

Local Government Reorganisation – is it the end of Epsom and Ewell Borough Council?

On 16 December 2024 the Government published its *English Devolution Whitepaper* which is seeking to make far reaching changes to local government across England.



The Whitepaper headline was the devolution of more powers from Westminster to local councils, something which local government has been seeking for many years. However obtaining the money to accompany those powers, comes with the establishment of new, large regional authorities, known as Mayoral Strategic Authorities, for around 1.5 million people, and the centralisation of a large number of powers under these newly elected Mayors.

In addition to the devolution of powers, Government also wants to implement Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). Part of LGR is to create new unitary authorities or “mega councils” for populations of around 500k people. These new mega councils will replace districts and borough councils, such as Epsom and Ewell Borough Council.

The Government rationale for the proposals in their Whitepaper are to:

- simplify the local government structure through the creation of larger authorities that will be more financially resilient. There is no evidence to suggest that creating larger authorities makes them more financially resilient and in many cases it has been the opposite.
- grow the economy by giving Mayors certain powers, for example, around planning, housing and strategic infrastructure.

Much in the *English Devolution Whitepaper* remains unclear and local government is pushing back on many aspects contained in it. These include the lack of evidence for the Government’s policy around the minimum 500k population threshold for a unitary authority, and vital questions remain unanswered on how the Government will treat the debt of numerous district councils or how these changes will create a democratic deficit as the result of less elected members.

What has happened so far?

The Government is working at pace to bring forward the legislation to make these changes.

Surrey CC, as the upper tier authority, submitted their request in mid-January as part of the Government timetable to be considered for devolution and local government reorganisation. They will know in early February if they have been accepted on the Government’s Priority Programme to reorganise by April 2027.

To push through these changes, Government are considering postponing County Council elections scheduled to take place in May 2025, for one year, to put in place these new governance arrangements.

Surrey CC have made a request to postpone the County elections this year. In response, the Surrey District and Borough Councils have written to the Jim McMahon MP, Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, requesting that the election must go ahead as planned.

What does this mean for Epsom and Ewell Borough Council?

If these plans go ahead, the Residents' Association led Epsom and Ewell Borough Council is unlikely to exist by April 2028, perhaps sooner if Surrey is included in the Priority Programme. This is along with the other 10 Surrey District and Borough Councils and Surrey CC, who will also all be abolished.

Can we stop this from happening?

In 2020 I led the successful cross-Surrey campaign, *Residents Against Surrey Single Unitary* (RASSU), to oppose the proposal to create a single unitary council for Surrey. I would like to think that we could do the same this time, but unlike 2020 this is not one person's crusade for a unitary authority.

This time we are facing a Government with a significant Parliamentary majority who have an electoral mandate for devolution (establishing Mayors). While they do not have the same electoral mandate for LGR, all the evidence so far indicates that they are taking no prisoners to force through the *English Devolution Whitepaper* in its entirety.

This is not a time to stick our heads in the sand and pretend this is not happening.

While it does not sit comfortably with me and many of my borough colleagues, there is a need to engage in the conversation already taking place about the future of local government in Surrey and to be part of shaping whatever that might be, so this is not done to us and the best can be secured for you, the Borough's residents.

Rest assured though, I am not simply accepting this!

I am speaking and working with other councillors near and far to see how parts of the Whitepaper can be opposed. In addition, as a member of the Executive Board of the *District Councils' Network*, as a group of cross-party colleagues, we are pushing back on Government, seeking to get answers to questions and de-bunk some of the information being used by Government to implement LGR.

Cllr Hannah Dalton

Chair, Residents' Association Majority Group