long-term costs and potential for economic disparity between wealthier and less affluent areas.

According to the financial appraisal, the three-unitary option is expected to be the most expensive to implement and least likely to meet government criteria for financial sustainability.

Next Steps and Government Decision

The submission of the interim proposals on 21st March marks the first step in the government’s review process. Local councils across Surrey are set to hold **Extraordinary Council Meetings** in the coming weeks to discuss and note the submission.

A full business case is required by 9th May, and consultations with residents, businesses, and stakeholders will continue in the interim period. Surrey’s final decision will ultimately rest with central government, which is expected to announce its verdict in the autumn.

The coming months will determine whether the vision of two or three unitary authorities prevails and what the reorganisation will mean for local governance, service delivery, and financial sustainability across Surrey.

Stay updated with the Epsom and Ewell Times for ongoing coverage of the local government reorganisation process.

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Epsom and Ewell Times has invited representatives of The Residents Association, Liberal Democrats, Labour and Conservative Party to share their policies on local government reorganisation. But today we publish newly independent Councillor Alex Coley's viewpoint.

Devolution to the middle

Just before Christmas the government in Westminster announced it would be reorganising local government by abolishing the lower tier of councils like Epsom & Ewell, in the name of devolution. From Whitehall's perspective, power will be devolved down to new, larger unitary councils across much bigger geographic areas. From the perspective of residents power is going up, up and away. For balance, let's call it devolution to the middle.

Dissolution from the Ministry

There exists a patchwork quilt of small councils dotted across England like needlework, playing a unique role that dilutes and moderates the big, concentrated politics of national government. They represent the interests of local residents while collecting the bins, planning for housing and keeping the streets clean and tidy.

These councils and their councillors represent a range of political control that serves as the final layer of pluralist democracy with the greatest proximity to reality. The English don't like being 'done to' and the lower tier of councils which are closest to residents operate like a kind of natural filter against the sometimes harmful UV rays of Whitehall bright ideas. It's a kind of self-regulating eco-system that looks messy and manic under the microscope but serves an important purpose in the good governance and democratic health of the nation.

Duopoly

The higher up you go with government the more it becomes a two party system. At the lower level, where residents experience local government most acutely, there's a huge range of political views openly held and discussed. Councillors are local people who live in the neighbourhood and know it really well and they know the local people really well too. Those local relationships are more important than the party flag.

That will be lost as the whole sector gets shrunk to a handful of people operating across much larger areas at a much higher level; as the obedient servants of one of two political parties. Soon, whole swathes of the country will be concentrated for or against the government of the day. There will be very visible winners and losers at each general election and no patchwork quilt to dilute and moderate the bright ideas which make for good headlines but poor outcomes.

Bigger is not always better

Are we heading for an American style two-party state with no spectrum of voices or views? Or will it be more like King John and the barons across 12 mayoralty strategic authorities; a conspiracy against the public?

I believe that three unitaries in Surrey could work. A lot will depend on retaining some plurality of political groups and an affinity between voters and their elected representatives that goes beyond a party flag. I welcome reformation, and change is a constant, but we must keep democracy close to the people at a local level. Bigger is not always better.

I've done considerable research on the options in THIS REPORT, which I hope your readers will take the opportunity to read.

Cllr Alex Coley

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council

Ruxley Ward Councillor

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Local LibDem view on Epsom and Ewell Council’s future

11 April 2025



Epsom and Ewell Times has invited representatives of The Residents Association, Liberal Democrats, Labour and Conservative Party to share their policies on local government reorganisation. Here is the second from Cllr Julie Morris (College Ward) of the Liberal Democrat Party.

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) is a recurring theme in British politics. Government which is fit-for-purpose contributes to overall efficiency. Proportional Representation would be by far the best change central government could make toward this. However, the removal of two tier authorities is what we have to deal with and there are undoubtedly economies of scale to be had from the edict that Surrey should become two or possibly three unitary bodies, instead of one county council and eleven districts/boroughs.

It is really important to create new unitaries using current boundaries as far as possible. The logistics and costs of any other scenario are complex and could lengthen the process by years. Debt needs to be spread so that no new authority is immediately bankrupt (as some existing councils are heavily in debt) and, ideally, areas of wealth and deprivation should also be fairly distributed so that each new unitary begins life as both fair and financially viable. Amalgamating services such as refusal collection, recycling and disposal makes sense as for small boroughs the costs of energy-efficient collection vehicles are prohibitive and it’s worth remembering that some councils already share staff such as legal, chief executive, IT, etc. Working in partnership is not an entirely new thing, so amalgamation might be relatively straightforward in some areas. Redistributing services covered entirely by the existing county council could be the key to success in the eyes of local residents, and there are some sensitive areas here e.g. social services and education, to say nothing of potholes.

We do not as yet know the preference of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, and the Liberal Democrats in Surrey as far as I am aware have not yet come out in favour of any particular scenario. I personally favour three new unitaries over two, but I’m sure there is room for manoeuvre once the fuller picture is known. For Epsom, a new Town Council would probably find favour with local people. Even though it has limited power particularly when it comes to planning applications, it can do a good job of keeping residents informed and, most importantly, involved. This does nicely lead onto the tricky bit which is how to make sure residents themselves are not further disengaged from local politics (and politicians) and feel they have no say or contribution to make. Decisions taken many miles away and a local councillor who represents a much wider area could impact voter turnout (and apathy) even more. Only around 40% of the electorate currently vote in local elections anyway.

Cllr Julie Morris

Leader of the Liberal Democrat group

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council

Related reports:

Local Labour view on Epsom and Ewell Council’s future

Local Labour view on Epsom and Ewell Council’s future

11 April 2025

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Epsom and Ewell Times has invited representatives of The Residents Association, Liberal Democrats, Labour and Conservative Party to share their policies on local government reorganisation. Here is the first from Cllr Kate Chinn (Court Ward) of the Labour Party.

The government has directed a total reorganisation for two-tier local authority areas across the whole country. This was planned by the previous government and outlined in the Labour manifesto. Surrey County Council will cease to exist and will be divided up into, what Surrey Labour Party hopes, will be three unitary authorities.

Labour in Surrey has long argued that twelve councils, twelve civic centres or town halls, with twelve chief executives and a top-heavy administration is not the most economical way to deliver essential services. Small boroughs all with their own legal teams, revenue teams, housing teams, procurement staff—all duplicating roles unnecessarily. On completing the process, unitary authorities will soon start making efficiency savings.

Surrey Labour has been discussing for years how unitary authorities could be most effectively organised to best serve the residents of Surrey. Unlike the Liberal Democrats, who are hardly engaging, or the independents, burying their heads in the sand and calling for elections to be held in 2025, as did some council ruling groups. How they can claim good financial management whilst wanting an unnecessary election to go ahead makes no sense. Wasting taxpayers' money on a soon-to-be irrelevance would be unforgivable.

Surrey Labour has embraced the process, made a case for three unitary authorities, and carefully examined how they could be organised, taking into account the guidance from the white paper:

- **Sensible economic geographies**
- **Travel to work areas**
- **The ability for local residents to engage and hold their devolved institutions to account**

The Case for Three Unitary Authorities

We believe that there is an overwhelming case for three councils based on existing geography, taking into account expected population growth and recognising the political, economic, and social challenges faced by the county.

Surrey is to be divided into unitary authorities (UAs), with the government suggesting a **population of 500,000 or more** as ideal but recognising that there *may be exceptions to ensure new structures make sense for an area*. The population of Surrey is **1.25 million**, which implies **two or three authorities**.

Dividing Surrey into two UAs would mean both would be oversized and geographically challenged in an area of anticipated population growth, whereas three would be initially undersized. The likely divisions would be:

- **Two UAs** – (East/West) – as proposed by the Conservatives
- **Three UAs** – (North/South-West/South-East) – as proposed by Labour and supported by all the boroughs and districts

Proposed Unitary Authorities

With service delivery to residents being the most important issue, we suggest the following councils:

Middlesex-Surrey Borders

- Elmbridge, Spelthorne & Runnymede
- **Population:** 334,000

Surrey Hills

- Guildford, Surrey Heath, Woking & Waverley
- **Population:** 478,000

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North Downs

- Epsom & Ewell, Mole Valley, Reigate & Banstead, and Tandridge
- **Population:** 416,000

These names and details are **provisional** and will be decided later. However, they best fit geographically and population-wise.

All these areas would have much stronger geographical links and community ties than the larger, two-unitary authority model. While all three are under the government's ideal **500,000 population** threshold, Surrey Hills is closer to that figure, and all are areas of **population growth**.

These three UAs could provide a more **local and focused** delivery of key services, ensuring better support for **adult social care and SEND needs**, both priorities for Surrey. It would give greater clarity for residents, with one authority being responsible for all local services. Service delivery would be **more efficient, more accountable**, and **free from disputes** over which council has responsibility in an area.

Local Voices Must Be Heard

It is essential to establish a close relationship between Surrey County and district councillors in shaping their new unitary authorities as they are formulated. The reorganisation process must not descend into factional disagreements but remain **focused on communities and democratic engagement** at a local level.

Other unitary councils, such as London boroughs, often have **local committees** to represent community views. Boroughs and districts in Surrey should now begin **engaging residents**, examining the options, and organising forums to ensure local voices are represented in the new UAs.

Conclusion

The devolution offer in the white paper suggests a **Surrey Mayor**, offering **priorities for funding that suit their areas** and providing **strategic leadership**. This could positively impact key Surrey priorities, including:

- **Skills and employment**
- **More housing**
- **Increased local investment**
- **Making Britain a clean energy superpower**

Surrey's approaches to neighbouring areas for a joint strategic mayor have not been successful.

A **Surrey Mayor** would automatically represent an area that aligns with the **current police and crime commissioner** and the **Surrey Fire and Rescue Service boundaries**, as envisaged by the white paper's goal of **"reforming and joining up public services"**.

Overall, we believe that our **three-unitary authority model** will best serve the needs of Surrey residents going forward.

Much of this is based on previous contributions by **Robert Evans & Arran Neathey (2019), Cllr Catherine Powell (2025), Tony Rooth & Michael Moriarty**, with additional input from **Cllr Robert King**, but it does not necessarily represent all of their individual views.

Cllr Kate Chinn
Leader of the Labour Group
February 2025

Mega Surrey council ruled out as leader says it would 'lack accountability'

11 April 2025



Council leaders across Surrey have ruled out making the county a single mega authority. The agreement was reached during a meeting on February 7, attended by leaders from all eleven district and borough councils.

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The government confirmed last week that Surrey is among the first areas to take part in devolution to simplify and streamline local government. Elections have also been postponed until at least 2026 as part of the process.

Catherine Sayer, Leader of Tandridge District Council, said: “I am delighted we have been able to rule out proposing a single unitary which I believe would have been too large and so lack accountability to residents.”

Two-tier systems of borough and county councils could be thrown away with single unitary authorities created instead. The government argues this would not only be more cost effective but also shift power away from Westminster and towards local people.

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council, who was unable to attend last week’s meeting, said: “The government’s White Paper sets out their ambition to create strategic combined authorities under mayoral devolution, and within Surrey’s geography a single unitary wouldn’t meet that criteria.”

A statement from the Surrey Leaders LGR Steering Group said it “remain[s] committed to working together towards submitting one bid for the County”.

Options still on the table include Surrey being made up of two or three smaller council regions, with possibly an elected mayor overseeing the whole county. Last week Spelthorne councillors voted on their preferred make-up of councils depending on whether Surrey would be split into two or three.

But leaders across the political divide have warned shrewd councils should not be flattened by neighbouring council’s crushing debts. Leader of Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, Richard Biggs, and Leader of Elmbridge Borough Council, Mike Rollings, as well as Cllr Sayer (Tandridge) have raised alarm at being forced to pick up the tab of other councils.

Council leaders are aiming to meet weekly to develop an interim proposal, in line with government criteria, to be submitted by 21 March with a full proposal to follow by 9 May.

Epsom & Ewell Council not much in the red but too much in the pink!

11 April 2025



Governance Failing Exposed by External Audit Findings

The Audit and Scrutiny Committee of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council convened on 6th February 2025, where the External Audit Report by Grant Thornton ignited a heated debate over transparency, governance, and the Council’s use of confidential “pink papers”. Against the background of relative positive news on the accounts and budgets the meeting focussed on the culture of secrecy over decision-making.

The external auditors highlighted a culture of secrecy, citing too many decisions being taken in private and a lack of openness in decision-making. Opposition Councillors Kate Chinn, Chris Ames and James Lawrence strongly criticised the Council’s handling of transparency, while the Council’s leadership attempted to downplay the concerns, insisting that governance processes were robust.

The External Audit Report: A Damning Verdict on Transparency

The Grant Thornton audit report drew heavily on a Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Review, which criticised the Council’s decision-making culture. The report highlighted that:

- “Too many decisions are being made under part two as a media management strategy.”
- There is a “lack of transparency” in governance structures.

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- The Council needed to demonstrate clearer and more open decision-making.

These findings were met with stark reactions from opposition councillors, who argued that the Council was withholding information from elected members and the public.

Councillor Kate Chinn: “Stop the Navel-Gazing”

Before the committee formally discussed Item 4: External Audit, Councillor **Kate Chinn** (Labour, Court Ward) made a strong opening statement, focusing on the governance failures exposed by the auditors. She highlighted:

“Throughout their report, Grant Thornton noted the LGA report stating a culture of secrecy, noting a lack of transparency, stating a culture of secrecy described by members and that too many decisions are being held behind closed doors.”

Chinn criticised the ruling administration for focusing on internal restructuring, particularly the proposal to separate audit and scrutiny functions, rather than addressing substantive transparency issues. She stated:

“The ruling group has chosen to focus as a priority on the LGA recommendation to decouple audit and scrutiny. This is a decision that was already planted in council by the political leadership as a direction of travel, and I’m quite sure this is not a priority for the residents of Epsom and Ewell facing so many cost-of-living challenges.”

She urged the Council to move beyond constitutional tinkering and focus on supporting frontline services:

“In view of the move to a unitary authority, the Council should stop spending so much time on internal matters—no more tweaking the constitution or fiddling about with the functions of a soon-to-be different committee. It’s just become navel-gazing.”

Councillor Chris Ames Challenges “Pink Paper” Secrecy

The overuse of confidential “pink papers” (private reports) became a central point of contention, with Councillor **Chris Ames** (Labour Court) raising concerns over the council’s reliance on closed-door discussions.

He directly challenged the administration on whether they were deliberately using “part two” rules to restrict public access:

“Are you using part two to be a euphemism for going into a closed session? Because that’s not my understanding of what part two means….. There is a withheld report here. It’s Appendix Two. It’s quite clear. It says on both the public pack and in item 13.”

Chair **Steve McCormick** Chair of the Committee (RA Woodcote and Langley) defended the Council’s approach, arguing that some reports contained sensitive financial details:

“If you start to ask questions on that, then we will have to go into part two. We will have to basically stop the feed. And once we go into part two, we can’t come out.”

However, Ames remained sceptical, pressing for clear definitions of what was truly confidential and what was being unnecessarily withheld. He questioned whether decisions should be debated in secret unless absolutely necessary: “My question is, are we using the word Part Two consistently and accurately? Because it says item 13 and it says it’s on the public pack.”

Adding to this transparency row, Councillor **Alex Coley** (RA Ruxley) reported that he was unable to access the part two documents on the Council’s internal system, ModGov:

“I’m not actually able to access the part two items in ModGov. So that’s perhaps why there’s been some confusion. I can’t get to them.”

Councillor James Lawrence: “A Transparency Crisis”

In one of the most scathing criticisms of the evening, Councillor J**ames Lawrence** (LibDem College Ward) said that his own experiences confirmed that the Council had a serious transparency problem. He declared:

“Quite frankly, my own experience of transparency at the Council is not great.”

He pointed to several key examples where he felt information was deliberately restricted:

1. The Local Plan Process: “I’ve struggled to be involved at all in the local plan process. The entire time I’ve been elected as a councillor, it has not come to a public committee until right before it went to full council……..If I’m struggling as a councillor, my goodness, what do we think residents are struggling to see?”
2. The Town Hall Move (£7m Project): “Still don’t really know why that was in part two……Then of course we had the well-prepared, very slick PR statement to go out after, to give the impression to residents that there were no problems, that it’s all clean sailing.”
3. The Hook Road Arena Plan: “I remember I saw that appear in the Local Plan documents, and I emailed in

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questions about that. Nothing. Nothing back."

4. Access to Audit Reports: "Having my own struggles to get hold of an audit report as a member of audit and scrutiny—it's not a very good sign……Of all the people to be struggling to get hold of an audit report, it shouldn't be someone on the Audit and Scrutiny Committee."

Council's Response: A Dismissive Attitude?

The Council's official response to the audit findings did not acknowledge any fundamental governance failures. Instead, the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) issued a brief statement, saying: "SLT believes the Council is transparent in its reporting and through Committees."

Lawrence ridiculed the response, stating: "My impression of the management response is essentially: Don't care. It's already transparent enough."

A pragmatic attitude from Councillor Alan Williamson

Cllr **Alan Williamson** (RA West Ewell) struck a pragmatic tone, questioning whether the Council should devote energy to internal reforms when local government reorganisation was imminent. He remarked:

"Obviously, the one area where there is an element of concern from the external auditors is governance and transparency. Now, this is, in my mind, an issue of culture rather than performance…….. The whole focus of this Council is going to be the impending local government reorganisation, and to expect it to change its culture in the next year or two is somewhat implausible."

He suggested that the Council's priorities should shift towards ensuring stability during the transition rather than engaging in lengthy internal governance debates.

A Governance Crisis?

The Audit and Scrutiny Committee meeting exposed deep divisions within the Council. While external auditors and opposition councillors raised legitimate concerns about secrecy and accountability, the administration remained largely dismissive of these criticisms.

As Councillor Lawrence bluntly put it: "If I'm struggling as a councillor to access this information, what hope do our residents have?"

With local government reorganisation looming, the Council faces mounting pressure to reform its decision-making processes—but the meeting made clear that no immediate action is planned.

Whether transparency will improve or whether secrecy will remain embedded in the Council's culture remains to be seen.

Related reports:

Seeing through transparency in Council Chamber

"Audit and Scrutiny" under scrutiny

Annual audit of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council

What might local government reorganisation mean for Epsom and Ewell?

11 April 2025

As Surrey faces a significant overhaul of its local government structure, residents of Epsom and Ewell are rightfully concerned about the potential financial repercussions. The proposed reorganisation may lead to two unitary authorities that merge the county's 11 borough and district councils, a move intended to streamline services and reduce administrative costs. However, this consolidation raises pressing questions about fiscal responsibility and the equitable distribution of debt, particularly for boroughs like Epsom and Ewell that have historically maintained prudent financial

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practices.

The Financial Landscape of Surrey's Boroughs

The Epsom and Ewell Times has just published three reports detailing the financial woes of three councils within Surrey that are grappling with substantial debts resulting from ambitious investment strategies.

- **Woking Borough Council** declared effective bankruptcy in 2023, burdened by debts exceeding £2 billion due to failed investments in large-scale projects. The council has since been compelled to implement severe austerity measures, including significant tax increases, service closures, and asset sales.
- **Spelthorne Borough Council** faces over £1 billion in debt from investments in commercial properties. A recent audit revealed "significant weaknesses" in financial record-keeping, inadequate plans to address looming budget gaps, and concerns over governance and internal culture.
- **Guildford Borough Council** is confronting a challenging financial future, with projected budget gaps escalating to £5.9 million by 2028/29. The council has acknowledged the need for cost reductions and increased income to manage these pressures.

Epsom and Ewell's Prudent Financial Management

In contrast, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has consistently balanced its budgets or been able to use reserves to meet its obligations, demonstrating fiscal discipline and effective financial stewardship. This prudent management has enabled the council to maintain most services and infrastructure without accruing unsustainable debt levels.

The Justice of Debt Redistribution

The proposed reorganisation raises a critical question: Is it just for residents of financially prudent boroughs like Epsom and Ewell to assume responsibility for the substantial debts incurred by other councils? Merging councils into larger unitary authorities could lead to a pooling of assets *and liabilities*, potentially obliging Epsom and Ewell's residents to contribute to servicing debts they had no part in accumulating.

This scenario not only challenges principles of fiscal fairness but also risks penalising councils that have exercised sound financial management. It is imperative to consider whether it is equitable for residents to bear the financial burdens resulting from the mismanagement of neighbouring authorities.

Calls for Government Intervention

Recognising the potential injustice, Surrey County Council's leader, Councillor Tim Oliver, has advocated for central government to write off the significant debts of councils like Woking before proceeding with devolution plans. This approach aims to mitigate the financial risks associated with high debt levels and prevent the unfair distribution of financial burdens across the county. How likely is it that a Labour Government will write off a debt accumulated by Woking under its previous Conservative led Council?

The Path Forward

As discussions about local government reorganisation progress, it is crucial to ensure that any new structures are underpinned by principles of fiscal responsibility and equity. Potential solutions include:

- **Debt Segregation:** Isolating the debts of heavily indebted councils to prevent them from being transferred to newly formed unitary authorities.
- **Government Debt Relief:** Advocating for central government intervention to alleviate or write off unsustainable debts, ensuring that the financial missteps of certain councils do not adversely impact the entire county.
- **Transparent Financial Assessments:** Conducting comprehensive financial evaluations of all councils involved in the reorganisation to inform fair and equitable decision-making.

The proposed reorganisation of Surrey's local government presents an opportunity to enhance efficiency and service delivery at the cost of Borough based democracy. However, it also necessitates careful consideration of the financial implications for all residents. Epsom and Ewell's community, having benefited from prudent financial management, should not be unduly burdened by the debts of other councils. It is incumbent upon policymakers to design a reorganisation framework that upholds fiscal justice, ensuring that the residents of Epsom and Ewell are not unfairly disadvantaged in the pursuit of broader administrative reforms.

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Postponing Democracy?

11 April 2025

The Conservative-led Surrey County Council's recent decision to seek a postponement of the May 2025 elections raises serious questions about the motivations behind this move. This decision, spearheaded by Councillor Tim Oliver, comes after the Conservative Party's near-total defeat in the July 2024 General Election and appears to be as much about retaining control as it is about facilitating local government reorganisation.

The argument put forward by the council's leadership—that elections would create a "zombie" authority that wastes public funds—is unconvincing. Elections are a cornerstone of democracy, not a bureaucratic inconvenience. By delaying them, the current leadership retains power at a time when its mandate to govern Surrey is at best questionable. Surrey's residents, many of whom voiced their dissatisfaction with Conservative governance at the ballot box just months ago, now face the prospect of being governed by a council that is effectively prolonging its tenure without public consent.

One cannot ignore the context of this decision. Central government's push for local government reform and devolution is not an altruistic initiative aimed at better serving communities. It is a cost-cutting exercise disguised as modernisation. The Government's stipulation that new councils must serve a minimum of 500,000 residents almost guarantees the dissolution of smaller, locally focused boroughs like Epsom and Ewell.

For Epsom and Ewell, the smallest of Surrey's 11 boroughs, this means the likely loss of a council that has served its residents with proximity and understanding for decades. What replaces it may be a sprawling mega-authority or a fractured, less accountable unitary structure. Either way, Epsom and Ewell risks losing its unique voice, with decisions about its future made by those unfamiliar with its needs and aspirations.

Equally troubling is the inclusion of Woking Borough Council's extraordinary debt—reportedly the largest in UK local government history—in the negotiations surrounding devolution. This financial calamity, created under Conservative rule, should be a cautionary tale about the dangers of poor governance, not an issue swept under the rug in the rush to reform. Why should other Surrey residents shoulder the burden of Woking's mismanagement? And why has Surrey's Conservative leadership not been more transparent about its plans to address this issue?

The proposal to postpone elections also conveniently consolidates power for a party facing an uncertain future. By delaying the democratic process, Surrey's Conservative leadership ensures it remains at the table during pivotal discussions about the future shape of local government, even as the electorate has made its dissatisfaction clear.

Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, like others across the county, is being swept into a centralised reorganisation process with little clarity about what it will mean for its residents. The likely outcome is the erosion of local democracy, with decisions affecting communities being made further away and by people with less understanding of local needs.

Surrey's leadership has yet to explain convincingly why postponing the elections is necessary. If their proposals for reorganisation are sound, why not put them to the test of public approval? Democracy is not an obstacle to progress; it is the means by which progress is legitimised.

Epsom and Ewell's residents deserve to have their voices heard in shaping the future of their local government. They deserve transparency about what reorganisation will mean for their services, their representation, and their community identity. Most importantly, they deserve the chance to vote on who should lead that process. Anything less is an affront to democracy and a betrayal of public trust.

The May 2025 elections must go ahead. It is time for Surrey's leaders to trust the people they serve and stop hiding behind bureaucratic excuses.

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Local government reorganisation: What will it mean for Epsom and Ewell?

11 April 2025



The leader of “doomed” Surrey County Council will write to the Government asking for the May 2025 elections to be postponed and Woking’s debt cancelled as part of devolution measures to merge the county’s councils. The moves are said to allow the council the time to draft proposals for how the county and its 11 boroughs and districts will be dissolved and reborn as potentially a single authority with a directly elected mayor. Other plans could see the county split in two or three smaller unitary authorities in one of the biggest shake-ups in a generation.

In December, the Government placed councils on short notice over devolution plans, giving those who want to get on board until March to submit interim merger proposals. Those who do not will have their devolution plans dictated to them by Downing Street. To give councils time to reorganise, the Government also said it would consider passing legislation postponing the May 2025 elections until next year. On Wednesday, January 8, Surrey County Council confirmed it would pursue the Government’s offer, with conditions.

The move to push back elections, however, was disputed in the chamber with councillors calling it undemocratic, while the leaders of the 11 boroughs and districts have also called for the May polls to go ahead. Councillor Paul Follows, leader of the opposition, told the meeting the boroughs and districts made it very clear local government reform was necessary – but that it could be done alongside the democratic process. He said: “We accept and broadly agree that some unitary council combination would make sense for a variety of reasons but we believe that the pace, the haste, and the lack of plans should not just be folly but a clear threat to services our residents need, and we do not accept that elections must be cancelled.

“The Government aren’t asking us or making us cancel elections. The deputy prime minister confirmed in an interview [on Wednesday morning] that councils are not being asked this way.” He added: “The timetable is going to remain as is and the work is going to happen and we can do everything that the leader is proposing to do while holding the scheduled elections. The leader has argued that leaping in here brings benefits but nobody has outlined what they are and honestly whatever they are, unless they include defined government interventions on debt and adult social care, nothing is worth taking that leap because then any successor authority will be immediately in serious troubles.”

He would also raise concerns that without clear guidelines and financial support, scenarios where playing fields in Godalming could be sold off to pay debts in Woking could emerge. The ruling Conservative group, however, dismissed demands to keep the election saying it would not only cost millions – estimated at about £2.48m – but also elect a “zombie” body that would be dissolved in just a year’s time.

Councillor John O’Reilly (Conservative; Surrey) said: “This council is doomed. This council will not survive and the 11 boroughs and districts will also not survive. So we are talking about a new structure and framework and for those saying the election to go ahead, it is quite clear, the minister’s letter has said that those authorities where elections do go ahead, they have still got to provide submissions by autumn, leaving only a few months. So what is going to happen if we have elections? It will essentially be a zombie council in the twilight, lurching through its own oblivion maybe only a year or so later when elections will take place for the new authorities.”

Councils have until March to submit interim devolution proposals with final drafts delivered by either May or the Autumn. The council has said it will work with “all stakeholders” over the next eight weeks in drawing up plans, including residents, as well as taking feedback from police, fire and rescue, and health services. The Government states it wants new councils to have a minimum of 500,000 residents meaning it is most likely Surrey would become either a single mega authority or split in two – with a directly elected mayor.

Some councillors raised a preference to create three bodies. Councillor Tim Oliver did not rule out expanding beyond the Surrey border to create a regional authority but hoped that all parties could come to an agreement. He said: “We propose to make it clear that the Government will be asked to deal with the debt partially, Woking that is publicly known and crystallised, but there are other levels of significant debt across the county.” He said it was better to get in early to create some leverage over the debt position rather than be handed down a Government dictate.

He said: “Work will start on Friday – officers are putting together the working groups needed. This will be exceptionally time consuming. Not only will it need collaboration between the boroughs and districts, but this council will need to have an input into the proposals. We may go with more than one proposal, one from this council and one from the boroughs and districts.”

The county council leader will now write to the Government setting out that Surrey wishes to be part of the accelerated devolution program and that it would support any new legislation postponing the May 2025 elections until next year.

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11 April 2025



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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