

Dear Minister,

RE: Devolution and Local Government Reform for Surrey

I welcome the clarification contained in the English Devolution White Paper of the Government's commitment to transfer power closer to communities, helping all places in England to realise their full potential. I share the Paper's ambitions for boosting the country's economic prospects and reforms to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of our public services.

In March 2024, Surrey County Council agreed a Level 2 Devolution Framework Agreement and implementation is well underway. It is clear to me that reforming the structure of local government is an enabler to unlocking the full benefits of further devolution for the county. This was recognised at meetings of our Council and Cabinet on 8 January. The Leaders of all councils in Surrey also met on 7 January to discuss how we can collectively harness the opportunities presented through the White Paper.

The current two-tier structure of local government in Surrey, comprising 12 sovereign local authorities, is fragmented and in a number of areas inefficient which inevitably diverts resources away from delivering the services that residents rightly expect. I believe reorganisation would provide more streamlined and cost-effective services for Surrey, enabling us to achieve further efficiencies and deliver better outcomes for our residents and communities.

Local government reorganisation is a crucial stepping stone to further devolution for Surrey, to enable our communities to take more control of their own destinies. This county already has a very strong track record for growth, delivering over £50 billion of Gross Value Added every year, but further and deeper devolution could lead to even better returns to support this Government's Plan for Change to kickstart economic growth.

I am therefore writing to ask you to exercise your Ministerial powers to lay the necessary legislation to postpone the county council elections in Surrey, which are due to take place in May 2025. This will give us the time to work with the Leaders of Surrey's district and borough councils to put together proposals for local government reform that are necessary to unlock further devolution for Surrey. Our current two tier structure will require reorganisation to enable the development of a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) for Surrey. New unitary elections could then take place in 2026 and a Mayoral election in 2027. However, mindful of the White Paper's reference to MSAs usually covering places with populations larger than 1.5 million it would also make sense to engage concurrently with neighbouring authorities to explore the benefits of forming, or joining, an MSA over a larger footprint.

DRAFT Letter to Minister of State for Local Government and Devolution
To be sent on 10 January 2025

A postponement of the county elections will also allow time to give consideration in any business case to how we can best manage the unique, significant financial risk of the level of debt currently held across the Surrey local government footprint. Any proposals for local government reorganisation will need to adequately consider how to ensure the sustainable operation of any new authority/ies in the absence of exceptional financial support from Government or a level of write off.

In addition to working with district and borough councils, I will also work with MPs, town and parish councils, businesses, the police and health authorities, the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector, and our residents, to build on our ambition of a more integrated set of public services across the county.

I look forward to starting the conversation with you on the future of Surrey. I am copying this letter to all Surrey MPs as well as district and borough Leaders.

Yours sincerely,

Tim Oliver OBE

Leader of the Council