Strategic Comparison for Godalming Town Council of Two Unitary V Three Unitary Proposals

This comparison considers the **strategic, operational, financial, and representational implications** to assess which position may be more **beneficial for Godalming Town Council (GTC).**

1. Strategic Vision and Governance Model
Two-Unitary Model

- Views the East–West division as a simplified, scalable, and streamlined governance approach.
- Emphasises clarity, reduced bureaucracy, and a stronger strategic voice in regional and national affairs.
- Supports future devolution through fewer but larger authorities.

Three-Unitary Model

- Advocates for more balanced local leadership across East, North, and West Surrey, maintaining clearer links with NHS footprints, housing markets, and transport corridors.
- The response is rooted in spatial logic and functional geography, with strong backing from data in the final proposal.
- Emphasises that the three-unitary structure offers greater alignment with integrated care systems (e.g., Royal Surrey Trust) and a stronger base for strategic devolution via a Combined Authority.

Advantage: *Three-unitary model*, as it aligns with NHS and public service boundaries, enhancing cross-sector strategic coherence.

2. Operational Effectiveness and Service Integration
Two-Unitary Model

- Projects improved integration of county and district services, with simplified governance and economies of scale.
- Risks over-centralisation, particularly in large western or eastern blocks.

Three-Unitary Model

- Identifies specific operational efficiencies, including £22.5 million in savings per year by Year 4 and up to £46 million in transformation savings.
- Suggests nimbler and community-focused structures, with closer ties to residents and fewer layers of hierarchy.

- Highlights that a three-unitary system scored highest (28/30) on comparative evaluation of effectiveness.

☑ **Advantage**: *Three-unitary model*, for being evidence-backed with tangible costings, operational depth, and a credible roadmap for service transformation.

3. Financial Sustainability

Two-Unitary Model

- Anticipates cost savings from consolidation and service alignment.
- Less specific on how it would handle legacy financial issues, especially large liabilities (e.g. Woking).

Three-Unitary Model

- Explicitly flags stranded debt and legacy issues and proposes a sustainable, decentralised approach.
- Offers detailed financial modelling showing more manageable risk allocation and avoids centralised liability exposure.

☑ **Advantage**: *Three-unitary model*, due to clearer financial planning and a proactive stance on long-term liabilities.

4. Local Identity and Accountability

Two-Unitary Model

- Aims to preserve identity by embedding localism through parish empowerment.
- However, risks homogenising diverse communities across a wider area.

Three-Unitary Model

- Stronger case made for preserving historic geographies and social cohesion.
- Backed by public consultation (63% support for three-unitary structure), showing resonance with residents.
- Proposes participatory budgeting, digital democracy, and local forums as tools to deepen engagement.

☑ **Advantage**: *Three-unitary model*, offering better alignment with GTC's focus on preserving community identity and grassroots leadership.

5. Empowerment of Parish and Town Councils

Two-Unitary Model

- Expresses a desire to involve parish councils but lacks mechanisms or commitment structure.

Three-Unitary Model

- Proposes devolved service and asset transfers.

- Calls for formal parish involvement in transition planning and governance (e.g. a Transition Programme Board and Local Democracy Review Panel).
- Recognises the essential civic role of town councils like GTC.

Advantage: *Three-unitary model*, provides concrete measures to uplift first-tier governance and embed subsidiarity.

6. Political Realism and Alignment

Two-Unitary Model
- May align more closely with Surrey County Council's original LGR ambitions.
- Risks alienating borough and district partners, potentially becoming politically divisive.

Three-Unitary Model
- Developed and supported by a coalition of boroughs and districts.
- Builds broader local consensus and is rooted in extensive joint working.
- Demonstrates regional cohesion—aligns with sentiments across Waverley and Guildford areas.

Advantage: *Three-unitary model*, for uniting local partners and enhancing GTC's influence through alignment with prevailing views.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The three-unitary proposal presents a more beneficial and balanced position for Godalming Town Council across all key criteria:
- It offers **greater protection of local identity** and participatory governance.
- Demonstrates **stronger financial resilience** and operational feasibility.
- Provides **a clearer structure for parish empowerment** during and after transition.
- Enjoys **greater public support and regional consensus**, which enhances its political viability.

Recommended Position for GTC:

Godalming Town Council should adopt and endorse the **three-unitary model**. It not only safeguards the interests of Godalming and its residents but also reinforces GTC's commitment to practical, people-centred local governance rooted in tradition and community pride, while being future-facing.

Godalming Town Council (GTC) – *Draft* Response to the Government's Consultation on Local Government Reorganisation in Surrey
(for consideration by the LGR Working Group – 26 June 2025)

<u>Internal Note</u> – For Council Consideration Only (To Be Removed Before Submission)

While the consultation process lists Surrey Association of Local Councils (SALC) and the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) as named consultees, individual town and parish councils have not been identified as statutory consultees. Therefore, to ensure that GTC's position is reflected through both the SALC and NALC responses, **it is recommended that GTC submits a copy of its final response to both organisations**.

Additionally, in the interests of collaboration and regional cohesion, **GTC is encouraged to share its response with neighbouring town and parish councils within the Waverley area**. This may help inform wider local perspectives and encourage consistency where appropriate.

<u>Covering Statement</u>

Godalming Town Council (GTC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Government's proposals for the reorganisation of local government in Surrey. GTC supports a model of governance that:

- enhances local identity and democratic accountability;
- improves the efficiency and quality of public services;
- ensures appropriate roles and recognition for the first tier of local government;
- delivers lasting financial resilience and strategic capability.

Based on the information provided, GTC supports:

The Borough Councils of Epsom and Ewell, Guildford, Reigate and Banstead, Runnymede, Spelthorne, Surrey Heath, Waverley and Woking, and Tandridge District Council proposed 3 unitary councils:

- East Surrey (Epsom and Ewell, Mole Valley, Reigate and Banstead, and Tandridge)
- North Surrey (Elmbridge, Runnymede, and Spelthorne)
- West Surrey (Guildford, Surrey Heath, Waverley, and Woking)

The following provides GTC's consultation response to each question posed by the Department.

Question 1 – Does the proposal reflect a sensible geography of economic, social and environmental linkages?

Yes. GTC agrees that creating East, North and West Surrey unitary councils reflects real travel-to-work areas, housing markets and service-use patterns. These boundaries avoid artificial splits, preserve community ties, and provide each council with a robust tax base. The three-unitary structure also aligns with existing functional geographies and NHS systems. For example, the proposed West Surrey authority reflects the footprint of the Royal Surrey NHS Trust and Surrey Heartlands Integrated Care Board, as well as strong east-west transport corridors. This spatial logic is well-evidenced in the Final Proposal (pp.16–18), which demonstrates the coherence of these regional identities and their suitability for effective local government.

Question 2 – Is the proposal likely to improve the effectiveness of local government across the area?

Yes. The evidence shows that a three-unitary model will simplify governance, strengthen local leadership, and deliver long-term financial sustainability while maintaining the services residents rely on. It offers a clear structure for accountability and decision-making, removing duplication and confusion between tiers. The Districts and Boroughs' own comparative assessment (Table 10.2, p.103) scores the three-unitary option highest—28 out of 30 against the government's criteria—compared with 21 for a two-unitary model and 16 for a mega-unitary. GTC supports the view that this model is the most effective in delivering improved local government for Surrey.

Question 3 – Will the proposed unitaries be of a size and scale to be efficient, sustainable and capable of providing strategic leadership?

Although each new authority will have a population slightly below the 500,000 benchmark, the proposed scale is sufficient to secure efficiencies, ensure professional capacity, and support strategic leadership. At the same time, the population sizes offer the best balance: large enough to deliver economies of scale and resilience, yet small enough to retain responsiveness to local identity and

community needs. This approach avoids the risks of over-centralisation while still enabling strong and sustainable service delivery.

Question 4 - Will the proposal put local government on a firmer financial footing?

Yes. A single-tier arrangement of three unitary councils will deliver consistent financial oversight across Surrey and tackle legacy issues in areas such as Woking and Spelthorne. The transformation plan and detailed modelling give confidence that the new councils can start on a sustainable footing, provided government support is secured for any stranded debt. Crucially, the Final Proposal projects recurring savings of £22.5 million a year by Year 4 (Table 10.1, p. 103; Appendix J). These efficiencies come without the stranded-debt risks that would accompany a mega-unitary, which could inherit significant long-term liabilities from Surrey County Council.

Question 5 – Will the proposal improve services, make them more integrated and provide better value for money?

Yes. Moving from the current two-tier system to three unitary authorities will remove duplication and enable integrated neighbourhood teams, shared commissioning, and closer collaboration with NHS and emergency services. This approach is expected to improve outcomes in areas such as adult social care, SEND, and homelessness, while ensuring continuity of service during transition. The Final Proposal sets out how key services—including housing, waste management, and social care—can be better joined up through local integration strategies (Annex E). Godalming Town Council also notes the potential for £40–46 million in additional transformation savings over five years, particularly through streamlined delivery and investment in digital capability (Appendix I, p.90).

Question 6 – Will the proposed unitary structures reflect and support local identities, and facilitate strong local leadership and accountability?

Yes. Public engagement involving over 3,300 residents shows 63% support for the three-unitary model—the highest level of backing for any option (p.75). Respondents consistently cited local identity and effective representation as key factors. The proposed boundaries align with historic and social geographies, reinforcing natural

community ties and rejecting top-down "area board" models in favour of participatory approaches that keep decision-making close to residents. This mirrors our experience in Godalming and surrounding parishes, where strong place-based identity and civic pride underpin effective local leadership.

Question 7 – Does the proposal support a future devolution deal for the area?

Yes. The three-unitary model provides a clear and coherent footprint for establishing a county-wide Mayoral Combined Authority by 2027. This would enable strategic decision-making on transport, skills, housing, and climate action at the right scale. The Final Proposal (p.84) confirms that this model is intentionally designed to unlock devolution opportunities—something that would not be viable under a fragmented or mega-unitary arrangement. It avoids the governance complexity of the two-unitary option and strengthens the case for a future devolution deal.

Question 8 – Will the proposal strengthen community engagement and empower neighbourhoods?

Yes. Smaller, recognisable unitary areas—working in partnership with empowered parish and town councils—create fertile ground for participatory budgeting, co-designed services, and genuine neighbourhood control over local priorities. The proposed unitaries will operate on a more local scale, enabling approaches such as neighbourhood forums and devolved service design. The Final Proposal (p.78) sets out six key outcomes to strengthen local engagement:

- Strong civic engagement
- Local decision-making powers
- Visible ward councillors
- Partnership working with town and parish councils
- Citizen involvement through digital democracy
- Community-level performance monitoring

GTC sees significant potential for deeper collaboration between the new unitaries and local councils, supporting truly community-led governance.

Question 9 - Do you have any other comments with regards to the proposed local government reorganisation in Surrey?

Yes. Godalming Town Council welcomes the overall direction of the proposal and offers the following additional observations and recommendations:

1. **Parish and Town Council Role** – The reorganisation must affirm the importance of parish and town councils as delivery partners and community leaders. Mechanisms should be embedded for devolved service and asset transfers, underpinned by adequate funding and governance frameworks. Godalming Town Council welcomes the proposal's recognition of this role and supports the commitment to involving local councils in transition planning.

2. **Governance of Transition** – A formal Transition Programme Board should be established with representation from the parish and town council sector to ensure local knowledge informs delivery and democratic accountability is maintained. The inclusion of a Local Democracy Review Panel is a welcome step toward ensuring legitimacy and continuity.

3. **Electoral Representation** – Boundary and electoral arrangements must protect the representational integrity of local communities, avoiding over-centralisation or dilution of local voices.

4. **Financial Stewardship** – Government must actively address the financial legacies of failing authorities—most notably Woking—to ensure that the viability of any successor bodies is not compromised at the outset.

5. **Climate Responsibility** – The reorganisation presents an opportunity to embed climate action and sustainability at the heart of governance and service design. Godalming Town Council supports the commitment to aligning future unitaries with local delivery of Net Zero plans, which complements our own Climate Action Plan.

Conclusion:

The three-unitary proposal is **realistic, locally supported, financially sound**, and **strategically aligned** with future governance and devolution opportunities. Godalming Town Council strongly urges the government to support its progression to the next stage and ensure that the principles of localism, accountability and resilience remain at the heart of reform.

Provisional Recommendation

Subject to further feedback, it is proposed that **Godalming Town Council endorses this submission in support of the three-unitary model**, and additionally ensures that its views are registered with **SALC, NALC, and neighbouring parish and town councils** within the Waverley area.