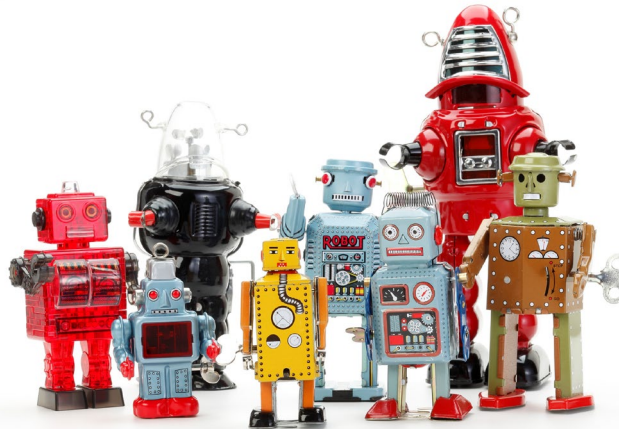




Our January 2025 Blog 'Unitary Authorities', referred to the 'English Devolution White Paper' published in December 2024. At that time there were 317 Local Authorities of which 62 were already UA's. In principle the plan was to disband the remaining Borough (or District) Councils and combine them with County Councils into a unified authorities (UA's).

From a local perspective, this led to elections in May this year of members to the 'Shadow' West Surrey Council who will work with existing County Councillors until 'vesting' of the new Authority in April 2027. But is it actually 'Devolution' ?

(NB Parish Councils are not 'authorities' but the impact of these changes on them must be considered, along with the majority of those who are 'Unparished').

Reflecting on an outcome of the SHBC Community Governance Review (CGR) – that the majority population of the 'inner' wards do not want to form Parish (or Town) Councils and to be reliant on the UA, in February 2026 we published 'Why do we need Parish Councils ?'. In July there were related publications 'West Surrey UA & Parish Councils' and 'Council Tax – the Parished vs Unparished'. All of which were to inform debate on this important issue.

With the introduction of Andy Burnham as our Prime Minister we are seeing a 'new' emphasis on 'Devolution' but, is his idea different to the spread of UA's ?

I think the answer is yes, but hopefully it will be complementary. Although his model of devolution is fundamentally different to the creation of UA's they can be seen as perhaps 'designed' to work together. UA's are to focus on local government delivery – merging Boroughs and County – his proposal is a devolution model which puts a focus on transferring powers down from central government in Whitehall to regional



leadership – as experienced with the existing Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSA's) and from his experience in Manchester.

The UA's are a local government reorganisation to focus on streamlining service delivery by abolishing the two-tier arrangement and consolidating under one 'administrative roof'. They are a 'bottom-up' consolidation intended to cut duplication and bureaucracy but without any new powers taken from Westminster – so not actually devolution ? With a remit of council tax collection, local planning applications, social care provision/execution, libraries, bin collections etc (not a full list).

The MSA's under Burnham's vision treat city / regions as a single economic unit, a 'top-down' transfer of power from Whitehall to the regions, backed by the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 – its about forcing central government departments to hand over control to major national levels. Their remit (again not a full list) will be strategic policy including spatial development strategies for infrastructures, fully integrated transport networks, post-16 skill funding, employment support and integrated regional NHS commissioning. If practical and well implemented it would be devolution. UA's are being used as building blocks for the devolution process and by consolidation, with government approval, to create future MSA's with powerful Mayor's as the direction of travel.

But 'Community Empowerment' ? To prevent local voices being lost in the massive new UA, the West Surrey 'Shadow' Council is, for the moment, heavily using the 'Neighbourhood Area Committee' model, trialled by the previous administration. These non-constituted advisory bodies aim to group smaller unparished towns or villages together to promote local priorities. As these bodies and 'Neighbourhood Forums' do not carry the same (potential) democratic weight as local councils, there is some movement towards the establishment of new Town or Village 'parish' councils but without enforcement they will remain in the minority. It will be for the UA to decide on representation at that level to achieve democratic fairness to 'Community' level.

And to answer the headline question, Andy says that he wants to see devolution down to post code level but if there is to be empowerment at that level, Town & Village Councils, what will it consist of and will a structure suited to 1894 be changed to meet the needs of the 2020's and onwards. An outcome of a CGR according to the statutory guidance is that it ought to bring about "improved community engagement, more cohesive communities, better local democracy and result in more effective and convenient delivery of local services". The legislation is referred to in the SHBC report forwarded to the West Surrey Council for approval without making a specific reference to these outcomes. I hope that this will be part of their considerations as without clear statutory direction that level of 'devolution' will not be achieved. The "improved engagement" involves not just the councils but also carries a greater level of responsibility on the Electorate, in order to be successful.

This is a considered current view of an as yet unsettled, situation. If you have any comments to make, you will be welcomed at windlesham.life

