

Surrey Council leader urges an elected Mayoral office for the County

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The outgoing leader of Surrey County Council has warned Surrey risks being “left behind” if the county does not adopt an elected mayor in the near future.

Councillor Tim Oliver (Conservative: Weybridge) urged the incoming East and West Surrey councils to lean into Prime Minister Andy Burnham’s devolution agenda that could see the creation of an overarching mayor for the county.

The two new unitary councils will assume all local government responsibilities from April 2027, and are aiming to pool their resources on key issues through a framework called a foundation strategic authority (FSA).

An FSA can also serve as a stepping stone towards the creation of a mayoral combined authority – such as those seen in Greater Manchester, the West Midlands and the Tees Valley.

Speaking at a Surrey County Council meeting, Councillor Oliver said: “[The FSA] will enable the two councils to work together over a strategic footprint, capitalising on the government’s devolution agenda and take Surrey’s local economy from strength to strength.”

He added: “Surrey needs to grab this opportunity with both hands, and I hope the leadership of East and West Surrey go full throttle in working with government to deliver it – including backing a mayor for Surrey in 2028.”

Andy Burnham, who served as Greater Manchester mayor for nearly a decade before becoming Prime Minister, has vowed to make devolution of power to England’s regions a defining mission of his government.

Shortly after entering Downing Street, Mr Burnham pledged to give regional mayors a share of income tax receipts, as well as granting strategic authorities more control over business rates revenue.

Councillor Oliver said: “No one can be oblivious to the Prime Minister’s mission to create mayors across the country with wide ranging strategic powers and access to funding that simply won’t be available to non-mayoral areas.”

He further warned: “Without a mayor, there is a very real risk that Surrey will be left behind.”

It comes as East and West Surrey shadow authorities prepare the groundwork for the handover of local government power from the county council next spring.

These shadow councils were elected in May, and are tasked with setting up the new authorities in time for vesting day – including setting the new councils’ budgets for the coming year.

But Councillor Oliver cautioned that the financial picture for the new councils remains tricky amid changes to government funding and increased demand for services.

He said: “There will be huge challenges ahead as a result of the government’s Fair Funding Review, which will cost Surrey dearly as money is diverted to other areas of the country instead.”

The government’s Fair Funding Review is designed to recalibrate the money each council receives based on factors including population and deprivation, but Surrey is estimated to lose out as a result.

Last year, Councillor Oliver said Surrey could lose as much as £50m a year over the next three years through the reforms.

A ministerial foreword to the Fair Funding Review says: “This government is prepared to take the tough choices to improve services for the working people of Britain – with a balanced approach that protects all local authorities but ensures funding is truly based on need.”

The next round of council budgets will be set by the West and East Surrey shadow authorities ahead of the handover in April.

But speaking at today’s meeting, Councillor Oliver warned: “We know a council tax increase will be necessary, but it won’t be enough to make up for the shortfall in funding imposed by this government.

“Tough decisions and innovative transformation will be needed.”

However, he praised the legacy that Surrey County Council is leaving for the new authorities, saying: “We can be proud that we are handing over an organisation that has been managed well – with robust reserves and perfectly manageable levels of debt.”

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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