



LGR Consultation
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Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
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LGR Consultation: Proposals for local government reorganisation in Surrey

I am writing in response to these proposals on behalf of the Westcott Village Association (WVA). The WVA is a Residents' Association in Mole Valley, Surrey originally founded as a Charity in 1974 when the residents of the Westcott Ward voted in favour of an association rather than to elect a Parish Council. In 2019 the WVA became a Charitable Incorporated Organisation.

Having attended presentations and meetings on the subject and reviewed as best as possible - given their length and breadth, and detail and claims - the two documents published in support of two and three Unitary Councils, respectively by Surrey County Council supported by Mole Valley and Elmbridge District Councils, and by the other nine District Councils in Surrey, we have the following comments on the proposals:

Overview

The proposals are at a very high level and the extent to which they will result in quantitative improvements in the delivery of services to local residents is very difficult to comment on. However, creating a one tier authority rather than the current two tier system has the advantage of removing confusion and the opportunity to deny responsibility, and instead should ensure clarity of accountability for local services. How this works in practice will depend wholly on effective leadership and management of the service providers, something sadly lacking at District Council level.

Our overriding concern is that in unparished wards, it is very difficult to see how the reorganisation will effectively deliver on criteria #6 – “New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment”.

Residents or Village Associations, of which there are a significant number in Surrey, have little or no legal status (other than that provided by The Charity Commission) which can be used to improve the lives of local residents, and are almost always only an afterthought in community engagement, and delivering and improving services.

Therefore, it is our view that LGR in Surrey MUST make provision for these voluntary associations to be fast tracked to becoming Parish Councils with at least all the legal status and statutory powers currently enjoyed by existing Parish Councils – if that is the wish of their residents.

Response to Specific Consultation Questions

Question 1 – Sensible economic areas and geographies which will achieve a single tier of local government for Surrey

On the basis of the information so far provided it seems that two rather than three geographies is our preferred option. This is based on the premise that two geographies saving more money for taxpayers, and what should be an easier and (relatively) less risky disaggregation of services to two geographies rather than three.

Question 2 – will the proposals being put forward achieve the outcomes described if implemented?

This is impossible to answer as the level of detail on how things will be managed and delivered in practice is not available. Much will depend on how the transition to the new Unitary Authorities is led and managed, the effectiveness of employee communication and engagement during the transition, the ability of the new authority to redefine systems and processes to deliver reorganised services, and the ability to recruit and train the best staff into their new roles.

It will be crucial that those responsible for the reorganisation research and understand what worked and didn't work in other areas of the UK that have already undergone this transition.

Question 3 – is the proposed unitary authority of the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks?

On paper there are clearly efficiencies to be achieved, but as those having worked through organisational change in practice will confirm, to achieve those savings and efficiencies will require strong management, the relentless challenging of old ways of doing things and the pursuit of improvements, over at least the first five years within what will be a difficult environment.

Question 4 - Do the proposals put local government in the area on a firmer financial footing?

Again, difficult to answer because it will depend wholly on the calibre of management, the efficiencies of staff, and the extent to which locally elected councillors hold staff accountable and make strong commercial decisions. It also depends on a fair financial settlement for implementation including debt relief where necessary.

Question 5 – will the proposals prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable services, improve local government and service delivery, avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services and lead to better value for money?

The proposals will undoubtedly remove much of the current confusion and frustration for residents when trying to identify which department or tier of government is responsible for a particular service and how to resolve problems. The proposals go a long way to rectify this, but the delivery of high quality, value for money services will be a function of organisation design, inter-departmental co-operation, leadership and management competency, and motivated and efficient staff. Significant effort will be required to effect change.

Question 6 – have the proposals been informed by local views, and do they consider issues of local identity, cultural and historic importance?

We do NOT believe Surrey's historical village / resident association structures, which in the past have relied heavily on the support of District Councils, have been taken properly into account in these proposals.

Surrey has a much higher number of unparished wards than other Counties and for instance, in our immediate area the market town of Dorking has no town council. This lack of coverage and maturity of Parish Council structures will undoubtedly create significant issues for us when making sure non-essential services and associated community assets continue to be covered after the transition.

Much of what is currently delivered locally in unparished Wards like Westcott, comes from District Council staff. Historically this service has often been of poor quality because this second layer of local government struggles to recruit the best people for the job, very often having vacancies in key roles for long periods of time. By way of example, we have been unable to obtain an accurate list of assets for which the District Council is currently responsible in the Westcott Ward. Nevertheless, they do provide some level of service, but we have grave concerns about continuity of local service provision in the new unitary structure. Time, money and energy needs to be spent on standardising data capture and quality if these changes are to be effective.

Similarly, it is our experience that Village Associations are an afterthought when consultation and engagement are concerned, and their views taken little account of. The chasm between a Village Association and the new unitary authority will undoubtedly lead to significantly poorer service provision and community engagement, and deny the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.

Question 7 – Do the proposals support devolution arrangements?

NO - unless they make provision for Village Associations to migrate to become full Parish Councils with all the current statutory powers. The proposal to introduce Community Boards will not fill that gap.

Question 8 – will the proposals enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment?

NO. The conversion of Village Associations to become Parish Councils by May 2027 - where local residents have considered and voted for the change - MUST be part of these proposals.

Any Other Comments.

We will be sharing this response with residents and will encourage them to participate in this consultation.

Yours sincerely

On behalf of the Westcott Village Association

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Honorary Secretary

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