



Micro-democracy:

Parish Power in London?

Opinion pieces by:

Simon Hughes MP

Alan Jones & Justin Griggs

Jess Steele & Geraldine Blake

Andrew Stevens

& Greg Taylor

November 2008

© LondonSays.org 2008

LondonSays.org
London. Better.

About LondonSays.org

LondonSays.org is an independent cross-party think-tank, focussed on leading the debate as to what would constitute a greater London.

LondonSays launched prior to the 2008 Mayoral election. So far it has published a guide to empowering Londoners, *Getting Out the Vote*, an *Alternative Manifesto* of policies prior to the election itself (welcomed by the Mayor as 'very informative'), and also *The Transport Manifesto*, examining London's options for future transport.

Parish Power in London is LondonSays' fourth policy paper.

About this Publication

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the Rt Hon Hazel Blears MP, spoke recently about her faith in the role which parish councils can play in "putting power in the hands of local people, to make the key decisions that affect their local communities".

The Secretary of State went further to indicate that she would like to see the largely rural model of parish councils translated to towns and cities across the UK, "empowering communities". What would such a move mean for London and its already complex system of government?

LondonSays asked a number of figures from across different levels of government and community engagement to give us their thoughts on these proposals. The varied and thought-provoking articles contained within this pamphlet are their response.

About the Authors

Geraldine Blake is Director of Links UK, part of Community Links. She was the independent chair of the Get Set programme.

Justin Griggs is Head of Development at the National Association of Local Councils.

Simon Hughes is Member of Parliament for North Southwark and Bermondsey and President of the Liberal Democrats.

Alan Jones is Head of Communications at the National Association of Local Councils.

Jess Steele is Head of Consultancy at the Development Trusts Association. She was the Strategic Director of Magpie, the lead body for the Get Set SRB.

Andrew Stevens is author of the Politico's Guide to Local Government (Politico's/Methuen).

Greg Taylor is Assistant Public Affairs and Media Officer at the Local Government Association.

LondonSays would like to thank each of its authors for the time and obvious effort they put into their articles.

1. Andrew Stevens: An Introduction to Parish Councils

The chances are that not many conversations in pubs or bus queues in London mention the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. Nor do parish councils drop off the lips of most people when expressing views on public services in the capital. All for good reason. Parish councils have been absent from the political landscape in London for over a century and despite their existence throughout the rest of England over the past four decades, their creation in London was forbidden by law. The new Act lifts this legislative bar and allows communities the right to decide the governance arrangements for their area for the first time in decades.

In theory, parishes bring democracy closer to the people and allow for new opportunities in both political engagement and recruitment for other tiers of government. Yet existing local government in the capital has resisted their introduction and some have counselled that extremists could potentially gain representation and therefore control of some parts of the capital under them. We should also ask ourselves how the new councils would overlap with existing arrangements, both in terms of the 32 London Boroughs and the myriad of Business Improvement Districts and regeneration partnership boards.

How does the notion of 'parishes', with its Anglican connotations, fit in with an increasingly secular and multi-faith population in London? The new Act does create the opportunity for more relevant community governance, by allowing for the substitution of 'parish' with more appropriate descriptions for councils (for instance community councils, village councils, neighbourhood councils etc.) As such it is probably more appropriate to refer to the new London parish offer as being of parish/community councils.

Finally, do people in London actually want parish/community councils in their area? This report assembled by LondonSays examines the issues and presents a range of viewpoints to support arguments both for and against new local councils in London.

Background

The story of London local government, as constituted in a sense that would be recognised by Council Tax payers today, began with the creation of the unelected Metropolitan Board of Works in 1855. While a first stab at the provision of public services in the capital, the hated board became a byword for corruption and was eventually replaced by the London County Council (the LCC) in 1889. Both institutions however concentrated on the city-wide needs of Londoners and were very much formed on the basis of economies of scale.

The situation prior to 1855 was that very basic arrangements for 'Poor Law' welfare and limited infrastructure provision existed in the form of local vestries (parishes) and the City of London Corporation (first elected in 1384). Following the creation of the Board of Works, which saw the introduction of proper sanitation, roads maintenance and a fire service to the capital, these were reorganised as civil parishes (or District Boards of Works where vestries did not exist).

A decade on from the creation of the LCC (1889-1965), central government then introduced another tier in the form of the 28 Metropolitan Boroughs, which had the effect of both rationalising the civil parishes and taking some powers away from the perceived radical and runaway tendencies of the county council. The LCC's existence is now regarded as having facilitated London's rapid yet seemingly orderly urban expansion during the early 20th century, via the provision of extensive public transport networks, river crossings and social housing (arguably the LCC estates have aged better than those built since). But the Metropolitan Boroughs were not without their own achievements in the form of the numerous health centres, libraries, museums and baths, many of which remain in use today.

As the 1899 reorganisation had the effect of reordering the inchoate and disorderly pattern of civil parishes in the capital, parish councils were a non-issue under that system. However, in 1965 the next wave of reorganisation following the 1960 Herbert Commission and the 1963 London Government Act, the parish question was rendered null and void by the legislative anomaly which provided for their existence outside of Greater London but effectively banned their creation in the new capital region. In 1965 the Greater London Council replaced the LCC

and 32 new London Boroughs, 20 of which were from outside the former county, replaced the 28 Metropolitan Boroughs.

Under the two-tier system which existed from 1965-1986 relations between the two tiers remained subject to dispute and debate (for instance the 1978 Marshall Inquiry), ultimately leading to the abolition of the upper tier in 1986. This was hardly the time to debate reviving parishes. While city-wide governance was restored in 2000, the resumption of a two-tier system (of sorts) has exposed a governance gap, particularly at the community level. In recent years, both central government and London's local government have examined competing alternatives to answering this. Though the narrative has settled with the lifting of the 1965 bar on the creation of parishes, the task of taking this forward has effectively been passed to communities themselves, in the form of the various levers for the creation of parish/community councils where demand is expressed for them.

2. Simon Hughes: Local Communities in Action

In inner London, parish councils have been like allotments – incapable of existence. There is an obvious logic in preventing members of the public having the right to demand an allotment in inner London – a certain lack of space! There never seemed to me to be logic in preventing the establishment of parish councils. That is why in 1990, after seven years as a member of parliament, and seven years of frustration at the lack of flexibility and effectiveness of a local Labour run council, I introduced a bill into parliament to make inner London like the rest of the country and have an elected, very local tier of government¹.

My initiative wasn't simply based on a theory. When I was 18, my parents moved to a village in Herefordshire. In time both parents became elected members of our parish council and indeed both became the chair. It was a very good and effective parish council. It gave a focus for village debate, authority for village protests and democratic justification for village campaigns to gain better services from district, county and central government.

Southwark, I discovered, had no such place where the local community could hold to account anybody who had specific authority over our little bit of London. Since the abolition of the metropolitan boroughs of Bermondsey, Camberwell and the old borough of Southwark we had become a local authority of approaching a quarter of a million people. Like each of the other thirty one London boroughs, the small, historic and geographically manageable communities - of Kilburn or Rotherhithe, St Pancras or Streatham - were little more than the old Church of England parishes and names on a local map. In fact, the Anglican parochial church councils have had a period when they were arguably the most representative form of community government!

Six years ago, and for the first time since the London borough of Southwark was created, Labour lost political control of the council. My Liberal Democrat colleagues won the largest

¹ The 'London Local Government Bill 1989/90' was a private members bill introduced by Simon Hughes MP with cross-party support. The full text of the bill is viewable online at <http://parlipapers.chadwyck.co.uk/fullrec/fullrec.do?id=1989-086514&DurUrl=Yes>

number of seats and the largest share of the borough vote against Labour opposition and Conservative abstention. Liberal Democrats formed a minority administration – and ran the borough (very well) for the next four years (we are still in government in Southwark though now as leaders of a coalition majority administration). One of the key manifesto pledges in our 2002 programme was to create community councils across the borough, and to give them real power. We have done this – and it has worked very well. Eight councils have been setup, reflecting natural, historic and geographical communities. In my constituency two wards make up the Borough and Bankside Community Council; two and a half wards make up the Rotherhithe Community Council; three wards are in Bermondsey and two wards are in Walworth together with one ward from the seat next door. Every councillor elected within the community council area has equal rights. They have devolved budgets and powers to make appointments as well as lead consultations and trigger initiatives. But – all this is entirely by way of delegation from the full council. The communities of Southwark are entirely dependent on the council as a whole deciding what it can devolve and whether to do so. And there is no formal right of electors to petition or organise to make sure community councils are setup and if they are setup to make sure that they are given real power and influence. So here lies the rub. And this is why the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 is such a welcome arrival in the legislative stable. At last there is the opportunity for every part of England, including London and the other parts of the country where parishes did not previously exist to create (or abolish!) a parish level of government. And the people are in the driving seat. The public can petition for a council to the existing district unitary authority or London borough and the district must consider it. The government plan to create a further right of appeal to the Secretary of State where the local authority says no. And there are extra opportunities such as the entitlement to name it a community, village or neighbourhood council rather than just a parish council.

As you would expect I am delighted that at last government and parliament have seen the merit of this system which I and others have promoted for the last twenty five years. It is important that people in urban and suburban communities have the same possibility for local democratic engagement as people in rural England. Indeed there is a case that urban Britain needs parish or community government even more. That certainly was my sense in all those early frustrating days of battling against a traditional one party monolith.

The next step is to publicise the possibility of this new form of democracy and encourage areas without this form of local government to take it up. I know it doesn't always feel like it but although we may have far too many laws and regulations, I believe we have far fewer people elected to make them than any comparable system in Western Europe. Tip O'Neill, the former speaker of the House of Representatives in the United States, is probably most well known for his summary political thesis: "All politics is local". Though self-evidently this is not wholly true, political engagement is often easiest locally and, as I and all other members of parliament know, local issues can stir large numbers of people into political activity. When there are such local issues it is vital that there are local forums of informed and committed local representatives who can listen but also have the power meaningfully to respond.

Up and down the country many councils have been trying to deal with the democratic deficit by creating ward committees, area forums, local meetings and the like. These are all well and good but what the council giveth it can as easily take away – and most of them only have power to talk and minimal power to act. The UK desperately needs greater devolution from the centre. Parish and community councils are an absolutely fundamental building block for local democracy. I hope that people both in London and across the land now seize the moment.

3. Alan Jones & Justin Griggs: A New Connection to Governance and Democracy

For many years people living in communities across England have had the right, if there is local support, to set up a local council. In rural areas these are usually called parish councils although there is no link to any church, and in more populated areas they are often called town councils. But not in London. Until now residents of the capital have been specifically prohibited from setting up a council that represents their neighbourhood or community.

This is changing. One of the provisions of the recent Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act aims to enhance community governance across the country, but particularly in urban areas. Communities in London now have the same right to establish local councils as exists elsewhere. This ends the anomaly which has previously prevented Londoners from setting up local councils and now enables grass roots governance in the capital where people want it.

Londoners, familiar with only their particular London Borough Council and the London Assembly, may, if they so choose, take advantage of establishing a local council in the same way residents in any other part of the country have and continue to do so. Londoners need to decide what geographical area their local council would cover and these will vary to suit local wishes. They may include formerly separate local authority areas in the outer boroughs such as those with Surrey, Kent or Essex postal addresses, town centres throughout the capital, London's "villages", districts defined as New Deal for Community areas under various regeneration programmes or easily definable housing estates.

Londoners, being a sceptical lot and whose perception of the activities and services of their London Borough Council may be negative, may question the benefits of having a smaller local council in the same area. For a start, the structure of local government is acknowledged as being fairly remote from people. In European countries, the most local of democratically elected representatives will often represent just a few hundred people, and everyone knows who their representative is. In London, a borough councillor will often represent nine or ten thousand people.

So the first benefit is any local council will be made up of elected representatives who must have a direct connection to that locality or neighbourhood and who then qualify to truly represent the interests of local people. Decisions on a range of issues specific to that area can then be made as locally as possible and based on the strength of the views of local people. This helps people feel that local government is relevant to them and to their lives. It also means their views can be easily heard and acted upon promptly. This already happens in over 8,500 communities up and down the country, where local councils of all shapes and sizes are a central part of the fabric of the community, so why not in London?

Local councils have a wide range of legal powers and can invest in the community to meet and deliver its aspirations through the precept, a form of council tax. In stark contrast to the £76 billion spent in the rest of local government, local councils do not receive money from Government, but raise money directly from their community – local councils raised around £400 million this year. As is often the case, this acts as a lever for drawing in further investment and funding from other sources. Because borough councils are large and with a complex range of functions, they need large numbers of staff and complex structures. But because a local neighbourhood council is concentrating on a relatively small area, overheads are low, and numbers of staff can in some cases be counted on one hand. The result is that the money is then carefully invested to provide and maintain a range of very local services ranging from sporting, entertainment and tourist facilities, community centres, car parks, crime reduction measures, open spaces for recreational use and bus shelters. These are all highly desirable visible services designed to meet the particular needs of local people, and with the expenditure remaining under very local control.

The versatility of local councils is a distinct feature, as they have a wide remit for activities in which they can get involved with, and can focus upon the priorities that emerge from within the community. For example, they may choose to fund dedicated community development workers to help them develop their vision for their area through a community-led plan. They might want to pay for a new Police Community Support Officer, or respond to queries from individual residents and represent the needs and interests of the community to other service providers.

Local councils provide a meaningful and effective conduit for local people to get involved with local services or issues they would not otherwise be able to. They can act as a focus for really empowering the local community, by stimulating action to improve services, providing facilities and supporting local community aspirations. Interestingly, there are many successful local councils around the country made up of people who are elected as independents and they operate in a bi-partisan way. The local councillors will all have their own views on national politics and vote in national elections accordingly, but in order to improve their neighbourhood, they often choose not to stand for election wearing a party hat.

So the National Association has long been an advocate of extending and developing the role of local councils. We have persistently made the case that neighbourhood and local community governance is becoming increasingly relevant and its spread should be encouraged, and particularly in urban areas.

We have strongly welcomed the Government's recent commitment to local democracy through its white paper on community empowerment and we believe the creation of new local councils can be an excellent way of achieving this objective. We have also been heartened by the support for neighbourhood councils shown by all three main political parties. This support was reinforced at their respective recent party conferences, with each vying to be the party of localism and devolution of power to people and communities.

However, the exciting prospect of local people starting to plan to set up neighbourhood councils in their own bit of London has raised eyebrows and come in for criticism from some quarters. Possibly predictably this is usually from people already in positions of power and who may feel threatened. This is unlikely to improve the already low levels of trust in politicians. We also fully understand concerns raised about community cohesion. This is vitally important, but one of the reasons and benefits for establishing local councils is their ability to contribute and enhance community cohesion. Any rise in extremism at local council level would be as much a failure of the political parties and our democracy collectively rather than of a particular local government system. Local councils are well placed to lead and organise events to celebrate the fact that in their areas there are so many different faiths and cultures

living and working together. A local council in Milton Keynes, for example, has been highlighted by the Home Office for their work in this area.

Only by giving local people a real voice and say over the way services are provided will communities feel connected to their governance and democracy. The key principle must be to empower communities, not restrict the democratic process. People and communities should not be constrained by people who are already in positions of power and responsibility seemingly taking the view that an extension of democracy is a good thing but Londoners are not quite ready for it yet.

Ultimately people have to be trusted to take a little more control over the things that most affect their day to day lives. People and communities in London now have a right to set up a local neighbourhood council if they want one. We believe that Londoners should be allowed to decide what is best for them and take decisions accordingly.

4. **Jess Steele and Geraldine Blake: An Important Part of the Picture?**

Towards the end of 2002, 43 people stood for election to a 'Council of Community Champions' in Deptford and New Cross, South East London. The development of local participative and democratic structures was a key part of the 'Get Set for Citizenship' programme, and the new Community Council should have become a force to be reckoned with. The fact that it didn't is as interesting (though tragic) as the story of how we got to that election.

This case study illustrates the paradoxes of the empowerment agenda. Here I can only chart a few of the highs and lows, point out some pitfalls and celebrate the fact that we tried it at all.

Deptford was a stroppy kind of place in the mid-1990s. We had seen 18 different regeneration agencies arrive, impose and disband, with precious little sense of progress or legacy and a minimum of lesson-learning from one to the next. In 1996, Magpie Resource Library was established by Deptford Community Forum, Deptford History Group and Goldsmiths College as a charity to promote and support active citizenship. When Lewisham Council decided not to put in a New Cross bid for Round 5 of the Single Regeneration Budget, we breathed a sigh of relief and set out to start a different process for regeneration planning, informed and led by local residents. The New Cross Research and Training Project set out to train local people to become their own regeneration managers. This kicked off an intensive programme of creative outreach and community capacity building that was sustained for more than five years and reached many thousands of local people.

The first and most astonishing finding by the team of local outreach workers was that local people didn't want to see any more regeneration funding unless and until they felt that they could control it, set the priorities themselves and be actively engaged in its planning and delivery. So instead of the multi-million pound bid for community-led regeneration on all fronts, we put together the £1.5m Get Set bid - written by roadshow through the NX Forums, edited by the core team - to 'lay the foundations of neighbourhood renewal'.

Get Set focused on achieving the skills, strategies, structures, and social capital that would enable ongoing community leadership. Two s-words were missing – sustainability (after all it only aimed to be a short-term preparatory programme) and sway (actually having an influence because someone is listening). In terms of structures the key idea was always to establish a community council, a group of active citizens, mandated by local people to act as their champions in seeking to protect and improve the neighbourhoods and ‘vertical villages’ of Deptford, New Cross and Upper Brockley.

In 2001 we put out a discussion document researched and produced by Colin Havard and the Magpie team. Full of both practical and philosophical questions and directly addressing the hopes and fears of local people and organisations, this is a great document for anyone considering establishing a community council, especially at neighbourhood level in London.

The process of establishing the community council had a long development time. We felt it was essential to invest in getting it right and there were lots of concerns to address and detail to decide. The list of ‘hopes and fears’ ranged from the impact on democratic participation and influencing service provision to whether it would reach beyond the ‘usual suspects’ and how it would be serviced. Fears included lower turn-out in local authority elections, concerns about ‘bashing’ of the council and other agencies, isolation from ward councillors and existing forums, and the worry that it would need ‘a whole civil service’, duplicating the bureaucratic burden. The corresponding hopes were that it would strengthen participation in general and local politics per se, that it would be an effective conduit for ward councillors with their local neighbourhoods, that it would act as a filter to channel criticism to the appropriate provider and change service consumers into active citizens, that it would encourage ‘bubbles of activism’ and reach new people and that a small staff team could help the champions to work with existing local deliverers to achieve real change.

We wanted to attract ‘new’ people as well as those who had already proved their community credentials and to draw champions from as many of the local neighbourhoods as possible. We agreed that one-third of the champions would be 11-18 year olds and that they would be voted for by their own constituency – young people themselves - with the help of the Citizenship Co-ordinator at our local secondary school. We wanted to extend the franchise so

that people who were part of our community even if they were barred from traditional elections could have a say – refugees and asylum-seekers, students, foreign nationals, and local employees and businesses.

It was also important that the community council be as inclusive as possible so we devised a system whereby the 15 candidates with the top votes would be automatically elected. Their very first task was to co-opt another six champions from the remaining candidates through an independently facilitated session to address the gaps.

Once the details were agreed, the big challenge was around communications. We had lots of big ideas and were able to carry some of them through. As well as our endless outreach with the NX forums, frequent stalls on Deptford market, school gate and bus-stop outreach, and a major door-knocking campaign, we had huge billboard ads in a simple four-stage campaign from 'Champion', 'Stand For It', and 'Demo Crazy', to 'Choose Your Champions'. We made full use of our existing communication channels – the NX News which had become the Inner Citizen, and the Burger Bar, a humble trailer transformed into a circus-style outreach vehicle which toured the estates. The Book of Champions with pictures and statements from each candidate could be found in community centres, schools, libraries and some of the more enlightened pubs. Later, when it came to the election itself, voting boxes were set up in each of the 21 neighbourhoods. Voting was through a petitioning process so that voters signed a petition to support the community council, a priorities questionnaire, and a separate sheet choosing the champions they wanted. This meant there was no secret ballot but rather a clear mandate from actual, trackable people willing to sign their name and give a home, work or study address. The London Civic Forum agreed to adjudicate the petitioning process and act as independent observers.

Magpie's role in the promotion and support of local active citizenship and the council of champions in particular was pivotal. As our Somali outreach worker would say 'everyone needs a mountain to lean on'. We had a skilled and committed team of local workers, including a trained sessional workforce with superb leadership by Carla Walker, by far the best outreach worker I have ever met. The Get Set area was a series of vertical villages (cultural communities existing on top of each other but not necessarily linked) and a network of small

distinct neighbourhoods. With no academic pretensions but an intuitive understanding of social glue, Carla worked the bonding capital that held these together internally and generated the bridging capital that brought them together.

What went wrong?

Sustainability

Get Set was always supposed to be a short-term programme to lay the foundations of genuine empowerment so that local people could play a full part in the regeneration of their area. We used to say that Government was our greatest ally – they seemed to be aiming for the same dreams but bitter hindsight would accuse them of pilfering the rhetoric. After Get Set ended, Magpie and other local partners were successful in attracting Neighbourhood Renewal Fund for some project work, including the inspirational Launchpad project which brought employment advice and creative outreach to people's doorsteps on a big JobCentre bus that had previously sat idle for 18 months. The project was so successful that it was quickly 'mainstreamed', which meant the bus went back to JC+ and dropped its outreach angle, parking up a safe distance from the estates with the door locked.

The discussion document had been clear that "the Community Council needs to be enterprising, imaginative and able to access new sources of funds". To be enterprising the community council would probably need to be a development trust, which raises issues about separation of local politics from local enterprise. We had seen the community council's success as "in conjunction with the Civic Centre/regen charity" but we failed to develop a strong balance sheet for the future. In those days I hadn't truly understood either the potential or the sheer hard work involved in asset based development. We leased a disused shop from Lewisham Council and transformed it into a small-scale civic centre called Open House while we investigated larger deals that could have created long-term independent income.

Meanwhile the investment in Community Empowerment Networks was being slashed as government interests moved on. With few agencies willing to fund active citizenship, and many looking forward to quieter times ahead free from critical friends, the promise of

Neighbourhood Renewal was broken. New sources of funds were not forthcoming. Magpie became increasingly dependent on third-hand employment support contracts from DWP via Reed, and began to collapse financially despite the ongoing dedication of its staff and trustees. The impact on the council of community champions was severe. For the most part the community champions were beginners, and when the organisation that supported them fell away they were left rudderless.

Sway

The other big problem was that 'they' weren't listening. The discussion document had envisaged a future in which the council would appoint a Bridge Officer based half-time at the Town Hall in Catford and half in DNX, plus a steering group comprising both community councillors and ward councillors. The Get Set bid was signed for Lewisham Council by Joe Montgomery, head of regeneration and Dave Sullivan the mayor. Montgomery moved soon after to head up the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit; Sullivan was defeated in the direct mayoral elections by just a few votes. Their replacements tended to despise and fear 'the north of the borough' for having had 'too much' regeneration money and being 'too active'. The evaluation of the Get Set programme waxed lyrical about its broad and deep impact on local people – we did create the skills and social capital – but highlighted a deficit on the other side of the coin: people with power have to be willing to listen in order for structures and strategies to make a difference.

Everything we were saying in Deptford and New Cross five years ago is reflected in the current 'Communities in Control' White Paper published by CLG in July 2008, including the commitment to encourage more neighbourhood councils, especially in urban areas. As usual, we were so far ahead of the curve that we lost our footing.

Conclusions

Sometimes it feels as if the best you can say about social innovations that fall from grace is that they cast a bright light while they lasted. Dovetail, the flexible childcare provider established with Get Set's support, provided 200,000 hours of flexible childcare before it went into liquidation because no agency would recognise the additional cost of flexibility.

The Get Set programme and the Council of Community Champions touched a lot of people, some of them deeply. It genuinely empowered some people for a while and perhaps it kept alive the ideas of community development, participatory democracy, and the fact that local people really do know best.

The sad truth is that we didn't have the resources to keep it working – local people rarely do. That's why the assets and enterprise routes to community strength and resilience are so important. While meeting-based democratic processes and structures will never be enough to protect and improve local neighbourhoods on their own, properly endowed or otherwise provided for, they can be an important part of the picture.

5. **Greg Taylor: No Need or Desire**

The Government's recent White Paper, *Communities in Control*, seeks to encourage the creation of neighbourhood councils and, once enacted as legislation, will give communities the right of appeal to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government should their application to establish a parish council be denied by their existing local authority.

It is my contention that there is little, if any, need or desire for a further layer of political democracy, especially in London where there are already a surfeit of democratic institutions which are dedicated to dealing with issues at neighbourhood, local, borough, and city levels. Parish councils, while inarguably presenting a further opportunity for civic engagement, complicate existing, well-functioning systems, encourage rampant nimbysism, and threaten the coherence of city and borough-wide planning in favour of sectional policies created and pushed by neighbourhood rabble-rousers.

This is not to say for a second that the voices of neighbourhoods and local communities should be silenced – far from it. However, the fact that we live in an active democracy gives the public myriad opportunities to engage with the political process on areas that are of concern to them. Residents can create powerful and vocal campaign groups, as have been seen across the country fighting against hospital closures, or fighting for better facilities for local children. The majority of councils respond to all petitions presented to them, with *Communities in Control* looking to strengthen this “right of reply”.

Westminster City Council, one amongst many, takes its priorities to its residents directly, allowing them to feed directly into processes at frequent neighbourhood fora, which are heavily advertised around the city and which give local people the chance to go face-to-face with their ward councillor. To help strengthen the bond between ward councillors and the people they represent, ward budgets of £100,000 have been allocated to each councillor, which are to be spent, following consultation with residents, on community projects which will see neighbourhoods improved and revitalised. These are some of the many ways in which active engagement between councillor and residents can, and should, be increased and strengthened.

At a fringe event at the Conservative Party's Conference this year, the Social Market Foundation argued that the role of parish councillors should be, amongst other things, to act as a channel of information between local communities and their first and second tier councillors.

To me, this is nothing more than letting existing councillors off the hook. Their core role is to get out in their localities, speak with their constituents, represent their views and affect real change where it is needed. The idea that these local councillors are in need of conduits to link to the people they represent is galling, and threatens only to put further distance between members of the public and their councillors who many already see as distant and too mired in bureaucracy to really represent their interests.

As we see in Westminster and elsewhere, rather than creating a new layer of bureaucracy, current councillors should be encouraged, with the support of their council, to get out amongst the people they represent, demonstrating that they are not far removed and alienated from the issues that are catalysing debate and engagement at the neighbourhood level. Understanding the idiosyncrasies of their wards is the central duty of councillors – if we devolve this responsibility to parish councillors we are effectively removing their reason for being. This will encourage those naysayers in the media and elsewhere who caricature our town halls as remote bastions of bureaucracy steadfastly fiddling while their neighbourhoods burn and will inevitably lead to the calls for further burdensome and unnecessary reforms to legislate for concrete relations between parish and first and second tier councillors.

The White Paper looks to give petitioners the right of appeal to the Secretary of State over a denied application to set up a parish council. This kind of "running to daddy when mummy says no" flies in the face of the idea of localism that the government has been so actively espousing in recent years. Councils are best placed to determine the best policies for their communities – if they believe that the establishment of a parish council could ferment unrest and create isolationism within their boroughs, cities or counties, then central government should accept this. If a council believes that the creation of a parish council could threaten the coherence of a wider policy or become a roadblock to important housing, transport or

cohesion plans then their decision should be final. Forcing an inherently local decision to be taken at national level will demonstrate the government's inability to relinquish power and practice the policies that they preach and, in doing so, make them look desperately weak.

Democracy thrives at the local level in our cities and boroughs. We see it in our community groups, at our council meetings and in the mobilisation of troops during local and general elections. Legislation to create further, unnecessary tiers of governance risks further fragmenting an already teetering sense of civil coherence, giving rise to competing, confusing layers of governance and creating a bunker mentality for current councillors who suddenly will lose the compulsion to actively and physically engage with their local communities.

In a country in which the channels available for the public to engage with politics at a local level are so multitudinous, it would be serious and unjustifiable mistake to crowbar in an extra level of representation. Instead, the government should be looking at the many examples of best practice in engagement across the country and encouraging councils and councillors to take on, and surpass, these policies and continue their already excellent work engaging with and involving their communities.

The opinions expressed in this article are Greg Taylor's personal views and should not be considered as either current or future Local Government Association policy.

6. Andrew Stevens: Arguments For and Against Elected Parish/Community Councils in London

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 lifted the 40 years plus bar on the creation of parish/community councils in London. The Act followed the 2006 Strong and prosperous communities Local Government White Paper, which argued that²:

“Uniquely, communities in London are denied the option to form parishes. We intend to give them the same rights to have a parish council as the rest of the country. As with all other parts of the country, local authorities will need to consider the impact on community cohesion when deciding whether to create a parish in London.”

This was also a firm commitment in the Labour Party’s 2005 General Election manifesto³:

“Good parish councils engage communities and make a real difference, so we will extend the right to establish parish councils to communities in London.”

The government later expanded on their view through guidance issued on community governance reviews⁴:

“The Government’s view is that Londoners should have the same rights as the rest of the country. The 2007 Act corrects this anomaly to allow London boroughs the possibility to exercise the same community governance powers as other principal councils including being able to set up parishes and parish councils. Similarly, local electors in London boroughs will, as elsewhere in England, be able to petition for a community governance review.

² Strong and prosperous communities, 2006: p44

³ Britain forward not back, 2005

⁴ Guidance on community governance reviews, 2008, p35

In London, there will be the same possibility to choose a style for a parish perhaps to reflect better the local urban area like “community” or “neighbourhood”. Whilst some parts of London are populated by people who may be more transient or mobile than elsewhere, there are equally areas of the capital where there are stable populations who may wish to see the creation of a parish council for their local area.”

A neat summary of the arguments presented against lifting the legislative bar on the creation of parish councils in London (and therefore against parish councils in London) is provided by former FT journalist Alan Pike’s report for the then Association of London Government (now London Councils) in 2006. In this Pike summarises the position of the joint ALG-GLA Commission on London Governance (which reported in 2006) as⁵:

- Many roles and responsibilities of parish councils were already managed by area committees and neighbourhood arrangements in the boroughs;
- There would be confusion over roles and responsibilities of parish and ward councillors;
- There was evidence from other parts of the country of antagonism and negativity between the tiers, turf wars and a refusal to compromise;
- The structure empowered ‘Nimbyism’ and could undermine attempts to equalise access to local services and advice across London;
- There would be significant capital and running cost implications;
- In terms of capturing communities, some inner London wards were only a few streets big and the Boundary Commission already took into account cultural factors and geographical boundaries when setting up ward boundaries.

⁵ London: any place for parish councils?, 2006: p14

The Evidence

In September and October 2008 all 32 London Boroughs were surveyed⁶ about their existing community governance arrangements and what, if any, interest had been expressed by local citizens in establishing a parish/community council within their area. The responses present a very mixed pattern of both existing arrangements and demand for reform across the capital:

- Only two London Boroughs intended to undertake a community governance review, as enabled under the 2007 Act.
- No councils had received any indication of support or demand for the creation of an elected parish/community council
- Of those that responded, only half had some form of community governance arrangements or representation in place

The majority of councils responding said that no community governance reviews were planned under the 2007 Act, though one was establishing a working party to examine what arrangements could be introduced for neighbourhood working. Another factor was political control, for instance several London Boroughs had abolished community and neighbourhood forums following a change in overall control of the council. In one case however, a lacklustre area committee format was replaced with enhanced ward forums (with devolved budgets) following a change of political control.

Case study: Lewisham

The Mayor of Lewisham's Commission on Empowering Communities and Neighbourhoods reviewed community governance structures in Lewisham, which has resulted in 18 Local Assemblies.

The Commission was established in September 2006 to consider how best to empower local people and facilitate their engagement in their local area. The Commissioners, comprising

⁶ Of the 32 councils contacted 14 responded

cross-party representatives, resident and community activists and relevant council officers, were asked to explore the potential for establishing new means to empower Lewisham's local communities, examine existing and new models of governance and recommend how Lewisham might progress these ideas in future policy arrangements.

The Commission recommended that the London Borough of Lewisham introduce local ward assemblies for each of the borough's 18 wards. The Commission argued that these localised bodies, defined by the active involvement of the ward councillors, will enable people living and working in each area to have a stronger and more direct influence in shaping their local community. The Commission suggested that these ward assemblies represent the most effective and pragmatic vehicle for local empowerment, establishing a structured environment in each ward that will support an ongoing process for identifying and resolving local concerns and implementing local solutions.

Local Assemblies were launched on 6 March 2008. All 18 Assemblies have now met for the first time with over 1550 people engaged during this first round. Assemblies will be meeting again this autumn to choose their five priorities for action in the ward and begin the process of developing their Programmes of Work. These priorities will feed into the service planning and budget setting cycle within the council and with relevant partners in order to plan a response to these Local demands. Assemblies have £10k devolved budget to the three ward members, which members have been consulting their assemblies on regarding spend for 2008/09. A further more substantial figure will be made available to the Assembly in 2008/9 and 2009/10.

Local Assemblies are chaired by one of the ward members and meet up to four times a year. A co-ordinating group of volunteers from the assembly has been established in each ward in order to plan and structure future assembly meetings. This group are also encouraged to look at issues of inclusion, engagement, publicity etc. in the longer term this group will monitor the assembly's progress against its action plan.