

Historic Background – Unitary proposition

- 1.1 Back in early 2020, a government White Paper looked at the prospect of local government reorganisation. There was considerable anxiety at the time that this would result in a loss of local democracy and that the needs of *our* residents would not be put first as a result of the creation of Unitary authorities. In Summer 2020, Surrey County Council announced its plans to submit a proposal to Central Government, to amalgamate its 11 District and Borough Councils into one single, Unitary Authority. During that same period (August), the Leaders of all 11 districts and boroughs launched a 'Putting Residents First' campaign.
- 1.2 It should be remembered that at this time the world was in the tight grip of a global COVID-19 pandemic. This placed enormous pressures on the Council to support the most vulnerable of our residents, as well as delivering services in a radically different way. There was an Extraordinary Council meeting on 21 May 2020 which set out our initial response to that pandemic, and gives a clear picture of the work that was being undertaken.
<https://democracy.spelthorne.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=133&MId=1951&Ver=4>
- 1.3 Over the summer a survey was undertaken by this Council to gauge the feeling of the residents, business and communities within the borough on the prospect of a Unitary Surrey – 90% of respondees supported the view that Spelthorne should remain an independent borough. There is further information on the Councils website in terms of our response to that Unitary proposal which can be found here <https://www.spelthorne.gov.uk/yourfuture>. **Appendix B** is a copy of the letter which went to every resident in the borough regarding potential Unitary for Surrey (September 2020)
- 1.4 The link below will take committee members to the minutes of the Extraordinary Council meeting which was held on 24 September 2020 where 4 motions were considered. The Council unanimously voted to agree all motions to oppose a single Surrey-wide Unitary Authority.
<https://democracy.spelthorne.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=133&MId=2343&Ver=4>
- 1.5 A letter was sent by the then Leader of this Council (Cllr Boughtflower) and other council leaders across the county to Cllr Oliver (Leader of Surrey County Council) setting out that this was not the optimum solution, and that a Unitary authority would be too large to apply the principles of localism. However, it did indicate that as a Council we were open to exploring and evaluating other options which represented localities (and the characterises of Surrey localities) more appropriately. Similar communications were also sent to the Secretary of State.

- 1.6 In October, the government (MHCLG) clarified that in terms of local government reorganisation there was no compulsion for proposals for reform of local government in two tier areas, nor a need for structural change, but that any work going on should:
 - be based on locally-led improvements
 - be based on locally-led proposals for any council restructuring, rather than top-down Whitehall solutions being imposed on local areas
- 1.7 As part of the Districts and Boroughs 'Putting Residents First' campaign, KPMG were commissioned to undertake a report which reviewed local government provision across the county and explored ways of joint working with partners and closer collaboration. This was published in January 2021 and highlighted collaboration opportunities in areas such as waste, building control, IT infrastructure, housing, revenues & benefits, procurement, economic development and leisure services. <https://www.spelthorne.gov.uk/article/19982/Local-Government-Reorganisation-and-Collaboration>
- 1.8 However, at the time of its publication all 11 district and borough councils made it clear that they were firmly focused at present on helping residents through the COVID-19 pandemic - and would be for some time to come.