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LGR Consultation
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Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
London
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1st August 2025

Consultation on Proposal for Local Government Reorganisation in Surrey

Dear Sir or Madam

Herewith the response from the Merrow Residents' Association to the above consultation:-

We are an organisation that was established over 50 years ago with 500 members serving the interests of residents in Merrow in the Borough of Guildford. Since we do not have a parish council this organisation fills that lacuna and has a constructive and vigorous ongoing dialogue with Guildford Borough Council, our ward councillors and our single Surrey County councillor.

Q1 Does the proposal suggest sensible areas and geographies which will achieve a single tier of local government for the whole of Surrey?

This question is very oddly worded because the proposals on which we are consulting would result in two or three authorities for the whole of Surrey and not a single tier. **We will respond on the basis that government is consulting on whether there should be two or three new authorities in the whole of Surrey.**

We are disappointed that the government has taken the view that there is a need for reorganisation of the authorities within Surrey with such haste, without early consultation and without confirming the clear parameters on which any reorganisation will take place.

In particular we are concerned at the very high levels of debt within Woking and Spelthorne and that some of that debt may not be covered by Exceptional Financial Support. This therefore begs the question as to who will become responsible for Woking's debt. It would seem totally unfair for the residents and council taxpayers in Guildford to pay anything towards Woking's debt since we had no responsibility whatsoever for their council and for the decisions taken that led to this ever-increasing level of debt. It is reasonable to suggest

that since central government is leading on the reorganisation of Local Authorities in Surrey that they should also write off the debt.

We are very uncertain as to how the responsibilities for county highways currently lying with Surrey County Council will function in the future. The proposals may work in the long term but in the short term there could be wastage, uncertainty and lack of clear direction in a crucially important area. The new authority must ensure that a high quality co-ordinated service is delivered from the outset.

We remain to be convinced that the savings suggested by government will in fact be realised. As government will be aware, some of the support services in the Borough of Guildford are shared with Waverley Borough Council. This has realised some savings but these savings are simply and solely related to the cutting of posts and not to savings in operating expenditure or improvements in service delivery.

We are firmly of the view that Surrey should be served by three authorities and not two when the reorganisation takes place.

We say this because the amalgamation of Guildford, Woking, Waverley and Surrey Heath would be a reasonable size and in particular would allow residents to have a reasonably close association with those who are making decisions for the new area. Residents in Merrow feel that they do have a good and close working relationship with those who make decisions that affect us and we wish that to continue. If decision makers are too far away, as they are in Surrey County Council, then we have a reduced opportunity to influence decisions that affect us all. Put another way, rate payers in Merrow who pay a substantial amount into the services provided throughout Surrey feel that they should have a **real** say as to how that money is spent. The farther away the decision makers are from us the less influence we can have on those decisions. Planning is a very good example. Guildford is saddled with a large housing target of 562 new homes per year in the 2019 Local Plan which will only increase in accordance with the Local Plan review that is currently taking place. It is imperative that residents in the outlying areas of the borough have a real say as to how these developments are taken forward and it is only through contact with local planners and with our councillors that we shall be able to achieve that objective.

We are concerned at the number of councillors that are provisionally proposed for the two new unitary authorities. We greatly value communication with our ward and county councillors with whom we have routine meetings. 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. Hence, if current county wards are used we would prefer two members per ward/division. Consideration should be given as to how Parish/Town Council representation for local issues can be included in the local authority decision making process.

Q2 Will the local government structures being put forward, if implemented, achieve the outcomes described?

We are firmly of the view that Surrey should be served by three authorities and not two when the reorganisation takes place and the following comments are put forward in support of that opinion

It is suggested that the local authority reorganisation in Surrey could result in some improvement in achieving the government housing objective of 1.5 million homes during the course of this parliament. We cannot understand how that conclusion could be reached. In fact, we suggest that this reorganisation will in fact make it even harder to achieve that overall housing objective since we don't have the infrastructure within Surrey for the very large developments that are proposed and nor do we have developers who have sufficient resources to be able to finance the developments proposed. As government will be aware, Surrey already is one of the most congested areas for traffic in the country and that will not get any better unless major infrastructure improvements are made which are not being proposed at this time. In fact, National Highways are opposed to any such improvement scheme having refused to put forward any improvements to the A3 around Guildford which was one of the key issues discussed when the 2019 Local Plan was examined in public relating to the development of Gosden Hill-Policy 25 of the Guildford Local Plan - Strategy and Sites. Therefore, developments are going to come forward to the planning stage even though the infrastructure improvements promised in 2019 will not be delivered. We see nothing in the reorganisation proposals that would assist the government in meeting their objective. Quite the contrary, as it will take the new authorities time to bed down and in the meantime, services are unlikely to improve. In addition, since the reorganisation in Surrey does not include any changes to the structure and organisation of National Highways who make the decisions on highway improvements it makes the aspiration that the proposals should help to increase housing supply and meet local needs unachievable.

Q 3 Is the councils' 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?

We are firmly of the view that Surrey should be served by three authorities and not two when the reorganisation takes place and the following comments are put forward in support of that opinion

Like many local authorities, Guildford Borough Council has had to tighten its belt and at the present time has a balanced budget. With a population of 143,000 Guildford Borough Council has fared well and therefore there is no reason to seek to increase the number of people that are covered by the authority. We also see no reason why the new authorities should aim for a population of 500,000 or more. There is no logic in this suggestion since large does not necessarily equate with better performance.

There is no reason to believe that Guildford Borough Council could not withstand any new financial shocks. We are aware of the maintenance contract overspend between 2020 and 2023 of over £13m but are also aware of the steps taken by Council to address the management failures. We are also aware of the potential overspend on the development of the Weyside Urban Village - Policy A24 of the Guildford Local Plan - Strategy and Sites -

where mitigating measures are now being put in place. However, the same cannot be said for any new authority that is linked to Woking unless the government extends the Exceptional Financial Support that it has already put in place for Woking Borough and writes off all their current debt. As government will be aware, Woking has more than £1 billion in unsecured debt.

Guildford Borough Council has already put forward measures to improve their financial stability and there is no reason to suggest that these savings cannot be carried forward into the new unitary authority that is set up by government but subject to the above caveat on outstanding debt.

Guildford Borough Council in their response to this consultation will, no doubt, put forward suggestions as to how their financial stability can be maintained and will also suggest where savings could be made. However, as indicated above there is no evidence so far of any really significant savings from the amalgamation of certain services between Guildford Borough Council and Waverley Borough Council except where there have been the loss of some senior posts resulting in additional pressure on existing senior post-holders. The government should be aware that most planning departments and certainly the planning department in Guildford Borough Council is under immense pressure due to the number and complexity of planning applications and difficulties in recruiting and maintaining staff and therefore any savings in this area will be very difficult indeed to achieve.

We have commented in this response on the amalgamation of some services between Guildford Borough Council and Waverly Borough Council, especially at the senior post level. We have listened and followed this initiative with some interest but we are not convinced that it has delivered improved efficiency for the two authorities except that some senior posts have been lost and therefore some savings made.

It is for Guildford Borough Council to make the case that this amalgamation has delivered improvements in service. We are fortunate that the Guildford Borough Council finance director has some experience in this field and therefore his comments which we expect to be incorporated into the response from Guildford Borough Council will be particularly important.

However, we note in the consultation papers that there is no proposal for debt to be addressed centrally or written off as part of reorganisation. We find this an astounding comment since the debt in Woking is entirely due to mismanagement of the borough's finances and there is no reason on earth why any other authority should be required to bail out Woking's inept decisions.

Q 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?

No; we are concerned at the very high levels of debt within Woking and Spelthorne and that some of that debt may not be covered by Exceptional Financial Support. This therefore begs

the question as to who will become responsible for Woking's debt. It would seem totally unfair for the residents and council taxpayers in Guildford to pay anything towards Woking's debt since we had no responsibility whatsoever for their council and for the decisions taken that led to this ever-increasing level of debt. It is reasonable to suggest that since central government is leading on the reorganisation of Surrey that they should also write off the debt.

Q5 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?

We are firmly of the view that Surrey should be served by three authorities and not two when the reorganisation takes place and the following comments are put forward in support of that opinion

The proposal is extremely aspirational and it remains to be seen whether it will lead to improved service delivery and better value for money in the delivery of services. We have mentioned in this response that the Guildford Borough Council planning department is under immense pressure. It must be clear that a new planning department covering four existing local authorities and some of the planning responsibilities of Surrey County Council will be under even greater pressure. The success of the new department will to a very large extent depend on the quality and experience of the senior officers that are recruited and whether they are able to manage and deliver to the high standards expected. No one can predict how that will turn out.

On fragmentation there will be some problems associated with the splitting of some services provided by Surrey County Council which could adversely affect the provision of current services.

Q6 Has the proposal been informed by local views, and does it consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance?

The proposal for reorganisation of local authorities in Surrey was not initiated by Guildford Borough Council but by central government supported by Surrey County Council. However the proposal from Guildford Borough Council for three and not two unitary authorities was informed by local views and we believe to be supported by the majority of residents in the Borough of Guildford.

Q7 Does the councils' proposal support devolution arrangements?

It remains to be seen whether the new arrangements will support devolution since on the one hand some of the activities currently carried out by Surrey County Council will be devolved to the new unitary authorities whilst on the other hand some responsibilities currently carried out by Guildford Borough Council, e.g. planning will become a responsibility of the new authority so in one situation there is devolution and in another centralisation.

Q8 Will the councils' proposal enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment?

Not in its present form and that is why this Association supports the initiative for a Community Governance Review for Guildford Town Centre as we don't have a parish council in Merrow. For that reason we need to have strong local representation in addition to the support that we will obtain from our new authority councillors.

Q9 Do you have any other comments with regards to the proposed local government reorganisation in Surrey?

No.

Kind regards

Keith C Meldrum CB
Vice Chairman