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Epsom and Ewell to have three tiers of government when promised one?

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Following Surrey County Council's release reported here Plans for East Surrey Council continue to progress that the new East and West Unitary Councils will work toward adoption of an overarching Foundation Strategic Authority for all of Surrey and a local Charter Trustees body for Epsom and Ewell, Epsom and Ewell Times provides our readers with a summary guide to what Foundation Strategic Authorities are:

Surrey's proposed new strategic authority: what would it do?

Surrey's two new shadow unitary authorities have backed the creation of a county-wide Foundation Strategic Authority, adding another layer to the local government structures due to take effect in April 2027.

The proposed body would bring East Surrey Council and West Surrey Council together to make decisions on matters considered too large or interconnected to be handled effectively by either authority alone.

An analysis published by the Local Government Information Unit describes Foundation Strategic Authorities, or FSAs, as the entry level in the Government's new system of devolved regional government.

Unlike a Mayoral Strategic Authority, an FSA would not have a directly elected mayor. It would instead be governed collectively by representatives of its constituent councils.

For Surrey, this would mean the two new unitary councils retaining responsibility for everyday services such as social care, waste collection, local planning, housing and environmental health, while working through the FSA on broader county-wide priorities.

What powers would it have?

According to the LGIU, Foundation Strategic Authorities are intended to provide a statutory framework for strategic functions including:

- transport planning;
- adult education and skills;
- economic development;
- infrastructure and investment;
- housing strategy; and
- the preparation of a Spatial Development Strategy.

The last of these could be particularly significant. A county-wide spatial strategy would establish the broad direction for development, housing and infrastructure across Surrey, above the more detailed local plans prepared by East and West Surrey councils.

An FSA could also act as Surrey's Local Transport Authority, allowing decisions about buses, roads and other transport investment to be planned across the whole county rather than divided between the two new councils.

The Government argues that operating at this larger scale will make it easier for areas to negotiate with Whitehall, attract investment and coordinate services that cross council boundaries.

Not as powerful as a mayoral authority

The LGIU stresses, however, that an FSA occupies the lowest of the Government's three strategic-authority tiers.

Above it sits a Mayoral Strategic Authority, led by a directly elected mayor, and then an Established Mayoral Strategic Authority. Authorities in the higher tiers can gain greater powers, more influence over government departments and access to broader, longer-term funding arrangements.

A Foundation Strategic Authority would therefore give Surrey a formal seat at the devolution table, but it would not

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initially receive all the powers or financial freedoms available to areas such as Greater Manchester.

This raises the question of whether an FSA is intended to be a lasting form of government in its own right or principally a "waiting room" on the way to an elected Surrey mayor.

The Government has said that areas may choose a non-mayoral arrangement, but its most substantial devolution offers have generally been attached to mayoral authorities.

A third level of decision-making

From April 2027, Epsom and Ewell Borough Council and Surrey County Council are due to disappear, with their responsibilities passing to East Surrey Council.

The FSA would sit above both East and West Surrey councils for specified strategic functions. Residents would therefore be governed locally by a unitary council and, on county-wide matters, by the strategic authority.

This would not reproduce the present county-and-borough division because the FSA would have a narrower and more strategic role. Nevertheless, its creation means the replacement of Surrey's current two-tier system will not leave the county with a single level of local decision-making.

Questions remain about how the FSA would be constituted, how its decisions would be scrutinised, how costs and votes would be divided between East and West Surrey and how clearly residents would be able to identify which authority was responsible for a particular policy.

Why Surrey wants one

Surrey County Council has argued that establishing an FSA will unlock further devolution and allow more decisions and funding to be transferred from central government.

The two shadow councils would remain separate unitary authorities, but the strategic body would preserve a mechanism for county-wide coordination after Surrey County Council is abolished.

Its practical importance will depend on the powers and funding ultimately transferred by ministers. Without substantial resources, the FSA could amount mainly to another coordinating committee. With meaningful control over transport, skills, strategic planning and investment, it could become one of the most influential public bodies affecting Epsom and Ewell.

The central issue identified by the LGUI analysis is therefore not simply whether an FSA is created, but whether it is given sufficient authority, money and public accountability to make a noticeable difference.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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