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# Parishes answer planning problems

By [James Derounian](#) and [Elisabeth Skinner](#) | 05 March 2015

**Charles Darwin – in his Voyage of the Beagle – describes how the natives of Tierra del Fuego couldn't see HMS Beagle because it was so massive. Psychologist Dale Mathers (2001: 37) goes on to say that the “Beagle was too big to be a ship. It might be a cloud.” We have the same sensation in relation to parish and town (local) councils in England.**

They are HUGE – according to the National Association of Local Councils (NALC online) there are '9,000 parish and town councils and 80,000 councillors' employing over 25,000 staff and their annual expenditure is in the region of £1bn with over 16 million people (25% of the population) living in the communities they serve”. And yet they cost, on average, just £1 a week per council tax-paying household to provide services targeted precisely at local need; localism at its best.

These local councils are both urban and rural; representing electorates via the ballot box from small rural villages to market towns, county towns and communities in major cities like Bristol. Over 200 such councils have been created in past decade including London's first, serving Queens Park. We argue that local councils represent an ally and complement to principal authority activity and that partnership and combining forces for public benefit is essential in a time of austerity. We also believe that, just like Darwin's ship the Beagle, local councils remain hidden, derided, obscured or absent.

It is a source of some pain to find that local councils are virtually invisible. Nowhere is this more evident than in the failure of policies and reports that purport to deal with local issues whilst omitting to mention local councils. Take, for example, the [New Local Government Network that ran Future Councillors'](#) sessions in 2013 to assist politicians in the frontline and address cuts and issues around austerity; local councils can help their principal authorities but weren't mentioned.

Or how about their 2014 report on Local Government and the Arts that – again – not a word about the support that local councils can give across 72 pages. Linda Roberts, Clerk to Calne Town Council (Wiltshire) and now Society of Local Council Clerks President is “very sad that we have been overlooked...we could have added a new dimension to the report.” Ian Briggs of INLOGOV at the University of Birmingham says “Health & Wellbeing Boards are reviewing local assets that contribute to healthy living and yet few (if any) seek the involvement of parish councils despite their management of allotments, open spaces and sports grounds that are intensively used.”

In stark contrast to the erroneous Dibley stereotype, many local councils actively respond to local need. They use their extensive powers to provide facilities and services supporting local economies, caring for local people and protecting the local environment. As far back as

1992 the only full audit of local councils – sponsored by the then Department of the Environment – proved that localism was thriving: around 50% of parishes provided burial grounds, notice boards, shelters, outdoor recreation, open spaces and community halls; a third financed street lights, footpath maintenance, war memorials, newsletters and information services and dealt with litter.

About 1 in 5 sponsored community surveys (the forerunners of Neighbourhood Plans), allotments, and roadside upkeep. This predates the Localism Act 2011 and its Community Rights by just shy of 20 years. Local councils are embracing Neighbourhood Plans; they are negotiating with principal authorities to take on services that these authorities can no longer afford to deliver; they are welcoming the opportunity to take part in the Our Place programme. If DCLG could fund a 2015 update of Parish and Town Councils in England: A Survey, we are certain that it would show a substantial increase in activity, responsibilities and innovation across local councils.

A prophet remains unacknowledged in their homeland, whilst further afield they are lauded: take the [2013 Community-Led Governance Review for Local Government New Zealand](#), which “points to the success...of many ‘local’ (parish, town and neighbourhood) councils in England”; and advocates “a strong ‘bottom-up’ element” in NZ and Australia. In unfortunate contrast Civitas, “a community of researchers and supporters committed to discovering how best to strengthen democracy” failed to mention the contribution of local councils. Or the Country Land and Business Association Manifesto for the 2015 General Election: Unlock the Countryside’s Potential? Not a sausage!

Central government is no better: remember the 2007 Quirk Review under the previous Labour administration, looking at asset transfers by local authorities? Not only did it fail to mention parish councils but, it implied that - although “community ownership can be an effective way for local government to achieve its goals” – local councils (as local authorities) could be required to transfer halls and other resources to unspecified community organisations.

Jonathan Meades (in the Independent 21 September 2014) asks "how many extra levels of non-productive, ludicrously overpaid functionaries does a country need?" The answer is zero. We already have in England urban and rural local councils that have existed since the 1890s; and have therefore predated and outlived most manifestations of local government and quangos (like the Countryside Agency). They are not only localist but sustainable.

Academics are also found wanting.....at a Regional Studies Association event an academic from one of our august universities seriously suggested a need for “ultra local, democratically accountable, bodies”. When we pointed out the presence of local councils we were met with stunned silence!

These ultra-local parish, town and community councils have tax raising (precept) powers, operate community facilities and deliver services. The message is clear; local councils can, do and will act to improve their communities when given the opportunity to do so. If local government is to deliver sustainable development, local and principal councils must work hand in glove. Town councils, in particular, can harness capabilities and resources by acting as a ‘hub’ for communities that look to them (for schooling, shopping and jobs). Taken as a unit this combination - of market town and surrounding villages - represents a practical response to delivering sustainable development and can often deliver services more

effectively and efficiently at the more local level.

The debate about devolution has taken on new life and vigour in the wake of the Scottish Independence referendum. The latter elicited a turnout of nearly 85% and gives hope to reviving political engagement and reversing the democratic deficit, not least among young adults. Greater Manchester is blazing a trail for City Regions and has just picked up new powers over housing, transport and planning. Whilst this decentralising is good news, it represents constrained localism or localised centralism. In this particular case, what of the rest of the English North-West? Where is their new found autonomy, beyond the city limits?

Delegates at an autumn seminar on [‘Connected or Disconnected? Rethinking the role of local councils in changing times’](#) run by the Universities of Birmingham and Gloucestershire stressed that local councils offer real hope and an existing mechanism for localism that is intelligible to, and within reach of, citizens.

Otherwise we are doomed to repeat past failures – like the Government Offices of the Regions, Regional Development Agencies, and perhaps even the latest manifestation of Local Enterprise Partnerships; these operate across large geographical areas, thereby putting large population centres before smaller places. Do LEPs register, understand and act in any significant way for local communities and social concerns, as opposed to carrying out predominantly urban economic development?

In 1969 US researcher Sherry Arnstein stimulated debate by presenting her ‘Ladder of Participation’. This creatively controversial idea suggests that we might aim for genuine ‘citizen power’ but that we often have to make do with being manipulated or, at best, experiencing token consultation. We have yet to come anywhere near real power to make decisions affecting our own communities and it remains a struggle to influence the decisions of others.

But parish councils, closer to the people they serve in local communities, are well-placed to influence decision making directly, including the initial framing of issues and opportunities to be addressed. Communities Secretary Eric Pickles, encouraged such festive thinking at Christmas 2013, gushing that ‘we love our parish people. You are localism’s magic wand’!

It's time so-called informed political commentators and principal authority officers and councillors realised that local authority structures don't end with them. Where principal authorities have a choice, they should focus on strategy and pass on responsibility for operational management to those local councils ready and willing to take it on. We accept that many local councils are not yet equipped for the whole localism agenda but there is nothing wrong with the local council model. Principal authorities can help to explain local councils to local people and encourage them to choose representatives who have an innovative, can-do approach to meeting local needs. We ask principal authorities to do what they can to help local councils develop their capacity by facilitating training.

To quote Alexis de Tocqueville from his work *On Democracy* (1835), the ‘strength of free peoples resides in the local community. Local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put it within the people's reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it.’

Parish councils offer a practical reply to Stokes and Knight (1997 p.11) ‘we have a duty to

exercise our power as citizens, thoughtfully and collectively. If we do not, who shall we blame?'

There is huge potential in a capable tier of councils representing the interests of genuine local communities – rather than districts, cities or counties. Government and principal authorities should focus on strategy and unlocking the potential of parish and town councils to manage communities locally. Seek them out, create them, bring them out of the shadows and see the Beagle for what it really is.

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