

GODALMING TOWN COUNCIL (GTC) – RESPONSE TO THE GOVERNMENT’S CONSULTATION ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION IN SURREY

Covering Statement

Godalming Town Council (GTC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Government’s proposals for the reorganisation of local government in Surrey. GTC supports a model of governance that:

- enhances local identity and democratic accountability;
- improves the efficiency and quality of public services;
- ensures appropriate roles and recognition for the first tier of local government;
- delivers lasting financial resilience and strategic capability.

Based on the information provided, GTC supports:

The Borough Councils of Epsom and Ewell, Guildford, Reigate and Banstead, Runnymede, Spelthorne, Surrey Heath, Waverley and Woking, and Tandridge District Council’s proposed 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, Waverley, and Woking)

The following provides GTC’s consultation response to each question posed by the Department.

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. GTC agrees that creating East, North and West Surrey unitary councils reflects real travel-to-work areas, housing markets and service-use patterns. These boundaries avoid artificial splits, preserve community ties, and provide each council with a robust tax base. The three-unitary structure also aligns with existing functional geographies and NHS systems. For example, the proposed West Surrey authority reflects the footprint of the Royal Surrey NHS Trust and Surrey Heartlands Integrated Care Board, as well as strong east-west transport corridors. This spatial logic is well-evidenced in the Final Proposal (pp.16–18), which demonstrates the coherence of these regional identities and their suitability for effective local government.

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

Yes. The evidence shows that a three-unitary model will simplify governance, strengthen local leadership, and deliver long-term financial sustainability while maintaining the services residents rely on. It offers a clear structure for accountability and decision-making, removing duplication and confusion between tiers. The Districts and Boroughs’ own comparative assessment (Table 10.2, p.103) scores the three-unitary option highest—28 out of 30 against the government’s criteria—compared with 21 for a two-unitary model and 16 for a mega-unitary. GTC supports the view that this model is the most effective in delivering improved local government for Surrey.

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?

Although each new authority will have a population slightly below the 500,000 benchmark, the proposed scale is sufficient to secure efficiencies, ensure professional capacity, and support strategic leadership. At the same time, the population sizes offer the best balance: large enough to deliver economies of scale and resilience, with the greatest chance to retain responsiveness to local identity and community needs. This approach minimises the risks of over-centralisation while still enabling strong and sustainable service delivery.

Question 4 – The proposal covers an area in which there are 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?

Yes. Provided that there is an acceptable solution to the stranded debt issue associated with Woking & Spelthorne (debt not backed by assets). This could be via ringfencing and precepting repayment from these former borough areas. If this is achieved, then a single-tier arrangement of three unitary councils could deliver consistent financial oversight across Surrey. Unless government support is secured for the management of the stranded debt of Woking & Spelthorne, GTC firmly believes that, irrespective of whichever proposal is finally adopted, no new unitary authority could be launched on a firm financially sustainable footing or prevent community assets in Godalming from exposure of potential disposal. Crucially, if the stranded debt situation is resolved then the three unitary proposal projects recurring savings of £22.5 million a year by Year 4 (Table 10.1, p. 103; Appendix J). These efficiencies come without the stranded-debt risks that would accompany a mega-unitary, which could inherit significant long-term liabilities from Surrey County Council.

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. Moving from the current two-tier system to three unitary authorities will remove duplication and enable integrated neighbourhood teams, shared commissioning, and closer collaboration with NHS and emergency services. This approach is expected to improve outcomes in areas such as adult social care, SEND, and homelessness, while ensuring continuity of service during transition. The Final Proposal sets out how key services—including housing, waste management, and social care—can be better joined up through local integration strategies (Annex E). GTC also notes the potential for £40–46 million in additional transformation savings over five years, particularly through streamlined delivery and investment in digital capability (Appendix I, p.90).

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

Yes. Public engagement involving over 3,300 residents shows 63% support for the three-unitary model—the highest level of backing for any option (p.75). Respondents consistently cited local identity and effective representation as key factors. The proposed boundaries align with historic and social geographies, reinforcing natural community ties and rejecting top-down “area board” models in favour of participatory approaches that keep decision-making close to residents. This mirrors our experience in Godalming and surrounding parishes, where strong place-based identity and civic pride underpin effective local leadership.

Question 7 – Does the proposal support devolution arrangements?

Yes. The three-unitary model provides a clear and coherent footprint for establishing a county-wide Mayoral Combined Authority by 2027. This would enable strategic decision-making on transport, skills, housing, and climate action at the right scale. The Final Proposal (p.84) confirms that this model is intentionally designed to unlock devolution opportunities—something that would not be viable under a fragmented or mega-unitary arrangement. It avoids the governance complexity of the two-unitary option and strengthens the case for a future devolution deal.

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

Yes. Smaller, recognisable unitary areas—working in partnership with empowered parish and town councils—create fertile ground for participatory budgeting, co-designed services, and genuine neighbourhood control over local priorities. The proposed unitaries will operate on a more local scale,

enabling approaches such as neighbourhood forums and devolved service design. The Final Proposal (p.78) sets out six key outcomes to strengthen local engagement:

- Strong civic engagement
- Local decision-making powers
- Visible ward councillors
- Partnership working with town and parish councils
- Citizen involvement through digital democracy
- Community-level performance monitoring

GTC sees significant potential for deeper collaboration between the new unitaries and local councils, supporting truly community-led governance.

Question 9 – Do you have any other comments with regards to the proposed local government reorganisation in Surrey?

Yes. Godalming Town Council welcomes the overall direction of the proposal and offers the following additional observations and recommendations:

1. **Electoral Representation** – Godalming, with a population of approximately 23,500, is currently represented by 11 principal authority councillors, 2 County and 9 Borough — equating to around 1 councillor per 2,100 residents. Under the proposed unitary model, this could fall to just 2 or 3 councillors, increasing the ratio to as high as 1 per 11,750 residents.

This would dilute local democratic access by up to 80%, placing a significantly heavier burden on remaining councillors. Such a shift risks overwhelming elected members with casework, reducing their visibility and responsiveness to residents, and ultimately weakening public trust in democratic institutions.

Moreover, this increased workload may discourage new candidates from standing, particularly those with balancing work, caring duties or accessibility challenges—making it harder to attract and retain a diverse and representative cohort of councillors and risks the sustainability of local representation.

GTC strongly urges that any new governance model must preserve genuine democratic access, ensure manageable workloads for elected members, and support a healthy pipeline of future community leaders.

2. **Parish and Town Council Role** – The reorganisation must affirm the importance of parish and town councils as delivery partners and community leaders. Mechanisms should be embedded for devolved service and asset transfers, underpinned by adequate funding and governance frameworks. GTC welcomes the proposal's recognition of this role and supports the commitment to involving local councils in transition planning.
3. **Governance of Transition** – A formal Transition Programme Board should be established with representation from the parish and town council sector to ensure local knowledge informs delivery and democratic accountability is maintained. The inclusion of a Local Democracy Review Panel is a welcome step toward ensuring legitimacy and continuity.
4. **Financial Stewardship** – Government must actively address the financial legacies of failing authorities—most notably Woking—to ensure that the viability of any successor bodies is not compromised at the outset.
5. **Climate Responsibility** – The reorganisation presents an opportunity to embed climate action and sustainability at the heart of governance and service design. GTC supports the commitment to aligning future unitaries with local delivery of Net Zero plans, which complements our own Climate Action Plan.

Conclusion:

The three-unitary proposal is **realistic, locally supported, financially sound**, and **strategically aligned** with future governance and devolution opportunities. GTC strongly urges the government to support its progression to the next stage and ensure that the principles of localism, accountability and resilience remain at the heart of reform.