

Proposed Devolution of Surrey County Council

Currently the delivery of local council services in Surrey is split between Surrey County Council (SCC) and 11 Borough and District Councils, including **Runnymede Borough Council** (RBC), and is known as a two-tier model.

Runnymede organises your refuse collection, planning, meals at home, social housing, parks and open spaces, environmental health and licensing, whilst SCC provide adults and children's services, highway maintenance, education, libraries and the community recycling centre in Epsom.

76% of your council tax payment goes to SCC, only 10% goes to **Runnymede** with 14% funding Surrey Police.

In the autumn, Central Government is expected to publish a White Paper which will set out plans for devolving more responsibilities to local government, creating more elected Mayors in England and more unitary authorities (ending the two tier system).

In July, and following a news report, Surrey County Council confirmed that, ahead of the Government's White Paper, it has been developing plans to abolish Surrey's Borough and District councils and develop the County Council as a single Unitary Council managing all services for Surrey's 1.2 million residents. Private conversations had been held with Government Ministers and Surrey's 11 MPs, but no Borough or District Councils were advised of SCC's plans to see their abolition.

The case for change

SCC's leaders **argue** that creation of a single unitary authority can create economies of scale as well as cost savings in the region of £35 million (though this figure has not been tested). It also argues that a unitary council **based on the County Council boundaries** will be financially more resilient, provide improved joined up services as well as strong, accountable leadership.

The Government has hinted that new Unitary Councils may be given new freedoms and responsibilities, although the Government has also said that it is looking at these unitary authorities to be run by elected Mayors.

A Local and Democratic Response

However, it would be strange if the Government's plans to devolve power actually ended up by taking it further away from residents.

Professor Colin Copus of Montfort University, Local Governance Research Unit has noted that England already has the biggest units of local government anywhere in Europe, and that councillors in England already represent a much higher number of people on average than seen across Europe. He further argues that there is no consistent evidence to suggest that bigger local government is automatically better, cheaper, more efficient and more effective than smaller units, and the larger local government gets, the more damage is done to democratic criteria, such as trust in councillors and officers and loss of community cohesion.

A single Surrey Unitary Authority could see:

- **Runnymede Borough** swallowed up into a one large, unitary council
- A council where a Cabinet of 12 elected representatives or a single Mayor make decisions for 1.2 million people
- Decision makers with scant knowledge of the area, let alone any real concerns or interests in the impact of their decision making. For example in Planning, where applications would be considered by a group of councillors who in all likelihood do not live in **Runnymede** and possibly have never visited it.

The response of your Borough Council to the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted how critical it is to have in place a local authority which has a strong relationship with both the community it serves and the local voluntary groups that support them. Through this in-depth knowledge and partnership working Runnymede Borough Council was able to act decisively and effectively, creating a Welfare Hub which made over 40,000 telephone calls to vulnerable and shielding residents, introduced new shopping and prescription services and rapidly expanded key services such as meals at home.

What Next?

Surrey County is continuing to develop its case for a single Unitary for Surrey. It has already spent £71,000 on initial research and financial analysis and has agreed a sum of £97,500 to support a business case to be submitted to the Government. It is also spending £5,000 per month up to the end of September for Public Affairs support during this period.

Runnymede Borough Council is working in partnership with the other 10 Borough's and Districts in Surrey, ***none of which support a single Unitary Authority in Surrey.*** We are looking at other options for local Government in Surrey based on:

- devolving decision making to the lowest level commensurate with effective delivery
- efficient and cost-effective service delivery
- a local authority's knowledge of people and places
- councils that are closer to, and not further from, our residents

Residents will want to have their say too. It is believed that the Government White Paper will require any local authority seeking unitary status to show that it has local support. How that will be done is not yet clear, but please ensure that you have your say.

However, if you are concerned about this proposal, then we urge you to take an active part in the **#Residents Against Surrey Single Unitary** and you can find out more at www.RASSU.org.uk.

Also, please look out for items that appear in the press as the debate moves forward.

Your Local Councillors.