

Surrey Liberal Democrats

Consultation on possible Unitary Authorities

Introduction

The government has indicated that in the autumn it intends to bring forward proposals for changes to local government in England. The likelihood is that this will include the conversion of all remaining two tier areas in shire counties to unitary authorities. This is made even more likely by the additional financial pressures being experienced by councils as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Recently the Conservative administration at Surrey County Council has announced that they will be seeking a single unitary authority for the entire county. So far this has met with universal opposition from Liberal Democrats across the county.

However, in order to meaningfully oppose the SCC proposal it will be necessary to put forward a clear Lib Dem counter-proposal. The South East regional party is asking each county to agree a single, unified Lib Dem policy on the issue.

To that end informal discussions have already been organised and these identified overwhelming Lib Dem opposition to either a single unitary authority or a two unitary authority option for Surrey, and broad support for some variant of a three unitary authority option.

We are now consulting with all local parties in Surrey on the issue to see if there is any general agreement on any variant of a three unitary authority option.

We are also asking if your local party is in favour of unitary authorities in general or would prefer to maintain the current two tier structure in your area.

Assumptions

In advance of any firm proposals from central government we have had to make some assumptions whilst putting together the possible options listed below.

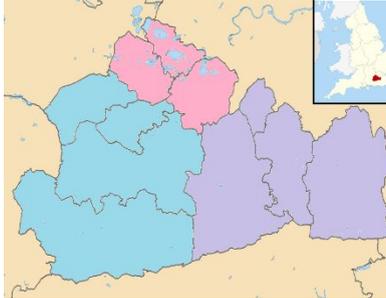
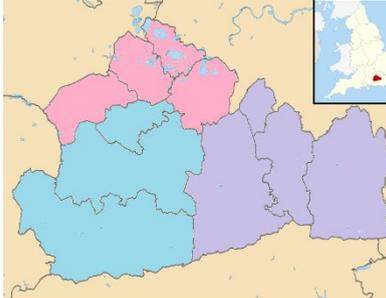
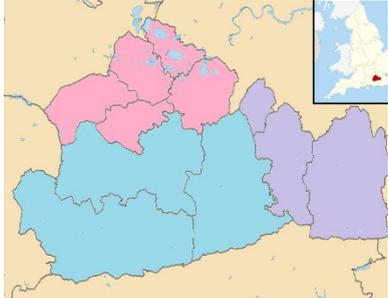
Populations: It is clear that the government thinks that many current unitary authorities are too small, having a population below 300,000. It is thought that their target population for new unitary authorities is a minimum of 300,000 people and ideally around 500,000 people, but perhaps going up to 700,000. All of our options meet this criteria.

The figures we have used are the latest estimated population figures for each local authority as shown on the ONS website.

Building Blocks: For a whole range of reasons (allocation of assets, distribution of surpluses or deficits etc), the government usually chooses to create unitary authorities from a collection of existing local authorities and tends not to split existing ones. We have therefore constructed our proposals on that basis.

Number of councillors: Based on previous introductions of unitary authorities, the number of councillors would initially be put at 3 for each previous county council division and that is what we have assumed in the tables with each proposal.

Options

Option A	Option B	Option C
		
<p>East Surrey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Epsom & Ewell, Mole Valley, Reigate & Banstead, and Tandridge ● 402,434 people ● 81 councillors <p>North Surrey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Elmbridge, Runnymede and Spelthorne ● 323,960 people ● 66 councillors <p>West Surrey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Guildford, Surrey Heath, Waverley and Woking ● 463,540 people ● 96 councillors 	<p>East Surrey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Epsom & Ewell, Mole Valley, Reigate & Banstead, and Tandridge ● 402,434 people ● 81 councillors <p>North Surrey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Elmbridge, Runnymede, Spelthorne and Surrey Heath ● 412,834 people ● 84 councillors <p>West Surrey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Guildford, Waverley and Woking ● 374,666 people ● 78 councillors 	<p>East Surrey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Epsom & Ewell, Reigate & Banstead, and Tandridge ● 315,181 people ● 63 councillors <p>North Surrey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Elmbridge, Runnymede, Spelthorne, Surrey Heath and Woking ● 514,001 people ● 105 councillors <p>West Surrey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Guildford, Mole Valley and Waverley ● 360,752 people ● 75 councillors

Considerations

In evaluating the different options there are various different factors to consider. The following three are worth highlighting for local parties to consider.

Public interest: The first and foremost consideration for Liberal Democrats must be what is in the best interests of the communities which we represent.

The advantages of unitary councils from this point of view are primarily the simplification of local government to having just one council responsible for most major public services, and potentially greater efficiencies from having all services administered together.

The disadvantages are that unitary authorities are larger, and therefore can dilute the voices of individual communities within a larger population area, potentially making the council less responsive to local needs. There are also those who question whether any efficiency savings will be significant enough to pay back the costs of disruption and reorganisation within a practical timescale.

We should also consider that unitaries may be forced upon us whether we like it or not and therefore, even where we may prefer the status quo to unitaries, we should still consider which model of unitaries would be the 'least worst' from a public interest point of view.

Political: As Liberal Democrats we must also consider the 'winnability' of any new unitaries; would they be likely to retain a significant Liberal Democrat presence and what would our short, medium and long-term prospects of taking control of the councils be. To this end the following tables list the current district/borough councillors by party for each of the options listed above.

Party	Option A		
	West Surrey	East Surrey	North Surrey
Liberal Democrats	50	38	18
Conservatives	60	55	62
Labour	8	3	6
Greens	5	5	3
Localist parties	35	58	31
Independents	12	4	7
Political control:	NOC	NOC	NOC

Party	Option B		
	West Surrey	East Surrey	North Surrey
Liberal Democrats	41	38	27
Conservatives	44	55	78
Labour	7	3	7
Greens	3	5	5
Localist parties	35	58	31
Independents	7	4	12
Political control:	NOC	NOC	NOC

Party	Option C		
	West Surrey	East Surrey	North Surrey
Liberal Democrats	53	16	37
Conservatives	41	44	92
Labour	4	3	10
Greens	3	5	5
Localist parties	42	51	31
Independents	5	3	15
Political control:	NOC	NOC	NOC

Economic: A factor central government is likely to consider heavily when evaluating proposals for unitary authorities is the degree to which the areas within a proposed boundary are linked to each other economically and socially. The key statistical tool used by central government for this purpose is Travel To Work Areas (TTWAs) which are areas in which the majority of a population both lives and works.

A supplemental tool is the Broader Rental Market Area (BRMA) which is used by central government to set Housing Benefit amounts and is defined as being an area “within which a person could reasonably be expected to live having regard to facilities and services for the purposes of health, education, recreation, personal banking and shopping, taking account of the distance of travel by

