

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

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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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