Parish councils can empower local communities, but we need more of them in cities

By Democratic Audit UK

*Parish councils, the lowest level of local government in the UK, tend to be synonymous with rural communities. But the government has taken steps to make it easier to create new councils, which have been seized upon by campaigners in a number of urban areas. In this post, **Richard Berry** discusses the trend and considers the prospects of an increasing number of parish councils transforming UK local government.*
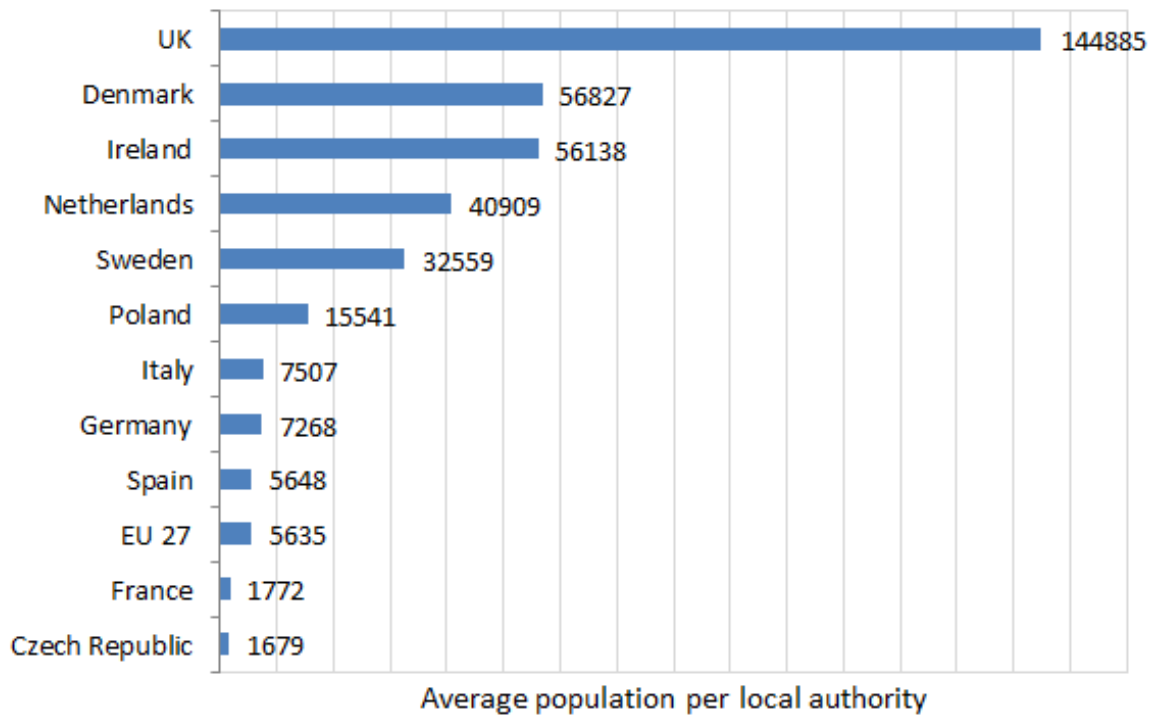

Sutton Coldfield in Birmingham, where residents are seeking to create their own parish council. Credit: Graham Taylor, CC BY-SA 2.0

JK Rowling's first novel for adults, post-Potter, was centred on the business of a fictional parish council, which provided the forum for the class, racial and ideological tensions within a single town to be played out. Despite the spotlight provided by our most successful living novelist, however, most of us are probably unaware of the work of parish councils. There are over 12,000 of them in the UK, mainly in rural areas. In England, about 35% of the population lives in an area served by a parish council.

Parish councils are, in effect, mini-local authorities, elected by the local community. Although they have few formal responsibilities, many are active in running local services and amenities, and all have the power to levy a precept on top of local council tax to fund their work. They are important players in local governance in many areas, therefore, but there is potential for them to make a bigger contribution to UK democracy.

This matters because local authorities in the UK are not very local. They tend to serve much larger populations than their foreign counterparts, with fewer elected representatives per constituent. In some places 'the council' can seem like a distant institution, whose boundaries don't necessarily correspond to the communities people think of as their local area. Figure 1 below compares the average population served by local authorities in the UK and selected EU countries.

Average population served, local authorities in the UK, EU and selected EU countries, 2012

	Average population per local authority
UK	144885
Denmark	56827
Ireland	56138
Netherlands	40909
Sweden	32559
Poland	15541
Italy	7507
Germany	7268
Spain	5648
EU 27	5635
France	1772
Czech Republic	1679

Source: Calculated from Council of European Municipalities and Regions, 2013

Support from central and local government

The government has given a clear indication that it would like more parish councils to be established. First of all, it is providing grants of up to £10,000 for local campaigns seeking to set up new councils. It has also proposed changing the law to make it easier and quicker for community groups to establish a parish council (a draft Legislative Reform Order has been published for consultation). The proportion of local voters who need to sign a petition to trigger an application to the local authority would be reduced from 10% to 7.5%, and for some established community groups (those that already have a neighbourhood plan) no petition would be needed.

Local authorities – which make the decision on whether to grant parish council status – would also be required to complete a review of all proposals within 12 months. This latter measure is designed to prevent undue delays from reluctant authorities. The National Association of Local Councils (NALC), which represents parish councils, has called for an independent appeals process for rejected applications, but this is not the government's plans. Cllr Ken Browse, Chair of the NALC, has said:

Local councils are popular with people and can really make a difference, and for too long communities have battled with burdensome bureaucracy to get them created. The proposals to remove red tape, simplify and streamline the current process are common sense. Of fundamental importance is a strong presumption in favour of creation and avoiding community groups being pitted against their principal council in a David versus Goliath battle.

One local authority has developed innovative proposals to devolve power to parish councils. Buckinghamshire County Council is inviting parish councils in the county to take responsibility for some transport services currently delivered at county level, with funding transferred downwards. Some aspects of the proposals appear prescriptive, for instance the preference for working with clusters of parish councils rather than individual bodies; it is important parish councils are not treated merely as delivery arms of higher authorities. However, this represents an important test of how parish councils can develop.

Parish councils in urban areas

The key test of the model will be whether the number of parish councils increases significantly in the coming years, especially in urban areas. There have been encouraging developments recently. In particular, London now has a single parish council; before a change in the law in 2007, parish councils were not allowed to be established

in the capital. The first is the Queens Park Community Council, covering a single ward in the City of Westminster, which grew out of a vibrant community forum following several years of campaigning for parish status.

Queens Park held its first elections simultaneously with the London borough elections in May 2014, electing twelve new councillors in four wards. The outcome was mixed, from a democratic perspective. Two of the wards did not need to hold a vote because only three candidates put themselves forward in each ward, meaning all were automatically elected. In the contested wards, however, turnout was relatively strong at 38%, higher than the 32% who voted in the borough elections across Westminster.

There are a number of other campaigns to establish parish councils in urban areas. London has several others: in Plumstead, Charlton, Barking Reach and London Fields, Hackney. Central Bradford , Fenton in Stoke-on-Trent, Sutton Coldfield in Birmingham and several parts of Peterborough all have ongoing campaigns at different stages. If these and others prove successful, urban local government could look very different ten years from now, and the pressure for genuine devolution of power to communities may prove irresistible.

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