



## Some election detail on the new Surrey Councils

Election dates in Surrey, and how the seats will be split in the two new mega councils, have been confirmed as more details emerge of how everything will work following the Government's local government reorganisation announcement. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government wrote to council bosses across Surrey laying out the roadmap to how and when the old authorities will be abolished. Councils will be sent a draft structural change order with a November 7 deadline to give their feedback. From there, parliament will scrutinise the plans in early January before the formal creation of East Surrey Council and West Surrey Council – and the abolishment of the existing authorities. Elections for the new councils will take place in May 2026 in order to create shadow bodies that will sit alongside the outgoing system. Those elected will be responsible for budgets and long term planning before formally taking over local government functions and powers on April 1 2027.

The new councils will run under a leader and cabinet model, as is currently the case with Surrey County Council. The outgoing councils will remain responsible for services in their areas until they are abolished on April 1 2027. It is understood wards in the new mega councils will follow the current county boundaries – having only recently undergone an electoral boundary review. The major difference will be that each ward will have two councillors representing their areas rather than the current one. Elections will be overseen by the head of paid service of Reigate and Banstead Borough Council for East Surrey Council, and the head of paid service of Runnymede Borough Council for West Surrey.

The ministry has said it wants the first elections to carry a five-year term and is scheduling the second ballots for 2031. After this it will revert to a standard four-year cycle. Writing to Surrey councils' chief executive, Ruth Miller, deputy director for local government reform and strategy, said: "This is in line with recent reorganisations and brings benefits of stability, with councillors serving most of their first year on the 'shadow' council. From your representations that means the election cycle will align with the majority of elections to parish councils. Where that is not the case, we can, in further legislation, look to align parish elections with the 2031 election, and we will be guided by your views."

Any Parish council elections are expected to take place as normal in 2027. During the shadow year, the new councils will be expected to prepare and submit a devolution proposal or consent to a government plan, to progress the work for a Strategic Authority.

Chris Caulfield LDRS

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Image: Scout outside a polling station Molesey (image: Chris Caulfield)

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## Surrey elections: Democracy delayed, democracy denied?

Surrey's politicians have clashed over rumours that Conservative council leaders have tried to stop local elections taking place next year.

An article in The Times this week, by Max Kendix, claimed that ministers were "considering accepting private pleas from Tory leaders of seven county councils" to delay local elections currently scheduled for May 2026 until 2027.

The report alleged that council leaders were "lobbying hard" to move the polls back to avoid potential gains by Reform UK and to



maintain stability during plans to reorganise local government.

But senior Conservatives in Surrey have strongly denied making any such request.

The story references that fact that the Conservative-held county councils of Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Surrey, East and West Sussex, and Hampshire postponed elections until 2026 to prepare for the transition to new councils. But the article does not name Surrey as part of the lobby group nor does it name any other county council.

Surrey County Council leader Tim Oliver said in a post on social media: “Any decision on whether to postpone elections is ultimately up to the government, but we are absolutely not calling for a delay to Surrey’s elections in May next year.

“We expect the government to announce their decision on local government reorganisation at the end of October, and elections to be in May 2026 as planned.”

Since the story was published in The Times, Mr Kendix clarified on X (formerly Twitter) that although some county councils may have their local elections cancelled, Surrey is on a different devolution timeline so “would go ahead”.

Max Kendix X

However, Dr Al Pinkerton, Liberal Democrat MP for Surrey Heath, said he was “deeply concerned” by The Times’ report and had written to the Secretary of State to seek clarification.

He wrote in a social media post: “If such lobbying succeeds, Conservative county councillors could remain in office for up to two years longer than their current mandate allows — an unacceptable democratic deficit.”

Dr Pinkerton accused the Conservatives of “seeking to delay the inevitable verdict of the voters”, citing growing anger over “the state of Special Educational Needs provision, adult social care, our schools, and the county’s deteriorating roads.”

The news comes as the Lib Dems won a clean sweep of council seats at six different by-elections across the county last week, prompting claims the Tories are “running scared”.

A spokesperson for Surrey Conservatives accused the Liberal Democrats of “spreading baseless misinformation” in a Facebook post, adding: “We have not sought to delay any elections, nor will we. Surrey will definitely have elections either to the new unitaries or to the county council if we are not being abolished.”

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## LibDems continue to rise in Surrey

The blue wall has crumbled a bit further with the Liberal Democrats having completed a clean sweep in Surrey, winning all six by-elections in a county once seen as the beating heart of Conservative Britain.

The party’s so-called ‘Super Thursday’ victories mark another major step in the slow unravelling of the traditional Tory stronghold across the South East, as Reform failed to make the breakthroughs many had predicted.

Among the winners were Alan Ashbery in Camberley West, Catherine Houston in Guildford South East, and Tony Pearce in Caterham Valley – each elected to Surrey County Council following by-elections. For Caterham Valley, Mr Pearce won 48% of the vote which was enough to flip the seat decisively into Lib Dem hands.

The results mean the Lib Dems have absorbed three more county council seats, taking their total to 19 and cementing their position as the main opposition to the ruling Conservatives. The results signal growing frustration with local Conservative leadership amid complaints about potholes, debt, and children’s services, the traditional flashpoints in county politics.

Surrey Lib Dems group leader, Paul Follows said he was delighted with the results. He said in a press statement:



"These results also underline how Surrey's political landscape continues to change. It is clear the Conservatives are in retreat and since they cancelled the elections last May, they have not won a single by-election, whereas we have now picked up wins in all six.

"We are approaching a period of unprecedented change in the form of Local Government Reorganisation so I look forward to welcoming the new members to our group so that we can all work together in preparing for the two or maybe three new unitary authorities."

While the Lib Dems' surge is striking, the scale of their challenge remains. Conservatives still hold overall control of Surrey County Council, and Reform's vote share, while not translating into seats, hints at turbulence on the right.

The party also celebrated borough and district-level success in Staines, where Laura Barker was elected as councillor, as well as Mark Johnston in Meadvale and St John's in addition to Mr Pearce again in Whyteleafe.

Leader of the Lib Dems Sir Ed Davey, buoyed by the results, said: "What remains of the Blue Wall is crumbling away. People across Surrey and beyond have voted for true community champions who will put them first."

The victories included Camberley, part of the Surrey Heath constituency once held by Michael Gove, and Caterham, in the East Surrey seat of Claire Coutinho, now the Shadow Secretary for Energy Security and Net Zero.

Not only a story of Conservative decline, the Liberal Democrats also gained from the Greens in Spelthorne, suggesting the party's resurgence stretches beyond anti-Tory protest votes. Although the Lib Dems won decisively in many of the seats, Reform UK was second place in four out of six seats.

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## Parliament motion to reinstate Surrey County May elections

Surrey elections could still go ahead if a "fatal motion" (\*see below) to overturn the decision to cancel the May 2025 ballot wins out. This year's local elections were postponed until at least May 2026 after the Government passed legislation to delay the vote in order to allow councils to focus on devolution.

Its argument, backed by Surrey County Council, was that it would free officer time to focus on merging the lower layers of government while being overseen by more experienced politicians. It would also save millions of pounds as any newly created councils would need to hold their own polls soon after. Opponents to the delay argue that cancelling elections robs people of their right to vote and that elected officials only have authority by virtue of being backed by residents – and nobody voted for them to be in power this long.

Leader of the Conservative Party Kemi Badenoch had previously tried to stop the order passing in February, and now the fight has been picked up in the House of Lords with a debate set for March 24 to annul the government's decision to cancel the election. Devolution would result in Surrey and its 11 boroughs and districts merging into either two or three mega councils overseen by a single mayor.

Two fatal motions put by Green Party Baroness Jenny Jones and the Liberal Democrats' Baroness Pinckock will be debated, along with a Conservative Regret Motion. It calls on the order to be annulled as it "denies timely democratic representation to a substantial portion of the electorate; undermines local democratic accountability; disrupts established electoral cycles; lacks sufficient consultation; and erodes the democratic mandate for major restructuring of local government."

Baroness Jones said: "I believe that a majority of peers are against the Government cancelling elections in May." She added: "The government can't guarantee that some areas won't have a second year of cancelled elections as they try to impose mayors that will spend more time talking to ministers than local people. There has been no attempt to gather consensus within two-tier areas or to consult local residents about what they want. The government know that the elections in May would become a referendum



of their plans to sideline local communities, and they might not like the answer that voters give.”

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\*Epsom and Ewell Times adds:

The phrase “**fatal motion**” is a specific parliamentary term used in the UK House of Lords. It refers to a type of motion that, if passed, effectively **annuls** or **blocks** a statutory instrument (a form of secondary legislation made by the government).

In this context, the “fatal motion” being debated on **March 24** aims to **overturn the government’s decision to cancel the May 2025 local elections**. If the motion succeeds, the original order delaying the elections would be nullified, and the elections could go ahead as planned.

This type of motion is distinct from a “**regret motion**,” which allows the Lords to express disapproval of a government decision but does not actually stop it from taking effect. The **fatal motion, on the other hand, has binding consequences** if passed.

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## Elections Delayed as Surrey Faces Uncertain Future of Local Government Shake-Up

Surrey residents will have to wait an extra year to vote in the county elections following the government’s decision to postpone the polls from May 2025 to May 2026. The delay comes as part of a sweeping local government reorganisation that will see the biggest structural shake-up in fifty years. However, concerns are mounting over the rushed timetable, the fate of council debts, and the financial burden that could fall on responsible local authorities.

### Reorganisation at Speed

The government’s drive for local government reform is progressing at an accelerated pace, with councils required to submit interim proposals by 21 March 2025 and finalised plans by 9 May 2025. The reform aims to replace Surrey’s current two-tier system – where Surrey County Council oversees borough and district councils – with unitary authorities that will consolidate power at a higher level.

Under plans being considered, a directly elected mayor could manage strategic services such as policing, fire and rescue, health, and education. However, uncertainty remains over whether the new unitary system will feature a single authority covering all of Surrey’s 1.2 million residents or two to three smaller councils.

### Who Pays the Price?

A key source of controversy is the issue of existing council debts, particularly in boroughs such as Woking, Spelthorne, and Runnymede, which have amassed a combined debt exceeding £3 billion. Woking has already declared effective bankruptcy, with Spelthorne and Runnymede under government scrutiny.

Local leaders across Surrey are voicing their objections to any attempt to spread the financial burden of these debts across councils that have maintained responsible fiscal management.

Councillor Richard Biggs, leader of Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, said: “Our view remains that plans should not support any restructuring of local government boundaries based on ‘redistributing’ the debt of other authorities.” His council, along with others, has worked to maintain financial stability while continuing to provide additional services beyond statutory requirements.

The Residents’ Association and Independents Group at Surrey County Council has strongly criticised the government’s approach,



arguing that it is forcing through change with “zero funding” while suggesting that costs could be covered by selling off council-owned assets. Group leader Councillor Catherine Powell raised concerns that the government expects local authorities to fund reorganisation through “capital receipts,” which could mean selling buildings currently used to deliver essential services.

## Opposition to Election Postponement

The Surrey Leaders Group, a forum representing the county’s borough and district councils, has already voiced opposition to the decision to delay elections. Chair of the group, Councillor **Hannah Dalton**, (RA Epsom and Ewell for Stoneleigh ward), warned that the proposed reorganisation could remove decision-making from local communities and lacks clarity on how existing debts will be handled.

“There is a real risk that new authorities will be set up to fail,” said Cllr Dalton, highlighting the potential for new unitary councils to inherit substantial financial liabilities without sufficient funding or support from the government.

## A Distracted Local Government

Critics argue that the rapid timeline for reorganisation is an unwelcome distraction at a time when councils are struggling with increased demand for statutory services, including social care and housing. Concerns have also been raised about the practicalities of implementing a new financial IT system for the newly formed authorities, given that Surrey County Council’s recent system overhaul has been plagued with problems.

With just weeks to prepare draft proposals and a final deadline in early May, councils across Surrey are left scrambling to determine the best way forward. The government’s insistence on a rapid restructuring without clear funding commitments has left many questioning whether the changes will deliver better services—or simply create further financial and administrative chaos.

For now, Surrey residents must wait for further clarity on how their local government will be reshaped, and more crucially, who will bear the cost of these sweeping changes.

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## Political furies over Surrey election postponement

Rival political parties are furious over the cancellation of Surrey’s 2025 county council elections, with groups claiming the ruling Conservatives are “running scared”.

The government announced on Wednesday (February 5) that it has accepted Surrey’s request to postpone the county council elections for May 2025 to the following year. The county is now set to be part of the government’s ‘first wave’ of simplifying and streamlining local authorities.

Specifics of how Surrey will be governed are still yet to be carved out but it could involve either a single mega authority with an elected mayor, or two to three smaller regions.

The news comes much to the despair of some political parties. Liberal Democrats and the Green Party saw a surging level of support in Surrey district and borough council elections last year and they were hoping to repeat the same success at a county-level.

Surrey MPs have reacted to the cancellation, with newly-elected Liberal Democrats claiming the “Conservative-led Surrey Council has denied local residents their voice”.

A joint statement from the Lib Dem MPs in Surrey and the group leader read: “It is clear that the Conservatives are running



scared and have succeeded in stopping these elections from happening in May, in a desperate attempt to cover up their own abysmal record.

"Meanwhile, the Labour Government has stood by and done nothing, knowing they can't win in Surrey.

"Voters are rightly fed up with this Conservative council and years of financial mismanagement. From endless potholes, to cutting local frontline services, to letting down thousands of children with special educational needs and much more, its record speaks for itself."

Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council, welcomed the decision to postpone the elections to allow for "detailed work for reorganisation" to begin while supporting residents. The Conservative member asserted that devolution is in the "best interest" of residents and businesses.

Meanwhile, the Green Party reacted with anger to the news. Cllr Jonathan Essex (Redhill East) said: "Our fragile democracy can't afford to ignore the people's right to vote." He said: "The local Conservatives have forfeited their right to represent the county as we face an uncertain future for local decision-making."

The Greens said it would have stood more candidates than ever before at the Surrey County Council elections as the party has been growing in popularity. Cllr Essex said: "People should have a real choice between the failed Tory and Labour parties [...] The real aim of so-called 'devolution' is quite the opposite: to move decision-making upwards to more unaccountable bodies."

But Surrey's two Labour county councillors said the delay was "good news for the people of Surrey". The pair said the change will hand power from Westminster to local people with new powers and a better deal.

"Surrey County Council was formed in 1889 so the world is very different now," Cllr Robert Evans (Spelthorne). The population of Surrey has more than doubled since Victorian times and much of what was Surrey then is now in London. The boroughs and districts were formed more than fifty years ago and don't serve the same purpose as they might have done then.'

Cllr Robert King (Runnymede) added: "In Surrey we have a two tier system which means service delivery can be confusing. Add to that we have 12 headquarters, 12 chief executives, dozens of deputies and more than a thousand councillors. A top-heavy system of local government does not serve our communities as well as it should."

Out of 16 local authorities which wrote to the government asking to postpone the May 2025 elections, only nine of the requests were accepted by Angela Raynor, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. Other councils that sought a delay included Warwickshire, Devon, Leicestershire, Gloucestershire, Kent and Worcestershire, and Oxfordshire.

"Any party calling for these elections to go ahead must explain how this waste would be justifiable," Ms Raynor said in her announcement to the House of Commons. She added: "We're not in the business of holding elections to bodies that won't exist and where we don't know what will replace them. This would be an expensive and irresponsible waste of taxpayer's money."

Describing the need for creating a sustainable unitary local government for Surrey as "urgent", the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government said postponing the elections will help "speed up" reorganising local government and its benefits.

Tim Oliver Surrey County Council leader – Surrey Live

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## Surrey County Council election delay stirring up a





# storm

## Surrey County Council Elections Postponed Until 2026 Amid Local Government Reforms

In a significant move reflecting the evolving landscape of local governance in England, the British government has decided to postpone the Surrey County Council elections, originally scheduled for May 2025, until May 2026. This decision aligns with the government's broader devolution agenda, which seeks to streamline local government structures by transitioning from a two-tier system to single-tier unitary authorities.

The government's devolution white paper, *Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth*, published in December 2024, outlines an ambitious plan to decentralize power from Westminster to local regions. A key component of this strategy is the reorganization of existing two-tier local government areas into unitary authorities, each serving populations of at least 500,000 residents. The white paper states:

"Local government reorganisation: We will work with individual areas, inviting proposals from all remaining two-tier areas and those unitary councils where there is evidence of failure or their size or boundaries may be hindering their ability to deliver sustainable and high-quality services to their residents."

This restructuring aims to enhance efficiency, improve service delivery, and provide clearer accountability by consolidating responsibilities previously divided between county and district councils. The government asserts that such a model will lead to: "Better outcomes for residents, save significant money which can be reinvested in public services, and improve accountability with fewer politicians who are more able to focus on delivering for residents."

**Surrey's Inclusion in the Devolution Priority Programme:** Surrey has been selected to participate in the first wave of the government's Devolution Priority Programme. This inclusion necessitates a comprehensive review and potential reorganization of the county's local government structure.

**Tim Oliver**, (Conservative) Leader of Surrey County Council, expressed his support for the initiative, stating: "Now we've received confirmation that Surrey is in the first wave of local government reorganisation and devolution priority programme, we will develop a business case for reorganisation and submit a draft to government in March."

To facilitate this process, the government has decided to postpone the local elections scheduled for May 2025. This postponement allows the council to focus its resources on developing and implementing the reorganization plan without the immediate pressures of an electoral cycle. Oliver emphasized the practical benefits of this delay: "The resource and time that would have been spent on elections for a soon-to-be-abolished council can now be directed to working on the best possible outcome of reorganisation for Surrey."

The decision to delay the elections has elicited mixed reactions across the political spectrum. **Helen Maguire**, Liberal Democrat MP for Epsom & Ewell, criticized the move: "The decision to allow this Conservative-led council to postpone the election and silence the voice of our community is scandalous." She further contended that the postponement serves political interests. Maguire also highlighted concerns about the council's performance, citing issues such as "endless potholes," cuts to local frontline services, and shortcomings in supporting children with special educational needs. She concluded: "Democracy delayed is democracy denied, and the people of Epsom, Ewell, Ashted and Leatherhead must be allowed to decide who they think is best to lead Surrey County Council through this time of significant change."

The Labour Group of councillors in Epsom and Ewell, however, welcomed the postponement of the elections. Cllr **Kate Chinn** (Court Ward) stated: "Those who are calling for the elections to go ahead need to explain why we should vote again for an authority with just a year to go. It would be a costly and unnecessary exercise."

Surrey County Labour Party also expressed support for the devolution plans. Cllr Robert Evans commented: "This is good news for the people of Surrey as it will open the doors for more local decision-making as the government has agreed to devolve additional powers to new unitary authorities and regional mayors." Evans emphasized the need for modernisation: "Surrey County Council was formed in 1889 so the world is very different now. The population of Surrey has more than doubled since Victorian times and much of what was Surrey then is now in London. The boroughs and districts were formed more than fifty years ago and don't serve the same purpose as they might have done then."

Cllr Robert King added: "In Surrey, we have a two-tier system which means service delivery can be confusing. Add to that we have 12 headquarters, 12 chief executives, dozens of deputies and more than a thousand councillors. A top-heavy system of local government does not serve our communities as well as it should."

**Jonathan Carr-West**, Chief Executive of the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU), acknowledged the mixed reception of



the announcement within the sector: "Councils were given 16 working days to put their applications together... Countless hours were spent by council staff and elected members who worked incredibly hard over the Christmas period to meet this deadline." Carr-West emphasized the need for transparency in the decision-making process: "It is essential that we understand more about the decision making process around this as there will undoubtedly be some places that feel they have been marched up the hill and then marched down again having spent considerable amounts of time and political capital getting to this point."

**Financial Implications and Debt Concerns:** A significant aspect of the reorganization involves addressing the financial disparities among Surrey's councils. Several boroughs, such as Woking and Spelthorne, are grappling with substantial debts due to ambitious investment strategies.

Woking Borough Council declared effective bankruptcy in 2023, burdened by debts exceeding £2 billion from failed large-scale projects. Spelthorne Borough Council faces over £1 billion in debt from investments in commercial properties. In contrast, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has maintained prudent financial practices, consistently balancing its budgets and avoiding unsustainable debt levels. This disparity raises concerns about the equitable distribution of debt in the proposed unitary authority. Residents of fiscally responsible boroughs like Epsom and Ewell question the fairness of assuming responsibility for the substantial debts incurred by other councils.

Councillor **Tim Oliver** has advocated for central government intervention to address these financial challenges: "The Labour Government has set up their agenda in the white paper and that is to create Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) across England... 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."

**Future Steps and Considerations:**

The postponement of the Surrey County Council elections provides a window for detailed planning and consultation regarding the proposed reorganization. The council is expected to submit a draft business case for reorganization to the government in March, with a full proposal to follow in May. The government will then evaluate these proposals, conduct consultations with affected bodies, and make decisions on the future structure of local government in Surrey.

Throughout this process, maintaining transparency and engaging with residents will be crucial. Tim Oliver sought to give assurances: "I can be absolutely clear that, throughout this process, our vital work supporting residents will continue—services will be delivered and we will still be here for those who need us most—until whatever new council is fully established to take on that delivery."

The debate over the postponement underscores broader concerns about governance, fiscal responsibility, and democratic accountability. As the reorganization progresses, the challenge will be to ensure that reforms deliver tangible benefits for Surrey's residents while preserving democratic integrity and local representation.

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## Surrey County elections must go ahead clamour

The May 2025 Surrey county elections must not be postponed, the 11 boroughs and district councils have said. That call has been amplified with the Surrey Liberal Democrat MPs writing to Government lending their support to the call - while a petition arguing the same has been signed by more than 3,000 people. The decision to call off this year's poll will be down to Government ministers who said they would consider delaying local elections in areas going through the devolution process. Surrey has put itself at the front of that queue - which would get rid of existing councils and replace them with a new structure. What that would look like is anyone's guess at the moment, but could range from a single mega council, or potentially two or three slightly smaller bodies. Any new system would have an overarching strategic mayor.

The county leadership argues that postponing the elections would give officers time to get on with the once in a lifetime reorganisation - which needs to have interim proposals submitted by March ahead of a more ironclad May deadline. They also





question the value of holding elections, which would cost an estimated £2.48m, for a council that was effectively doomed to die within two years – the new devolved authority is expected to be up and running in 2027 with shadow elections held the year before.

The leaders of the 11 Surrey District and Borough Councils met with their Surrey County Council counterpart on January 7 to discuss the English Devolution White Paper and what this would mean for the residents of Surrey. There was acknowledgement that the central Government was determined to introduce sweeping changes through devolution with district and county councils merged into new unitary authorities. A statement released after the meeting read: “All the Leaders of the Surrey District and Borough Councils expressed their concerns around the pace of change being imposed by central government and that such widespread and significant change needs wider consultation with the residents, stakeholders, and businesses across the county. In addition there was concern that the change, as proposed, will decrease local representation for residents of Surrey. While the Leaders concluded that there needs to be a dialogue with Surrey County Council on the proposed changes, there was wide agreement that the county council’s plan to write to the Secretary of State, Jim McMahon MP on Friday January 10, requesting to postpone the county elections scheduled to take place on May 1 2025 was not supported by the District and Borough Leaders and would be opposed if submitted.”

Surrey Heath Borough Council leader Shaun Macdonald added that allowing the elections to go ahead would ensure that all those involved “in shaping the future of our communities” had the democratic mandate to represent residents. The six Liberal Democrat MPs for Surrey also co-signed a letter to Government calling on it to not pass legislation postponing this year’s elections, describing it as an affront to democracy. They also expressed concerns over the speed of devolution and local government reorganisation. They said: “A proposal of this scale requires careful consideration and broad support. Yet, just three weeks after the government’s announcement, no credible plan exists. There has been insufficient engagement with district and borough councils or MPs to justify this unprecedented step.”

Elections, they said, must go ahead to give those voted in the mandate for how to deliver those changes. They added: “This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape local government in Surrey, and it must not be derailed by unnecessary delays or a lack of transparency.”

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## Surrey’s Conservative leader wants to postpone May’s poll reckoning

The leader of Surrey County Council is set to write to the Government calling for the 2025 elections to be postponed in order to allow authorities to focus on merging under devolution plans. In December last year the Government announced its vision to merge councils in Surrey and get rid of its 11 boroughs and districts. There would also be a directly elected mayor.

Councillor Tim Oliver plans to formally ask the government to postpone county elections until May 2026 to give the councils time to “put together proposals for local government reform necessary to unlock further devolution for Surrey.”

Not everyone has welcomed the delay with Surrey Heath Borough Council set to discuss a motion rejecting the county council leader’s proposals and allow the May 2025 poll to go ahead “in the interest of democracy and hearing the resident’s voice.”

Devolution plans are part of sweeping changes to how services are run as Downing Street looks to reshape local government.

Surrey currently operates under a two tier system with the county council overseeing things such as education, transport and fire with the boroughs and districts focused local planning matters, refuse collection and housing.

Devolution would do away with this system and instead create single unitary authorities, arguing it is more cost-effective.

In a draft letter set to be approved at an extraordinary meeting next week, Cllr Oliver writes that he shares the ambitions for



boosting the country's economic prospects and reforms to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of public services.

He said it was clear that reforming local government would unlock the full benefits of further devolution for the county.

The letter reads: "The current two-tier structure of local government in Surrey, comprising 12 sovereign local authorities, is fragmented and in a number of areas inefficient which inevitably diverts resources away from delivering the services that residents rightly expect.

"I believe reorganisation would provide more streamlined and cost-effective services for Surrey, enabling us to achieve further efficiencies and deliver better outcomes for our residents and communities.

"Local government reorganisation is a crucial stepping stone to further devolution for Surrey, to enable our communities to take more control of their own destinies."

Cllr Oliver said the county already delivered more than £50 billion in gross value added every year, but further and deeper devolution could lead to even better returns.

It adds: "I am therefore writing to ask you to exercise your ministerial powers to lay the necessary legislation to postpone the county council elections in Surrey, which are due to take place in May 2025.

This will give us the time to work with the leaders of Surrey's district and borough councils to put together proposals for local government reform that are necessary to unlock further devolution for Surrey."

New unitary elections could then take place in 2026, and a mayoral election in 2027.

He argues that the delay would also allow time to determine how to deal with the "significant financial risk of the level of debt currently held across the Surrey local government footprint."

Woking Borough Council is currently bankrupt with deficit of more than £1billion and debts of about £2billion, while Surrey County Council and Spelthorne Borough Council both have debts of more than £1billion.

Any proposals, Cllr Oliver adds, will need to adequately consider how to ensure the sustainable operation of any authority in the absence of exceptional financial support from the Government or a level of write-off.

## Timetable for Devolution

10 January 2025	Letter submitted to Minister of State requesting election postponement
Before March 2025	Minister's response to letter received
March 2025	Interim Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) proposal submitted to government
May 2025	Full LGR proposal submitted to government
May - June 2025	Government evaluates proposal(s) received for LGR and makes a decision on whether to proceed on single proposal, or to consult further on one or more proposals
July 2025	Government consultation with affected bodies on LGR proposal(s)
Autumn 2025	Government decision on LGR anticipated, which begins statutory process to establish new council(s)
January 2026	Parliamentary process begins to lay Statutory Instruments
May 2026	Elections to shadow unitary authority/ies
Spring 2027	New unitary/ies 'go live'
Spring 2027 or 2028	Mayoral elections and mayoral strategic authority 'go live', with the preparations for the establishment of the Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) taking place throughout 2026/27, or Surrey joins MSA with neighbours

Related reports:

Tiers to be shed if Epsom and Ewell loses its Borough Council?

Image: Tim Oliver - Leader of Surrey County Council, Woodhatch Place, Cockshot Hill, Reigate. GL



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## A poll on polling - Epsom and Ewell consults

Epsom & Ewell Borough Council will launch a six-week consultation into proposed changes to the polling district and polling places within the borough from 21 November 2024 to 2 January 2025.

In 2023, the Local Government Boundary Commission for England carried out a review of Surrey County Council's electoral boundaries. The resulting Surrey (Electoral Changes) Order 2024 is anticipated to be passed by parliament and will make changes to the County Council's electoral division boundaries.

This consultation will propose changes to Court and Horton wards in order to bring the areas in line with their new County Council electoral division and ensure ballots are placed in the correct ballot box.

There are no proposed changes for any other wards, as issues arising from the Police and Crime Commissioner elections in May were resolved for the Parliamentary elections in July.

Jackie King, Chief Executive of Epsom & Ewell Borough Council said,

"I would like to encourage all residents in the borough to have their say on the proposals in this consultation. It is important to review our polling district and places now to ensure the council is fully prepared for next year's County Council election and the changes to the electoral divisions."

The consultation can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.epsom-ewell.gov.uk/council/elections-and-voting/electoral-boundaries>