

Parish, town and community councils are genuinely democratic vehicles for translating fine words about localism into reality.

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Recent debates on the government's flagship localism policy have tended to focus on the reform of the planning system and the devolution of powers to local councils and elected mayors. [James Derounian](#) argues that the role that parish and town councils can play in delivering localism has been mostly overlooked. To deliver real localism, government must encourage principal authorities to cede power and funds to the most local of local authorities.



OK, let's see if you can identify the Cinderella of British Politics. No peeking further down the article! They've been around since 1894 (Lloyd George knew my agency). There are roughly 10,000 of these most-local of local authorities. They serve urban and rural communities; are elected and have tax raising powers. They have been mercilessly pilloried as a byword for parochialism and lampooned in the TV series the *Vicar of Dibley*.

Give up? Well you aren't alone. A top DCLG mandarin, David Prout, got into hot water at a recent NAVCA (National Association for Voluntary and Community Action) gathering by [suggesting](#) that "there should be greater recognition of the volunteering efforts undertaken by many of the country's 20,000 councillors". Many people jumped on him for suggesting that councillors form part of the voluntary sector. My problem, however, is with the fact that there are NOT "20,000 councillors" across the country as he says. There are some "100,000" parish and town councillors for a start. And these local councillors are indeed volunteers, although of course Parish, Town and Community Councils comprise the ultra-local tier of the public sector in many English (& Welsh) communities.

So there you are... Did you guess that it was parish and town councils that I was on about? If so, reward yourself with a mince pie.

The trouble is that central government and principal local authorities (the counties, boroughs, unitaries etc) have been partially sighted, not to say blind in relation to the actual and potential role of the parish/town councils to deliver localism. What about the finances that such councils precept/ levy in local tax? Shrewsbury Town Council, for example, receives a sum from Council Tax payers, which is then recycled in to projects of community benefit. Overall, the council is operating a £2.9m budget in 2011/12.

And of course, it's only by precepting that local councils can generate income to do things of benefit to local people. If the parish doesn't contribute to community initiatives then why should anyone else, e.g. Housing Associations and District Councils? In addition, and according to its website, Shrewsbury Town Council employs approximately 60 "full and part time staff, the majority of whom work to maintain the outdoor spaces and play areas for which the Town Council is responsible."

But there's a battle going on across British Politics. Central Government is locked in a tussle with principal authorities, who in turn are – to a greater or lesser extent – reluctant localists; some are giving power whilst others are balking at ceding it to the parish, town and community councils (P&TCs). There's also the issue of off-loading liabilities ('asset transfer' of things like public loos) from higher up the chain to parishes.

But, things may be looking up. Take, for example, two issues emerging alongside the recent [Localism Act](#). First is encouragement for local councils to assemble, in conjunction with community interests, *Neighbourhood Plans*. First and foremost, a community must want to undertake a broad-based vision or community-led plan (to cover whatever local people deem priorities). The desire must come from the ground up, or not at all.

Another source of hope may be the fact that Government has consulted on how business rates should be distributed. The principal authority currently receives the business rate, but it seems arbitrary and plain wrong that a local council gains none of this to recycle into community benefits when it's the community itself that is on the receiving end of direct business impacts. Similarly the *Community Infrastructure Levy* consultation (October 2011) suggested a "duty to pass on a meaningful proportion of the funds raised through the levy" to the relevant parish or town council in England. I would welcome 60% going directly to the

parish and 40% to the principal authority; this would reflect the mainly local impacts of individual developments. In a similar vein, the representative body for P&TCs suggests a modest reward of just 5% to local councils, for bringing empty properties back into use, via the *New Homes Bonus*.

So where does this leave us? First, it leaves the body politic with a massive case of amnesia or partial sightedness as far as local councils are concerned. Now is the time for central government and local authorities to see parish councils for what they are – a genuinely democratic vehicle for translating fine words into local reality. Local councils are, and can be, localism incarnate.

Or as de Tocqueville observed, as far back as 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. Without local institutions a nation may give itself a free government but it has not got the spirit of liberty.”

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