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Tiers to be shed if Epsom and Ewell loses its Borough Council?

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Surrey could be split in two as part of sweeping changes to how services are run. Downing Street is looking to reshape local government and has set out a white paper outlining its vision. It wants to do away with two-tier systems of boroughs and counties and instead create single unitary councils. It argues this would not only be more cost-effective but also shift power away from Westminster. If devolution plans for the county go through, Surrey and its 11 boroughs and districts would be no more. The big question is: what replaces it? The most likely answer at the moment appears to be two councils with a directly elected mayor overseeing county-wide issues – these could include policing, fire and rescue, and transport.

The English Devolution White Paper says that new unitary councils *"must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks. For most areas, this will mean creating councils with a population of 500,000 or more, but there may be exceptions to ensure new structures make sense for an area, including for devolution, and decisions will be on a case-by-case basis."* Surrey has a population of 1.2 million, and a single "mega-council" stretching from Farnham to Oxted, an area larger than Greater London, would simply be too vast, some have argued. This leaves the most likely option of merging the current boroughs of Tandridge, Mole Valley, Reigate & Banstead, and Epsom & Ewell into East Surrey Council, with Woking, Guildford, Spelthorne, Runnymede, Surrey Heath, Waverley, and Elmbridge forming West Surrey Council.

The white paper also argues: *"Unitary councils can lead to better outcomes for residents, save significant money which can be reinvested in public services, and improve accountability with fewer politicians who are more able to focus on delivering for residents."* However, opponents argue devolution could push residents further from the decision-making process and only delay funding reforms for local government.

Will Forster, newly elected MP for Woking, expressed his concerns: *"I don't think that having a single mega council is a good idea. Camberley to Oxted is far too large, there are huge differences east to west. It's too large and remote. A single council would be too vast. That's not devolution, that's not empowering people."* Even the idea of a West Surrey Council would create a single area stretching from Haslemere to Staines. He added: *"It also ignores the elephant in the room, social care – this seems to be the Government's way of ignoring that. They want authorities of 500,000 or more. You look at a map, you do the sums. That's clearly an east and west split. They've never divided up a borough or district and you can't do north or south."*

Other questions would need to be answered as well, such as how the directly elected mayors are held to account. At the county level, the council holds regular meetings to vote on decisions, with scrutiny committees playing a further role. How this would be replicated for a single mayor is yet to be made clear. Councils have been invited to submit proposals to the government in January.

Tim Oliver, leader of Surrey County Council, welcomed the devolution paper and its *"bold ambition to empower local communities and councils."* He said: *"The government has set out an agenda for change, including potential reorganisation of local government, particularly in two-tier county areas like Surrey. I believe there is general consensus that the current structure – here and elsewhere in the country – is not the most effective. Therefore, we welcome a real examination and review of how local government is organised to make it more efficient and more effective for residents. We intend to work alongside government, and other partners locally, and ensure any change ultimately benefits the people of Surrey."*

Announcing the paper's publication, Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner stated: *"Our manifesto pledged to give everyone access to devolved power. So I will legislate for a new power of ministerial directive – which will allow central government to knock heads together and create strategic authorities when local leaders cannot agree. If we are going to build an economy that works for everyone, we need nothing less than a completely new way of governing – a generational project of determined devolution. Because the Westminster system is part of the problem. Whitehall is full of layers of governance and bureaucracy, controlled and micromanaged from the centre. To truly get growth in every corner of the country and put more money into people's pockets, we must rewire England and end the hoarding in Whitehall by devolving power and money from central government to those with skin in the game."*

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