

Two unitary proposal confirmed

10 May 2025



Plans for Surrey's various district and borough councils to be devolved have been finalised. Surrey county councillors voted on how all 648 square miles of Surrey should be carved into two during a cabinet meeting on Wednesday, May 7.

Surrey County Council's plans, supported by Elmbridge Borough Council and Mole Valley District Council, propose two new councils are created, splitting Surrey into East and West. But devolutions plans supported by the majority of the borough and district councils support splitting Surrey into three.

The Labour government outlined colossal structural changes to councils in December, aiming to give local authorities more power. Surrey's 12 unitary authorities- district and borough councils- were told to submit their proposals for one a single-tier council would like across Surrey.

At rapid speed, the county council has drawn up plans for Surrey to be split in two: making up West Surrey would be Woking, Spelthorne, Runnymede, Surrey Heath, Guildford and Waverley; on the East would be Elmbridge, Epsom and Ewell, Reigate and Banstead, Mole Valley and Tandridge.

Leader of the county council, Tim Oliver said: "The decision was always going to be based on the evidence, not on political lines or emotional lines.

"This is about what is in the best interest for residents... how can we establish unitaries that are going to be financially secure going forward."

The leader emphasised the "evidence" only supports a two unitary authority is fair, even and best value for residents.

Cllr Catherine Powell, leader of the Residents' Association and Independents Group, said having three councils is the "most balanced option" and claimed the East and West division is "financially unsustainable".

"It will include all three areas with the highest need for children's services and the three areas with the lowest council tax band base, which also happen to be the same three areas with the highest levels of debt," she said.

She claimed that SCC's own analysis showed it would be better for Spelthorne to join the East Surrey side, both in terms of financial and service distribution.

Cllr Powell urged the potentially crippling debt from the councils needs to be solved before any final decision is made. Conversations continue between the government and Woking on how to manage their debt, while Runnymede's financial situation is still struggling and Spelthorne now has government commissioners in to manage the debt.

The three-council plan would put Epsom & Ewell, Mole Valley, Reigate & Banstead and Tandridge into East Surrey. Elmbridge, Runnymede and Spelthorne would become North Surrey, and Guildford, Surrey Heath, Waverley and Woking in West Surrey.

But Cllr Oliver slammed the arguments as "weaponising" the debt across Surrey. He labelled the claim as "inconsistent", as those in favour of three unitaries would lump struggling councils Spelthorne and Runnymede together with Elmbridge. He said: "How can it possibly be better than splitting them across two unitaries?"

Cllr George Potter slammed the Conservative councillors for supporting the idea of two mega councils based on their report. He said the council was merely "making the figures fit the pre-determined conclusions".

However, Cllr Edward Hawkins said residents he has spoken to are "not bothered about changes but want the reduction of administration". He said people just "want the bins emptied and the roads repaired".

Despite the mudslinging, none of the councillors will decide what ultimately Surrey will look like in years to come. Timelines show the government will consult and interrogate the various proposals put forward, and decide how Surrey shall be carved up in the autumn.

Options for Surrey to be split into two and three unitaries will both be put on the table and submitted to government ministers on May 9.