

CABINET MEMBER DECISION

Decision:

Petition - Unitary Status

(i) Details of petition

A petition of 5,288 signatories was submitted and presented by Hannah Dalton.

The petition read:

“Currently the delivery of local council services in Surrey are via a two tier system split between Surrey County Council (SCC) and the 11 Borough and District Councils. The proposed Unitary business case would abolish the Borough and District councils and develop the County Council as a single council managing all services for Surrey’s 1.2 million residents resulting in: - A council where a Cabinet of 12 elected representatives or a single Mayor make decisions - Decision makers with scant knowledge of the local area, let alone any real concerns or interests in the impact of their decision making. The response of the 11 Borough and District Councils to the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted how critical it is to have in place a local authority which has a strong relationship with the community it serves. If the Unitary business case is successful, at a time when our local authorities should be focused on economic recovery and supporting residents through recession, it will instead be engaged in implementing a radical restructuring of local government.”

Written Response of the Leader of the Council

As I have said previously and consistently, what is most important to me, beyond any structural change or governance, is our residents, their priorities and giving them more influence over their own communities. I want Surrey to be a uniquely special place where we address health inequalities and grow a sustainable economy from which everyone can benefit; that has a greener future and empowered communities and where no one is left behind.

Surrey County Council, working with its partners, has over the past year amply demonstrated a real and knowledgeable concern for and strong relationships with local communities and residents. Sitting as full Council, Cabinet and Scrutiny Committees, with Divisional Members and staff working tirelessly in people’s homes, neighbourhoods, villages, and towns, we have more than risen to the challenge for our 1.2m residents across the County. We will continue to do so as we move from tackling the pandemic to focusing on economic recovery and building back better. The Residents of Surrey want local government to deliver the best services they can and to keep council tax as low as possible, but the current two tier system can often cause confusion for residents who are unclear as to which authority is ultimately responsible.

Further to the Minister’s announcement on 3 July 2020 that there was to be a Devolution and Recovery White Paper in the Autumn, I wrote to the Government to set out our ambition for Surrey and our wish to engage with Government on the reforms needed to ensure its achievement.

As a consequence of not being invited by the Government to submit a business case for change and the urgent priority of tackling the pandemic in Surrey, I have made it crystal clear that Surrey County Council stopped all work on submitting a business case in October 2020.

The Leaders of the 11 District and Borough Councils in Surrey commissioned a report from KPMG which recognised that the current system of local government is not sustainable. As well as exploring unitarisation for Surrey, it identified a number of areas where authorities could deliver savings through greater collaboration. Indeed it has become very apparent during the current budget process that many District and Boroughs have insufficient funds to deliver their services and many are having to use reserves which cannot provide a long term solution.

The County Council has a strong track record in recent years of transforming and improving services and driving out efficiencies in service delivery and is ready to engage with any proposals from the District and Borough Councils that will deliver better and improved services to our residents and will potentially ultimately reduce their council tax.

Further comments by the Leader of the Council:

It was the Government's decision not to progress with the Surrey County Council submission and unless the Government changes its position then no further work has been or will be undertaken by the Council on this issue. If the Government does invite a business case, then there will be a full public consultation and it will be down to residents to decide if they want any change to the local government structure.

The position of the boroughs and districts is simple in that there needs to be better quality and lower costs services which may lead to a reduction in Council Tax.

(ii) Reasons for decision

Not applicable.

(iii) Details of any alternative options considered and rejected

None.

(iv) Details of any consultation and representations received not included in the published report

None.

Conflicts of Interest and any Dispensations Granted

(Any conflict of interest declared by any other Cabinet Member consulted in relation to the decision to be recorded and any dispensations granted by the Audit and Governance Committee)

None.

Decision taken by:

- (i) Name: Mr Tim Oliver
- (ii) Portfolio: Leader of the Council

Date of Decision: 18 March 2021

Date of Publication of Record of Decision: 18 March 2021

Date decision effective (i.e. 5 working days after date of publication of record of decision unless subject to call-in by the Environment and Transport Select Committee):

Not applicable