



It seems to be a fair question to ask as a result of the recent, Surrey Heath wide, Community Governance Review (CGR) consultation, which suggests significant lack of knowledge or interest in the subject in general. It also suggests that a proper review of a structure which has existed, essentially since 1894, might want to start with that question, but it appears that there isn't an appetite to do so which is 'unfortunate' as nothing is that perfect and that certainly includes this model of local government.

To be clear about my position, I strongly believe in the need for parish councillors in their representative role, as the first tier of democratic governance and that the need is becoming greater, not in decline. I accept that they can make other contributions to their communities, as identified and required, within their capacity, as a community, by choice as independent legal entities, including with others 'sitting in council' - the parish council definition. But their primary duty and their allegiance must be to their electorate to whom they 'report' and who also have a 'duty' of oversight by engagement.

But that is not the view coming from the currently unparished more urban areas of the Borough and can be related to the original need for Parish councils - in the rural or semi rural areas – it was about rural exclusion from the democratic process. The question may arise from whether that distinction, about physical geographical distances, still applies in today's world and in the context of the Local Government Reorganization into Unitary Authorities.



Around **36% to 40%** of the population of England live within a civil parish area. Apart from their 'style' or 'title', parish and town councils are essentially the same. They cover around 91% of the total geography of England, but a much smaller proportion of the population because they are nearly all in rural areas and are less common in large urban areas, the "unparished" towns and cities. They range from small villages with fewer than 100 people to large towns with over 100,000 residents. There are nearly 10,500 parishes in England. Since 2007, it has been possible to create parishes in London and other urban areas, though adoption is relatively low.

They function as the first tier of local government, the closest of government to communities. They are not mandatory and do not exist in all parts of the country, they can cover either a whole village, a town or city or a neighbourhood within them, calling themselves by choice either 'town', 'community', 'neighbourhood' or 'village' councils. They have discretionary powers to manage local amenities like village halls, parks, playgrounds and allotments. They are funded primarily through a 'precept' (a council tax top-up) and cannot receive general grants from the central government. They can be created, merged, or abolished through a "CGR" conducted by the local principal authority (Borough / District or Unitary). There have been discussions around expanding their role and during the past year the government has proposed making it easier to set up parish councils.

They were first established by the Local Government Act of 1894, replacing the Ecclesiastical Parishes. The LG Act 1972 restructured local government in England and Wales, providing the legal basis for the existence of today's parish and town councils. As individual Legal Entities they are not part of a hierarchy and some legislation covering principle authorities does not apply to them. For example, legislation regarding executive arrangements, overview and scrutiny in the Localism Act 2011, the requirement for political balance of committees in the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, they are not covered by the Local Government Ombudsman and there is limited requirement for audit for councils with income and expenditure of under £6.5 million under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014.

As an independent legal entity, parish councils can within certain legal restraints create their own terms of reference, their own codes of conduct, their own strategic plan and other policies – without wider democratic reference and can, essentially, 'mark their own homework'. There is no 'leader' of a parish council – the 'Chair' is elected from within and by members, on an annual basis, to Chair meetings but has no authority beyond managing their meetings and usually cooperates with the Clerk in preparing items for the agendas. The Clerk is the Proper Officer who manages the administration and provides advice to the council and 'reports' to the individual councillors who are responsible only to the electorate with the exception of disciplinary matters which are referred to the Monitoring Officer of the local Principle Authority (SHBC in our case).



In answer to the title question, why do we need them? The argument in their favour is that, whilst it is true that the majority of England's *population* lives in unparished urban areas and locally have not expressed a reason to change, parish and town councils (collectively known as local councils) are still considered vital for several key reasons, particularly in representing local communities, managing localized services, and acting as a bridge to higher-tier government and can be considered necessary as follows.

Local Representation: Parish councils are the tier of government closest to the people. They serve over 30% of the country and are often the first point of contact for residents with concerns or ideas.

Managing Local Assets: They hold discretionary powers and may manage specific community amenities that larger district or unitary councils might overlook, such as village halls, community centres, parks, playgrounds, allotments, public seating, and bus shelters.

Voice in Planning as Statutory Consultees: Parish councils have the right to be consulted on all planning applications in their area. Their views are taken seriously by larger "principal authorities" as they should represent the best reflection of local sentiment.

Influencing Larger Councils: They act as a crucial link to higher-tier authorities, acting as a bridge between residents and district/county/UA councils to bring attention to issues like traffic calming, street cleaning, or community safety.

The "Precept" (Funding): Unlike community groups, parish councils can raise their own money through a "precept"—a small addition to the council tax bill. This allows them to fund local projects and improvements directly.

Developing Local Plans: Parish councils can take the lead in developing "neighbourhood plans" to shape development and land use in their area.

Community Cohesion: They can foster a sense of community by involvement in organizing local events, maintaining village greens, and supporting local voluntary organisations.

The Trend Toward More Parishes

Despite the high population in unparished areas, the government has shown interest in making it easier to set up new parish councils in towns and cities, particularly to manage local, "ultra-local" services. Many areas that have become unitary authorities have created new town or parish councils to ensure that local democracy and service delivery are maintained at a grassroots level.

It does appear that the government have come late in their interest in parish councils - which is qualified by no interest in their independent structure, that they are not part of a hierarchy with oversight dependant on an electorate without the knowledge or the interest – a potential limitation on engagement and therefore a limitation on democracy.



There is a conflict of equality if parishes are obliged to take on greater responsibility - and therefore cost – if their neighbours in the unparished areas have the same provision without the cost. There is also a potential conflict between the elected parish councils and the potential Neighbourhood Area Committees which government also appear to support and are undergoing pilot schemes in Surrey at the moment.

And there remains a question about the government's motivation – in using the word 'devolution' do they really intend that to reach and give power to local communities or is it to be devolution to powerful but controllable Mayors – a Mayor for all of Surrey overseeing the two Unitary Authorities – leaving you with a further question.

Time will tell with the answer.

As usual, these are my opinions based on the facts as presented in support, if you have opinions on this they will be welcomed by windlesham.life

