



The relatively straight forward request, in March 2024, for a Community Governance Review (CGR), was to consider the separation of Windlesham Village from the existing 3 village arrangement. That it was delayed and absorbed into the wider CGR, for all of Surrey Heath Borough Council (SHBC), related to the coming demise of the Borough and the implementation of the West Surrey Council, has taken us into a 'new world' where the position of Parish Councils in general needs to be reviewed.

At the meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2026 SHBC approved a motion to accept the report which has concluded the CGR process but must now be passed to the Shadow West Surrey Council (UA) for their approval. Within that report is the recommendation to form a new "Windlesham Village Council" of 7 Members, to be elected at the Local Elections in May 2027. But, in the wider context of all West Surrey, the issue of Parished vs Unparished in terms of provision by the UA remains unresolved

Secular Parish Councils (officially called Civil Parishes) were established in England under the Local Government Act 1894.

The primary intention was to separate civic governance from the Church, exclude the Clergy from local politics and reinvigorate rural communities by giving ordinary residents a democratic voice. The creation of these councils addressed several specific goals:

- a. Separation of Church and State: Prior to 1894 local administration was handled by the “parish vestry” which met in local churches and was dominated by the local Vicar and Squire. The Act transferred all non-religious functions from the Church to elected ‘Laymen’.
- b. Democratization: The reforms were driven by a desire for greater local democracy. They allowed ordinary citizens to elect representatives who were directly accountable to the community.
- c. Centralizing Civic Duties: Before the Act civic duties were scattered across a confusing mix of bodies. The new Councils rationalized oversight of matters like public health, water supply, drainage, allotments and secular burials into one formal body.

Today, civil parishes are seen as the first tier of local government in England but their independence separates them from the Authority of Governance. Considered to be non political, but often not, they provide grassroots services such as maintaining village halls, managing parks, allotments, acting as statutory consultees on local planning applications and other matters as required by their community.

Contrary to the intentions, a strong argument can be made that modern rural areas suffer from a subtle form of democratic exclusion and that the very nature of these local bodies – which operate independently outside of a rigorous, hierarchical command structure – can sometimes make them less democratic in practice. While the 1894 Act solved the issue of systemic exclusion by giving rural citizens a vote, modern political scientists and local government experts point to a new ‘democratic deficit’ which stems from the way independent, hyper-local bodies like Parish & Town Councils, function today.

The structural paradox of independent rural governance compromises its democratic integrity through several mechanisms:

- a. The Paradox of Independence (Isolation vs Democracy) – Parish Councils are ‘independent’ in that they are the ‘lowest tier’ of local government but are not legally subordinate to higher tier ‘principle authorities’ (like Borough or Unitary). They have the power to levy an independent tax (the precept). However, this independence means that they lack robust, external top-down scrutiny. With minimal oversight, unlike ‘Principle Authorities’, Parish Councils do not have formal opposition parties, shadow cabinets or rigorous internal scrutiny committees. While they must submit financial audits, if a Parish Council suffers from poor leadership, institutional inertia, or personal grudges, there is no higher governmental ‘boss’ to step in and fix it.

b. They set their own internal rules to which they require allegiance and provide protection of their Legal Entity. While a complaint against a Councillor can be referred to the local Monitoring Officer, [of the Principle Authority] there is very limited power or sanction. A complaint against the council may be dealt within their own Complaint Procedure without appeal to higher authority. The Local Authorities Ombudsman will only act in a case of maladministration.

c. The Failure of the Electoral System (Uncontested Seats) – the only mechanism for correction is a local election, which frequently ‘fails to happen’. For a system to be democratic, the electorate must have a choice. In rural or semi rural Parish Councils, this mechanism has largely collapsed. A staggering number of Parish Council seats are uncontested – no competition.

If there are fewer candidates than available seats, everyone who applied is automatically appointed – without a single vote being cast. Then there is ‘co-option over election’, this is when vacancies arise during a term when councils routinely use co-option. This can mean that existing councillors simply vote on and choose their next colleague behind closed doors. This can lead to self perpetuating ‘echo chambers’ rather than democratically elected representatives.

d. Micro-Politics and Social Vetoes. Academic research reveals that the small scale of rural governance can actually suppress democratic engagement and disagreement can ruin personal relationships. Because conflict is central to healthy democratic debate, the desire to maintain social harmony, the fear of friction, often leads to self-censoring or avoidance.

There may remain a newer kind of social exclusion for working people, the young and newcomers feeling excluded by established cliques.

e. Funding. As higher tier local authorities face steep budget cuts they are withdrawing public services from rural areas and expecting unpaid parish volunteers to take them over so that those areas are being excluded from professional state funded public service safety nets.

While Rural Parish Councils are the most local form of democracy, their independence from a regulatory hierarchy, when combined with structural apathy and uncontested elections means that rural citizens are often left with a tier of government which is highly independent but functionally less democratic than the 1894 intentions.

Civil Parishes cover about 91% of the geography of England but, because they are concentrated mostly in rural or smaller urban areas, they account for only around 36 – 40% of the population. Only about 16 million people live in the 10,900 active Civil Parished areas which means that roughly 60 – 64% of England’s population lives in the unparished areas. This contrast between land area and population comes down to how local government developed.

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Only some 25 – 30% of the West Surrey Council (taking over in April 2027) electorate is Parished.

- a. Entirely Unparished – Spelthorne, Runnymede and Woking.
- b. Partially Parished – Surrey Heath – only the eastern part is Parished (Bisley, Chobham, West End and Windlesham (which includes Bagshot, Lightwater & Windlesham)). Guildford has 23 Rural Parish Councils, but the core Guildford urban area with over 52,000 electors remains unparished.
- c. Fully Parished – the entire Borough of Waverley is covered by Parish or Town Councils.

Note : Guildford Borough Council recommended the creation of a new Town Council for the unparished Guildford Urban area, the decision has been deferred to the West Surrey authority.

About 66.7% of Surrey Heath is unparished, without a Town or Civil Parish to represent it. That is 59,117 citizens of the total 94,492. They are the electoral majority with 45,164 electors in Unparished, governed directly by SHBC vs 23,061 in the Parished villages in the Eastern part of the Borough.

With the historic transition to the West Surrey Council (UA), the relationship between local communities and their government is changing dramatically. For the Unparished areas of Surrey Heath this has sparked a major debate about whether mega-councils can really meet hyper-local needs and whether a Parish tier is worth the extra Council tax precept.

From a statutory standpoint, residents in Unparished areas expect the new Unitary Authority to deliver all core public services. From 1<sup>st</sup> April 2027, the West Surrey Council will operate as a single-tier system, absorbing all duties previously split between Surrey County Council and the six western boroughs (including Surrey Heath). Residents will expect seamless delivery of major services, including waste collection & recycling, highways, roads and pothole repairs, education and children services, adult social care and community housing.

The core concern is diluted representation. While residents may accept the financial logic and 'economies of scale' of a large Unitary Authority, there is widespread concern that local voices will be diluted because the West Surrey Council represents over half a million people across the six distinct borough regions and local communities fear that small hyper-local issues will be overshadowed by regional agendas.

During the CGR process in Surrey Heath, proponents have argued that Parish or Town Councils are more necessary than ever under a giant Unitary Authority. The arguments for paying an extra precept to establish a Parish (or Town) Council are;

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- a. Bridging the Local Service Gap. As the West Surrey Council centralises, it may stop funding non-statutory 'niceties'. A Parish Council can use its precept to directly
- b. maintain infrastructure like public toilets, local parks, allotments and hanging baskets.
- b. A Statutory Voice on Planning. Whilst Unitary Councillors will hold the voting power on Planning Committees, a Parish Council is a legally protected statutory consultee giving the neighbourhood a formal legal voice to challenge or support local development, rather than relying on a distant unitary board.
- c. Hyper-Local Funding. Parish Councils have the right to a portion of Community Infrastructure Levy funds, without a Parish Council, these developer funds may be pooled into a wider West Surrey pot, where they might be spent elsewhere.

On the other hand, many residents in unparished areas strongly oppose creating a new Parish tier arguing that:

- a. The Precept is a Regressive Tax which adds to the Council Tax bill and places an extra financial burden on households – hitting lower-income families hardest – at a time when they are already paying for transfer to Unitary.
- b. It creates Duplication and Bureaucracy. As the primary goal of the Unitary is to reduce layers of government and to streamline efficiency, they argue that establishing new Parish structures creates unnecessary bureaucracy and duplicates council roles.
- c. Limited Direct Power. Ultimately Parish Councils are just advisory bodies. Opponents believe that since a Parish cannot veto a Planning Application or change a major policy, the extra precept does not offer a justifiable return on investment.

Opinion: as a democrat I support the twins of 'Engagement & Democracy' together with 'Openness & Transparency' and our elected representative being local, on the ground, recognisable, in regular contact with the electorate, knowing the issues of concern and capable of fulfilling their primary function which is to represent and advocate for the local community and the people who live in it, to the upper tiers of governance.

On balance, the ideal would be to treat all residents of West Surrey equally but that is challenging. If it is to be about the expected services provided by governance, that must be the provenance of Unitary Authority. This suggests that the purpose of a Parish or Town Council would be to care for what their Community wanted, in addition to statutory roles, with their desires chosen with knowledge of the cost of such provision, as an extra precept.

Residents of Parished areas may be aware that they are part of this arrangement, but are largely not engaged in it, or that they are paying a premium for services that those in the unparished areas receive, without this premium added to Local Tax. Residents of the Unparished areas are unsurprisingly expecting the services as usual without this addition.

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There appears to be a strong argument for review of Parish Councils as it is not being provided by the current CGR. If we do, as expected, get a Windlesham Village Council, it must be well considered in terms of 'structure'. If it is just 'copy & paste' of the present arrangements it will be a missed opportunity for 'engagement & democracy' as simply a smaller version of current arrangements which are 'nothing like a democracy'.

In closing these are opinions based on research and experience. If you have comments, they will be welcome on [windlesham.life](http://windlesham.life)