

## HOW TO EMPOWER LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Will Tanner, former director at Onward

The popular demand, expressed so clearly in 2016 and 2019, for British people to assume greater control over their lives is gradually being satisfied. Parliament has taken back powers from Brussels. City regions and devolved nations are increasingly reasserting their independence from Westminster. But in one arena, people remain woefully disempowered: in their local communities.

In political debates about English devolution, communities are often first invoked but last to be empowered. While Whitehall has started to meaningfully transfer power and budgets to metro mayors and combined authorities and is likely to go even further in future, there has been precious little focus on the tier of governance closest to local voters and most immediate to their lives. We must level up local (parish and town) councils to repair the social fabric and restore civic pride to places left behind.

The case for doing so is straightforward and robust. A recent paper by Onward, the think tank I run, reveals that just 37% of England is covered by a parish or town council. In the remaining 63% - which includes almost all major cities like London and Merseyside and large conurbations like Plymouth, Blackpool, and Stockport - the nearest level of democratic representation is at the district or unitary level. To put this democratic deficit into perspective, a councillor in the Stratford and New Town ward of Newham, in East London, represents more than 12,500 residents. By contrast, in some small parishes, there is a councillor for every 25 residents.

The value these local councils provide is often highly localised and varied but material to the lives of local people. In Suffolk and Sussex, parish councils fund community wardens and PCSOs to support excellent community safety. In South Gloucestershire and Cornwall, parish councils are helping residents install heat pumps to reduce bills and carbon emissions. Parish and town councils manage community transport schemes in Hertfordshire and Hampshire. Proximity means local councils understand local communities' challenges and are held accountable for fixing them.

There are many more examples from around the country. But wherever they exist, initiatives are too often despised, not because of government policy. It remains laborious to set up a parish or town council - requiring a petition of residents, a community governance review overseen by the principal authority, and a

referendum of local people. The entire process can take two years. As happened in Tower Hamlets recently, residents can campaign for two years for the fundamental right to manage their area only to be foiled by an obstructive local authority. Only one parish council, Queen's Park Community Council, was created in London in 80 years.

Even if local people succeed in setting up a parish or town council, they have limited powers over the local area. This is despite clear evidence that parish and town councils benefit their place. Onward's Social Fabric Index, which measures the strength of a community by a local authority, shows that areas with the whole town and parish coverage score significantly higher on community strength than areas without hyperlocal governance. For example, fully parished local authorities have, on average, over five times as many community assets as fully unparished areas, as well as 38% higher rates of volunteering and group membership and 34% higher rates of charitable giving, as measured by our Social Fabric Index.

The government's Levelling Up agenda offers an opportunity to fix this democratic deficit and strengthen the community by extending the parish and town council model all over England. In our report, we put forward three core recommendations for achieving that.

First, ministers should let the people decide. They should hold an automatic ballot of voters in every local area currently without a town or parish council to ask people whether they want to adopt neighbourhood-level governance. This could be held alongside the next cycle of council elections to reduce costs and replace the burdensome process of testing public opinion through referenda.

Second, we should strengthen the quality of local governance. We have all heard of Handforth Parish Council, and some local councils cannot take on a more significant role. This needs to change, so ministers should require every town and parish council to be two-thirds elected. In return, they should mandate that 25% of the planned Infrastructure Levy goes to town and parish councils. This could unlock £175,000 for every town and parish council in England.

Third, ministers should radically expand the role of neighbourhood councils. That means increasing the General Power of Competence so that parishes are on the same terms as the rest of local government and giving councils the ability to 'pull down' responsibility for neighbourhood functions if they believe they could do a better job than the district or unitary council.

These steps would achieve something even more important than policy benefits. They would put local areas in control of their destiny again. That is what voters

have been asking for, especially in the Red Wall and left-behind places. It is about time politicians delivered.

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