

THE FUTURE OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR A BRIEFING PAPER BY THE SURREY LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION (SLGA)

Much of the public sector in England is engaged in rearranging its boundaries and administrative structures. The Surrey Local Government Association, which comprises Surrey County Council and all eleven Boroughs and Districts in the County, has profound misgivings about the impact of these changes both on service delivery and on accountability to the community.

The changes are not being driven in the first instance by a desire to achieve real operational improvements. Rather their primary aim is to gain administrative savings under the post-Gershon reviews. This has led to a spate of independent and completely uncoordinated efforts by individual Government departments and partner organisations to achieve their separate goals, with the gravest of implications for the delivery of 'joined-up' services on the ground.

In Surrey we are proud of what we achieve in partnership working both at regional and local level. It has meant that we are in a position to deliver ambitious Local Area and Public Service Agreements for residents of the County. We have been helped in this when we have been able to work with partners in compatible administrative boundaries which give us all clear and common accountabilities to the communities we serve. All of this is now being put at risk.

A glance at some of the proposals which directly affect public administration in Surrey shows the contradictions:

- Police – due to be restructured to create forces whose administrative size would lie somewhere between county and regional level. In Surrey's case the existing county force is likely to be joined with Sussex.
- Ambulance – Surrey is likely to be joined with Hampshire (or possibly Kent or Sussex)
- Fire - being reorganised at the regional level but with a different control centre from both police and ambulance
- Health administration - PCT boundaries are being reshaped and there may be a single one for Surrey. However the SHA will then be regionalised
- Learning & Skills Council – likely to be combined with Thames Valley

The combined effect of the changes is to produce a complexity of structures which is difficult to manage and for the public to understand or more importantly relate to; which has no sense of accountability to the community; and which ignores the increasingly important and effective joint working with the services organised or delivered by local government.

We believe strongly that the Government needs to recognise the importance of the democratic dimension and legitimacy provided, uniquely, by local government. In addition the increasing importance of cross-agency working requires that structures are put in place with as much co-terminosity as possible to facilitate this. There are some simple principles which could put this into effect:

- Reviews should be conducted on a common and linked basis across the public sector
- Community identity and co-terminosity should be key criteria alongside administrative efficiency
- The scope for achieving efficiencies by bringing roles together, where appropriate with local government, should be considered, rather than just creating larger and larger units.

We urge the Government to build these principles in to every review that is undertaken of operational structures in the public sector.

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