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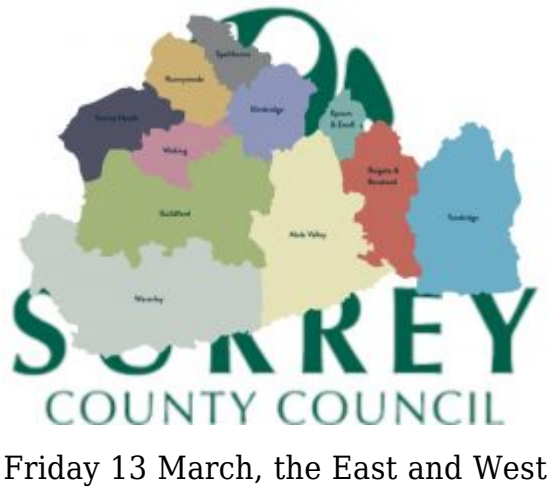
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Surrey leaders promise smooth transition to unitaries

19 March 2026



On Friday 13 March, the East and West Surrey Joint Committees met to continue preparations for the transition to new unitary councils ahead of “vesting day” on 1 April 2027.

The committees, made up of councillors from existing Surrey authorities, are meeting monthly to lay the groundwork for the creation of East Surrey Council and West Surrey Council. This interim phase will continue until Shadow Authorities are formally established following elections in May 2026. The focus is on ensuring stability and effective planning during a period of significant local government change.

Financial pressures and planning challenges highlighted

Members reviewed progress from the Implementation Team (Programme Board), which is overseeing the transition. A draft illustrative financial baseline was presented, offering an early indication of the financial position the new councils are likely to inherit.

The report highlighted that both East and West Surrey are expected to face ongoing financial pressures, including rising demand for services and constrained resources—challenges that would exist irrespective of reorganisation.

Particular concern was noted in parts of West Surrey, where historic debt issues—especially those linked to Woking—will require careful management. The importance of robust governance, financial oversight and continued engagement with government on potential debt support was emphasised.

A recent ministerial letter from Alison McGovern MP confirmed that the government would “continue to explore what further debt support is required at a later point”.

Scrutiny and governance arrangements

Looking ahead to the Shadow Authority phase, councillors discussed how implementation plans will be reviewed. Shadow Overview and Scrutiny Committees will be established to provide independent challenge to decision-making, helping ensure plans are realistic, legally sound and properly risk-assessed.

A draft timetable for meetings during the Shadow period was also considered, with initial meetings expected to begin from 20 May 2026.

Devolution discussions continue

Surrey councils are continuing discussions with government on a potential countywide Strategic Authority, which could bring greater local control over areas such as economic growth.

Councils will consider whether to submit an expression of interest for a “Foundational Strategic Authority” — a non-mayoral model that could act as a stepping stone towards a future mayoral arrangement.

Leaders emphasise stability and strong foundations

Terence Herbert, Chief Executive of Surrey County Council and Senior Responsible Officer for the programme, said the work was about “planning ahead, being honest about the challenges, and making sure the new councils start on a strong footing.”

Cllr Bridget Kendrick, Chair of the East Surrey Joint Committee and Leader of Mole Valley District Council, said the focus was on “clear programme governance” and “strengthening scrutiny and oversight” to ensure a smooth transition.

Cllr Ann-Marie Barker, Chair of the West Surrey Joint Committee and Leader of Woking Borough Council, added that the priority was to establish “two stable and resilient councils… providing confidence, continuity and stability through the transition.”

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What happens next

The next meetings of the Joint Committees are due to take place in April, with dates and venues to be confirmed. Meetings will continue to be webcast.

Background: what the changes mean

From April 2027, Surrey's current two-tier system of county, district and borough councils will be replaced by two unitary authorities—East Surrey Council and West Surrey Council—each responsible for delivering all local services.

Elections for the new councils will take place on 7 May 2026, after which elected members will act as Shadow Authorities to oversee the transition.

Until then, residents will continue to access services through existing councils in the usual way.

Sam Jones – Reporter



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