

## **English Devolution - What this means for Surrey Briefing Document**

### **Overview:**

The Labour Government has confirmed that Surrey will be part of the first wave of areas to undergo local government reorganisation and devolution. This initiative aims to simplify and streamline local government, making it more efficient and effective. The reorganisation will empower Surrey to make decisions that best suit the local area, supported by more stable resources.

### **Key Points:**

#### **1. Benefits for Surrey:**

- **Simpler, More Efficient System:** The reorganisation will lead to a more streamlined local government structure.
- **Local Decision-Making:** Devolution will enable Surrey to make decisions that are in the best interest of its residents and businesses.
- **Resource Stability:** The county will have more stable resources to support its initiatives and services.

#### **2. Timeline:**

- **Interim Business Case:** To be developed and submitted to the government in March.
- **Full Business Case:** Likely to be submitted in May.
- **Collaboration:** Proposals will be developed in collaboration with local government and other partners across the county.

#### **3. Elections:**

- **Postponement:** The Labour Government has decided to postpone Surrey's local elections in May until 2026.
- **Rationale:** This allows the resources and time that would have been spent on elections to be redirected towards reorganisation efforts.

- Precedent: There is a precedent for delaying elections in similar circumstances as the [Deputy PM outlined in her statement in the HoC](#)

#### **4. Reassurance:**

- Continuity of Services: Vital services will continue to be delivered, and support for residents will remain uninterrupted until the new council is fully established.
- Staff Certainty: Moving quickly will provide greater certainty for staff and unlock the benefits of reorganisation and devolution more swiftly.

#### **5. Engagement and Updates:**

- Resident and Staff Updates: Regular updates will be provided to residents and staff throughout the process.
- Collaborative Approach: The people of Surrey and local partners will be fully engaged to ensure the best possible outcome for the county.

#### **Quotes from Tim Oliver, Leader of Surrey County Council:**

- *"Now we've received confirmation that Surrey is in the first wave of local government reorganisation and devolution priority programme, we will develop a business case for reorganisation and submit a draft to the Labour Government in March."*
- *"Arrangements will also be made to postpone local elections in May so the detailed work for reorganisation and devolution can take place."*
- *"I can be absolutely clear that, throughout this process, our vital work supporting residents will continue - services will be delivered and we will still be here for those who need us most - until whatever new council is fully established to take on that delivery."*
- *"I have always been a firm believer that further devolution from Westminster to local regions and communities would be in the best interest of Surrey residents and businesses."*
- *"Of course, any proposal will now need to be worked up in collaboration with local government and other partners across the county so that together we can really grasp this opportunity to deliver something meaningful for the future of Surrey."*

## Next Steps:

- Develop and submit the interim business case by March.
- Engage with local government and partners to finalise proposals.
- Provide regular updates to residents and staff.
- Ensure continuity of services and support throughout the transition.

## Conclusion:

The reorganisation and devolution present a significant opportunity for Surrey to create a more efficient and effective local government system. By working collaboratively and keeping residents informed, Surrey can achieve the best possible outcome for its future.

## Q&A: English Devolution, Two-Tier Authorities in Surrey, and the One-Year Election Delay

**1. What is English Devolution?** English Devolution is the process of transferring powers and responsibilities from central government to local authorities in England. This aims to give local leaders more control over areas such as transport, housing, economic development, and skills. These proposals were set out in the government's Devolution White Paper in December 2024. For more details, you can read the full document here: [English Devolution White Paper](#).

**2. What are two-tier authorities, and how does this apply to Surrey?** Surrey operates under a two-tier system of local government which was first introduced in 1974. This consists of one county council and 11 borough and district councils. The county council oversees services like education, transport, and social care. Borough and district councils manage local services such as housing, planning, and waste collection, to name just a few.

**3. How does devolution impact two-tier authorities in Surrey?** Devolution will bring significant changes to governance in Surrey. There is potential for restructuring, such as creating one or more unitary authorities to replace the current two-tier system of one county council and eleven borough and district councils. This will lead to greater efficiency and simplification in how services are managed and delivered.

The current structure of local government in Surrey means that we have 12 Chief Executive Officers, 12 legal officers, 12 finance officers, and 12 departments for every service provided by local councils, duplicated across the county. This duplication makes even the simplest decisions slow and costly, with multiple layers of bureaucracy adding expense and inefficiency. Conservatives believe that unitarisation is the best way to make local councils more efficient, reducing unnecessary duplication and ensuring they are better equipped to proactively respond to residents' concerns and deliver holistic, fully integrated services across the county. This new

structure of local government will also provide significant cost savings, meaning more money for the delivery of services.

**4. Why has there been a delay in local elections for one year?** The Labour Government has decided to delay local elections by one year to align electoral cycles with potential governance reforms under devolution deals. This delay allows time for new structures, such as combined authorities or unitary councils, to be properly established before elections take place.

While some residents feel that delaying elections is undemocratic, holding county council elections now would cost approximately £2.5 million, only for the authority to cease to exist within a year. This would mean another set of elections for the new authority, leading to unnecessary public expense. By postponing elections, the government is ensuring that residents vote directly for the governance structure that will be in place long-term, rather than electing representatives to a council that will soon be abolished.

**5. Which areas of Surrey are affected by the election delay?** The delay affects the Surrey County Council elections that were scheduled to take place in May 2025.

**6. Will councillors remain in post during the delay?** Yes, councillors whose terms were due to end will continue in their roles until the rescheduled elections take place in May 2026 as confirmed by the Deputy Prime Minister in her [statement](#) to the House of Commons on 5th February 2025. This ensures continuity in governance during the transition period. It also means experienced councillors from across the political spectrum can help shape the reorganisation to ensure as many bases as possible are covered and not overlooked.

**7. What are the potential benefits of devolution for Surrey?** Devolution will bring several benefits, including:

- Greater local control over funding and policy decisions
- More tailored economic and social strategies specific to Surrey's needs
- Improved efficiency in public service delivery
- Stronger local leadership/representation and accountability
- More integrated services, such as transport networks, ensuring better coordination and connectivity across the region

**8. Are there concerns about devolution and restructuring in Surrey?** Yes, some concerns include:

- Potential loss of local identity if borough and district councils are abolished
- Uncertainty about funding and resources
- Administrative challenges in restructuring services
- Risk of reduced democratic representation if fewer councillors serve larger areas

**9. What happens next in the devolution process for Surrey?** The Labour Government will continue negotiations with Surrey County Council and district and borough councils, finalising

devolution deals and governance arrangements. Stakeholder consultations and legislative processes will shape the final structures before the rescheduled elections take place.

**10. How can Surrey residents stay informed and engaged?** Residents can keep up to date by:

- Visiting their local council's website for updates
- Subscribing to [Surrey Matters eNewsletter](#) from Surrey County Council
- Attending public consultations and meetings
- Engaging with [local councillors](#) to express concerns and feedback
- Reviewing government publications on devolution policies

**11. How will planning and other local services be affected?** Decisions on planning and other local services will be scoped out as part of the reorganisation process. This is why it is crucial for local residents to provide feedback and engage in all public consultation opportunities. Resident input will help shape how these services are structured and delivered under any new governance model.

**12. Who is driving this process, and what is Surrey County Council's position?** This devolution initiative is being led by the Labour Government. Surrey County Council, which is Conservative-run, has decided that it is more productive to engage with the process constructively. Rather than investing time, effort, and money into resisting the changes, the Council aims to actively shape the future governance structure to ensure the best possible outcomes for Surrey residents.

**13. What's in it for Surrey? / What's in it for me?** Devolution in Surrey will create a Strategic Authority (SA), allowing it to deliver better services across the county. Depending on the model adopted, this could unlock greater powers and funding in areas such as transport, housing, economic development, and public safety. By streamlining governance and reducing bureaucracy, decisions can be made more efficiently, ensuring residents receive faster and more responsive services.

A well-established SA could also gain further devolved powers over time based on local requirements, giving Surrey more local control rather than relying on and waiting for decisions to be made in Westminster. This means improved public transport, better infrastructure, more strategic planning for housing and regeneration, and greater investment in skills and employment. Ultimately, devolution ensures that local priorities are set by those who understand the area best, leading to a more coordinated and effective approach to tackling Surrey's needs.