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Tiers not shed for local government in Surrey after all....?

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Surrey's shadow authority leaders have insisted that devolution in the county must be "done right" after the government proposed beefed up new planning powers for mayors.

Proposals due to be published in the coming week would see mayors across England granted the authority to override councils on certain planning applications – giving them the same powers already held by the Mayor of London.

These "call in" powers would only apply to developments of more than 150 homes, more than 15,000 square metres of commercial space, or of buildings 30 metres or taller, the BBC has reported.

It comes amid widespread change to local government in Surrey, with two new unitary councils in East and West Surrey set to take over from the county council and 11 district councils next year.

But many figures in local government are calling for additional changes that would see the county get an overarching elected mayor covering the whole of Surrey.

East Surrey Shadow Authority leader Councillor Steve Wotton told the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) he supports the creation of a mayor and welcomes the prospect of additional powers handed over from Westminster.

He said: "We have a national housing crisis, public transport leaves behind rural communities and is wholly centred around London, and there is great potential in the county's own local economies.

"More power out of Westminster and closer to Surrey, with a mayor, can help tackle these issues if done right."

Prime Minister Andy Burnham, who assumed office last month, has made regionalism one of his core missions in government.

Mr Burnham previously unveiled proposals to give regional mayors a share of income tax revenue as part of a broader devolution drive.

The upcoming planning changes could also see mayors given the power to grant "up front" development permission, although a government spokesperson said councils will still decide most planning applications.

Under current proposals, Surrey could see a foundation strategic authority (FSA) set up from April 2027, which would allow the two new unitary councils to pool resources on certain service areas.

An FSA serves as a stepping stone towards the creation of a mayoral combined authority, which would involve the creation of a directly elected mayor of Surrey.

Councillor Wotton added: "It will be important that a future mayor works very closely with the two new councils in Surrey.

"We look forward to seeing further detail from government, so that we can help shape what is right for Surrey's residents and businesses."

West Surrey Shadow Authority leader Councillor Paul Follows told the LDRS he is "very keen" to see more powers devolved to the county, but that "those powers need to come with the funding to make them meaningful".

He added: "Local government at every level cannot absorb more un-funded mandates.

"Mayors make sense in some parts of the UK but not all, and I hope that the government will be open to working with local government to develop the most appropriate plans for each area rather than a one-size-fits-all option."

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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