Background

Local government reorganisation in Surrey will take effect on 1 April 2027, resulting in:

- the abolition of Surrey County Council, which currently acts as the Fire and Rescue Authority; and,
- the creation of two new unitary authorities (West Surrey and East Surrey).

To ensure the continuity of Surrey Fire and Rescue Service, a new governance arrangement must be in place to ensure that there is an authority to discharge fire and rescue services from 1 April 2027.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is consulting on the proposal to establish a Combined Fire and Rescue Authority for Surrey.

No final decision has been made, and the responses to this consultation will inform the Secretary of State's decision on whether or not to proceed with the proposal.

This consultation relates to fire governance in Surrey. The proposal relates to England only.

The proposal

The Secretary of State proposes the establishment of a Combined Fire and Rescue Authority for Surrey under Sections 2 and 3 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004.

- The new Combined Fire and Rescue Authority would cover the operational footprint of Surrey Fire and Rescue Service
- It would assume all functions currently executed by Surrey County Council in its role as the Fire and Rescue Authority
- The new authority would come into effect from 1 April 2027
- To ensure that the new Combined Fire and Rescue Authority can set a budget and council tax precept for the 2027/28 financial year, it is proposed that a shadow Fire and Rescue Authority is established in advance of 1 April 2027.

One alternative approach would be to transfer fire and rescue governance to a Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) for Surrey. This is a model that has been used in some parts of England to bring police and fire governance together under a single elected individual.

However, this approach is not considered feasible for Surrey. The Home Office has announced its intention to abolish PFCCs by the end of their current electoral cycle in 2028. In light of this, we do not believe that the PFCC model is a viable long-term governance arrangement.

Another alternative would be to have fire and rescue functions exercised by the Chief Constable, using existing legislation to allow closer integration between police and fire services.

However, this approach is also not considered appropriate for Surrey. The boundaries of police forces are currently subject to review, which creates uncertainty about the stability of this governance model. In addition, current government policy emphasises governance arrangements with clear democratic oversight and accountability. Transferring fire and rescue governance to the Chief Constable would not align with this policy.

Rationale

The government's current view is that this proposal is the most deliverable option to ensure continuity of governance and public service following local government reorganisation.

- The proposal maintains the governance of a single, county-wide fire and rescue service, avoiding fragmentation across the two new unitary authorities.
- Similar models have been implemented before, most recently in the case of Dorset and Wiltshire (2016) and Hampshire and the Isle of Wight (2021)
- The proposal is deliverable and ensures a new governance model will be in place by 1 April 2027.

Impacts

The proposal relates to the governance of fire and rescue services in Surrey, rather than the delivery of operational services. As such, we do not expect it to have significant direct impacts on businesses, the economy, or service users.
In line with the Better Regulation Framework, a proportionate assessment of impacts has been undertaken. This indicates that:

- The proposal is not expected to result in direct costs or savings to business. It does not introduce new regulatory requirements and is therefore not expected to have a material impact on the private or voluntary sectors.
- The proposal will change governance arrangements, with a new Combined Fire and Rescue Authority assuming responsibility for functions currently exercised by Surrey County Council. This may have implications for governance structures, funding arrangements, and decision-making processes, including the setting of the council tax precept.

Consultees

In line with Section 2(5) of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004, we are consulting the existing Fire and Rescue Authority (Surrey County Council), the new unitary authorities for West and East Surrey, and all the district and borough councils within Surrey.

We are also seeking views from other stakeholders considered appropriate, including the Chief Fire Officer of Surrey Fire and Rescue Service.

Consultation questions

Surrey County Council, which currently acts as the Fire and Rescue Authority, is being abolished and replaced by two new unitary authorities: West Surrey and East Surrey. Therefore, a new Fire and Rescue Authority needs to be established.

Question 1: Do you agree with establishing a Combined Fire and Rescue Authority for Surrey? If not, what alternative would you propose?

To ensure the continuity of Surrey Fire and Rescue Service, and in the interest of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, the new Combined Fire and Rescue Authority must be in place by 1 April 2027.

Question 2: Do you consider the proposed transfer could have any negative implications for public safety, and if so, what mitigations would be required to ensure services are not adversely affected?

As Surrey County Council is being abolished, it will no longer have the legal ability to set Council Tax for Fire and Rescue in respect of 2027/28. Consequently, the new Fire and Rescue Authority would not be able to effectively execute its functions without precept income.

To ensure that the new Combined Fire and Rescue Authority can set a budget and Council Tax precept for the 2027/28 financial year, it is proposed that a shadow Fire and Rescue Authority is established in advance of 1 April 2027, through the provision of Section 60(2)(b) of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004.

The shadow authority would operate on a temporary basis, planned for January to April 2027 when the new Combined Fire and Rescue Authority would be established. The shadow authority would be given limited functions necessary to prepare for the establishment of the new authority. Its membership would closely reflect the future arrangements for the new Combined Fire and Rescue Authority.

Question 3: Do you agree to the formation of the shadow authority?

Subject to Parliamentary timings, it might be possible to establish the shadow authority earlier than January.

Question 4: If this is the case, would establishing the shadow authority before January be beneficial?

Question 5: Are there any other considerations we should take into account?

Duration

This consultation will last for six weeks from 22 June 2026 to 31 July 2026.

In line with Cabinet Office Consultation Principles, we consider the six-week period to be proportionate. This is a targeted consultation with a group of stakeholders affected by the proposal.

Engagement with key stakeholders, including Surrey County Council, has been ongoing in advance of this consultation. Consultees will already be familiar with the proposal and the wider context of Local Government Reorganisation, and therefore will be able to provide informed responses within the consultation period.

We consider six weeks to be sufficient time for consultees to fully consider the proposal and provide informed responses, whilst also enabling policy development to progress in a timely fashion.

How to respond and make enquiries

To submit your response or make any enquiries about this consultation, please contact FireGovernance@communities.gov.uk.