

The young have their place in new Surrey governing

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Surrey's youngest councillors want to see more young people get involved in local government – and not let growing hostility towards elected representatives deter them from standing.

Elections to Surrey's two new unitary authorities in May saw several councillors under the age of 30 elected to the shadow council.

These new councils will formally assume all local government responsibilities from next April, at which point Surrey County Council and all 11 district councils will be abolished.

However, many younger councillors across the country face heightened online threats and abuse due to their age – with a 2024 Local Government Association (LGA) survey finding that seven in 10 councillors had received abuse or intimidation in the past 12 months.

The LGA's findings added that younger councillors will often report heightened abuse "suggesting they were too inexperienced" due to their age.

But several of the new shadow councillors told the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) they are determined not to let this stand in the way of doing their jobs – or deter them from standing for office.

Councillor Harleen Boparai (Liberal Democrats: Staines South and Ashford West) said: "Yes, we are faced with online abuse but young people are more aware than any other generation.

"We know how to ignore comments from bad faith actors and stay focused on getting things done for our communities."

In a July meeting of the East Surrey Shadow Authority, councillors of all ages shared examples of the threats and intimidation they had received from residents and voters – which included threats of violence and inappropriate messages.

"This behaviour discourages good people from standing for public office," Councillor Kirsty Hewens (Liberal Democrats: Walton South & Oatlands) told councillors at the meeting.

Despite the online abuse and intimidation faced by younger councillors, many of those elected have said they want to use their office to address the issues facing young people in Surrey.

Councillor Bradley Nelson (Liberal Democrats: Dorking) said "As councillors in our twenties, we also know how difficult it is to afford a home, get around without a car or find thriving town centres that offer opportunities for younger people.

"Rather than complain about those challenges, we've chosen to try do something about it."

He pointed to the startlingly high cost of housing in Surrey, which is among the highest in the country outside of London, as a key issue affecting younger people in the county.

He added that balancing his council duties alongside his early career helps bring a useful perspective to the council.

Councillor Josh Lambert (Liberal Democrats: Walton North) added: "Being a councillor shouldn't be restricted to those with surplus time or money. It's vital that young working people are represented in local government.

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter