

8b. LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION – STRATEGIC COMPARISON OF TWO VS THREE UNITARY MODELS

This comparison considers the **strategic, operational, financial, and representational implications** to assess which position may be more **beneficial for Godalming Town Council (GTC)**.

1. Strategic Vision and Governance Model

Two-Unitary Model

- Views the East–West division as a simplified, scalable, and streamlined governance approach.
- Emphasises clarity, reduced bureaucracy, and a stronger strategic voice in regional and national affairs.
- Supports future devolution through fewer but larger authorities.

Three-Unitary Model

- Advocates for more balanced local leadership across East, North, and West Surrey, maintaining clearer links with NHS footprints, housing markets and transport corridors.
- The response is rooted in spatial logic and functional geography, with strong backing from data in the final proposal.
- Emphasises that the three-unitary structure offers greater alignment with integrated care systems (e.g., Royal Surrey Trust) and a stronger base for strategic devolution via a Combined Authority.

Advantage: *Three-unitary model*, as it aligns with NHS and public service boundaries, enhancing cross-sector strategic coherence.

2. Operational Effectiveness and Service Integration

Two-Unitary Model

- Projects improved integration of county and district services, with simplified governance and economies of scale.
- Risks over-centralisation, particularly in large western or eastern blocks.

Three-Unitary Model

- Identifies specific operational efficiencies, including £22.5 million in savings per year by Year 4 and up to £46 million in transformation savings.
- Suggests nimbler and community-focused structures, with closer ties to residents and fewer layers of hierarchy.
- Highlights that a three-unitary system scored highest (28/30) on comparative evaluation of effectiveness.

Advantage: *Three-unitary model*, for being evidence-backed with tangible costings, operational depth, and a credible roadmap for service transformation.

3. Financial Sustainability

Two-Unitary Model

- Anticipates cost savings from consolidation and service alignment.

- Less specific on how it would handle legacy financial issues, especially large liabilities (e.g. Woking).

Three-Unitary Model

- Explicitly flags stranded debt and legacy issues and proposes a sustainable, decentralised approach.
- Offers detailed financial modelling showing more manageable risk allocation and avoids centralised liability exposure.

Advantage: *Three-unitary model*, due to clearer financial planning and a proactive stance on long-term liabilities.

4. Local Identity and Accountability

Two-Unitary Model

- Aims to preserve identity by embedding localism through parish empowerment.
- However, risks homogenising diverse communities across a wider area.

Three-Unitary Model

- Stronger case made for preserving historic geographies and social cohesion.
- Backed by public consultation (63% support for three-unitary structure), showing resonance with residents.
- Proposes participatory budgeting, digital democracy, and local forums as tools to deepen engagement.

Advantage: *Three-unitary model*, offering better alignment with GTC's focus on preserving community identity and grassroots leadership.

5. Empowerment of Parish and Town Councils

Two-Unitary Model

- Expresses a desire to involve parish councils but lacks mechanisms or commitment structure.

Three-Unitary Model

- Proposes devolved service and asset transfers.
- Calls for formal parish involvement in transition planning and governance (e.g. a Transition Programme Board and Local Democracy Review Panel).
- Recognises the essential civic role of town councils like GTC.

Advantage: *Three-unitary model*, provides concrete measures to uplift first-tier governance and embed subsidiarity.

6. Political Realism and Alignment

Two-Unitary Model

- May align more closely with Surrey County Council's original LGR ambitions.
- Risks alienating borough and district partners, potentially becoming politically divisive.

Three-Unitary Model

- Developed and supported by a coalition of boroughs and districts.
- Builds broader local consensus and is rooted in extensive joint working.
- Demonstrates regional cohesion—aligns with sentiments across Waverley and Guildford areas.

Advantage: *Three-unitary model*, for uniting local partners and enhancing GTC's influence through alignment with prevailing views.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The three-unitary proposal presents a more beneficial and balanced position for Godalming Town Council across all key criteria:

- It offers **greater protection of local identity** and participatory governance.
- Demonstrates **stronger financial resilience** and operational feasibility.
- Provides **a clearer structure for parish empowerment** during and after transition.
- Enjoys **greater public support and regional consensus**, which enhances its political viability.

Recommended Position for GTC:

Godalming Town Council should adopt and endorse the **three-unitary model**. It not only safeguards the interests of Godalming and its residents but also reinforces GTC's commitment to practical, people-centred local governance rooted in tradition and community pride, while being future-facing.