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A West Side Story of Surrey's new Parish Councils

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New lower tier councils will be created in Runnymede, Surrey Heath, Woking, and most controversially Guildford, just months after elections were held to simplify local government in Surrey.

In May, residents went to the polls in what was described as a once in a generation vote that would see Surrey County Council and its 11 boroughs and districts dissolved and replaced with two new mega authorities covering West and East Surrey.

The argument was it would mean less complexity, better value for money, and improved services.

However, some feared the huge new councils could leave too large a disconnect between residents and their representatives with some areas voting to create new hyperlocal bodies to oversee issues that might get overlooked by the larger bodies – at a cost.

The parish councils will require budgets of several hundred thousand pounds in start-up costs, and will have uncapped powers to charge more tax.

With some areas potentially facing increases in band d council tax bills of up to £100 for the privilege.

In three of the areas residents backed the plans and they were voted through by West Surrey's executive committee with little issue.

However, in Guildford, a public vote found 47 per cent of the people were against the plans compared with just 46 in favour but they were pushed through regardless, leading to calls for West Surrey to reject the bid.

Councillor Jane Austin, leader of the Conservative opposition group, said: "Generally my position is a parish council should go ahead if there is a clear will for it and a clear benefit to residents.

"I think this test has been met looking at the smaller parishes in Surrey Heath and Runnymede but I can't see evidence of this anywhere in the report for the Guildford case

"Given its significant size and budget we need more detail.

"If we are asking for a major part of Guildford to pay an extra estimated £69 per year.

She added: "The tests of whether people want this, whether they are happy with the cost, and whether this represents value and benefits the residents of Guildford have not been met."

Cllr Catherine Young (Horsleys: Residents for Guildford and Villages) said she believed the reason the vote was so close was that many people didn't understand the benefits of being in a parish council.

The expectation is that there will be elections held for the newly created lower councils in May 2027.

It would then be the new parish councils decisions to determine their own budgets.

Leader of West Surrey Council, Paul Follows said: "Do you think that the Western cabinet will be sitting here discussing planters in Guildford Town Centre, or the Christmas lights, or the fireworks, or what we're doing with certain elements of localised green spaces?

"It is ludicrous to think so and the problem is without making sure somebody else is responsible for it, we will be responsible for it, knowing that we don't have the time or capacity to deal with it properly, or with any real local understanding."

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

Surrey East West. (Credit: Elmbridge Borough Council) Permission for use.

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