

**MINUTES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNTY COUNCIL  
HELD AT WOODHATCH PLACE, 11 COCKSHOT HILL, REIGATE, SURREY, RH2  
8EF, ON 8 JANUARY 2025 COMMENCING AT 10.00 AM, THE COUNCIL BEING  
CONSTITUTED AS FOLLOWS:**

Saj Hussain (Chairman)  
Tim Hall (Vice-Chairman)

Maureen Attewell	Eber Kington
Ayesha Azad	Rachael Lake BEM
Catherine Baart	Victor Lewanski
Steve Bax	David Lewis (Cobham)
John Beckett	* David Lewis (Camberley West)
Jordan Beech	Scott Lewis
Luke Bennett	r Andy Lynch
Amanda Boote	Andy MacLeod
Dennis Booth	Ernest Mallett MBE
Harry Boparai	r Michaela Martin
* Liz Bowes	Jan Mason
Natalie Bramhall	Steven McCormick
Helyn Clack	Cameron McIntosh
Stephen Cooksey	Julia McShane
Clare Curran	Sinead Mooney
Nick Darby	Carla Morson
Fiona Davidson	Bernie Muir
Paul Deach	Mark Nuti
Kevin Deanus	John O'Reilly
Jonathan Essex	Tim Oliver OBE
Robert Evans OBE	* Rebecca Paul
* Chris Farr	George Potter
Paul Follows	Catherine Powell
Will Forster	Penny Rivers
John Furey	John Robini
Matt Furniss	* Becky Rush
Angela Goodwin	* Joanne Sexton
Jeffrey Gray	Lance Spencer
David Harmer	* Lesley Steeds
Nick Harrison	* Mark Sugden
Edward Hawkins	Richard Tear
* Marisa Heath	Ashley Tilling
Trefor Hogg	Chris Townsend
Robert Hughes	Liz Townsend
Jonathan Hulley	Denise Turner-Stewart
Rebecca Jennings-Evans	Hazel Watson
Frank Kelly	Jeremy Webster
Riasat Khan	Buddhi Weerasinghe
Robert King	Fiona White
	Keith Witham

\*absent

r = Remote Attendance

### **1/25 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE [Item 1]**

Apologies for absence were received from Liz Bowes, Chris Farr, Marisa Heath, David Lewis (Camberley West), Andy Lynch (remote), Michaela Martin (remote), Rebecca Paul, Becky Rush, Joanne Sexton, Lesley Steeds, Mark Sugden.

### **2/25 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST [Item 2]**

There were none.

### **3/25 ENGLISH DEVOLUTION WHITE PAPER [Item 3]**

The Monitoring Officer set out the legal position in respect of the Council's role. She noted that the responsibility to respond to the letter from the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution dated 16 December 2024 and the White Paper, was the Leader and the Cabinet's as set out in the Local Government 2000, the Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations 2000 and Part 3 of the Council's Constitution. Regarding the May 2025 county elections, she clarified that the Secretary of State had the powers to postpone or change the year of the election, the Council does not have those powers.

The Leader noted that he tabled the report to the Council to enable Members to express their views. The Government sought to have universal coverage of Strategic Authorities and would legislate accordingly. The main issue concerned what was in residents' best interests, a greater understanding was needed of the benefits that mayoral devolution might bring. Devolution would enable policies to be tailored to local situations and decisions to be made by those who know the area best, communities would have a greater say. The White Paper outlined that the most powers would be granted to mayors and a long-term investment fund would be available. Mayoral Strategic Authorities would happen so it was crucial to engage early with the Government. Residents would be consulted on how Surrey's twelve local authorities should be reorganised and he would request that the Government writes off the debt faced by some of Surrey's district and borough councils.

The Leader noted that at yesterday's meeting with the leaders of Surrey's district and borough councils, there was agreement that unitarisation would happen and they agreed to set up a cross-party steering group to work on the interim submission that all two-tier councils need to make to the Government by March 2025. The Minister indicated in his letter that he would lay secondary legislation to postpone local elections and securing a place on the Government's Devolution Priority Programme would provide clarity. The response to the White Paper was an Executive function, the Extraordinary Cabinet meeting would reflect on the points made before making a decision. More could be secured for residents through cross-party and stakeholder engagement, to shape a solution rather than a solution being imposed on Surrey.

Members made the following comments:

- Noted that the leaders of Surrey's district and borough councils met with the Leader yesterday and issued a joint statement agreeing that local government reform was necessary and accepted that a form of unitary council combination would make sense.
- However the haste and lack of a plan was concerning, the Government was not asking two-tier councils to cancel elections. Everything the Leader was suggesting could happen whilst holding the May 2025 county elections.

- Queried what the benefits were of acting hastily, defined intervention on debt and Adult Social Care were needed.
- Called for change to the structure of local government and its funding, the demand for children's and adults' social care must be addressed, unmet needs were not being resolved, more social housing was needed.
- Highlighted that many councils in England had unserviceable debt such as Woking Borough Council, the White Paper did not address that.
- Had undertaken a detailed analysis of Surrey - which was sent to the Cabinet - and the White Paper fell short of creating a successful long-term solution, it was unclear how the Government would 'rewire the relationship between town and parish councils and principal Local Authorities' as set out in the White Paper.
- Noted that the Council report did not weigh up the advantages and disadvantages, and set out the unilateral decision to be part of the Devolution Priority Programme.
- Noted that clarity had not been provided on whether byelections could be held should the May 2025 county elections be postponed; queried how that would be addressed if Members wished to step down.
- Had written to the Leader to ask the Government for a less aggressive timescale, allowing for May 2025 elections and having unitary council elections in 2027/28.
- Welcomed the letter and believed that the Council should grasp the opportunity to obtain greater powers for Surrey.
- Stressed that local government reorganisation was needed to make decision-making more joined up and efficient, the current structures were outdated. In the digital era there was no need for twelve councils in Surrey, reducing overheads and costs were needed rather than cutting services to residents.
- Noted that Surrey needed to catch up with the other authorities that had reorganised, delaying devolution could lead to uncertainty, staffing and contracts needed to be considered.
- Noted that the request to postpone elections would enable the Council to work with Surrey's district and borough councils, other organisations and residents.
- Noted that the decision being taken by the Cabinet and interim submission to be made in March, were in the Council's current term so it had the democratic legitimacy to do so.
- Noted that delaying the elections was part of the standard process in delivering local government reorganisation.
- Noted surprise by the emotive language being used when the Government had made it clear that councils were not being forced to act, for several years Surrey Conservatives had pushed for a unitary council but had not consulted and now the Leader sought time to consult with Surrey's district and borough councils.
- Emphasised that voting in the May 2025 county elections would be on a variety of issues, residents want to vote on the Council's performance and failures. Holding elections would give the next administration the mandate to act.
- Noted that the Leader was responding to the Government's request, Surrey must engage now so as not to have a sub-optimal solution being imposed.
- Noted that postponing the elections made sense, the current Members had collective experience of how Strategic Authorities run.
- Noted that elections cost around £2.5 million and if those proceed in May the term of office would be short and followed by elections to the shadow unitary authority, the pre-election period would affect the Council's work.
- Supported unitaries if those improve democracy and localise services, however the proposal without any indication of the number of unitaries risked centralising services.
- Noted that the Council must negotiate with the Government regarding Woking Borough Council's debt, boundary choices should be focused on sensible geography.

- Noted that the rush should not be towards two unitaries as the optimum 500,000 population size was based on more urban areas, Surrey should start with three unitaries planned with Surrey's district and borough councils.
- Noted that the mayoral proposals must consider a wider area as transport links and health services crossed the border, strategic economic planning was sub-regional, consultation with neighbours was needed.
- Stressed that a proper public consultation was needed, the May 2025 county elections should take place and the Council should submit its plans in the autumn co-signed with Surrey's district and borough councils. The process must not be rushed and must be co-owned by residents.
- Noted that the Government's local government reform was not devolution but the concentration of powers in mayors, localism was not favoured. Twenty Labour councillors had resigned in Broxtowe Borough Council against the Government's imposed centralism.
- Was surprised by Surrey's reaction to the Government's imposition, the Leader and the Government hastily pursued devolution without having the electoral mandate to do so, Members were not able to scrutinise the decision. Strong leaders should fight for what is right, residents must be consulted now and able to exercise their democratic right by voting in the May 2025 county elections.
- Had lost count of the number of times residents had asked which council was responsible for what service, it was confusing and hard to navigate.
- Emphasised that the Government sought to have empowered and simplified structures across England, to ensure all could benefit and to ensure the efficient running of public services. Devolution would provide: clarity to residents and meet their needs, economies of scale, new powers and funding.
- Stressed the desire for Surrey to be at the front of the queue, to accelerate towards an optimum local government structure.
- Noted that the Liberal Democrats wanted to empower local government through devolution, however there was no consensus for the Council to deliver its vision unilaterally, having not engaged with partners. Residents had the right to hold those in power to account, postponing the elections was undemocratic as there was no certainty if and when devolution would happen.
- Feared that the Council would negotiate poorly in its rush to be first, three unitaries were not being pushed and so one large unitary could be the outcome and more residents could be shackled with Woking Borough Council's debt.
- Noted concern that devolution could distract from addressing key issues.
- Noted that the authority would lose £50 million in the Fair Funding Review, change was essential. The Government's devolution criteria was fixed and the Council's goal was to ensure that devolution offers residents with more local decision-making with less bureaucracy, delivering better value for money.
- Noted that those using the matter for electioneering were doing a disservice to residents, devolution came with a nationally defined process.
- Noted the Redcliffe-Maud Report in the 1960s for local government reform, the matter had been discussed over one decade ago at the Council, the matter was included in Labour's 2017 manifesto, and was set out in 2019 by the previous government and a plan in 2021 outlined three unitaries.
- Devolution was not a new idea being hastily imposed, a modern democracy was in residents' best interests. The White Paper outlines that devolution was vital to provide the change that residents deserve and that could only be achieved if the public knows what local leaders are empowered to do and are accountable.
- Noted that the current mix of election timetables in Surrey was confusing.
- Noted that the devolution being offered was simply a return to a fraction of local government's powers from the 1980s.

- Noted that what devolution means in practice had not been outlined, the White Paper was clear that cancelling the 2025 county elections was unnecessary; clarified that the pre-election period does not stop work from being done.
- Members did not have the mandate beyond their four-year term from residents for the decisions on devolution that need to be taken.
- Welcomed more powers to town and parish councils, however the sizes of the populations they served varied and how services would work at that level needed to be worked out.
- Emphasised the urgent need for the Council to do more on the environment and health inequalities as outlined in the White Paper. Stronger and more strategic approaches across a larger area and more powers were needed.
- Noted that the current approach to planning was piecemeal and resources were inadequate to deal with developers. Some pockets in Surrey had significant health inequalities, long waits for treatment and shorter life expectancies.
- Noted the reality that the Council and Surrey's district and borough councils would not survive, to be replaced by a new structure and framework.
- Noted that if the costly 2025 county elections would go ahead it would be a zombie council in place for only a year when elections would take place for the new shadow unitary authority. The Council had a duty to get on and work out what would be best for residents in terms of the number of unitaries.
- Noted that true devolution was about placing responsibility at the local level, for example the former devolved town councils had an accountable town mayor.
- Noted that the White Paper focused on centralisation as the Strategic Authority would replace the current two-tier system with another.
- Noted that time was needed for consultation with neighbouring counties for a regional south eastern Strategic Authority.
- Noted that the Leader's letter did not address the flaws in the White Paper and did not reference the Council having listened to the views of residents.
- Noted that as was the situation in 1972 when the government issued an edict, it was the case that the current Government has issued an edict.
- Noted that the Council would maintain its authority for a year and struggle with dealing with challenges such as staff retention, to be replaced by a shadow unitary authority whereby a large number of staff would move over to that.
- Noted that unitarisation and local government reorganisation had been looked at for the past few decades, noted that there was no agreement on the matter due to differing geography and politics in Surrey; the Minister would end up deciding.
- Welcomed that the Leader had organised the meeting despite not needing to.
- Welcomed the Government's commitment to transferring power to the people, which would unlock growth to Surrey and the South East. The functions and powers were fragmented in the current system which was frustrating, slowing decision-making and making the commissioning of services more costly and staff recruitment was a challenge.
- Opposed a single unitary and favoured three unitaries, noting the differences in geography and economic output between different boroughs, due to the funding formulas some deprived areas would miss out if unitarisation is gotten wrong.
- Welcomed the courage shown by the new Government in transferring powers to communities but disagreed with the need to postpone elections.
- Highlighted the legal precedent for delaying elections in Surrey, the 2020 elections were delayed because of the Covid-19 pandemic; the Council had a mandate to do what was right for residents.
- Stressed that Surrey would be left behind if it did not cooperate with the Government's political will to bring about the changes swiftly, therefore the Council sought to be part of the Devolution Priority Programme.

- Asked the Group Leaders to work with the Leader through the cross-party steering group to co-design a plan that works for residents, and to design the decentralisation of power to town and parish councils.
- Supported unitaries, there were nearly 600 councillors in Surrey which was only a few less than the number of Members of Parliament nation-wide.
- Noted concern in postponing the elections as Members were voted in for four years; worried about mayors being the right solution.
- Had issued a regular newsletter to residents which included a section stating which council did what.
- Urged the Government to drive forward its devolution agenda and to not leave Surrey in paralysis. It was ludicrous to spend money on a costly election, that money could be used in the budget to fund vital services.
- Noted that the Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey (PCC) elections were postponed by a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Noted that in the 1930s Epsom and Ewell became a borough council, it voted against joining London; residents were given a voice which they were now being denied.
- Noted that it did not matter which council was responsible for what but how well they delivered services. Surrey should not have a political mayor, the Government was blackmailing councils to become unitaries by offering them additional funding, why not give that money to councils to assist them now.
- Noted that each time there was local government reorganisation there was always an extension to the existing authority to be replaced. Some of the arguments posed by opposition Members lacked substance and were spurious.
- Noted that Surrey had already experienced some devolution having been granted the responsibility for economic development.
- Noted that regarding yesterday's meeting, the Leader failed to mention that all the leaders of Surrey's district and borough councils agreed that the May 2025 county elections should take place and rejected the Council Leader's proposals; queried whether the offer of collaboration was genuine.
- Noted that the Leader had the right level of experience and integrity to provide the needed strategic leadership that was vital during times of upheaval.
- Noted that the Council had two choices: postpone and let the current Members with experience progress the next stage or hold elections where new Members would quickly come up with a plan, with elections for the new authority to be held the following year. Having one set of elections would be clearer.
- Noted that officers needed to be taken into consideration in the time of turmoil.
- Welcomed the consensus in the need for local government reorganisation as if done properly it would help address the crises faced nationally and by Surrey such as: debt, inadequate funding, planning, social care, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
- Called for a more reasonable timescale, such a restructure required public support and there was scepticism particularly in postponing the elections, called for cooperation between the Council and Surrey's district and borough councils.
- Noted the frequent complaints made by parish councillors that they were ignored and underfunded despite being the closest link to residents, however the coverage of town and parish councils across Surrey was uneven.
- Supported the Government's desire for the 'strengthening expectations on engagement and community voice' as set out in the White Paper and supported the need for a more holistic approach to house building and infrastructure, unitaries would assist with the creation of a regional housing strategy.
- Noted that moving to a unitary authority would not necessarily solve the problem about where to go with an issue, the move would be to a higher level authority potentially with a mayor, time was needed to discuss the number of unitaries.

- Referring to being a councillor on the only debt-free borough council in Surrey, asked how he could explain to residents that they would take on the liabilities from other district and borough councils, Government help was needed.
- Noted concern about the democratic deficit of having one unitary in the north with half the population nearest to London and having no town and parish councils.
- Noted that residents put their trust in their elected Member concerning strategic matters, Surrey had never had a fair deal on finances from central government.
- Noted that the figures on county election costs commented on in the meeting were double of that noted in a recent news article by the Leader.
- Noted that despite unitaries having been discussed for a long time in Surrey, discussions with Surrey's district and borough councils and the town and parish councils had only started recently; what devolution would look like was unclear.
- Noted that the postponement of the May 2025 county elections was a choice.
- Hoped that future elections would not be cancelled simply due to their expense, democracy was invaluable.
- Queried whether it could be guaranteed that the May 2025 county elections would be delayed for one year, if not then it was a cancellation and not a postponement and that denied residents the right to vote.
- Referred to the former South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA) which did deliver and was collaborative, then noted the move to South East Councils (SEC) which had joint meetings and joint contracts saved costs. There were twelve economic development functions across the county by each council and that was not good value for money.
- Was surprised that the debate had not focused more on the positives of devolution such as efficiencies, noted the need to stop being political and collaborate to achieve positive outcomes for residents.
- Noted concern in the speed of having to move towards reorganisation, central government formulates policy but does not know what it takes to deliver that.
- Highlighted the large transformation programme in the Children, Families and Lifelong Learning directorate, that was moving slowly, there was a SEND process review which had been underway for eighteen months and residents had not reported benefits; change took time.
- Stressed that the pace of reorganisation would disrupt the Council's work underway, it had a responsibility to improve the lives of residents including those most deprived and children with Additional Needs.
- Noted that local government reorganisation was the most significant change facing the Council and Surrey's district and borough councils, was disappointed that the previous Conservative government did not progress devolution.
- Believed that a single unitary authority would be too large to serve residents efficiently, two authorities would be optimal.
- Noted that Manchester had reaped huge benefits from unitarisation, it had a new integrated transport system called the Bee Network, through its elected mayor and streamlined structure it made such progress possible.
- Believed that Surrey could deliver such cohesive decision-making, local government in Surrey was outdated and that frustrated residents.
- Thanked the Leader for his dedication to residents and work to smoothly and intelligently undertake the reorganisation process.

The Leader thanked Members for the courteous way that they debated the important decision. He noted that the letter to the Minister would be in his capacity as the elected Leader. He was not surprised that the opposition had focused on the county elections, he noted that the focus must be on engaging with residents and key stakeholders. Regarding the proposed letter, he referred to the paragraph which referenced the usual size of Mayoral Strategic Authorities and need to also engage with neighbouring

authorities on forming such a model. He would amend his proposed letter to add into the second sentence of the first paragraph of the second page that the Council will request the Government to write off those debts. Referred to the Minister's letter whereby he intends to invite unitary proposals in January 2025 from all councils in two-tier areas, interim plans would be sought by March 2025, if elections do not take place a full submission was required in May 2025.

The Leader noted the limited period for resident consultation if the county elections take place in May 2025, the pre-election period would start in late March preventing engagement, a full submission would be required in the autumn. The first meeting of the cross-party steering group would take place on Friday, feedback from key stakeholders was vital. If the Council is not part of the Devolution Priority Programme, the May 2025 county elections would take place, district and borough council elections would take place in 2026, followed by shadow unitary authority elections. There would be uncertainty for staff and a lack of clarity for residents. Surrey's councils would not be net beneficiaries of the Government's proposals for redistributing funding. He did not like the Government's timetable but emphasised the need to engage and act now.

#### **Recommendation A:**

Under Standing Order 28.1, ten Members demanded a recorded vote, the recommendation was put to the vote with 42 Members voting For, 22 voting Against and 6 Abstentions.

The following Members voted For it:

Maureen Attewell, Ayesha Azad, Catherine Baart, Steve Bax, Jordan Beech, Luke Bennett, Natalie Bramhall, Helyn Clack, Clare Curran, Paul Deach, Kevin Deanus, Robert Evans OBE, John Furey, Matt Furniss, Tim Hall, David Harmer, Edward Hawkins, Trefor Hogg, Robert Hughes, Jonathan Hulley, Saj Hussain, Rebecca Jennings-Evans, Frank Kelly, Riasat Khan, Robert King, Rachael Lake BEM, Victor Lewanski, David Lewis (Cobham), Ernest Mallett MBE, Jan Mason, Cameron McIntosh, Sinead Mooney, Bernie Muir, Mark Nuti, John O'Reilly, Tim Oliver OBE, Richard Tear, Denise Turner-Stewart, Hazel Watson, Jeremy Webster, Buddhi Weerasinghe, Keith Witham.

The following Members voted Against it:

John Beckett, Amanda Boote, Dennis Booth, Harry Boparai, Stephen Cooksey, Jonathan Essex, Paul Follows, Will Forster, Angela Goodwin, Jeffrey Gray, Nick Harrison, Eber Kington, Andy MacLeod, Julia McShane, Carla Morson, George Potter, Penny Rivers, John Robini, Lance Spencer, Ashley Tilling, Liz Townsend, Fiona White.

The following Members Abstained:

Nick Darby, Fiona Davidson, Scott Lewis, Steven McCormick, Catherine Powell, Chris Townsend.

Therefore the recommendation was carried, it was **RESOLVED** that:

- A. Noted that the Leader will respond to the government expressing this council's interest in pursuing a joint programme of devolution and local government reorganisation (as set out in the draft letter in Annex 2), noting that acceptance onto this programme may lead to the postponement of the 2025 county elections.



**Recommendation B:**

The recommendation was put to the vote and was carried, it was **RESOLVED** that:

- B. Noted that the decision to respond to the letter from the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution, dated the 16 December 2024, is an Executive function.

[Meeting ended at: 12.05 pm]

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Chair