British Politics and Policy at LSE: Parish Councils are a vital space for participatory democracy – but they are in crisis

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Parish Councils are a vital space for participatory democracy – but they are in crisis

*Despite being the first tier of government in England, Parish Councils are the least democratic of all tiers, writes **Joanie Willett**. She explains why that is and argues that a big part of the solution lies in employing new communication strategies in order to effectively engage a broader demographic.*

When we talk about British politics, there is a tendency to imagine the workings of Westminster. If we want to include a more regional dimension, then we might recall the English devolution agenda which gives a little more administrative control to cities and principal authorities, often with an accompanying Mayor. We might also think about our somewhat textured assortment of local government – Local Authorities supported by borough councils, and Unitary Authorities. But there is an additional layer of government, which in the hierarchical way in which British politics is imagined, is frequently overlooked by academic studies. Parish councils (which includes town councils) operate on a community basis, varying in size from representing a community of fewer than a hundred people, to Sutton Coldfield with over 75,000.

The National Association of Local Councils, which represents Parish Councils describes them as 'the first tier of local government'. This reflects how parish councils are the closest tier of government to citizens, and therefore the most accessible. It is much easier and more straightforward to make changes to the communities within which we live and work in order to better accommodate our needs, than to a remote, distant, and relatively inaccessible national politics.

In recognition of the need for a vibrant local democracy, the The Localism Act 2011 seeks to decentralise administrative power from the state towards localities, empowering communities to enable them to make better responses to community problems, and over the course of the past few years Parish Councils have found themselves taking on many more responsibilities, including for libraries and public toilets.

The Localism agenda is to be welcomed. Vibrant communities with strong levels of civic participation are good for localities, good for the individuals that make up communities, and carry benefits for the much wider body politic; in turn, these effects improve life satisfaction, health, and individual and collective efficacy. Many of these effects congregate around Robert Putnam's version of social capital, whereby strong civic participation helps to develop networks that bind communities together and connect communities with other communities. Strong civic inclusion can have the ancillary effect of supporting well developed local economies, with a wealth of material connecting the social capital of civic participation to regional economic development. Finally, strong civic participation by a broad range of actors improves legitimacy and, importantly, *perception* of the legitimacy of political decisions.

There are many different kinds of political participation. Some are informal, whereby local, public, private, and voluntary groups and individuals seek some kind of change in their communities; and some are more formal, involving standing for election, voting, campaigning for a candidate or political party. Both types are important, but if the formal structures of parish councils are to be as vibrant as they need to be, then engagement with formal political participation is also vital.

This is where British politics has a problem. In the May 2015 elections, only 20% of eligible Parishes contested their vacancies. In some cases, applications to become a Parish Councillor are so low that vacancies left by retiring councillors go unfilled. In some instances, Parish Councils are very comfortable with this, because it means that they are able to avoid the expense of an election. From one perspective, avoiding an election is an efficient way of managing local citizens' Council Tax, but from the position of maintaining a vibrant and open local politics, this situation is a disaster.

Clearly, we are facing a crisis of community-based formal politics, at just the moment when the Localism agenda seeks to encourage and support Parish Councils to do more. Indeed, measures have recently been implemented to counter some practices which specifically tried to avoid holding elections. This is to be welcomed, but an important part of the question is to ask why so few people want to become Parish Councillors in the first instance.

In a recent University of Exeter study with Cornwall Council, we were told some interesting stories. On the one hand, Parish Councils had excellent brand recognition, as most of the 33 persons interviewed knew broadly what they were, and thought that Councillors enjoy their role. On the other hand, very few people knew what they do. This was not helped by a general perception that Parish Councillors tended to be of a particular, older, retired type of demographic group. As a consequence, this means that younger people in particular felt that councils did not represent their needs, or were not accessible.

It's very common for people to claim that they are not able to play a role in community politics because they lack the time. But when we dug deeper, we found that there was much more to non-involvement than a lack of time. Instead, we often found stories of conflict One participant told us that she had previously been a councillor, but disagreement over the use of community resources for young people had created so much discord that she had become isolated and had felt that she had no option other than to move house to a different locality. Another participant told us that since she had to live and work in her village, the inevitable conflicts that she foresaw with the existing councillors would be detrimental to her livelihood and lifestyle. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle – a lack of diversity on Parish Councils means that community issues are approached from a narrow set of perspectives and possible solutions, which then amplifies the perception that Parish Councils are less relevant to the lives of many citizens.

Part of the problem lies in communication. Frequently, we were told about how communities and Parish Councils were both trying really hard to communicate with each other, but found it difficult to do so effectively. Sometimes, the ways that Parish Councils disseminate information is very different to how members of the community would like to receive it. Sometimes, Councils can be very wary of the kinds of response that they will get from the community when they manage to find ways of opening up a multi-way dialogue. This could have really damaging effects for Councils, and we heard stories about how less-than-effective use of communication meant that positive actions could easily be misconstrued, creating negative narratives.

So what can be done? One of the key factors that emerged from this research, is that people do want to be involved in their communities, and they do want to help to make positive change. But they also need to feel that this is an effective and productive use of their time. We suggest that one way of widening participation, and exploring new ways of communicating effectively, would be for councils to work with younger people – including those under the age of 18 – to explore ways of communicating across generational divides. This might include exploring ways of using social media and new technologies such as mobile phone applications.

Parish Councils have an enormous potential for helping to create vibrant communities, where individuals can share information and get involved in shaping the places they live in. They are the most accessible point of democratic engagement in the UK, and therefore are vital for reinvigorating our representative democracy. Now, we need to make sure that they are able to reach that potential.

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Note: the above draws on the author's published work (with Joe Cruxon) in *British Politics*.

About the Author

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