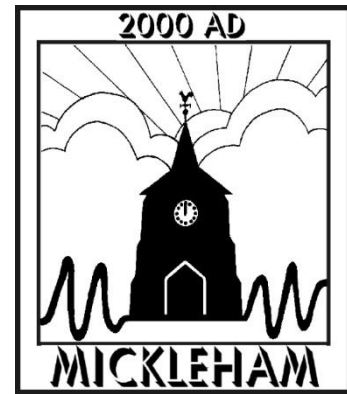


Local and Community Government Reorganisation

New Year Update 2026



The government confirmed on 28th October 2025 its plans for local government reorganisation in Surrey. Two new 'unitary' councils will replace the existing twelve councils in April 2027. An East Surrey unitary will replace the current areas covered by Elmbridge, Epsom and Ewell, Mole Valley, Reigate and Banstead, and Tandridge councils. A West Surrey unitary will take over Guildford, Runnymede, Spelthorne, Surrey Heath, Waverley, and Woking. Surrey County Council will also disappear from existence.

The government also confirmed its commitment to repayment in principle during 2026/7 of £500m of Woking Borough Council's enormous debt. This is a first tranche of repayment support, and the government will 'continue to explore what further debt support is required at a later point'. Woking's total debt is estimated at £2.5bn, with annual debt service costs estimated at £170m. Spelthorne and Surrey Heath, also in West Surrey, also have debts totalling in the region of £2bn. Thus, even after the government has repaid £500m, there will be a debt burden of about £4bn inherited by the new West Surrey Unitary Authority.

None of this should fall on the East Surrey Unitary Authority, of which we will be a part, but someone is going to have to pay for the profligacy of Woking Borough Council. You may think that someone should be the councillors who presided over Woking's disastrous financial policies, but so far, other than the Financial Reporting Council announcing that it had opened investigations into the conduct of two former employees, and possible action against the auditors, there has been no such move. East Surrey's inherited debt will be a more manageable, but hardly trivial, £285m.

The government's line is that this reform will see stronger local councils in charge of all local services, equipped to drive economic growth, improve local public services, and lead and empower their communities, and that ultimately it will help drive up living standards. There may be some wishful thinking here. There will be no tier of local government between Mickleham Parish Council and East Surrey Unitary Authority, and of course Westhumble doesn't (yet) have a parish council. So, if you thought our voice wasn't being listened to by Mole Valley District Council on such matters as biker noise, wait until we are trying to engage with a unitary authority dealing with four times the population.

Elections for the new unitary councils will take place in May 2026, with the new authorities formally taking over responsibilities from 1st April 2027 (no, this isn't an April Fool, but you'd have thought they might have chosen a different date). Existing councillors will remain in post until 31st March 2027. Services will, we are told, 'be delivered as usual throughout the process'. Those of us who have experienced corporate mergers will be only too aware of the disruption and stress for employees that such reorganisations bring, as employees struggle to understand different

working practices, and compete to keep their jobs. I personally think that there will be a significant degree of chaos and/or stasis.

The Lib Dems have announced their two local candidates for the East Surrey unitary authority to be Johanna Farrar Astrop and Dineke van den Bogerd, currently both district councillors for Capel, Leigh, Newdigate and Charlwood. Other political parties will no doubt follow suit.

Parish Councils

About half of Surrey, like Westhumble, and indeed Dorking, does not have parish councils, 'unparished' in the jargon. A public consultation on this topic closed on 31st October, and Mole Valley District Council has, as a result, stated its intention of creating a number of new parish councils, including Westhumble, but of leaving Mickleham Parish Council in place. Mole Valley District Council is also considering expediting the process so that the new parish councils can be established before the East Surrey Unitary Authority is in place, removing the risk that the new authority blocks this change.

A decision on this is to be taken at a Mole Valley District Council extraordinary general meeting on 13th January.

Strategic Authority and Mayor

There is also talk of an elected mayor for Surrey, who would create a new Strategic Authority covering the whole of Surrey. Establishment of this will be subject to the 'relevant statutory tests' (no, me neither) being met and there will be ongoing discussions between local officials and the Minister of Devolution. This part of the exercise is remarkably opaque, even by the standards of the rest of this reorganisation, and quite what the functions of the Strategic Authority and the mayor will be, as opposed to the functions of the unitary authorities, remains to be seen. Maybe the prime minister is going lukewarm on the creation of new mayors, given that they seem to create power bases for leadership challengers such as Andy Burnham.

Neighbourhood Area Committees

The government appears to have spotted the gap in governance between parish councils and unitary councils, and has mandated the creation of Neighbourhood Area Committees, NACs for short, to try to fill the gap. These are supposed to be attended by a cross-section of local residents' representatives. One of these areas, Dorking and Villages, has started a pilot NAC, to which I was invited on 2nd October 11th November and 8th December.

We sat in groups comprising parish, district and county councillors, police officers, health professionals, county council officers and charity organisers. The chair was Hazel Watson, our county councillor. We discussed a whole range of problems facing people who live in the area. Housing affordability and lack of transport were mentioned, but also youth and vulnerability challenges, health and wellbeing, anti-social behaviour, noise. Work was done on what caused deprivation for some in our otherwise wealthy part of Surrey. All that was quite instructive, but when I asked what power and budget these NACs will have, the answer was 'we don't know'. This is because the new unitary authority will be the body that decides how much power and what budget, if any, they will allocate to these NACs. Also, as set out above, that unitary authority won't formally assume power until April 2027. I made the point that without power or budget the NACs would be talking shops, and then we would all stop attending them. Also, whenever a point was made with which the elected officials disagreed, it tended to be dismissed pretty quickly. For

example, I expressed the view that the issues that affected Dorking as an urban area were rather different from the issues affecting the rural villages that surrounded it. This view did not seem to be accepted. Nor was any district councillor prepared to accept that housing affordability problems in our villages might be down to their planning policy.

I was left with the impression that if a NAC wanted to do something which wasn't the policy of the party in power in the new unitary authority, it would simply never happen. Nor does there seem to be any point in abolishing district councils and then creating another body that does the same thing. Perhaps the appropriate model to be followed might be that of a parliamentary select committee, which scrutinizes the work of elected officials and civil servants, and seeks to hold them to account. Without budget or power, NACs will be useless.

Abolition of Police Commissioners

The government has announced that it will abolish police and crime commissioners. The police forces who currently report to these commissioners will report to mayors, where there is a mayor, and to a newly created board where there isn't. They have also floated the idea of merging some police forces, but Surrey Police and Sussex Police already operate closely together in any event.

Conclusion

I apologise for the length of this note, but the subject is important to all of us. In short, we have a decision on unitary authorities. They are going to come whether we like it or not. We probably have a decision on a mayor and a strategic authority, but zero detail. We probably will have a new Westhumble Parish Council, but the same Mickleham Parish Council. We do have a pilot project on NACs, but no indication as to their budget or powers. We won't have police commissioners, going forward.

Let's hope it all works. As of now, I'm more than a bit sceptical. It does feel a bit like pushing the deckchairs round on the Titanic. Maybe we should just have written a note to Santa and shoved it up the chimney. Probably just as effective as all the work that the government is doing, and a lot cheaper.

Will Dennis

Chair of Mickleham Parish Council