

Double Devo

The case for empowering
neighbourhoods as well as regions



ONWARD >

About Onward

Onward is a modernising think tank whose mission is to develop bold and practical ideas to boost economic opportunity and strengthen communities in all parts of the United Kingdom.

We are not affiliated to any party but believe in a mainstream conservatism. We recognise the value of markets and support the good that government can do, and believe that a strong society is the foundation of both. We want to seize the opportunities of the future while preserving the accumulated knowledge of the past. We believe that most people are hard working, aspirational and decent, but that many do not have the opportunities to fulfil their potential.

Our goal is to address the needs of the whole country: young as well as old; urban as well as rural; in all parts of the UK – particularly places that feel neglected or ignored in Westminster – by working with ordinary people directly and developing practical policies that work.

Thanks

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We are also grateful to our partners for the Repairing our Social Fabric programme – the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Power to Change and Shelter UK – and our patron Richard Oldfield, who have collectively made the Social Fabric Programme possible.

The Social Fabric Programme

Onward's Repairing our Social Fabric programme seeks to understand the changing nature of community in different parts of the UK, and explore ways to repair the social fabric of different places in meaningful and practical ways. It is chaired by Lord O'Shaughnessy, and the steering group includes Jon Cruddas MP, Alex Smith, Vidhya Alakeson, Richard Clark, Richard Oldfield, Frank Sodeen, Chris Wood and Rob Walsh. We are grateful for the support of Danny Kruger MP, who stepped down from the steering group on his appointment as the PPS for the Department of Levelling Up, Communities and Housing.

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Summary of the argument





Some of the most important but least discussed problems around levelling up are issues of governance: how local areas are managed, what structures exist for them to control their own affairs, and the quality of people involved in overseeing those structures.

The policy debate about governance has historically focused overwhelmingly on the regional tier. Through the replacement of regional development agencies with local enterprise partnerships; the creation of metro mayors; and, more recently, the extension of devolution through county deals, policymakers have at every stage been primarily concerned with creating a layer of strategic governance at a city region or county level to which they can devolve power and money, and thus diversify and dilute the UK's overly centralised administration.

A meaningful shift of power from Whitehall to Town Halls would be welcome and is long overdue. As academics like Philip McCann have argued, the UK's long standing regional productivity problem can be traced in large part to problems of regional governance.¹

But it is just one side of the devolution coin. The UK is not only unique among developed countries for the level of taxes raised and spent nationally, but is also unusual for the extent to which power is deprived from communities at a hyperlocal or neighbourhood level. As ministers consider proposals to strengthen governance in Britain's city and county regions, they should also consider how to level up governance within neighbourhoods, thereby doubling devolution.

This note considers one of the oldest and most effective structures of local governance – the town and parish council – and sets out ways to empower them to level up the communities they represent. The vision we set out is not revolutionary but it is vital: for every neighbourhood, no matter where it is located, to be able to establish its own local democratic governance, and, if a sufficient share of residents wills it, to take greater control of local functions.

We recommend three core reforms:

1. **Let the people decide.** The Government should hold an automatic ballot of voters in every local area currently without a town or parish council, to ask local people whether they want to adopt neighbourhood-level governance. This would address the democratic deficit in nearly two-thirds (63%) of England where the most immediate form of governance is at the district or unitary level. Such a ballot should be held alongside the next cycle of local elections, to largely eliminate costs, and replace the bureaucratic process of holding a local referendum and lengthy community governance reviews, which has been used by local government in some cases to frustrate community self-determination.

2. **Strengthen the quality of governance.** The Government should simultaneously improve the capability and legitimacy of town and parish councils, by requiring that every town and parish council is two-thirds elected and ensuring that 25% of revenue from the planned Infrastructure Levy goes to town and parish councils. This would reverse the current system where only one-third of parish councillors have to be elected, and ensure that town and parish councils have a meaningful capital budget by which to improve their local place without raising large levels of additional council tax. The combination of meaningful resources and contestable elections should reinvigate local decision-making.
3. **Expand the role of neighbourhood councils.** The Government should radically increase the powers available to town and parish councils, by extending the General Power of Competence on the same terms as the rest of local government and by creating new powers for town and parish councils to “pull down” responsibility for neighbourhood functions if they believe they could do a better job than the district or unitary council. These functions should include: maintenance of green space; management of civic assets, such as libraries, community hubs and sports facilities; and street cleaning and sweeping. It could even extend to licensing of markets and street trading and power should be clarified to give town and parish the ability to invest in church buildings too.

The effect would be to give local neighbourhoods the ability to take back control of their place through a well-resourced and democratically legitimate neighbourhood council. While town and parish councils currently have few powers and limited legitimacy, the ability to pull down responsibility and to benefit from the Infrastructure Levy would encourage places to adopt proper community governance, and thus give high calibre people a more direct incentive to represent their community as town and parish councillors.

Most importantly of all, these recommendations could be achieved by straightforward changes to the Localism Act, without a politically costly reorganisation of local government or the fiscal challenge of decentralising current Whitehall budgets. There are few simpler and more democratic ways to boost the capability of local places to take back control of their own destiny - and level up local growth.



Standing orders

The history, powers and coverage of neighbourhood councils



Britain has historically given local places considerable responsibility for their own administration. Town councils, comprised of self-electing aldermen, date back to feudal times. Counties can be traced to the aftermath of the Norman conquest, although administrative county councils were not introduced until the late 19th century. Parish councils, meanwhile, grew out of local ecclesiastical committees which enjoyed limited local administrative responsibility over the poor laws and local infrastructure until 1894. The emergence of the modern state has eroded this local link and diminished the role of local councils. It is time to reverse that trend and give people back control of their place.

The history and powers of town and parish councils

Parish councils are the lowest elected tier of local governance in the UK. While they are called different things in different parts of the UK - ranging from local, parish, neighbourhood, village or town councils in England to community councils in Scotland and Wales - they are nevertheless familiar across the country as the most immediate form of local decision-making and the first port of call about community issues.

The first elected parish councils were established in England and Wales by the Local Government Act 1894, which removed all non-ecclesiastical functions from local church councils and passed them to newly-established elected parish councils. The remaining church bodies became known as parochial church councils.² During debates in the House of Commons over the 1894 Act, H.H. Fowler, the President of the Local Government Board, was adamant of the value of parish councils, calling them “special organisations for special purposes and with special advantages”, and arguing that “we must have the Parish Council in all its fulness and efficiency undisturbed.”³

And undisturbed they remained until the Local Government Act of 1972, which not only completely restructured local government in England and Wales to what we know today, creating a two-tier structure of counties and districts, but also changed the legislation surrounding parish councils.⁴ This is not the case in Scotland, which abolished parish councils under the 1929 Local Government (Scotland) Act and transferred many of their responsibilities to counties and established small and large burghs. Community Councils were reinstated in the 1970s, but today enjoy limited power or responsibilities.

While much of the 1972 Local Government Act relating to local authorities has since been superseded by successive local government reforms, the Act still governs much of the way town and parish councils in England work.⁵ The powers available to councils vary across the UK, but can include responsibility for a range of neighbourhood-level services, including green spaces, such as commons and

allotments, infrastructure, including community centres and village halls, and transport powers, such as the maintenance of footpaths and highways.⁶

In 2011, the Localism Act expanded the powers of town and parish councils with regard to neighbourhood planning. Whereas previously these played a consultative role in local planning decisions, under the neighbourhood planning provisions of the 2011 Act, town and parish councils were given the role of leading the creation of Neighbourhood Plans and may promote a Neighbourhood Development Order to grant planning permission for specific types of development in identified areas.

The 2011 Act also significantly increased the powers for town and parish councils in England, including by creating a General Power of Competence allowing eligible councils to do anything that individuals generally do (subject to exemptions) as well as the ability to bid on local assets under the Community Right to Bid and to challenge public service delivery under the Community Right to Challenge.

Box 1: New town and parish council powers introduced by the Localism Act 2011

A **General Power of Competence**, empowering local authorities, including parish councils, to do “anything that individuals generally may do”, provided it is not prohibited by other legislation, giving them greater freedom to improve their local communities.⁷ A review by the Local Government Association found that these powers have helped parish councils to provide youth services and improve community facilities, as well as giving them the confidence to take on additional services, including where higher tier authorities had reduced provision.⁸

Neighbourhood Planning powers, allowing parish councils and community groups to create Neighbourhood Development Plans and Orders, which can shape developments in local areas, and Community Right to Build Orders, providing permission for small-scale specific developments.⁹

The **Community Right to Bid**, empowering parish councils and local groups in England to nominate assets of community value. If their application is successful, this allows local groups the opportunity to bid for the asset if it is sold.¹⁰

The **Community Right to Challenge**, allowing parish councils and other community groups in England the right to challenge how local authorities run services, with an opportunity to bid to run these services themselves.¹¹

Where do town and parish councils exist?

Today there are over 10,200 town and parish councils in England,¹² 730 community councils in Wales, and 1,200 in Scotland.¹³ A lack of data makes it difficult to estimate the number of people served by a town and parish council but a 2014 evidence review commissioned by the Welsh Government suggested that 37% of the English population are covered by a parish council, in comparison to 70% in Wales.¹⁴

Communities are also entitled to hold a parish meeting annually, to which all local people within the parish are entitled to attend. These parish meetings, distinctive from parish council meetings, are an opportunity for local people to come together to discuss issues affecting their area. In places where there is no parish council, Section 109 of the Local Government Act 1972 also allows district councils to confer upon a parish meeting any functions of a parish council, essentially allowing these meetings to make decisions on many of the neighbourhood-level services discussed above. In areas where there is no parish council, these meetings can also be held twice a year, instead of annually.¹⁵

Under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, the process for setting up a town and parish council in England involves organising a local petition which, if successful, triggers a Community Governance Review by a higher tier authority in the local area to consider the case for establishing a new parish. These reviews can also be used for altering the boundaries of a parish, grouping a number of parishes under a common parish council, or dissolving a parish council altogether.

In 2015, the Cameron government introduced measures to make it easier for local communities to create new town and parish councils in England. These included reducing the minimum levels of petition signatures required, as well as allowing community groups with a neighbourhood development plan approved by a local referendum to set up a parish council without a petition.¹⁶ In the last year, new town and parish councils have been created in Northamptonshire and South Cambridgeshire, while a number of existing parish councils in Cornwall and Bournemouth have been grouped together.¹⁷

Recent innovative proposals to make it easier for local communities to create new parish councils include Danny Kruger MP's recommendation that Ministers explore a 'pop-up parish' system.¹⁸ This would allow the Government to strike quick-set-up, time-limited agreements to empower specific local communities in unparished areas to create a Community Improvement District (CID). These CIDs, as proposed by Power to Change and others, would provide communities with greater opportunities for participation in decisions about their local area.

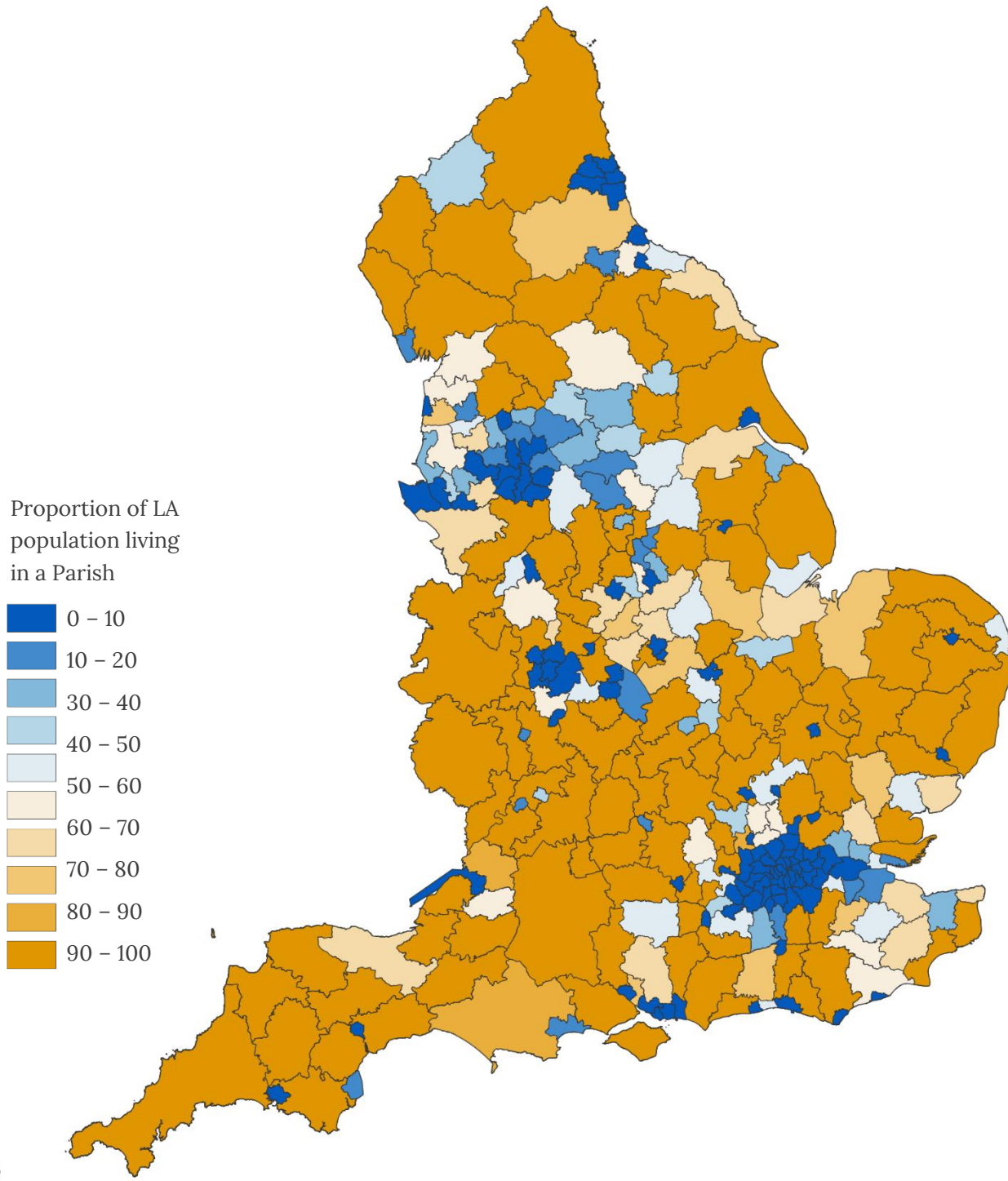
Town and parish councils could play a significant role in delivering the aims of these proposed Community Improvement Districts. As Power to Change note in their discussion paper on CIDs, local communities are already able to create Community Interest Companies to invest in their local area, noting that CICs could be “the simplest option for developing a body which can spend with limited liability to the directors, has clear responsibilities, such as an asset lock, and which has social aims”. However, these companies “have no specific power to act on behalf of the community” nor would local authorities have a duty to recognise them.¹⁹

Parish council-run CICs could offer the solution. Local authorities, including town and parish councils, already have the power to create these CICs and to use them to carry out commercial activities for a community benefit.²⁰ Indeed, there are already isolated examples of parish councils creating CICs to improve their local areas, such as the Hailsham Town Council saving the local Post Office branch through such a company in 2019.²¹

Through CICs, parish councils can easily set up bodies to drive local economic investment and protect vital community assets in their neighbourhoods, while at the same time ensuring that the new body works closely with existing local stakeholders, rather than clashing with them. Those town and parish councils making use of CICs would, in effect, become Community Improvement Districts.

Figure 1: Proportion of local authority population living in a parish.

Source: ONS, Onward analysis



Parish councils in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

The structures, powers and existence of parish councils vary by nation. There are a number of similarities as well as differences that apply to parish or community councils across the different nations:

- **Wales.** The establishment of parish councils in Wales were included in the Local Government Act 1894. However, in 1972, Welsh parish councils were renamed 'Community Councils' by the Local Government Act. In Wales, they have the power to do "anything they consider is likely to achieve the promotion or improvement of economic, social, and environmental well-being of the community". This could include a number of responsibilities, such as the provision of signs, war memorials and public clocks, playing fields and footpaths, and other services. They also vary in size. For example, the community council in Llanwrthwl, Powys, served just 155 people in 2003, while Barry served 45,053. By 1998, all ministerial powers over community councils were devolved to the National Assembly for Wales under the Wales Act 1998.²²
- **Scotland.** Community councils were not introduced in Scotland until 1973, under the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973. The model scheme sets out an entitlement for every local community in Scotland to petition their local authority to establish a community council in their area, after which the local authority will issue a public notice and consult on the areas and composition of the community council before adoption. The 1973 Act defined the duties of a council as: 'to ascertain, co-ordinate and express to the Local Authorities for its area and to public authorities the views of the community which it represents, in relation to matters for which those authorities are responsible.' Their electorates currently range from 35 to 34,000 electors.²³ Their powers, however, are more limited than in England and Wales, and are largely confined to carrying out local surveys, arranging community events, holding public meetings and responding to consultations.
- **Northern Ireland** is the only part of the UK to have never had any form of parish or community council. The Local Government (Ireland) Act introduced in 1898 brought a new mixed tier system of government, with every administrative county establishing a council,²⁴ but this did not include parish councils. Instead, Northern Ireland only has 11 local councils today.

Table 1: Parish and community council powers in different parts of the UK

Sources: *Parish Councils UK*²⁵; *Community Councils Scotland*²⁶; *Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011*²⁷

Powers available	England	Wales	Scotland
Ability to raise funds locally via a precept	X	X	
General Representative Functions	X	X	X
General Power of Competence	X	X	
Creation of a Parish or Neighbourhood Plan	X		
Legal Power to defend the interests of the community	X		
Request Assets of Community Value be listed	X		
Acquisition, appropriation and disposal of land by agreement	X	X	
Power to manage allotments	X	X	
Spending on local amenities, e.g. village halls, transport	X	X	

Parishing alongside unitarisation

In recent years, there has been a trend towards replacing district and county councils in some areas of the country with more strategic unitary councils. In the last two years, four new unitary councils have been created - North Northamptonshire and West Northamptonshire (2021), Buckinghamshire (2020), and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (2019).

There is clearly a strong rationale for unitarisation - not least given the deep-seated financial troubles of the Northamptonshire County Council - but it is also true that reorganisations can lead to responsibilities being concentrated further away from local communities if steps are not taken to support new local governance. To counter this, a number of unitarisations, including Cornwall, Wiltshire and Northamptonshire, have been accompanied by efforts to create additional town and parish councils alongside a stronger strategic layer. Five new parish councils were established in Northamptonshire in the last year, for example, alongside the unitarisations outlined above.²⁸

This has been accompanied by the delegation of some functions from the unitary level to the town and parish council level, negotiated with the principal authority. In 2009, the Commission for Rural Communities and the National Association of Local Councils published a guidance note on best practice for this process, setting out options, considerations and practical steps required.²⁹

This note set out three broad types of delegation:

- **Delegation of operational tasking**, giving parish councils some formal power to direct the operation of a local service and monitor performance through a contract management role.
- **Delegation of service delivery**, giving parish councils a delivery role, effectively making them the local contractor providing a service to an agreed frequency and standard.
- **Delegation of service responsibility**, giving parish councils the full responsibility and accountability for the delivery of a service.

More recently, the NALC published a case study on Sutton Parish Council in Cambridgeshire, discussing the success of services being delegated to the hyperlocal level. The study showed that delegating youth services to the parish council helped it achieve its aim of tackling the “rowdy behaviour and vandalism” caused by local youths, with the Cambridgeshire County Council praising the parish council’s approach.³⁰

As the Government develops a stronger regional leadership through county deals and the extension of the metro mayor model, there is a strong argument it should consider ways to strengthen hyperlocal leadership in this way.

The democratic deficit left by uneven governance

The variation in coverage for town and parish councils in different parts of the United Kingdom creates something of a democratic deficit between different places. In many parts of the country, particularly rural areas, local people now benefit from strong local representation at both the community and strategic level of governance. There are, for example, 265 separate parish councils in Dorset, 252 in Wiltshire, 242 in Hertfordshire, 177 in East Suffolk and 172 councils in East Riding of Yorkshire. In many of these places, including Wiltshire and Cornwall, the move to unitary government in recent years has been complemented by the establishment of stronger governance at community or parish level.

In contrast, however, there are no town and parish councils whatsoever in over 80 district or unitary council areas in England, including many of the UK’s largest municipalities such as Plymouth, Blackpool, Stockport, Liverpool, South Tyneside and Leicester. In such places, local residents have far fewer councillors despite far greater population density, and local government is inevitably more remote. This democratic deficit is at its most extreme in London. Between 1935 and 2007, parish councils were not permitted in Greater London.³¹ Even now there is only one local area - Queen’s Park in Westminster - which has successfully established a community (parish) council.³²

The lack of new, bottom-up councils is partly because the mechanism for adopting a town and parish council is convoluted, despite recent efforts to improve the process. It is as follows:

- The first stage involves local residents and community groups submitting a petition containing the signatures of at 7.5% of the local population, or more signatures for areas with fewer than 2,500 electors. This petition must set out exactly what is being proposed, including the area covered and the rationale for establishing a parish council.
- Second, if this petition qualifies, the principal authority (i.e. the local authority within which the proposed parish would exist) is obliged to instigate a Community Governance Review. This can take up to 12 months from the submission of the petition and involves the principal council consulting local people and other interested parties on the matter. This may include a referendum but rarely does.
- Following the review, the principal authority must propose a solution, which may range from the creation of a parish council along the lines proposed by the community, establishing a parish council on different lines, or not proceeding with a community council at all. This final decision is made by the principal authority without mandatory recourse to a referendum or democratic vote.

While there have been over 270 new local councils created since the Localism Act was passed in 2011, these have frequently been the result of wider changes - such as unitarisation or local government restructuring - rather than communities successfully forcing a principal authority to cede control, as in Queen's Park.³³ There have also been a number of high profile examples where parish councils have been proposed by local communities and then subsequently rejected after the Community Governance Review, as happened in Tower Hamlets in 2019. This suggests that it could still be made considerably easier for local communities to adopt a town or parish council in England, to work with principal authorities and, in some cases, draw down powers from them on key decisions that affect local people's lives

Box 2: Case Study: Queen’s Park, Westminster

In 2011, local residents in the ward of Queen’s Park in the London Borough of Westminster started a campaign for a new Community Council. The group stated that they wanted to “address important local issues themselves”.³⁴

The campaign instigated a 12-month Community Governance Review to look into options for local service provision across the Borough. This also included a local referendum within the ward only. The referendum allowed online, telephone, text and paper voting, which resulted in 69% of people voting to support the establishment of a community council on a turnout of 20% of the ward’s 8,000 registered voters.³⁵

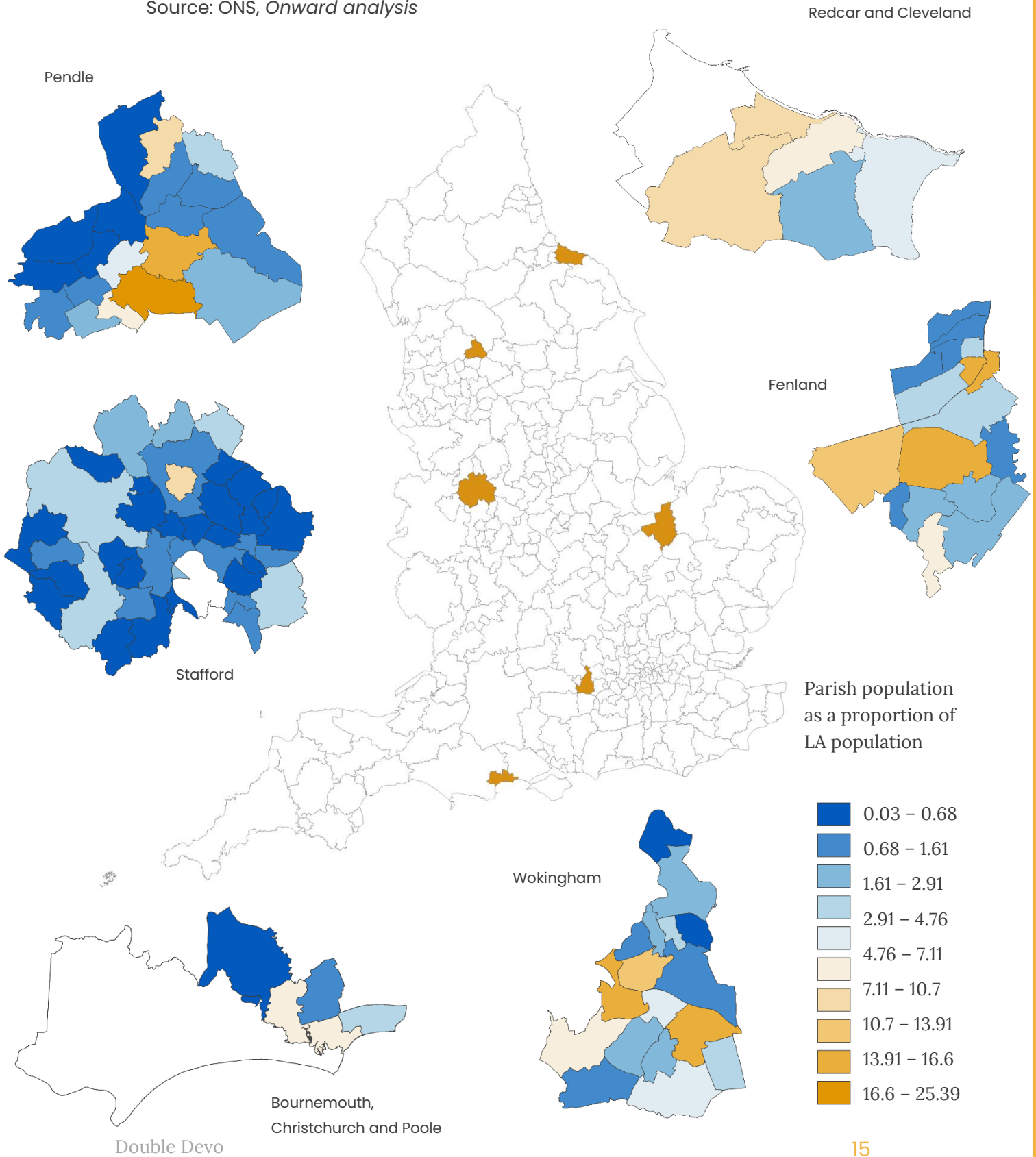
In 2014, Queen’s Park Community Council was created - the first parish council in London for nearly 80 years. Today, the Community Council is made up of 12 local, unaffiliated councillors. The Community Council is funded by both a precept of £46.38 a year (or 89p a week) for an average band D household in 2018/2019, as well as other sources of funding.³⁶

It has since led the creation of a Neighbourhood Plan for Queen’s Park, put to a referendum in October 2021, in which over 90% of the more than 700 people voting approved the plan. The plan has set out ambitious proposals which put placemaking at the heart of the council’s agenda, including:

- Protecting community facilities and services, including sports and leisure facilities;
- Improving the local environment, including Queen’s Park Gardens, as well as improving recreation and play spaces and protecting parks, gardens and allotments;
- Respecting the neighbourhood’s heritage, by protecting historic buildings, at the same time as providing energy efficiency improvements to support the transition to net zero;
- Establishing safer and more pleasant streets, by encouraging more people to cycle and walk, including by taking action to increase cycle parking and storage;
- Supporting high street stores, by maintaining commercial space along the local high streets; and
- Welcoming a diverse mix of people, by protecting social housing stock and ensuring a proportion of new homes are affordable.³⁷

Figure 2: Parished population as proportion of local authority population of selected local authorities

Source: ONS, *Onward analysis*



Of the 314 local authorities in England, less than a third are fully parished and over 80 have no town or parish at all. Lack of representation at the town level can create wide disparities in democratic representation. For example, in the Stratford and New Town ward in the London Borough of Newham, where there is no town or parish council, there are more than 12,500 residents for every councillor, compared to just 25 residents per parish councillor in the village of Weeford in Staffordshire.

Of those local authorities that are parished, there is huge variation both in the coverage, size and population represented. Figure 2 above shows a breakdown of local authorities by the population share of the parishes within them. Just under 90% of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole is unparished, leaving only 13% of the local authority's population with hyperlocal representation. However, being fully parished is no guarantee of more equity in representation or size.

Of the local authorities detailed above, Pendle has the largest degree of variation in parish population share. Pendle is fully parished and has 19 parish councils. The population of the authority is shared unequally across the parishes. The largest share is found in the parish of Nelson with 34.4% of the local authority's population while the smallest population share is 0.22% in Goldshaw. This state of affairs is common across England and works to undercut the democratic representativeness of councils.

Some town and parish councils have considerably more electors per councillor than others. A minimum of five parish councillors was set by the 1972 Local Government Act.³⁸ However, there no minimum number set by parish size.

This leads to examples such as Redcar and Cleveland, where there are five parishes that cover 45% of the population. Within these, parishes range from a population of 3544 (2.5% of the authority) in Lockwood to a population of 18775 (13.7%) in Guisborough. Lockwood has 9 parish councillors³⁹, breaking down to 394 parishioners per councillor, Guisborough has 15 councillors, one councillor for every 1251 parishioners.⁴⁰

There is wide variation in the representativeness of different parishes, Ringway, the smallest parish in England and only parish in Manchester, has 49 parishioners and five councillors.⁴¹ The latest available data suggests that Sutton Coldfield is the largest parish in England, with a parishioner population of 93,486 and 25 councillors. So, for every ten parishioners in Ringway there is one councillor, and for every councillor in Sutton Coldfield there are over 3739 parishioners.⁴² However, the new Northampton Town Council covering most of Northampton is likely to cover an even larger population.

Parish precepts

Town and parish councils have the power to raise a precept, or additional levy on top of council tax, to support their costs.⁴³ This precept cannot be refused by either the taxpayer paying it or the billing authority levying it. It is the largest source of revenue for many town and parish councils, but parishes are free not to set a precept and have the option to seek income from other sources. While several places have no annual precept at all, such as Waternewton in Huntingdonshire and Boconnoc in Cornwall, over 80% of town and parish councils in England do set a precept of some kind.⁴⁴

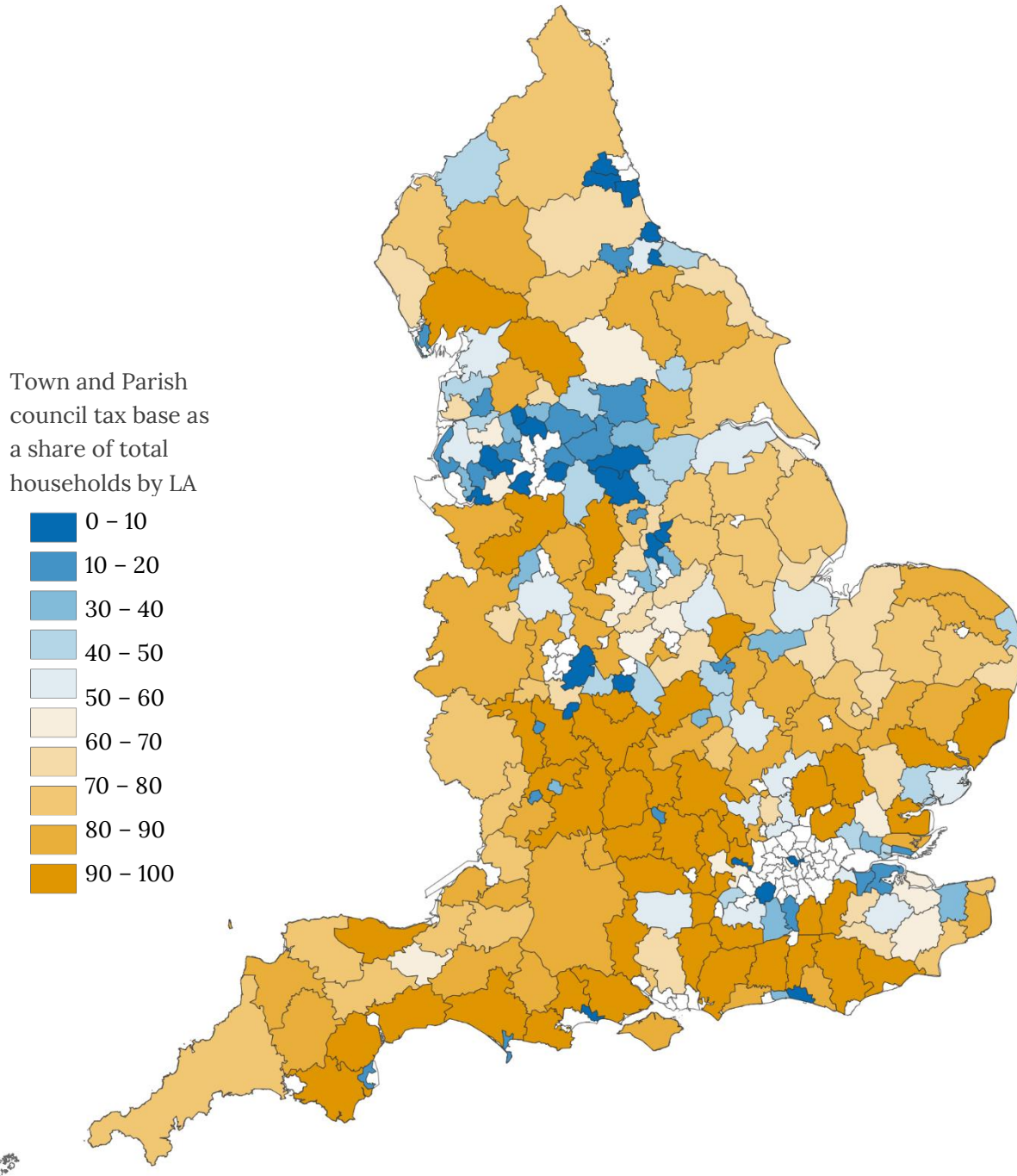
Since 2017-18, the number of precepting parish councils has marginally increased from 8,839 to 8,877 today, and the average parish precept for a Band D property has risen from £61.03 to £71.86 a year, or an average rise of 4.6% annually over the last five years. The council tax base for precepting parishes varies considerably between different local authorities. For example, in Redditch there are only 367 households paying the precept of its single parish, Feckenham, paying £10,000 in aggregate in 2021-22. This compares to the 221,229 households who pay an aggregate total of £15.8 million in parish precepts in Buckinghamshire, or the 193,560 households in Cornwall who paid over £27 million towards their community governance this year.⁴⁵

This variation is shown most clearly when the council tax base for precepting authorities is compared to the number of households in each local authority area, as shown in Figure 2 below. For example, in Gateshead, Coventry and Brighton and Hove, an equivalent of 1% of local households were paying parish precepts in 2018. This compares to 100% of households in Derbyshire Dales, East Devon, South Oxfordshire and elsewhere. The South West and South East have the highest parish density on this measure, while London and Liverpool are clearly visible as areas with no parishes. The M62 corridor is also clearly visible as having a lower level of parish density, demonstrating a degree of overlap with the Red Wall (which is discussed further below).

Here too, it is possible to see the problems that arise from vast differences in parish population size. Those town and parish councils with considerable populations will have far larger tax base to draw from, giving them a more sustainable funding position and the ability to enact more ambitious policies. Those smaller parishes, while having fewer people to service, are at a disadvantage when it comes to the provision of services due to the smaller tax base they have to draw from.

Figure 3: Town and parish council tax base as a share of total households, by local authority district, 2018


Source: MHCLG (2019) Local Government Live Finance Tables; ONS, Local Government Households



Placemaking

Parish councils and the social fabric





Town and parish councils can play an important role in supporting belonging and community strength. This is particularly true when it comes to social trust, with a study of European cities published earlier this year finding that “an increase in the dimension of local public service quality is substantially associated with an increase in social trust.”⁴⁶

But research also suggests that localism only delivers wider benefits for social fabric when local bodies are entrusted with genuine responsibility. For example, an evidence review by the Connected Communities programme in 2011 concluded that localism “can be instrumental” in delivering community empowerment, provided that it goes beyond “mere rhetoric” and includes the “active devolution of power to different scales of local government”.⁴⁷ Similarly, a separate study reported in 2015 that “bottom-up, self-help, state-enabled projects” best provide the opportunity to empower local communities, rather than “top-down, state-led policy initiatives”.⁴⁸

The Coalition Government’s reforms have gone some way towards ensuring that some town and parish councils have sufficient responsibilities to improve belonging and community strength. As the Local Government Association has concluded, the devolution of more assets and services to the parish-level has been “highly empowering” and given communities greater control over “the wellbeing and appearance of their places”.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, a study by the University of Exeter has noted that in Cornwall’s larger parish councils, “the public realm is now managed by local councillors and council staff”, with “evidence of considerable improvements in the quality of service provision”, resulting from these parishes being “able to pay closer attention to the buildings and facilities on their patch” and “better able to police contracts so that services are more responsive.”⁵⁰

These conclusions on the important role that town and parish councils can play in place-making are also supported by Onward’s own analysis. While there is no linear correlation between parish coverage and overall community strength, as measured by our Social Fabric Index, local authorities that scored strongly for specific place-making elements within our Index do tend to have higher parish coverage than those who scored poorly.⁵¹

For example, as shown in the tables below, fully parished authorities, on average, score far higher in numerous Social Fabric Index elements than fully unparished authorities, and there are large differences in average parish coverage between local authorities in the top and bottom deciles of these elements.

Notable Social Fabric Index elements with a strong relationship with town and parish councils include:

- Volunteering and group membership - measured by the proportions of local people who volunteer or are members of a local association;
- Community assets - measured by per capita rates of assets that are community-owned or designated as having community value;
- Socialising and leisure - measured by the proportions of local people who are satisfied with their leisure time or who regularly spend time with their friends and family;
- Local business - measured by per capita rates of independent businesses;
- Local assets - measured by per capita rates of assets including libraries, bank branches, and pubs;
- Open and public spaces - measured by per capita rates of green spaces, allotments, and sports fields;
- Political engagement - measured by turnout in elections; and
- Charitable activity - measured by charities per capita and share of population reporting Gift Aid.

Table 2: Mean scores for selected Onward Social Fabric Index elements for fully parished and fully unparished areas compared.

Source: Onward Social Fabric Index, ONS, Onward Analysis

Social Fabric Element	Fully parished LAs	Fully unparished LAs	Difference
Community assets	1.6	0.3	1.3
Volunteering and group membership	5.6	4.1	1.3
Socialising and Leisure	6.6	5.1	1.2
Local Assets	4.7	4.1	0.9
Local business	4.1	3.5	0.8
Open and Public Space	5.3	4.3	0.8
Political Engagement	5.3	4.2	0.8
Charity	4.7	3.5	0.7

Table 3: Mean proportion of local authority parished in bottom and top deciles for selected Onward Social Fabric Index elements, compared.

Source: Onward Social Fabric Index, ONS, Onward Analysis

Social Fabric Element	Bottom Decile, % parished	Top Decile, % parished	Difference
Volunteering and Group Membership	6.2	79.9	1.8
Community assets	26.3	92.	1.6
Socialising and Leisure	3.9	69.6	1.6
Local business	12.5	71.9	1.4
Local Assets	27.7	81.4	1.3
Open and Public Space	16.1	68.8	1.3
Political Engagement	19.9	71.7	1.2
Charity	20.3	59.8	0.9

The important role that town and parish councils can play in place-making is also supported by anecdotal evidence of the work that parish councils do at the local level. As Box 3 below demonstrates, town and parish councils oversee a wide range of activities in their areas to support stronger community and connection among residents. While the activities of parish councils can seem modest, it is these kinds of changes on the hyperlocal level that are best placed to deliver the kind of activity needed to restore local pride, a key priority for the levelling up programme.

The important role that town and parish councils can play in strengthening social fabric in left-behind areas is underscored by comparisons of the least and most deprived local authorities in England, as defined by the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. The least deprived tenth of local authorities have, on average, 72% of their population covered by a parish, compared to 11% in the most deprived tenth.⁵²

Furthermore, the Red Wall has considerably lower levels of parish coverage. Just 20.7% of people living in the Red Wall have a town and parish council, less than half the figure across the rest of England (47.0%). This is partly a function of urbanity, given many post-industrial towns have either low levels of parish coverage, such as Hyndburn (1.5%), Wigan (3.2%), and Darlington (14.7%), or no town and parish councils at all, as in Blackpool, Stoke-on-Trent, and Rochdale. This compares strongly to many market towns in the South of England which have complete parish coverage, such as Cornwall, Wiltshire, and Shropshire.

The correlation between levels of parish councils and stronger social fabric, together with the relative scarcity of these councils within the Red Wall, suggests that efforts to level up towns in the Red Wall would benefit from a greater focus on hyperlocal governance.

Box 3: Case studies of parish councils empowering communities

Below are a number of recent case studies compiled by the NALC, demonstrating the role that town and parish councils can play in strengthening places and belonging:¹

Battle Town Council, East Sussex. Developed a plan to repair and improve the local Grade II* listed Almonry Building, with work commencing earlier this year.

Tollerton Parish Council, Nottinghamshire. Acts as trustees for the Tollerton Community Trust, which supports fundraising, local causes and volunteering in the village, as well as organises the annual Tollerton Village Faye.

Darley Dale Town Council, Derbyshire. Created the Darley Dale Town Council Community Awards to thank local people who give their time to help others and to celebrate local businesses who go the extra mile for their customers.

Filey Town Council, Yorkshire. Holds an annual series of summer band concerts, taking place every Sunday from late July to mid-September, with local businesses supporting the maintenance of the bandstand.

Flitwick Town Council, Bedfordshire. Created a five year Town Strategy, including actions to enhance the local village hall and market, work with local businesses to encourage networking, investment and job creation.


Snettisham Parish Council, Norfolk. Owns the local common, and is managing it under a plan created with Norfolk Wildlife Trust in order to encourage ecological diversity, aiming to boost habitat connectivity, create new areas of grassland, and improve the wildlife value of the woodland.

Branston and Mere Parish Council, Lincolnshire. Employs a volunteer coordinator to oversee Branston Community Library along with approximately 20 volunteers, with the library also offering a place for a variety of local community groups to meet.

Pulling places up by their bootstraps

Giving every area the ability to govern their own affairs





If ministers are serious about extending devolution throughout England, they should consider strengthening local governance through town and parish councils as well as empowering cities and counties. The recent history of town and parish councils since the Localism Act, whereby unitarisation has been accompanied by a stronger parish layer in Cornwall and Wiltshire in particular, demonstrates the value of “double devolution” to communities.

In doing so, the Government should take the opportunity to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of town and parish councils. In 2015, only 20% of parishes held a contested election in some areas, and some parish seats had no candidates in 2015.⁵³ This is not sustainable, and will inevitably drive down the quality of both councillors and decision-making over time. A fresh approach is needed to empower town and parish and, in the process, increase the quality of people standing for election.

In *Policies of Belonging*, Onward called for ministers to create an entitlement for every local area to form a town or parish council to improve hyperlocal governance. By extending hyperlocal governance, we argued that the Government could create greater capacity in the places with fraying social fabric to devise and deliver local reform. In practice, we believe that three key reforms are necessary to deliver this objective. These are as follows:

1. Give every local area a straight choice about whether to adopt a town or parish council

In England, town and parish councils are the exception rather than the rule. This is partly because the process for establishing a town or parish council is reactive and bureaucratic. As described above, local residents in favour of self-governance have to, first, convince one in every fifteen voters to sign a petition, then, second, engage with a Community Governance Review run by a principal authority whose interest is rarely aligned to further devolution, and, finally, wait up to a year for a decision over which they exercise explicit no control. Even if a referendum delivers majority support, it is possible for a principal authority to reject the proposal.

This is convoluted, undemocratic and costly, given the expensive nature of holding local referenda and community consultations. A simpler, direct and more cost effective way to test local support would be to do so through the ballot box, by holding an automatic vote in every local area without a town or parish council alongside the next local government election.

Such a ballot could simply ask local people in every community without a town or parish council whether they would like to instate one, with a council being created if a majority of voters is in favour. Unless there is a historic parish or an existing

Neighbourhood Plan area within the community, votes should be counted at the ward level. Local wards that vote in favour of parishes would then automatically create a large ward council covering the whole ward, unless the new council opted to create a series of smaller parishes within the ward.

When providing these ballots, the Government would need to take account of the fact that many places, especially in major cities, have not ever enjoyed hyperlocal governance and will have a limited idea of the functions of town and parish councils. The Government should require the Electoral Commission to fulfil its statutory duty of making the public aware of parish ballots, with a national campaign to make people know about the role of town and parish councils. This should not be devolved to principal authorities, who have little direct incentives to support the growth of more local forms of governance.

This direct mechanism has precedent in the recent vote on whether to retain a mayoral model or revert to a Cabinet system of local government in Tower Hamlets, in which a majority of voters supported retaining the current system despite the incumbent mayor, John Biggs, campaigning to abolish his own position. That vote was held alongside the local council elections in 2021, as a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ referendum. The same principle could be applied for whether or not to adopt a town or parish council. By holding these referendums at the same time as other local elections, the Government would maximise community engagement and voter turnout, in the same way that turnout in local elections is far higher when held alongside a General Election.

To support local communities with the cost of establishing a town and parish council, and to improve the quality of local councils and councillors when they are established, Ministers should also introduce a Local Democracy Fund to provide support including small grants of up to £20,000 for local campaigns aiming to set up town and parish councils in their area. Similar grants already exist for local areas establishing a neighbourhood plan, administered through Locality.

As noted above, principal authorities are increasingly moving towards unitary forms of local government. To ensure that local communities are not left without hyperlocal representation when lower and upper tier authorities merge, we recommend that the establishment of town or parish councils is made a condition of any new unitary and devolution deals, including county deals. In time, this requirement will ensure that communities across England benefit from both strong local government through a new two-tier system of strategic governance at unitary level and hyperlocal governance at the town, parish and neighbourhood level.

The Government should also consider amending the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 to allow for an automatic vote on creating a new town or parish in the event that a local petition reached the required threshold

under the Act. This would ensure that, in the event that a community initially voted against creating a town or parish council but subsequently a large number of local people changed their position, they would easily be able to revisit the issue. Again, such a triggered vote could take place at the next round of local elections within their principal authority.

Finally, the Government should require all principal authorities to respect the results of referendums on town and parish councils and neighbourhood plans by making such ballots binding and by ensuring that only those who live within the proposed boundaries of the parish are eligible to vote. This would ensure that principal authorities are not able to ignore the wishes of local communities.

2. Invest in the capability and legitimacy of town and parish councils

If town and parish councils are to play a greater role in the governance of more local places in England, ministers should take steps to increase their capability and legitimacy. The Handforth Parish Council meeting that went viral in April 2021 was a reminder that local councils can, at times, suffer from parochialism and dysfunction. In this, they do not differ from any other form of government. In recent years there have been high profile scandals relating to corrupt and illegal activity in two of the UK's largest metropolitan councils: Liverpool City Council and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

However there remains a good case for legitimising this form of government. Elections to town and parish councils are often uncontested, with the remaining councillors co-opted from the local population. In 2019, a NALC poll found that, of 2,821 respondents, 38% of town and parish councillors were co-opted, 33% elected unopposed, and only 29% won a contested election.⁵⁴

The same survey found that 25% of councillors were elected for the first time. While this shows a growing number of people keen to get involved in supporting their local community, such a high rate of churn might suggest a lack of experience in many town and parish councils. Meanwhile, an accompanying survey of town and parish councils found that over 50% of councils in England reported co-opting councillors. This democratic deficit in England is mirrored in Wales, where an independent review of town and parish councils for the Welsh Government found that 64% of town and community council seats in Wales were uncontested in 2017.⁵⁵

The best way to increase the quality and legitimacy of town and parish councils would be to both increase the responsibilities of town and parish councils and subject them to greater democratic pressure. We propose the Government achieves the first by requiring that every town or parish council is two-thirds elected, in

either a contested or uncontested election. This would retain some flexibility to co-opt local people if there were fewer candidates than seats, but ensure that a majority of the council is directly accountable to voters.

We would hope, given the importance of town and parish councils remaining largely apolitical, that such a requirement would not be too onerous or lead to greater involvement of political parties in parish elections. As the NALC poll referenced above found that less than 10% of English town and parish councils surveyed co-opted three or more council seats, the impact of this requirement on these matters can be expected to be minimal.⁵⁶

In exchange, the Government should give town and parish councils a meaningful budget by which to improve their area, by ensuring that 25% of revenue from the planned Infrastructure Levy goes to town and parish councils just as it currently does with the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) in those areas with an adopted neighbourhood plan.

The consolidated Infrastructure Levy is a much more considerable funding stream than CIL, bringing together Section 106 and CIL which combined generated around £7 billion in developer contributions in 2019. It is not yet known what level this will be set at, but if this level of developer contributions continued in the new system, a 25% share for town and parish councils would represent an average income of £175,000 for every existing town and parish council in England.

This would have two important effects: first, it would create a meaningful capital budget by which local councils could improve their local place without raising large levels of additional council tax; second, it would create a positive incentive for town and parish councils to develop neighbourhood plans, given they will share in the land value uplift that should accrue from development.

Alongside increased responsibilities and greater democratic pressure it is essential that council clerks have the necessary skills to discharge their responsibilities for local services effectively. Encouraging training when clerks join a town or parish council would also help them attain this level of effectiveness and confidence faster, as well as avoiding inefficiencies with public money.

Parish clerks have a huge range of responsibilities, from accounting and public relations to staff management and administration. However, there are no minimum qualifications required unless the town or parish council wants to achieve the Quality or Quality Gold levels of the Local Council Award Scheme or to gain GPC powers. Under this system, there is a risk that councils will struggle with the increasing responsibilities they pull down from their principal authority.

Systems of support and training already exist, with the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) offering professional qualifications. The membership of both SLCC and NALC are already large, including clerks from thousands of town and parish councils across England and Wales.⁵⁷

Ministers could require councils to automatically enroll their clerks in the SLCC within a year of their taking the post.⁵⁸ Paying for training is supported by existing legislation and councils should be encouraged to make use of it.⁵⁹ Smaller councils, with low precepts, may struggle to finance the cost of the Certificate in Local Council Administration (CiLCA), which costs around £610.⁶⁰ We suggest that for councils with low precept funding, the cost could either be met through the Local Democracy Fund or subsidised by the relevant county association.⁶¹

3. Radically increase the powers available to town and parish councils to level up their place

The Government should strengthen the ability of town and parish councils to level up their local area, by extending the General Power of Competence on the same terms as the rest of local government and by creating new powers for town and parish councils to “pull down” responsibility for neighbourhood functions if they believe they could do a better job than the district or unitary council.

The Localism Act gave local government the General Power of Competence (GPC) to provide legal certainty about undertaking any function that any individual could do, but did not provide these powers for town and parish councils on the same conditions. Instead when the GPC was extended to parish councils in 2012 by statutory instrument, the Government introduced eligibility requirements that forced councils to have their clerks undertake training to be eligible and two-thirds of the councillors elected. The Government could extend full GPC rights to town and parish councils on the same terms as the rest of local government.


Alongside a strengthened General Power of Competence, the Government could create a set of devolved responsibilities that town and parish councils could have the right to pull down from the principal authority, if the council was unhappy with how it was being run at district or borough level. These functions should include, but not be limited to: maintenance of green space; management of civic assets, such as libraries, community hubs and sports facilities; and street cleaning and sweeping. It could even extend to licensing of markets and street trading. Where town and parish councils do “pull down” responsibility, the Government could require the principal authority passes down a share of council tax revenue to the town or parish council alongside this.

If town and parish councils failed in their ability to deliver services to a higher standard, local people would need to be able to either take these services directly into their own hands or return it to the principal authority. The Government should therefore amend the community right to challenge, to include town and parish councils on the list of relevant authorities that can be challenged, and to ensure local communities are able to return powers to principal authorities, should they wish to do so.

Ministers could also consider issuing guidance clarifying whether town and parish councils are able to fund repairs in local parish churches and other places of worship, an issue of some contention arising from conflicting provisions within the Local Government Acts of 1894 and 1972.⁶² Places of worship can play an important secular role in local communities, for example, as venues for food banks and blood drives, community spaces, post offices, village cafes and shops, and visitor centres.⁶³ Allowing town and parish councils to fund the maintenance of places of worship, as recommended by the independent Taylor Review, would help ensure these community hubs remain in our local areas.⁶⁴

Conclusion





In the context of the UK's deep-seated problems around skills, connectivity, infrastructure investment and R&D intensity, the governance of neighbourhoods may feel like an insignificance. It is quite the opposite. Levelling up will not be successful at reviving places which have been left to wither for decades if it only does things to places from above.

Ministers must find ways to build greater capacity and capability in these places to drive change for themselves, and create the virtuous pressure for self-improvement that bottom-up democratic governance has always provided. Town and parish councils, as the most recognisable and established form of local governance, represent one of the best ways to achieve that, especially if combined with reforms to make the model more legitimate and better resourced.

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