



Statement by Surrey Green Party Leaders on Proposed Local Government Reorganisation in Surrey

Context

Surrey County Council's recent proposal to cancel the May 2025 local elections in order to expedite the local government reform proposed by the present government has sparked significant concern among residents and political figures. The County Council, currently under Conservative leadership, argues that delaying the elections would provide necessary time to develop comprehensive local government reorganisation plans, including the potential consolidation of existing borough and district councils into larger unitary authorities.

Position Statement

We consider the move by Surrey County Council to cancel local elections this year is a hasty, top-down approach that undermines democratic processes and removes the opportunity for adequate public consultation. Such significant restructuring, the first in 50 years, should not proceed without thorough debate and consensus among all stakeholders, including the leadership of the borough and district councils in Surrey. The proposed election postponement is a clear attempt to expedite reforms without proper scrutiny while compromising the democratic engagement of Surrey's residents.

We fully support holding Surrey County Council elections this year. We need to strengthen democracy and ensure that the process of creating new local government structures bring politics closer to people. The current proposal to cancel this year's elections appears based on plans rushed through without proper consultation or agreement, imposed top-down by a small number of councillors from one party.

We must bring forward plans for new single-level council areas with new boundaries and mayoral areas as required by the Government. However, the current Conservative proposal lacks prior agreement or support from County Councillors of all parties, and Borough and District Councillors across Surrey. It is not cross party and was published without any discussion, consultation, or debate.

Democracy and devolution should start with residents and should be agreed democratically. The fact that the government has written only to the leadership of upper tier authorities for submissions does not preclude the need for full democratic debate and agreement before such plans are submitted.

There has been no discussion and debate, let alone public consultation by Surrey County Council Conservatives of their proposals before their first public debate on 8th January leaving little time for subsequent debate or inclusion of alternative proposals such as from Surrey's districts and borough councils. If this is to be devolution not centralisation then this should be led from the bottom up, starting with communities and local councils. We need a collective agreement on the timescale and process on how we listen, prioritise and select a preferred new structure of local government across Surrey.

We must bring forward plans for new single- level council areas with new boundaries and mayoral areas as required by the government. But this Conservative proposal has no prior agreement or support from County Councillors of all parties, let alone borough and district councillors across Surrey. There has been no attempt to reach a political consensus and the proposal was published without any discussion, consultation or debate. We should not fast track Surrey for local government reorganisation without prior agreement, based on rushed discussions behind closed doors.

There are various options for local government reform, some of which may cross county boundaries.

- We should challenge the government's limits on new council size as being too big for rural areas and have smaller unitary areas in Surrey. We favour a minimum of three unitaries for Surrey, based on sensible geographies - such as East, South and North Surrey.
- The mayoral proposal is simply based on the size of Surrey's economy - and considers nothing else. Any action taken should assess the pros and cons of mayoral authorities that cover wider areas and consider the ways these mayors will be best held to account.

Alternative options or alternative timescales are not included in the proposals published by Surrey County Council Conservatives for debate on Wednesday 8th January. It is 50 years since the last major council reorganisation in Surrey. The government launched this new reorganisation on 18th December 2024. This is a change that will define Surrey for future generations. Rushing it is no justification for cancelling elections. Democracy needs to be done properly.

Surrey County Council's ruling Conservatives should not seek to postpone this year's county council elections.

Signed

Jonathan Essex, Leader of Green Group, Surrey County Council and Reigate & Banstead Borough Council

Catherine Baart, Deputy Leader of Green Group, Surrey County Council

Steve Ringham, Co-Leader, Runnymede Borough Council

Steve Williams, Cabinet Member, Waverley Borough Council

Victoria Chester, Deputy Green Group Leader, Reigate & Banstead Borough Council

Quotes from Surrey Green Party Leaders

Jonathan Essex, Green Group Leader on Surrey County Council and Reigate and Banstead Borough Council says: "It has been 50 years since the last major council reorganisation in Surrey, and this change will shape the governance of Surrey for future generations. Rushing this process is no justification for cancelling elections. Democracy needs to be done properly, with full consideration of alternatives and public debate."

Catherine Baart, Deputy Green Group Leader on Surrey County Council says: "The Government's fast-track timetable requires an 'oven-ready' reorganisation plan. The County Council's plan is not oven ready so there is no practical reason to cancel the May County Council elections. It appears that the Conservatives running the county council are using this as an opportunity to remain in power longer."

Steve Williams, Cabinet Member, Waverley Borough Council says: "Democracy and devolution should start with residents and be agreed upon democratically. The lack of discussion and public consultation by Surrey County Council Conservatives means that they can steamroller in their own proposals rather than looking at possible alternatives. A full democratic debate is essential before any reorganisation plans are implemented."

Steve Ringham, Co-Leader, Runnymede Borough Council says: "On one hand we have a Labour Government trying to impose an ideologically-driven change to the tiers of governments that arguably affect the daily lives of residents the most. And on the other hand we have, in Surrey, the vestiges of a busted Conservative Party trying one last desperate roll of the dice to cling onto some form of power. Deferring May's elections would skew the outcome by sidelining proper democratic process and bypassing proper public consultation."

Victoria Chester, Deputy Green Group Leader on Reigate and Banstead Borough Council says: "Whilst there is certainly room for improvement in local government, rushing through a thrown-together proposal without consultation on such a significant change is not the way to go about things: it's more of the same poor decision-making and undemocratic action".

Victoria continues: "Public trust in politics is at an all-time low - rushing this through makes it worse. The process should take time, and not start by cancelling elections before we have a clear agreed plan. Local Government Reorganisation was not voted for at the recent general or county elections - we cannot pretend to be in a democracy and push forward such a huge change with no recourse whatsoever to public opinion. Let's keep the County Council elections in May, take a breath, and figure out how we are going to reorganise local government in Surrey properly afterwards."