



PRESS RELEASE

Guildford, Surrey, 23 FEB 2026

Coalface Engagement and the University of Surrey's Centre for Britain and Europe launch the Local Government Reorganisation Initiative ahead of major council changes

[Coalface Engagement](#) (COALFACE) and the [Centre for Britain and Europe](#) at the [University of Surrey](#) (CBE) today announced a partnership to launch the [Local Government Reorganisation \(LGR\) Initiative](#), responding to what many regard as the most significant shake up in local governance for a generation, presenting a once-in a generation chance to unlock economic regeneration, significant housing delivery, and investment opportunities for business and communities. The programme will examine how reorganisation, approached as the redesign of a local democratic system rather than an internal corporate merger, can unlock meaningful devolution through good governance design, a clear civic purpose, and strong leadership that carries community support. It will also examine how structural change without the associated powers, capability, and legitimacy risks storing up larger problems later, including weaker delivery and missed opportunities for growth, housing, and local investment.

The Coalface-CBE partnership, also joined in varying capacities by other sector leaders, will undertake cutting edge research ahead of local elections taking place in May 2026, publishing much needed practical guidance for councillors and senior officers, and developing national recommendations on governance, devolution, delivery, and public confidence. It will start its work immediately, launching two surveys to understand current understating and perception's of LGR, one will be for residents of the Surrey, and the second for Councillors and Senior Officers at the 12 Local Authorities. A further survey will be run and published just ahead of the Local Elections in May.

Looking closely at previous examples of where local government reorganisation has succeeded and failed, the LGR Initiative will produce a new '*100 Days Playbook on LGR*' ahead of the May elections. Combining practitioner experience with academic rigour and policy expertise, the LGR Initiative will directly assist in the place-based government transitions taking place in Surrey by producing highly useful, practical tools for local leaders helping them to work through change, alongside evidence informing recommendations for national policy design.

In this way, the LGR Initiative will focus directly upon the transitional decision-making environment that councillors and senior officers are currently working in, providing insight in the various changes to local government reorganisation, including member officer governance, scrutiny arrangements, organisational capacity, financial resilience, public confidence, and delivery performance.

The LGR Initiative will be led by University of Surrey graduate and former Surrey Councillor [Rowan Cole](#), who established public affairs consultancy Coalface Engagement in 2018, and [Professor Amelia Hadfield](#), prominent academic as well as Founder and Director of the Centre for Britain and Europe, a Centre of Excellence based within Politics and International Relations, at the University of Surrey.

The work builds on Coalface's LGR Series, which will serve as a foundation within the programme, providing structured analysis and practitioner focused commentary as reorganisation proposals develop, including in Surrey and other areas considering change.

Over the coming months, the LGR Initiative will:

- Immediately conduct surveys with residents of Surrey, as well as Councillors and Senior Officers across the county to understand the current views and understanding of LGR now, and at future points in time
Produce practitioner focused briefings and commentary for councillors, senior officers, and stakeholders navigating reorganisation in real time in the run up to the local elections in May and during the formation of the two new Surrey councils
- Conduct Interviews and roundtables in the coming weeks with senior leaders and decision makers, alongside wider sector engagement activity to help inform the production of a LGR toolkit and guide
- Publish 'The 100 Days Playbook on LGR', a practical toolkit intended to support councillors from day one of a new unitary authority just ahead of the Local Elections in May.
- Send a White Paper setting out recommendations to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and Parliament, informed by interviews and cross sector analysis after the formation of the new East and West Surrey Council's to help support future rounds of LGR in 2027 and beyond.

The LGR Initiative programme will test whether reorganisation is delivering its core promise: meaningful devolution that strengthens local economic capacity and improves councils' ability to deliver services on a sustainable footing. The Initiative will examine the governance, financial, and operating mechanisms new authorities need from day one, including clear accountability, effective scrutiny, realistic delivery planning, sound financial controls, and transition arrangements that reduce the risk of acute financial distress.

The programme will also consider how digital capability and AI governance should be embedded from the outset of newly formed authorities. The Initiative will explore how new councils can build transparent and resilient decision making systems and service models, with clear assurance frameworks for data, automation, and AI enabled services.

Rowan Cole, Founder of Coalface, said:

"Reorganisation is treated too often as an internal transformation when in reality it is a monumental reform of local democratic systems. Turnout in local elections is notoriously low, and this needs to change. With councils across the country facing financial crisis, local government reorganisation is only a first step and must be accompanied by devolution, stronger governance, and a clear public mandate. Devolution is the key which unlocks the investment, homes, and jobs that will benefit everyone."

"My concern has been that the public and councillors are being overlooked because of a perception of apathy. The LGR Initiative is designed to counter that, encourage public participation, and strengthen councillor involvement in the process."

Professor Amelia Hadfield, Centre for Britain and Europe at the University of Surrey, said:

"The reorganisation of local government creates an unusual, and concentrated opportunity within which to strengthen local governance. Real and progressive transformations are the goal, but the risks are material if structural change runs ahead of capability, systems, and trust. Building on a strong track record of engagement with public and private sector decision-makers in Surrey, the Centre for Britain and Europe is delighted to join the LGR Initiative to strengthen the evidence base, support rigorous analysis, and translate reform ambition into practical guidance for those leading change on the ground."

The Initiative will be supported by a number of sector organisations contributing to specific elements of the programme. [ECF](#) is joining as a Strategic Advisory Partner to support interviews, analysis, and practitioner input to strengthen outputs. The programme is also supported by specialist organisations providing targeted contributions, including digital engagement platform [Commonplace](#), and [Truth About Local Government](#), which will provide periodic updates for listeners through its podcast platform.

Local government reorganisation is not only a change in structures. It reshapes accountability, scrutiny, capability, and the relationship between councils and the public. The LGR Initiative is intended to support better outcomes by focusing on what makes reorganised councils governable, trusted, and able to deliver, and by ensuring national policy design reflects the practical realities of implementation.

Further announcements will follow.

END

Notes to editors

Media enquiries should be directed to:

lgr@coalfaceengagement.co.uk

0207 123 7056 / 07534 224159

You can find more detail at www.lgr-initiative.co.uk

About COALFACE®

COALFACE® is a political risk, governance, and stakeholder engagement consultancy. It supports organisations operating in politically sensitive environments, with a focus on strategic communications, community facing engagement, and reputational risk management. COALFACE was founded by Rowan Cole in 2018 and works across local government and the built environment. Rowan was Surrey's youngest ever elected Councillor when he first won public office on Elmbridge Borough Council in 2008. www.coalfaceengagement.co.uk

Legal entity and disclaimers: Coalface Engagement Ltd | England & Wales No. 11741464 | Registered address: Prebend House, 72 London Road, Leicester, LE2 0QR. COALFACE™ brands include COALFACE Council Scanner™, Insights and Engagement.

About the Centre for Britain and Europe, University of Surrey

The Centre for Britain and Europe at the University of Surrey is a public policy research institute focused on the political, institutional, and policy challenges facing the UK and Europe. The Centre contributes academic insight and policy analysis to support evidence informed debate and practical reform. www.surrey.ac.uk/centre-britain-and-europe

1. About the LGR Initiative

The LGR Initiative is a programme established to support better local government reorganisation across England. It focuses on three linked priorities:

- Governance quality: how new authorities design decision making, scrutiny, accountability, and ethical standards
- Public confidence: how councils build legitimacy and maintain trust through periods of change and uncertainty
- Delivery capability: how organisations sustain service performance while structures, teams, and responsibilities shift

The Initiative is designed to be practical and usable, producing outputs that councillors and officers can apply immediately, alongside evidence informed recommendations for national policy makers.

2. Lead Partners and roles

The Initiative is led by two Lead Partners:

- COALFACE (Coalface Engagement Ltd) leads the Initiative's editorial direction and strategic programme, ensuring outputs remain grounded in political reality, governance risk, and the practical pressures of reform
- The Centre for Britain and Europe at the University of Surrey leads the Initiative's academic and policy contribution, strengthening the evidence base and ensuring outputs are credible for national policy and parliamentary audiences

Together, the Lead Partners will develop a programme that is operationally relevant and analytically robust.

3. Strategic Advisory Partner

ECF is a Strategic Advisory Partner to the Initiative. ECF is committing staffing support, including participation in interviews, contribution of analysis, and practical input to strengthen the Initiative's outputs and ensure they reflect lived experience across engagement, governance, and institutional change. <https://engagecf.co.uk/>

4. Supporting Partners

Supporting Partners provide targeted, specialist input to specific parts of the programme. This includes:

- Commonplace, supporting the Initiative with digital engagement expertise and practical insights into modern participation methods. <https://www.commonplace.is/>
- Truth About Local Government, supporting dissemination through its podcast platform, including regular updates and amplification of key outputs <https://www.truthaboutlocalgovernment.com/>

5. Programme outputs

The Initiative's planned outputs include:

- A programme of briefings and commentary for practitioners
- A White Paper with structured recommendations to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and Parliament
- The 100 Days Playbook on LGR, a practical toolkit for councillors entering new unitary authorities
- A schedule of interviews, roundtables, and sector engagement activity

6. Digital capability and AI governance

The LGR Initiative includes a strand on digital capability and AI governance, examining how newly formed authorities can:

- set clear governance for data, automation, and AI enabled systems
- design transparent decision-making processes and assurance frameworks
- build resilience and public confidence in modernised services

This work will focus on practical governance frameworks suitable for local authorities, rather than technology promotion.