

Consultation on Proposals for Local Government Reorganisation in Surrey

Response by Guildford Residents Association

Consultation for 2 unitary councils:

-East Surrey (Elmbridge, Epsom and Ewell, Mole Valley, Reigate and Banstead, Tandridge)

-West Surrey (Guildford, Runnymede, Spelthorne, Surrey Heath, Waverley, Woking)

Question 1: Does the proposal suggest sensible economic areas and geographies which will achieve a single tier of local government for the whole of Surrey?

No

The geographies appear administrative rather than based on meaningful economic areas or community identity and ties.

Surrey is densely populated and highly congested. Journey times getting around the county are considerable and unpredictable making meaningful integration across large areas problematic.

The areas falls more naturally into three economic areas and, given the Gross Value Added in Surrey, creating a structure based on three more meaningful geographies has merit.

The east forms a distinctive economic, commuter and social area which is notably separate from districts to the west. Gatwick, Redhill and Epsom are focal points set within, and enjoying close ties with, a more rural hinterland.

It is not clear that Elmbridge faces east and it is hard to avoid the question that suggesting this district becomes part of East Surrey in the two-unitary model might be more to do with balancing numbers or seeking to reduce exposure to Woking and Spelthorne debt than with economic and community ties.

The districts to the north-west have strong links with London and Heathrow, are unified by the River Thames floodplain and feed into the M25. The River Thames Scheme is a significant project bringing these districts together. They are distinct from the districts to the south-west which have strong ties with Guildford and Woking's tech, administrative, medical, educational and creative industries focused around the University and Research Park.

Question 2: Will the local government structures being put forward, if implemented, achieve the outcomes described?

No

Bolting together districts that do not share economic and community ties, and that businesses, service providers and residents will find it hard to relate to and engage with in a meaningful way, gives little confidence that cohesive unitary authorities will be achieved. There is more likely to be pressure for sub structures to be established reducing the efficiencies of a unitary approach.

Question 3: Is the proposal for unitary local government of the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks and is this supported by a rationale for the population size proposed?

No

We do not consider population size should be considered in isolation. Once the efficiency and other benefits of reflecting meaningful economic geographies and community ties are taken into account, we consider fast growing unitary authorities of just under 500,000 can be just as viable as ones above this population threshold.

With a growing population, which is currently at 1.2 million, a two unitary option would create authorities well above the 500,000 proposed threshold for unitary authorities. Given the significant level of Gross Value Added by Surrey's economy and the proposal for a Mayoral Strategic Authority sitting above any unitary structure, we consider a unitary structure based on meaningful economic and social geography is likely to be more resilient and effective than a two unitary structure divorced from real world connections.

Question 4: As an area covering councils in Best Value intervention and in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support, do you agree the proposal will put local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing?

As of 17 June 2025, councils in Surrey in Best Value intervention are Spelthorne Borough Council and Woking Borough Council.

As of 17 June 2025, the council in Surrey in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support in 2025/26 is Woking Borough Council.

No

No unless legacy debt is addressed. Once addressed, there is no reason why either a two or three unitary model would not be viable going forward.

The pattern and number of Unitary Authorities should not be driven by debt. It would be unjust to treat debt from one district as debt to be taken on by other districts brought together in a unitary. Nor is it fair to treat a district's debt as "Surrey debt". Districts in Surrey have been significant contributors to funding Councils nationally and, where districts have lost money in recent years, they were being encouraged to pursue unwise

investments. Debt should be resolved nationally and, only where appropriate, Surrey-wide. New unitary arrangements would be set up to fail if burdened by debt.

Question 5: Will the proposal prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens, improve local government and service delivery, avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services and lead to better value for money in the delivery of these services?

No

We note that the reason for two unitary authorities in this bid is because a mayoral authority cannot be established on the same geographical footprint as a single unitary council. We do not consider this to be a sound reason for a two-council scheme.

Although there is some support from some service providers to split their delivery structures in two, we would have more confidence in local government services based on natural economic networks, commuting patterns, strategic housing market areas and community ties. We welcome and prefer the approach in the three-council scheme for collaboration among unitary authorities to deliver shared services as appropriate to achieve efficiencies and to minimise disruption in any transition.

We are concerned by the need identified in the two-council approach to create community boards. When Surrey CC ran Local Committees, these did not work well and were inefficient talk shops with token budgets. Bigger authorities tend to find it hard to run local engagement structures well. We consider three unitary authorities, with clear community and economic identities, working together by means of a coordination board, would be more efficient and capable of establishing service delivery structures tailored to need.

Question 6: Has the proposal been informed by local views, and does it consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance?

No

The two-council proposal runs counter to the vast majority of views expressed by communities. There is concern that decision making would be too remote in the two-council model. Communities that do not share natural ties would be artificially bolted together. Relatable community representation would be hard to achieve.

We have examined both sets of proposals objectively and openly rather than from the perspective of being resistant to change. We do not find the two-council areas proposed reflective of our sense of community (see Q1). Indeed, the Surrey bid accepts that there are three distinctive areas across Surrey with their own characteristics and economic features. It suggests disrupting these might create economic opportunities, but we are unaware of evidence to support this and are concerned division into two large, artificially drawn unitary areas would be at the expense of community ties,

people's sense of local identity and strong collaboration. This could be deemed necessary if there were no alternative but there is a persuasive and viable alternative, the proposal for three unitary councils.

Question 7: Does the proposal support devolution arrangements?

Yes

Either option could support devolution arrangements with a Mayoral Strategic Authority.

Question 8: Will the proposal enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment?

No

We consider a three unitary option would be better placed to achieve this. With a two-council option there would be a greater need for local community engagement structures, and we are unconvinced that Community Boards would be effective. By contrast, the three-council option creates areas people could relate to more readily reducing the need for additional tiers.

Under a more relatable, three-council structure, we would favour Community Governance Reviews to establish parish/town councils in currently unparished areas. These would provide authentic local engagement on local issues. Also, parish networks would be an effective way for new, sensibly-sized unitary authorities and a Mayoral Strategic Authority to engage with local communities.

Question 9: Do you have any other comments on the proposed local government reorganisation in Surrey?

Yes

We are concerned at the number of councillors that are provisionally proposed for the two new unitary authorities. We greatly value communication with our district and county councillors. Under unitary arrangements, we are concerned that having too many Councillors on any single Authority (eg 90 in West Surrey and 72 in East Surrey) would make the council unwieldy and inefficient. The potential influence of Councillors would be reduced due to sheer numbers diluting influence in real decision making. Better to have a smaller number of councillors with the prospect of each being an effective voice. Hence, if current county divisions are used in the first instance, we would prefer two members per ward/division. Three would be too many for the Councillor role to be effective on the new Council. We would prefer to have Parish/Town Council representation for local issues.

We ask that waste and mineral planning be explicitly included in the scope of Local Government Reorganisation. Will this be undertaken by the Mayoral Strategic Authority

or by the Unitary Councils working cooperatively? These services are a good litmus test of how strategic functions will be delivered.

Consultation for 3 Unitary Councils:

-East Surrey (Epsom and Ewell, Mole Valley, Reigate and Banstead, and Tandridge)

-North Surrey (Elmbridge, Runnymede, and Spelthorne)

-West Surrey (Guildford, Surrey Heath, Waverly, and Woking).

Question 1: Does the proposal suggest sensible economic areas and geographies which will achieve a single tier of local government for the whole of Surrey?

Yes

We find the approach, based on economic areas and geography, in the three-council bid persuasive. Surrey falls more naturally into three economic areas and, given the Gross Value Added in Surrey, creating a structure based on three more meaningful geographies has merit.

Surrey is densely populated and highly congested. Journey times getting around the county are considerable and unpredictable making meaningful integration across large areas problematic.

The east forms a distinctive economic, commuter and social area which is notably separate from districts to the west. Gatwick, Redhill and Epsom are focal points set within, and enjoying close ties with, a more rural hinterland.

The districts in the north-west, named North Surrey, have strong links with London and Heathrow, are unified by the River Thames floodplain and feed into the M25. The River Thames Scheme is a significant project bringing these districts together. Elmbridge fits well within this grouping.

The northern, Thames-based districts are distinct from the districts forming West Surrey, which have strong ties with Guildford and Woking's tech, administrative, medical, educational and creative industries focused around the University and Research Park.

Question 2: Will the local government structures being put forward, if implemented, achieve the outcomes described?

Yes

Bringing together districts that share economic and community ties, and that businesses, service providers and residents more readily relate to and engage with in a

meaningful way, gives more confidence that cohesive unitary authorities will be achieved. There is less likely to be pressure for sub structures to be established under a three-council model enhancing the efficiency of a community-focused approach to unitary creation.

Question 3: Is the proposal for unitary local government of the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks and is this supported by a rationale for the population size proposed?

Yes

We do not consider population size should be considered in isolation. Once the efficiency and other benefits of reflecting meaningful economic geographies and community ties are taken into account, we consider fast growing unitary authorities of just under 500,000 can be just as viable as ones above this population threshold.

With a growing population, which is currently at 1.2 million, a three-unitary option would create authorities capable of being efficient and resilient. Given the significant level of Gross Value Added by Surrey's economy and the proposal for a Mayoral Strategic Authority sitting above any unitary structure, we consider a unitary structure based on meaningful economic and social geography is likely to be more resilient and effective than a two unitary structure divorced from real world connections.

Question 4: As an area covering councils in Best Value intervention and in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support, do you agree the proposal will put local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing?

As of 17 June 2025, councils in Surrey in Best Value intervention are Spelthorne Borough Council and Woking Borough Council.

As of 17 June 2025, the council in Surrey in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support in 2025/26 is Woking Borough Council.

No

No unless legacy debt is addressed. Once addressed, there is no reason why either a three or two unitary model would not be viable going forward.

The pattern and number of Unitary Authorities should not be driven by debt. It would be unjust to treat debt from one district as debt to be taken on by other districts brought together in a unitary. Nor is it fair to treat a district's debt as "Surrey debt". Districts in Surrey have been significant contributors to funding Councils nationally and, where districts have lost money in recent years, they were being encouraged to pursue unwise investments. Debt should be resolved nationally and, only where appropriate, Surrey-wide. New unitary arrangements would be set up to fail if burdened by debt.

Question 5: Will the proposal prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens, improve local government and service delivery, avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services and lead to better value for money in the delivery of these services?

Yes

We welcome and prefer the approach in the three-council scheme for collaboration among unitary authorities to deliver shared services as appropriate to achieve efficiencies and to minimise disruption in any transition. Although there is some support from some service providers to split their delivery structures in two, we would have more confidence in local government services based on natural economic networks, commuting patterns, strategic housing market areas and community ties.

We are concerned by the need identified in the two-council approach to create community boards. When Surrey CC ran Local Committees, these did not work well and were inefficient talk shops with token budgets. Bigger authorities tend to find it hard to run local engagement structures well. We consider three unitary authorities, with clear community and economic identities, working together by means of a coordination board, would be more efficient and capable of establishing service delivery structures tailored to need. We also note there would be a Mayoral Strategic Authority above the three unitary councils.

Question 6: Has the proposal been informed by local views, and does it consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance?

Yes

The three-council proposal is the preferred option in the vast majority of views expressed by communities. We have examined both sets of proposals objectively and openly rather than from the perspective of being resistant to change. We find the three-council areas proposed more reflective of our sense of community and local ties (see Q1). In south-west Surrey, we do not have strong ties with the districts in north-west Surrey.

Question 7: Does the proposal support devolution arrangements?

Yes

Either option could support devolution arrangements with a Mayoral Strategic Authority.

Question 8: Will the proposal enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment?

Yes

We consider a three-unitary option would be better placed to achieve this. With a two-council option there would be a greater need for local community engagement structures, and we are unconvinced that Community Boards would be effective. The three-council option creates areas people could relate to more readily reducing the need for additional tiers.

Under a more relatable, three-council structure, we would favour Community Governance Reviews to establish parish/town councils in currently unparished areas. These would provide authentic, community engagement on local issues. Also, parish networks would be an effective way for new, sensibly-sized unitary authorities, and a Mayoral Strategic Authority, to engage with local communities.

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We ask that waste and mineral planning be explicitly included in the scope of Local Government Reorganisation. Will this be undertaken by the Mayoral Strategic Authority or by the Unitary Councils working cooperatively? These services are a good litmus test of how strategic functions will be delivered.