



# STRONG VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

The town & parish council  
offer to Surrey's new unitary  
authorities



# THE BIGGEST CHANGE IN A GENERATION

Local government is undergoing its biggest change in a generation. Across the country, proposals to establish strategic authorities, led by an elected mayor are being developed and implemented. In two-tier areas, local government will reorganise into new unitary councils which will replace existing district, borough and county councils.

Surrey is at the vanguard of this change with one county and eleven district and boroughs reorganising into two unitary authorities. This change presents huge opportunities to reshape how public services are delivered and how local places and people are supported.

As Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) has shown in other parts of the country, with this opportunity comes significant risk.

Risk that services won't meet the needs of different communities; risk that local people feel remote from their new unitary councils; and risk that in a challenging financial environment, amidst huge organisational upheaval, the new unitaries are forced to focus on statutory services and reducing their debt burden leaving little time or funding for the things that matter to local people.

**At a time when there is so much change and uncertainty, town and parish councils are uniquely placed to support this transition, ensuring local people feel heard, supported and are able to live in strong, vibrant communities.**

## Why is this change happening?

In December 2024, the Government published the **English Devolution White Paper** which outlined an ambition for every area in England to establish a strategic authority, led by an elected mayor. It also set out a clear expectation that in two-tier areas, local government would be reorganised into new unitary councils which would replace existing district, borough and county councils.

The White Paper stated this approach would support growth, lead to more efficient public services, better outcomes for residents and improve accountability.

In February 2025, the Minister confirmed that he supported fast-tracked Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) across Surrey and in October 2025, the Government confirmed the county would reorganise into two unitary authorities.

The LGR timetable for Surrey includes elections for new shadow unitary authorities in May 2026 with these authorities 'going live' in April 2027.

# SO, WHAT ARE TOWN & PARISH COUNCILS?

There are a lot of misconceptions about town and parish councils. Vicar of Dibley, Handford Parish Council, tea and biscuit brigades – trust us – we’ve heard the jokes and seen the memes.

But the reality is so different. Highly professionally-run organisations, with qualified clerks; a general power of competence which allows wide-ranging and innovative service delivery; and significant budgets and access to funding which enables us to support local people and create thriving towns and villages that are amongst the most beautiful in the country.

We are running flagship parks, cafes and community centres that provide critical local services. We provide opportunities for local people to get involved in their communities whether that’s volunteering, rewilding green spaces or attending local events – all the things that make people love where they live and feel proud of it.

And these things make a difference – reducing anti-social behaviour, reducing loneliness, improving wellbeing, improving the environment, driving investment and growth and ensuring our communities are resilient in times of crisis.

This might all be happening at a micro-level, but it all adds up - less pressure on the NHS, less pressure on the police and less pressure on council budgets.

And, with the right support we could be doing even more...

## How does the funding work?

Town, parish, community and neighbourhood councils (also known as ‘local councils’) are elected, statutory bodies. They raise a precept each year (a form of council tax) to fund their activities. Larger councils are able to raise over £2 million. In Surrey, the precept ranges from over £1 million to just a few thousand pounds depending on the council.

## But this is not the only funding available to local councils.

In addition to their precept (which has no cap on its annual increase and no requirement for a local referendum to agree changes), local councils are also able to bid for most charitable and non-profit-making trusts, lotteries and organisations. They can borrow from the Public Works Loan Board, establish trading entities, join social enterprise partnerships and generate revenue through commercial activities. They are also able to fundraise and receive donations from the community.

Across the country, there are 10,000 town and parish councils, with over 100,000 councillors which are investing over £2 billion into their communities each year.<sup>1</sup>

£11.1M

Precept forecast to be raised by town & parish councils across Surrey in 2025/26

86

Town and parish councils in Surrey

680+

Local people elected as town and parish councillors



# OUR OFFER TO THE NEW UNITARIES

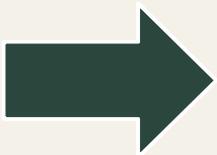
Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) presents a huge opportunity to reshape public services, drive efficiencies, and enable more strategic decision-making. But with this opportunity comes significant risk that services don't meet the needs of different communities and local people feel disempowered and remote from their new councils.

As LGR has shown in other parts of the country, change takes time and often the initial focus for new unitary authorities has been on statutory services and balancing the books - a particularly challenging task where significant debt has been transferred.

This can leave little time or resource for the things that matter to local people and foster strong communities – access to community centres and libraries; beautiful high streets and parks; activities for young people; opportunities to volunteer and socialise; and events and festivals.

With an in-depth knowledge of our local communities, access to funding and the ability to galvanise an army of volunteers, town and parish councils are uniquely placed to support unitary authorities to deliver **better services, more vibrant places and foster stronger communities.**

## BETTER SERVICES



Community centres, libraries, youth services, leisure centres and pools, open space management, play areas, tourist information centres, car parks, museums and galleries, flood mitigation, community buses, litter collection, public toilets

## VIBRANT PLACES



Parks and open spaces, events and festivals, biodiversity projects, allotments, community shops, food markets, sports facilities, skateparks, rewilding green spaces, floral displays, town centre management, community cafes, walking trails

## STRONGER COMMUNITIES



Emergency response support, coordinating volunteers, befriending services, wellbeing services, community pantries, community engagement, community grants, neighbourhood planning, fundraising, community awards, dementia support



# BETTER SERVICES

## SERVICES & SUPPORT TOWN & PARISH COUNCILS CAN PROVIDE

- Community Centres
- Libraries
- Youth Services
- Leisure Centres and Pools
- Play Areas
- Open Space Management
- Managing Community Assets
- Community Buses
- Car Parks
- Bus Shelters
- Ponds and Lakes
- Flood Mitigation
- Historic Buildings
- Public Toilets
- Tourist Information Centres
- Museums and Galleries
- Social Care Support Services
- Footpaths, Signs, Verges
- Litter Collection
- Cemeteries and Church Yards
- Traffic Calming

### BENEFITS

- ✓ **Better quality services** - based on our in-depth understanding of our communities and their needs.
- ✓ **Increased social value** – provides opportunities for local employment and volunteering.
- ✓ **Financial efficiencies** – often we can do it cheaper (and better!). We also have access to multiple funding sources to support delivery.

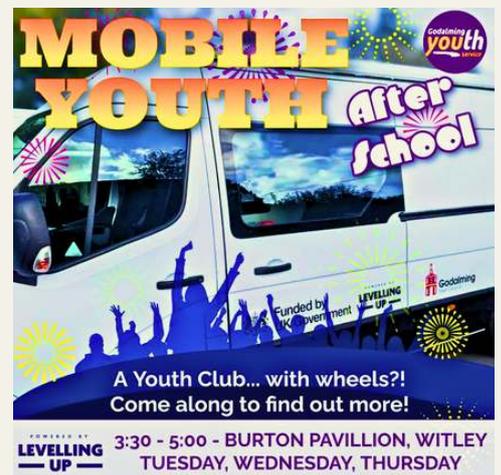
## WINDLESHAM PARISH COUNCIL – FIVE NEW PLAYGROUNDS IN FIVE YEARS



Windlesham Parish Council sees investment in place as being key to creating strong communities. Over the last five years, the Council has replaced all five playgrounds across the parish, providing safe spaces where young families can socialise and children can play together. The playgrounds include multiple accessible roundabouts and sensory boards, ensuring that children of all abilities can play, interact, and feel part of their community. Recognising the importance of staying active, the Council has also installed two outdoor gyms. These facilities are more than exercise equipment - they bring people together from different backgrounds and make fitness an integral part of the community.

## GODALMING TOWN COUNCIL – YOUTH SERVICES

Following cuts to youth services and reports of increasing anti-social behaviour, Godalming Town Council consulted with local people to see if they were willing to step into the gap and support young people. Feedback was resoundingly positive, so the Council raised its precept, secured government investment, collected donations from the public and was able to open a dedicated youth centre at Broadwater in 2022. A mobile youth service was also established so young people across the parish could access services. The service, which is run by qualified youth workers has proved a resounding success in providing safe places for young people to socialise, have fun and learn new skills. It has also reduced reported anti-social behaviour and provided a safe space for many vulnerable young people.



# VIBRANT PLACES

## SERVICES & SUPPORT TOWN & PARISH COUNCILS CAN PROVIDE

- Parks and Open Spaces
- Events and Festivals
- Arts and Cultural Centres
- Skateparks
- Outdoor Gyms
- Town Centre Management
- Markets
- Community Cafes
- Community Shops
- Sports Facilities
- Floral Displays
- Walking Trails
- Rewilding Green Spaces
- Biodiversity Projects
- Tree Planting
- Allotments
- Street Lights
- Christmas Lights and Concerts

### BENEFITS

- ✓ **Improved wellbeing** - more opportunities for local people to get out in nature, exercise and socialise.
- ✓ **Reduced anti-social behaviour** – activities and dedicated space for young people. Pride in place.
- ✓ **High quality environment** – harnessing our community to protect and enhance our environment for future generations.

## FARNHAM TOWN COUNCIL – THE PLACE TO BE FOR EVENTS & FESTIVALS



Farnham Town Council transforms the town centre each September with its Food and Drink festival, one of the South East's biggest one-day events. With over 100 stalls, food and drink demos from celebrity chefs, information talks and live music, the event attracted over 18,000 people in 2024. The festival forms part of an extensive programme of activities which is overseen by the Town Council's Events Team who work with partner organisations and volunteers to plan and deliver events. This financially-sustainable programme includes Farmers Markets, Antiques & Vintage Markets, Artist & Makers Markets, Christmas Market, Sustainability Festival, Walking Festival, Lantern Festival, Craft Month, Literary Festival, VE day, Summer Carnival, and Music in the Vineyard events.

## HORLEY TOWN COUNCIL – CAFÉ IN THE PARK

Horley Town Council manages some of the largest parks and green spaces in Surrey. This includes Court Lodge Fields, a 14-acre space with popular football pitches, playgrounds and a sports pavilion. It also runs the town's flagship 6.6-acre Horley Recreation Ground where the Council managed the delivery of a major capital project to construct a café with public toilets. This project was funded through the Public Works Loan Board and has transformed the recreation ground which also includes playgrounds, a skatepark, multi-use games area, ornamental gardens, tennis courts and hosts events throughout the year.



# STRONGER COMMUNITIES

## SERVICES & SUPPORT TOWN & PARISH COUNCILS CAN PROVIDE

- Emergency Response Support
- Coordinating Volunteers
- Befriending Services
- Wellbeing Services
- Job Clubs
- Community Energy Projects
- Fundraising
- Community Grants
- Community Awards
- IT Classes
- Community Wifi
- Community Rangers
- Community Consultation
- Community Representation
- Dementia-Friendly Groups
- Affordable and Social Housing
- Community Engagement
- Feedback on Planning

### BENEFITS

- ✓ **Improved community resilience** – greater community resilience in times of crisis.
- ✓ **Less pressure on public services** – less pressure on NHS, blue lights and council services, particularly social care.
- ✓ **Greater resident satisfaction** – in their councils, politicians and a greater willingness to support their community.

## WONERSH PARISH COUNCIL – BIODIVERSITY & FLOOD MITIGATION



Wonersh Parish Council manages over 40 acres of green space including greens, commons and playgrounds. In 2018, the Council took over grass cutting and tree management from the borough council following concern that the large contractor who did mass cuts several times a year was damaging trees and wild areas. The Council engaged a local farmer and local business to manage the cuts and worked with the Surrey Wildlife Trust to develop mowing maps to create a variety of habitats. Not only has this approach halved the cost of grass cutting but it has allowed safe hibernation for invertebrates and seen an increase in their numbers.

The Council has also taken over management of ditches on the common and uses a local contractor with a mini-digger which is less damaging to the environment (digging is scheduled to avoid the Spring amphibian migrations). A local hydrology engineer volunteered their time to map the flows of ditches and water catchments so the causes of flooding could be better understood. The Parish Council also engaged with private landowners and the County Council and supported them to clear ditches and drains on their land. Since this work was carried out there has been no flooding making the village more resilient to extreme weather.





# DOING IT RIGHT IN OTHER PLACES

Surrey is at the vanguard of the country's largest reorganisation of local government since 1974, with more than a third of England's population – about 20 million people affected. All eyes are now on Surrey to see how this change is managed and to follow its lead.

Whilst not on the same scale, devolution has occurred in other parts of the country in recent years and there is much to learn.

## Cornwall Council

Long seen as a benchmark in its approach to 'double-devolution', Cornwall Council has implemented a successful framework which has empowered town and parish councils, improved local communities, enabled valuable community assets to be retained and reduced costs.

- **Devolution Framework** sets out how Cornwall Council works with town and parish councils.
- **Dedicated Devolution Team** within Cornwall Council which supports town and parish councils.
- **Devolution Board** which meets monthly and reviews proposals from town and parish councils for further devolved responsibilities.
- **Agency Agreements** with town and parish councils setting out their responsibilities.
- **Service Level Agreement with the Cornwall Association of Local Councils** to enable proactive partnership working.
- **Community Networks** so Cornwall Council can effectively engage with the 200+ town and parish councils.

# £196M

In savings to Cornwall Council through 'double-devolution' approach <sup>2</sup>

# 200+

Town and parish councils in Cornwall. 100% parished <sup>2</sup>

# 400+

Services and assets transferred to local councils including car parks, historic buildings, libraries and parks <sup>3</sup>

# 2009

Unitary since 2009 after the County and 6 district and boroughs merged <sup>4</sup>



# WORKING TOGETHER TO DELIVER THE BEST OUTCOMES

LGR presents a huge opportunity for town and parish and unitary councils to work together to deliver better, more cost-effective public services; protect valuable community assets; access funding and resources to create better places; and improve outcomes for local people. To achieve this, we propose:

## A. TOWN & PARISH 'DEALS'

1. **Devolution Framework** which sets out how town and parish councils and unitary authorities work together including processes for service delivery; partnership working; devolved funding; governance; and asset transfers.
2. **Local Deals** which set out the specific devolved responsibilities for each town and parish council and are agreed annually.

## B. DEDICATED SUPPORT & ENGAGEMENT

3. **Dedicated Devolution Team** within the new unitary authorities with responsibility for supporting town and parish councils and maximizing opportunities for double-devolution.
4. **Devolution Board** with representation from the unitary authority, SALC and town and parish councils and provides an opportunity for new double-devolution proposals to be considered and best practice to be shared.
5. **Devolution Networks** that allow clusters of town and parish councils to meet regularly with the unitary authority and provide feedback on local issues and agree actions.
6. **Dedicated Portfolio Holder** responsible for supporting double-devolution.
7. **Devolution Leadership Meetings** between SALC and unitary leaders on monthly basis to discuss key issues and opportunities.

## C. CREATION OF NEW TOWN & PARISH COUNCILS

8. **Programme to establish new town & parish councils** in unparished areas to enable local representation, decision-making, service delivery and vital assets to be preserved across the county.

### The time for action is now!

As devolution in Shropshire, Northamptonshire and Wiltshire has shown, an early, proactive approach is key to enabling - **seamless service delivery; vital community assets to be retained; and new local councils to be established** so residents across the county are able to live in strong, vibrant communities.

**We would therefore recommend that a Shadow Devolution Board is set up immediately to:**

- ➔ Draft a Devolution Framework, Local Deal templates and proposals for Devolution Networks.
- ➔ Review community assets suitable for transfer and support the process of transfers.
- ➔ Agree and publish a programme for new town and parish councils to be established and support Community Governance Reviews.

The Board should have senior officer and member representation from Surrey County Council, SALC, town and parish councils, and other key local authority LGR leads.

# ECONOMIC & SOCIAL BENEFITS

A SINGLE TOWN & PARISH COUNCIL CAN DELIVER IN ONE YEAR...

**£115,000**

Health and social care savings generated from access to parks and open spaces that allows 500 people to do 30-149 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity (such as brisk walking) per week. <sup>6</sup>

**£960,000**

Benefit to the taxpayer from a town council investing £300,000 per year in youth services which enables improved physical and mental health and a reduction in crime. <sup>5</sup>

**£90,000+**

Health and social care savings generated by a befriending service which prevents 15 older people from feeling severely lonely. <sup>7</sup>

**£85,000+**

Avoided cost to the NHS by providing volunteering activities that prevent 100 people feeling lonely which results in improved physical and mental wellbeing and reduced contact with health services. In the UK, 4 in 10 people identify as being lonely at least some of the time. <sup>8</sup>

**£60,360**

Economic benefit generated by 30 volunteers who pick up litter based on replacement cost (i.e. avoided cost of paying staff) and wellbeing benefits experienced by volunteers. <sup>9</sup>





# ABOUT US

The **Surrey Association of Local Councils (SALC)** is a not-for-profit, membership organisation and the collective voice of our 83 member Parish and Town Councils across Surrey. We champion the vital role of local councils and ensure our members have the tools, knowledge and representation needed to shape thriving and resilient communities.

As part of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) network, we support councils to deliver effective, transparent, and accountable governance. We provide strategic advice on legislation, finance, planning, and governance, alongside high-quality training and development for councillors and clerks.

We work in partnership with all levels of government and the voluntary sector to achieve the best outcomes for Surrey's Parish and Town Councils and the 275,000+ electorate they represent.

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**References:** 1. [National Association of Local Councils](#) 2. [UK Government](#) 3. [Local Government Association](#) 4. [Cornwall Council](#) 5. [UK Youth](#) 6. [Sport England](#) 7. [Centre for Social Justice](#) 8. [University of Exeter](#) 9. [UK Government](#)

All data and facts included within the document were correct to our knowledge as at October 2025.

**SALC would like to thank the councils which contributed toward and funded this project.**

**THE GOOD GOV CO**

Public Sector Specialists

This report was prepared for SALC by The Good Gov Co in association with Matthews Associates (UK) Ltd. We are public sector specialists who understand how government works and how to get things done. Collaboration is at the heart of what we do and we know how to bring people together from across the public and private sectors to drive innovation and deliver change.

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