EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
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19th November 2026

ISSN 2753-2771

EPSOM & EWELL TIMES

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Surrey resident's views on County split ignored?

1 November 2025



The Government has been accused of ignoring Surrey residents' views on how to dissolve and merge the county's councils after it emerged there was a clear preference for three unitaries rather than the two mega authorities that have been imposed.

A consultation ran from June 17 to August 5 to help the Government understand what residents, businesses, and other stakeholders thought about the changes in Surrey. The results, we were told, would be used to "inform the final decision on which option is best for Surrey, with a decision expected in October."

On Tuesday, October 28, it was announced that Surrey County Council and its 11 boroughs and districts would be abolished and replaced with West Surrey Council and East Surrey Council. The decision flies in the face of the 51 per cent of the 5,617 respondents who backed three unitary proposals versus the 19 per cent that favoured East/West.

This, despite a costly PR drive from Surrey County Council that sent leaflets to every household pushing for the two unitaries. The results were published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government as part of its decision – and found that, in addition to the strong resident support for three councils, 56 per cent were also strongly opposed to what has been delivered.

The Ministry said: "Support for the three unitary proposal was based on the view that a three unitary council model resulted in authorities that were a good size and that the groupings of current authority areas made sense. Residents generally believed that the proposal would achieve good economies and efficiencies and be good for local identity, accountability, community engagement and service improvement.

"Negative responses relating to the three unitary proposal highlighted concern that it would not generate significant efficiencies, as well as concerns about how debt would be addressed. Those who supported the

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ISSN 2753-2771

two unitary proposal typically did so on the basis of the greater efficiencies presented in the proposal, with the belief that it would create authorities of a good size.

“It added: “There was no single factor as to why residents did not support the two unitary proposal, though the most common theme in responses was that the two unitaries were too large and secondly, that the proposals would be bad for local identity.”

Councillor Paul Follows, leader of the Liberal Democrats on Surrey County Council, was one of the drivers behind the three unitary model in his role as leader of Waverley Borough Council. He said: “They cancelled elections, asked for views, and then did the opposite.”

The Ministry said its decision process carefully considered responses to the consultation as well as all other relevant information. It said the proposals were assessed against set criteria and that, of the choices, the two-council proposal better met that – particularly as it is seen as more likely to be financially sustainable.

A spokesperson said: “Putting Surrey’s local authorities on a more sustainable footing is vital to safeguarding the services its residents rely on, as well as investing in their futures. The government consultation for both proposals, held between July 17 and August 5, treated the proposals equally.”

On the cancelled elections, the ministry said they were postponed for a year to provide additional capacity for speeding up reorganisation – given the urgency of creating sustainable unitary local government for Surrey.

Chris Caulfield LDRS

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