

The Future of Local Democracy

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THE FUTURE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY – DEVOLUTION AND THE NEED TO EMPOWER TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS

LOCAL POLICY INNOVATION PARTNERSHIP HUB

December 2025

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Executive Summary

Dr Amy Burnett (Middlesex University/LPIP Place Fellow) Dr Jason Leman (Citizen Network) and Dr Daniel Ozarow (Middlesex University) reflect on key issues related to the role of town and parish councils, and how this can be amplified in discussions on devolution under the current Labour government. This discussion paper explores the roles and capacities of this smallest scale of government to deliver meaningful democratic action at the ‘hyper-local’ level. This is a particularly topical debate in light of The [English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill](#), which underpins the government’s reforms devolve powers to local government.

The authors build on the debates raised in the National Association of Local Council’s (NALC) [Power Shift Conference](#) on 23rd June 2025, where its members and local government experts came together to discuss how the current devolution measures might affect town and parish councils. This document highlights the potential of parish and town councils to be leaders of this approach. It acts as a checklist for policy-makers, practitioners, and local government at all scales to consider an integrated approach to reflection, resourcing and measurement. The following is a summary of the key points of the report.



Key Finding: Importance of Town and Parish Councils in Devolution

Town and parish councils are essential place-based, locally-driven institutions that can reflect and voice diverse community cultures that are crucial for supporting local action.



Key takeaway

Town and parish councils are ready-made governance structures to bridge local and strategic goals within the devolution framework. Raising the profile of the sector may attract more diverse and skilled councillors and staff. However, it is important to consider the need to balance the complex situation of the expectation to 'do more with less' and that town and parish councillors are volunteers.



Key Finding: Risks of Current Devolution Proposals

Current devolution proposals that create unitary councils risk distancing democracy from the public. This may create gaps between the "local" government layer of town and parish councils and the "meso" government layers of unitary and strategic authorities, perpetuating "David and Goliath" battles. This includes between urban and rural areas, large organisations (public and corporate) and local communities, regional interests and local interests.



Key takeaway

Unitary and strategic authorities, alongside public services, need to invest in genuinely supporting the local layer of government and effectively building connections underpinned by transparent and honest relationships.



Key Finding: The Potential of Technology

Technology, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Large Language Models (LLMs), can be leveraged to analyse council minutes for themes, key actions, and funding opportunities. This would support the ability of councillors and the public to engage, alongside reducing the burden on staff. This could be particularly helpful in assessing complex documentation (such as those relating to planning applications). Digital platforms for place-based mapping of local issues and livestreaming meetings could also support the work of town and parish councils.



Key takeaway

Investment in technology pathways, developed alongside local authorities and community groups, would assist the capacity of town and parish councils to engage the public and deliver services.





Key Finding: Resourcing Community Action

Town and parish councils, despite funding constraints, possess significant power under the General Power of Competence from the Localism Act (2011) – if certain conditions are met (such as having a trained Clerk). Examples like Frome Town Council demonstrate how strong leadership can lead to transformative actions in sustainability, food justice, and placemaking by building community capacity. However, not all town and parish councils have the capacity to gain these additional powers or don't have the same necessary mix of experience and resource to replicate 'pioneering' communities. Regenerative funding models supporting social and environmental goods could help to encourage proactive and positive outcomes linked to multiple dimensions of value.

Key takeaway

The capacity building of town and parish councils is critical. The strengthening of social value measures in public procurement could direct increased funding towards the town and parish council sector. This would effectively resource local supply chains that complement and enhance devolution and community empowerment. The celebration of innovation in its various forms should be recognised through peer-to-peer support networks, including the 'wins' of rural and smaller communities. For example, through cross-boundary thematic working groups and knowledge exchange.



Key Finding: Power and Inclusion in the Parish

There is a need for town and parish councils to critically reflect on who exercises power and influence within the community, and how to foster greater inclusion. Examples of where town and parish councils have successfully used democratic innovations such as community assemblies or participatory budgeting processes need to be built upon (including lessons learning from what works and doesn't work).

Key takeaway

Future 'model standing orders' should consider how democratic innovations and flexibility in decision-making could be embedded in town and parish councils (i.e. to invite greater public participation). The legislation on decision making processes need to allow for bottom-up learning loops that meaningfully consider community voice.



Introduction

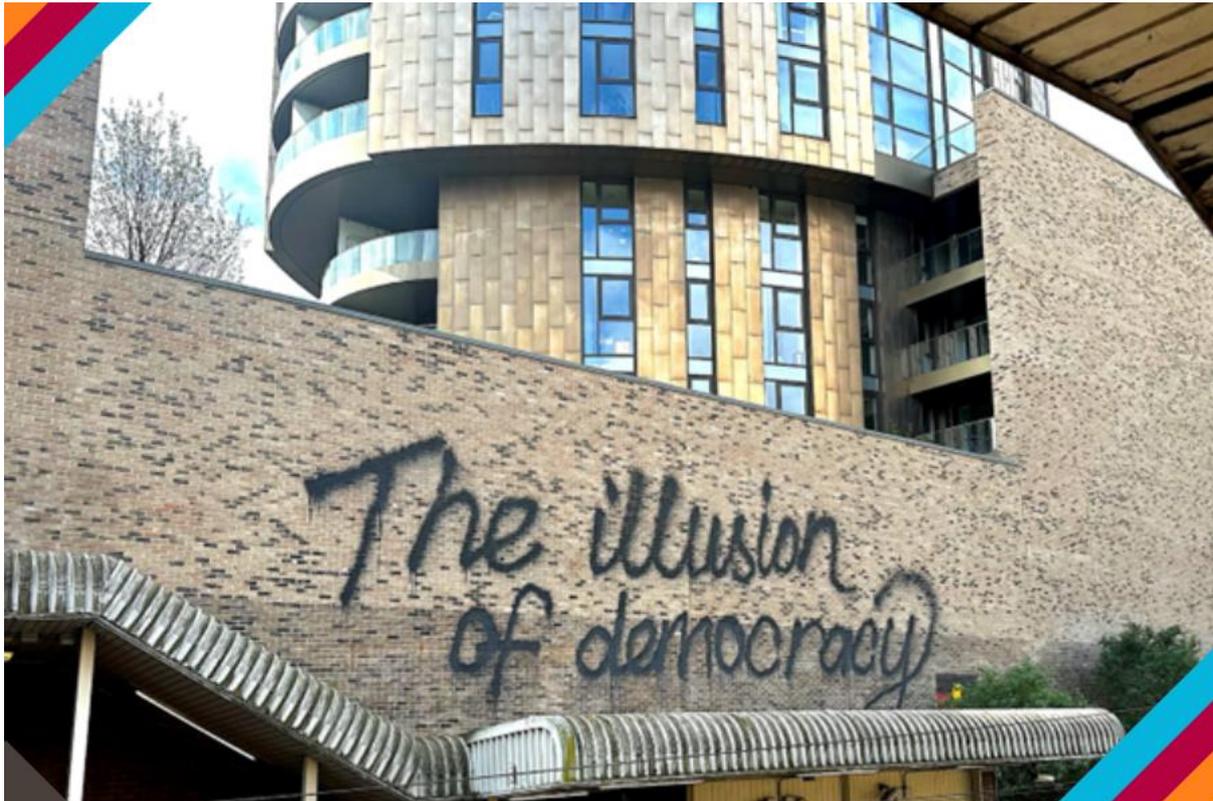
About this Review

Town and parish councils are the level of government with a mandate to support community issues in the 91% of England that is parished. They are comprised of elected councillors who manage local community assets and infrastructure, support community groups, and address issues in parished areas, supporting strategic decisions made by local authorities (such as feeding into planning consultations). Parish, town and community councils are essential in this supporting local action as place-based, locally-driven, relational institutions that can reflect and give voice to the diverse culture and place value in urban and rural communities.

Such debates are always important, but especially timely due to the proposals that will affect local government through the proposed devolution measures. There are significant governance transitions ahead - including the recent [English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill](#), which has recently had its second reading in the House of Commons). However, as we will see, not all areas are parished and their relationship to existing local authority governance is already shifting due to the ongoing move towards unitary authorities. The current proposals for devolution will accelerate this shift by abolishing district authorities. In addition, society is also amid a digital transformation that, unless coordinated and designed, could be an additional potential threat to the parish and town council sector in terms a shifting of power between state and community.

The discussion paper has the following objectives:

- To support understanding among different levels of government about the role of town and parish councils and how to partner with them in ongoing devolution proposals.
- To spark debate about potential ways to enhance reflective and inclusive governance so that these councils can amplify the value of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector (VCSE) whilst stimulating inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurship.
- To act as a checklist of questions to support understanding of potential principles and a value-led approach to policy-making with and for communities.
- To share potential use cases in the role of digital technologies that might further support action at this tier in collaboration with other tiers of government, key stakeholders, and supporters.



Graffiti at Dalston Kingsland Overground Station (Credit: Amy Burnett). In an age of scepticism, could parish and town councils make democracy feel real and within reach of ordinary people?

In local democracy we trust? Devolution and the role of town and parish councils

English representative democracy is made up of [multiple layers of government](#). [Trust in local democracy has consistently remained much higher than trust in national government](#), and participation has been consistently found to be [greater the closer government is to where people live \(i.e. local government\)](#). This lends itself to a discussion on place-based governance, leadership and imagination in the context of the recent devolution proposals and how this might affect the 'local' level.

In this discussion paper, we examine the democratic spaces in representative government that are 'closest' to communities, especially in less densely populated areas: town and parish councils. These can also be called 'neighbourhood' or 'community' councils, but their powers are the same. They are distinct from local authorities, who manage more strategic matters related to a larger area.

There are about 10,000 town and parish councils in England, though not every place has one, due to the configuration of English local government. [They cover 91% of land but intriguingly, only 36% of the population](#). Indeed, there is increasing interest in

establishing these entities to enhance representation in places that may not have been served by these lower tiers (including in London boroughs).

Below, we outline some ideas to stimulate discussion about the role of parish and town councils in promoting sustainable futures and inclusive democracy in the context of the recent debates about devolution and the role of local government.

What are the Devolution proposals and how might this impact town and parish councils?

In December 2024 the government introduced a White Paper on [English Devolution](#) (MHCLG, 2024) and its intentions to deepen devolution in England. In July 2025 this became [the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill](#) (Bill 283, 2024-25), which is currently receiving public comments at the committee stage in the House of Commons. Under the proposed measures there is the possibility to (re-) consider the role of town and parish councils. The Bill still has some way to progress before it becomes law, creating space to reflect on the vital function of town and parish councils in cultivating democratic renewal in the future, drawing on inspiring examples of councils at this scale that have pushed the frontiers of place-based innovation.

The Government is proposing a strengthening of regional government to support mayors with greater powers, and the creation of a series of strategic (combined) authorities. This would abolish district councils (in favour of unitary authorities), all underpinned by an English Devolution Bill. See the [LGIU's Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation Hub](#) for very useful summaries of the implications of these changes.

The small print of the Devolution Bill offers suggestions for new rights, powers, and a focus on neighbourhoods and communities in what is an extension of the existing [localism powers](#), including:

- *New rights for communities* to shape public services, own buildings and spaces of community value, and have a say over local spending decisions
- *More powers for town and parish councils* to support local businesses and include social value as a consideration in commissioning
- A [Community Wealth Fund](#) focused on investing in deprived communities with “no strings attached”, supported by a new Neighbourhood Unit
- *Neighbourhood Governance* as a key channel for representation and voice, including greater community involvement in decision-making and public service delivery.

Many of these ideas had roots in [A Labour Vision for Community Power: Participation, prevention and devolution](#), which was written by elected Labour and Cooperative Party representatives and supported by New Local, among others. However, the recalibration of powers that are outlined in the Devolution Bill emphasises standardised decentralisation from Westminster to ‘elite’ local authority actors such as Mayors,

Council Leaders, and the yet to be strategic ‘authorities’. This is in contrast to some bottom-up visions of local-level devolution that are highlighted in [NALC’s Devo Devolution](#) perspective on devolution and indicate the possible tensions between different forms of ‘the local’ as administrative structures are configured at different scales in the move towards devolution.

How will devolution affect the relationship between community and town and parish councils?

The Government has set out an ambition around both the role of community voice and the relationship between town and parish councils and local authorities, as reflected by the commons committee considering the Bill, [where the minister stated](#):

“Town and parish councils are already doing effective community engagement, and we will continue to support them to do that. At the heart of this is empowering our communities and creating structures that enable effective neighbourhood governance.”

However, town and parish councils were only specifically mentioned in section 4.2.3 of the White Paper, far into a document on local government reform. In the Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, the word ‘parish’ is mentioned 11 times and ‘parish council’ 4 times. By comparison, the word ‘community’ is mentioned 650 times and ‘mayor’ 1,824 times (see Appendix 2). In the devolution proposals, larger ward sizes arising from a shift to unitary governance will mean the ratio of local authority councillors to residents will be significantly diminished. Unitary councils facing severe financial pressures will not have the staff or councillors to engage without independent structures in place that empower community voice and activity. Town and parish councils have the potential to be representative bridges between “local” level of community and “meso” government layers, including the mayoral strategic authorities.

The Bill sets out several measures that would enable communities who wished to take ownership of community assets to do so, through the expansion of purchase schemes thus replacing the existing *Community Right to Bid* as outlined in the Localism Act (2011) with the stronger new *Community Right to Buy*. However, whilst this could help put local people ‘in control’, it is unclear whether the shape of governance arrangements would make the opportunity to exercise this control democratic and equitable, both within and across neighbourhoods. Clause 58 of the Bill states that:

(1) Local authorities in England must make appropriate arrangements to secure the effective governance of any area of a specified description that falls within the authority's area (a “neighbourhood area”).

(2) “Appropriate arrangements” for the purposes of subsection (1) are such arrangements as are specified in regulations made by the Secretary of State.
- English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (2024-25).

The Secretary of State, therefore, will have powers to determine the kind of governance arrangements that will be put in place. In their response to questions around what kinds of governance this might be, [the minister responded](#):

“It is right and appropriate that different principal authorities work out the best way to engage their communities, which can be very diverse and will need different approaches.”

This suggests that the purpose and outcomes of neighbourhood governance arrangements will be considered as more important than their specific form, as organisations such as [the Association of Democratic Service Officers](#) and [the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny](#) have proposed. Ministerial responses and contact with MHCLG suggest peer-support across unitary authorities will support good practice, whilst a level of devolved powers to neighbourhoods will be preferred.

Neighbourhood Governance Review

Overview

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment (EDCE) Bill brings a new requirement for all local authorities to make appropriate arrangements for effective governance of any neighbourhood area. It provides the Secretary of State with the power to make regulations which define a neighbourhood area, and to specify the criteria that these arrangements must fulfil.

MHCLG are reviewing local authority-led neighbourhood governance models in England, to inform this work. This survey has been designed to gather evidence to review existing local authority-led neighbourhood governance structures and to explore different approaches and their effectiveness.

‘Neighbourhood governance’ is about enabling decision-making at a more local level within a local authority area. Effective neighbourhood governance will move decision-making closer to residents, giving communities a greater say in what matters to them.

The [MHCLG consultation on neighbourhood governance](#), carried out alongside the Bill, has an assumption that there will be a devolution of some unitary powers to neighbourhoods.

What is lacking from the Bill is the integration of existing platforms for community voice. A principal authority run engagement process will tend to favour the interests of that authority, or at least be perceived as doing so, which risks reducing the extent to which it will be seen as the legitimate voice and convenor of the locality.

For independent local parties who have fought to control planning and services in their area (such as [Residents for Uttlesford](#) and [Canvey Residents’ Alliance](#)) they risk being left in a perpetual minority within far larger unitary authorities. Indeed, [our previous research](#) suggests that those who seek radical change in placemaking are often seeking greater [autonomy](#), whatever their underlying voting credentials. Their wish for such autonomy may be made ever more remote in ever-larger authorities; even large councils may find themselves losing some power and influence to the Mayoral Strategic Authorities as [a](#)

[new form of regional government](#). There is a risk that without independent mechanisms for community voice and activity, the strategic priorities of larger areas will be pitched against smaller communities and perpetuate the “David and Goliath” battles that have hitherto affected community voice in decision-making.

Town and parish councils offer a ready-made structure to articulate and broker place and strategic goals. NALC and the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) have said that the government need to “[include parish and town councils as key partners in shaping proposals for new unitary authorities](#)” with “[significant opportunities to rebalance local government in England and to reinvigorate the first tier of community representation](#)”. Similarly, [influential community supporters such as Locality are calling for Community Covenants](#) as “a new model of partnership between councils and local people” to strengthen the government’s devolution proposals. This is a localised reflection of the Government’s work on establishing a [National Covenant Framework](#) with civil society to catalyse conversation with government at all scales.

However, in spite of their enormous potential under the General Power of Competence from the Localism Act (2011), town and parish councils are often constrained by their *perceived* parameters of action. Of those that do exist, often they are typically assumed to perform a particular purpose, reflected in the [Local Government Intelligence Unit’s description](#) of them, where their function is seen as to “maintain local amenities such as recreational areas, footpaths, and cemeteries”. Of course, town and parish councils are part of the fabric of government and have statutory duties and expectations. However, as NALC suggests, town and parish councils can also play a role as “[empowering and strengthening the most local level of democracy](#)”.

If devolution proposals offer many opportunities to innovate and support community resourcing, this then begs the question: what does devolution mean in practice for the smallest scale of government to amplify its potential to exercise power for the communities they represent? In the next section, we appraise potential pathways and emerging transitions in town and parish council governance for and with communities before offering suggestions as to how to enhance these even more.

Resourcing community action through town and parish councils

Democracy can thrive at a smaller scale, where workforces number in the tens rather than the thousands, providing a [place-based backbone for democracy and community](#). In smaller organisations, staff can support [building relationships with residents](#) rather than simply delivering services to. Parish and town councils supported rapid community responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and have led on community-led neighbourhood plans.

Parish and town councils can also play a role in facilitating new forms of civic engagement. For instance, Forest Row's parish council is experimenting with the horizontal organising method of sociocracy, partly inspired and facilitated by connections with broader radical networks. Shipley Town Council ran a [citizen jury on the climate](#), while others are [experimenting with participatory budgeting](#). They could play a vital role in articulating community ambitions and sustaining community renewal. Such exemplars often have strong ties to pre-existing active community groups, such as transition towns (*for a deeper analysis of the role of town and parish councils and the VCSE sector in the context of Local Government Reform, see [Appendix 3](#)*). However, the capacity of these councils depends as much on resourcing as it does on their ambition.

Parish and town councils gain their main income from their precept – the amount that gets added onto Council Tax. These funds are allocated directly to the parish and town councils. They have independence on setting their precept, which has allowed these councils to expand and take on more services from principal authorities. Taunton Town Council, under the new unitary of Somerset Council, has an [income from its precept of nearly £6 million in 2024/25](#). This has enabled it to take on responsibility for the public realm and assets that were otherwise at risk. However, as [the Society of Local Council Clerk \(SLCC\) data on parish precepts](#) reveals, a third (32%) of parish and town councils had a precept of less than £10,000 in FY 2025/26 (of those that had an income at all). This leaves little money left after paying their administrative costs, with many sharing a part-time clerk and essentially being a voluntary group.

The variation in scale between the largest and smallest parish and town councils greatly affects their potential scope, though even the smallest council can be ambitious given sufficient human resources. At one end of the spectrum, it is useful to first consider Frome Town Council in Somerset under the governance of Independents for Frome. Here, the transformational and experienced leadership of the (non-party political group) - the Independents for Frome - led to the building of a capable and committed staff body and attitude for change. The size of the town (a population of around 27,000) and the ambition of the town council led to it having enough resources to act through people, assets, and money (including raising its precept).

Frome Town Council's actions were a platform for actions towards (radical) [sustainability](#) and the sharing economy, [food justice](#), [connected](#) communities, [well-being](#), and [placemaking](#) and community-led regeneration. These initiatives were initiated or

supported by the town council, which sought to “do with” residents and [build up the capacity of the community](#), seeing itself as a facilitator to maximise the town’s strong placemaking networks. Frome Town Council has been very proactive in calling for the appropriate devolution of local assets from the resource-constrained Somerset Council so that they can be managed by the town council in its ambitious and trailblazing [Devolution Prospectus](#). However, this is not always replicable at this level due to various factors, as we discuss below.



Frome Town Council’s ‘Devolution Prospectus’ proposed a range of transfers of open spaces, rights, and assets from Somerset Council. (Credit: Amy Burnett)

For larger town and parish councils, unitarisation and devolution represents an opportunity to take on assets and provide additional services. If a unitary authority finds itself struggling to provide anything beyond statutory services, being able to transfer assets and services to another public body can be a golden opportunity, particularly where it potentially further empowers local actors. Though, as we discuss below, this does not come without risk.

In theory, town and parish councils have fewer bureaucratic burdens than principal (district, county, unitary) authorities. Given the right leadership, they could enable more nimble, flexible and timely decision-making. Under the General Power of Competence from the Localism Act (2011), town and parish councils (potentially) have enormous power to transform local communities. However, this currently only applies if two-thirds of councillors are elected (as opposed to co-opted) and there is a qualified clerk in place. This is a very high bar for smaller town and parish councils.

The willingness of some town and parish councils to expand their scope of action is variable. Some engage with the broader voluntary sector and public services, consider planning and highways, and collaborate with nearby parishes. They have councillors with broad experience and deep expertise. Where unitary authorities make a commitment to support their position as a voice acting on behalf of the community, devolution may offer a route into engagement across all activities in a place. The extension of rights to acquire an Asset of Community Value proposed in the Devolution Bill alongside potentially gives smaller councils a role in convening a community to bid for these assets, even if not necessarily committing the resources to ongoing costs.

It will remain the case that some town and parish councils do not see their role as being one that extends much further than the village green. Many lack a connection to, or do not see as applicable, broader movements for social and environmental change. There are stories of frustration when those wanting innovation and ambition meet a preference for stasis and restraint. For those that might consider a broader remit, there are opportunities to support this.

The Chancellor recently announced a South-North [redistribution of council tax funding](#) to address structural imbalances. Where councils gain additional funding, the potential for principal authorities to doubly-devolve resources would be an opportunity to make this funding go further. The Government has also recently announced the [Pride In Place](#) programme, which brings together and expands funding for towns, neighbourhoods and small areas that are multiply deprived. However, the current version of the [English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill](#) focuses most on higher-level structures of power than the local financing of community-based resourcing (see [Appendix 3](#)). We reflect on the potential for further redistributive and regenerative finance below.

It is essential, therefore, to understand what works to further embolden and resource town and parish councils. Before we explore this point, we want to reflect on other emergent spaces that may impact how the debates and action in community and civic spaces may evolve under devolution transitions.

Who will occupy the spaces for representative democracy at a local level? - a note on other contenders

Principal Authorities have a critical role in supporting the formation of new parish and town councils (and can veto their creation), alongside enabling them to work well, with English devolution being [a key point of opportunity](#). Reasons for setting up new town and parish councils might include wanting to retain a sense of place-based identity in the face of larger unitary and combined authorities, enhancing control of local assets, and enhancing local representation in unparished areas (which includes most urban areas).

Nothing has emerged to match the scale of Birmingham City Council's mid-1980s proposals to parish the whole city (turned down by the Boundary Commission). However, several reviews are ongoing. In some cases, devolution proposals mean that where there

are unparished areas, like [Cheltenham](#), existing local authorities are undertaking a community governance review to assess whether new parish and town councils should be created. While the nomenclature ranges from community councils (such as the [Queens Park Community Council](#), the first of its kind in London), town councils (such as the freshly created [Harrogate and Scarborough town councils](#)) and parish councils (see [Lytham Parish Council](#)), all essentially have the same remit and powers.



John Steet in Harrogate. (Credit: Anthony Parkes CC BY-SA 2.0)

In contrast, there are some contenders to the spaces of representative democracy. Some more radical political social movements are suggesting a need to replace or supplant traditional democratic structures, such as the [House of the People](#), which argues for a direct form of democracy to replace elected representatives. Similarly, the group ‘Our House’ is holding conversations on a new ‘People’s Charter’ modelled on that of the Chartists, holding meetings in communities where the aim is to explore how democracy should be (re)constructed. Another movement, rooted in community organising, is promoting self-reliant models of community power, such as [Cooperation Hull](#), where those taking part are sceptical of the role of traditional councils.

Other VCSE convening groups are also a key space for community action, such as Social Action Hubs. Movements such as [We’re Right Here](#) are advocating for increased powers for communities and the role of community groups. Different models of voluntary group and social enterprise are emerging, with [Community Benefit Societies](#) providing a structure that provides for mutual ownership of assets and activities by communities. From [Coalville Can](#) to [Energise Barnsley](#), these bodies have transformative potential within local areas.

How town and parish councils work with these spaces and networks may have ramifications for the resourcing of local democracy and place-based debates into the future. Town and parish councils could work with these emerging organisations that seek democratic and social renewal, acting as a convenor and enabler. They could directly embed practices within the council, taking the lead in joining participatory and representative democracy. Whilst town and parish councils have a lot of scope to do this if they wish, as noted above, this may be restricted in practice.

If democratic and social innovations may play a role, national political parties also reach down to the town and parish level. Typically, parish and town councils remain relatively ‘independent’ in party-political terms, [particularly for smaller councils and only 12.9% of their councillors represent a political party](#). If parish and town councils become central to the delivery of services and articulation of community voice, then the presence of political parties would be expected to increase. However, the independence of town and parish councils would not disappear easily. Party political councillors in this layer of government [typically act in ways that are less partisan](#), being more likely to act “for the good of the area”, though this is by no means universal. Perhaps more importantly, for the small electorates associated with many town and parish councils, there is no advantage conferred on a candidate from a major political party [compared to an independent](#). At this scale, successful candidacy is perhaps more about a person’s standing in the community and personal relationships as it is an affiliation to a national platform.

Whilst parish and town councils are a form of representative government, its scale makes it distinct from that of local authorities and parliament. However, even while ‘party politics’ may not always be formally at play there can be a wider issue between the challenge of representation (i.e. where active ‘double or triple hatters’ play a significant role in orchestrating local activities) and encouraging the active citizenship and commitment that ‘community-focused’ individuals enable.

The post-devolution town and parish council - some suggestions

Below, we propose suggestions for enhancing autonomy, innovation and empowerment of the town and parish councils post-Devolution.

Strengthen skills and resourcing to further facilitate community capacity

The issue: National investment in neighbourhoods requires places to take the lead, but they often lack governance structures to effectively do this and can be reliant on limited funding horizons. Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds (from property developments) can already be spent on community infrastructure such as transport, local facilities. With the recent announcements from Localities that “as a result of the spending review, they cannot proceed with commissioning new neighbourhood planning support services for 2025 onwards”. Whilst the Government has committed to funding neighbourhood planning through “[a claims-based system](#)”, there appears to be a potential gap in the resourcing of local infrastructure spending and community influence on the built and natural environment. This could create uneven distribution of what communities can carry on developing community-led plans with the removal of these funds. More generally, there can be a lack of ongoing investment to support sustained, regenerative change.

The opportunity: Local financing systems can go further. Indeed, they will have to. Town and parish councils perform a key role as a place-based connector of people and organisations, supporting local network building, local assets and skills by working alongside local social enterprises and businesses. Initiatives such as Big Local have shown that a relatively small investment in a local community can reap big rewards. Where national programmes seek to strengthen community capacity through investment, town and parish councils offer the infrastructure to democratically administer and coordinate this investment. There is an opportunity for place-based sharing economy principles to link resources to need through local councils. Timebanking, where residents can exchange skills and do odd jobs, to food redistribution are activities parish and town councils could enable further. Town and parish councils could be embedded in the governance of such funding innovations, evaluating and allocating funding and non-financial assets according to the different types of value that is produced (see [Burnett, 2025](#)).

Ideas for change:

- Future training for council staff and councillors can continue to refine the role of town and parish councils as effective [community organisers](#), as well as being a platform to enable VCSE sector activity and resourcing.
- Town and parish councils' time should be sufficiently recognised through changing guidance on remuneration, linked to council size, or a means-tested bursary to support their ability to stand and perform their duties.

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- The skills of town and parish councillors need to be better recognised (who often may have extensive professional experience that may not be ‘seen’ by higher tiers of government). For example, town and parish councillor expertise could be logged on a local skills register, validated through application to thematic working groups, could be connected to local authority and public service decision-making.
 - A programme of investment in local areas, either at a national or regional scale, could be structured with an expected outcome of town and parish council formation, filling a potential democratic deficit by bridging representation in non-parished areas.
 - Investment systems that reward local council innovation and investment in social and environmental good (akin to [Social Investment Partnerships](#) and related outcomes measures, but targeted to supporting local council).

Further reflection: This also raises the issue of scale, where particularly small town and parish councils are subject to the same expectations as larger ones, indicating that there is a need to appraise the capacity and resources to deliver in the context of local government administrative functions.

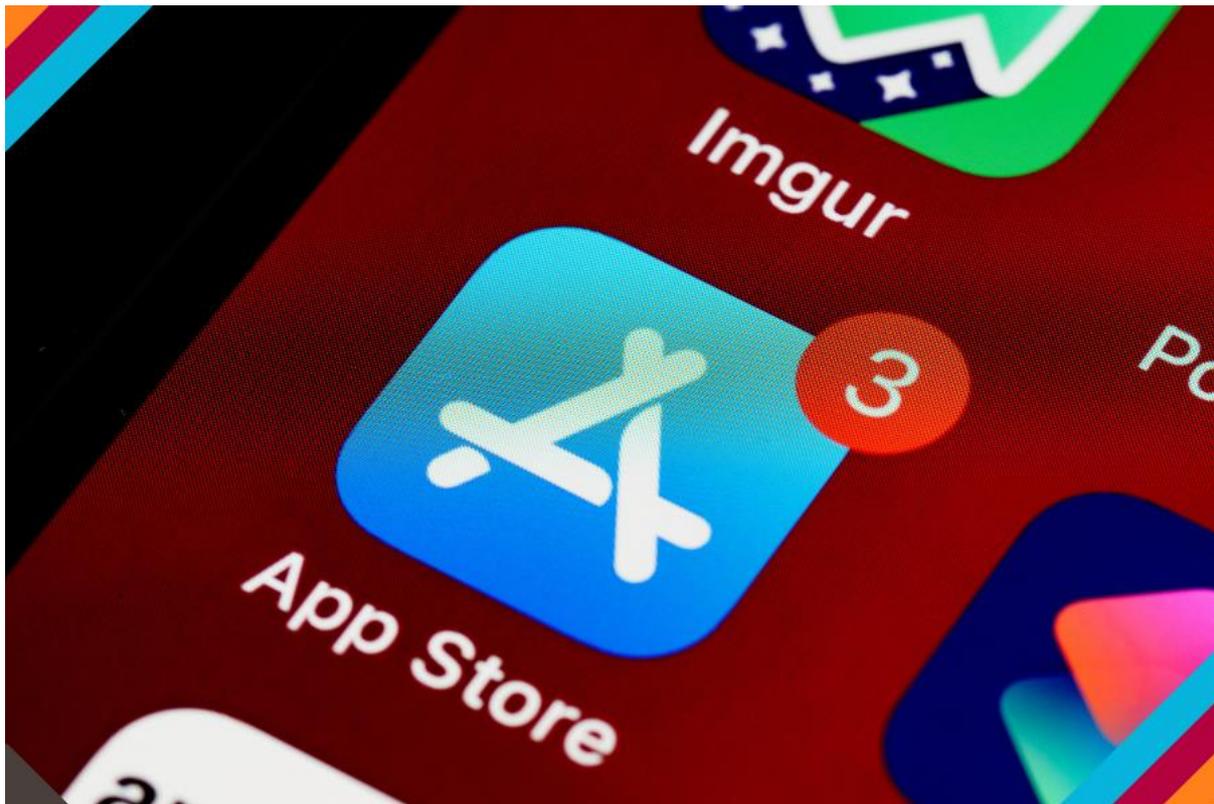


Image from Canva

Consider the potential of technology at the small-scale

The issue: It takes a particular kind of person to attend a parish meeting, let alone read minutes and scrutinise the work of the council. New ways are required to support community understanding of town and parish councils and connect people to local issues. A particular challenge is in reflecting the way that younger generations engage with content, [which is mainly via social media](#), and what that means in terms of a shift in how democracy is communicated and consumed. The work of parish and town councils has been [made more transparent](#), but can remain invisible to much of the community.

The opportunity: In the same way that residents [can log a pothole to be fixed or an obstruction in the road](#), new digital platforms are supporting community voice by enabling communities to undertake a [place-based mapping of local issues](#). This allows residents to flag issues of concern or [map how they feel about an area](#). AI platforms can be tailored to offer specific advice, supporting professionals, and summarise complex documents in simple language. Digital peer-to-peer resourcing solutions can support cross-organisational working and the growth of local networks.

Ideas for change:

- Existing tools used by parish and town councils (such as Parish Online) could be expanded to include functions such as interactive mapping; livestreaming parish and town council meetings; producing automated easy-read summaries of meetings (recognising there may be a potential digital divide in the uptake of these technologies and require capacity building on use).

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- AI and Large Language Models (LLMs) offer an opportunity to analyse town and parish council minutes for themes, key actions and opportunities. For instance, LLMs can help understand how policies address particular issues (or not), i.e. whether local action and policies support the vulnerable or marginalised. These could prompt new ideas for action, help indicate links to local community groups, and suggest funding opportunities.
 - Trained LLMs could support clerks with administrative tasks, offering guidance on legislation and regulations. When embedded across town and parish councils, these could facilitate connections between work and activities in different councils.
 - Undertake a youth-led assessment of engagement with democratic processes and what technologies, processes, and relationships might encourage and facilitate engagement with town and parish councils.

Further reflection:

While there are moves for disruptive technology to facilitate real-time insights and consultation (such as in the planning process, see [Optimal Cities](#) application of GIS and AI analytics in this space), communities need space to reflect with government and partners. Technology must accompany, not consume, community conversation processes. The governance to respond to these concerns must be resourced and transparent.

These suggestions should be accompanied by an assessment of risks and opportunities that digital technology (and screen use) may have on the current and future use of community assets in a community. The reliance on screens can turn people away from engaging in community events or shaping civic life. This preference for virtual engagement can apply to both citizens and the council. It is vital that there are clear structures to enable community voice, checks and balances for community action in digital transitions. Town and parish councils would need to be able to respond and advocate as needed, connecting with Principal Authorities to emphasise the need for human connection. It depends, ultimately, on what the appropriate balance is between place, people, efficiency, resources, the capacity for innovation and place-shaping, as well as place-keeping as issues of concern.

Take a critical reflection on power in the community

The issue: When assessing the potential impact of founding a new town or parish council, principal authorities have a statutory duty to consider community cohesion and the boundaries of place. Town and parish councils themselves can be keystone organisations in enabling cohesion and defining place but need the tools and freedom to do this.

The opportunity: There are steps that all towns and parishes can take to sense-check who is exercising power and influence, and how to create and sustain momentum for more inclusion at a local level. We suggest other value measures that can create a culture

of informed accountability and an appetite for inclusion of differences in viewpoints and backgrounds. For unitary authorities, there is a need to partner with the parish and town council in each place, engaging in conversation rather than dictation around double-devolution.

Ideas for change:

- Town and parish councils can routinely reflect on community cohesion and who gets to define place activity. This could strengthen the devolution measures being proposed by the government. Enhanced social value measures in public procurement are one route to setting purposeful indicators with VCSE partners.
- The broader ethos of including the community as an active partner and reflecting on impact can be supported from a national level, from government NALC, SLCC, but also from bodies such as [Involve](#), alongside principal authorities.
- In their [submission to the general commons committee](#) considering the devolution Bill, NALC argues that the Power of General Competence should be extended to every town and parish council. There is evidence that smaller town and parish councils, which find it harder to clear this bar, are being effectively excluded from the devolution of services from unitary authorities.
- The model standing orders and regulations underpinning the statutory parts of the standing orders could be considered with regard to democratic innovation, such as the ability to transfer decision-making powers to community assemblies or participatory budgeting processes. Town and parish councils could take a more open-door policy with residents at meetings.
- There should also be a broader focus on how these measures can map onto the wider [social and cultural infrastructure](#) of a place (i.e. via the [British Academy-commissioned Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure](#) and [DCMS's cultural and heritage value measures](#)).

Further reflection: There is discussion to be had about the role of town and parish councils in relation to the wider VCSE and social movements for action and [decision-making](#). Even where 'Neighbourhood Governance' structures might build on best practice across unitary authorities, this risks these structures being designed to meet the needs of principal authorities, or local government broadly described, rather than equally balancing the needs of the many actors present in neighbourhood governance. As such, we suggest there is a need for a more equal relationship between unitary authorities, VCSEs and town and parish councils in wider decision-making on certain matters, perhaps reflected by a memorandum of understanding, constitution or other agreement.

See [Appendix 1](#) for ideas on reflective questions town and parish councils can explore with VCSEs and other partners. Critically, reflective governance needs should become an onerous task but be framed as something that supports honest and transparent communication to encourage enhanced relationships and links to different groups in a community. This is essential to support purposeful change among town and parish councils and with community partners and other tiers of local government.

Conclusion - resourcing the town and parish councils for devolution

Town and parish councils have been part of the local action and civic debate since the Middle Ages, with an historic role in shaping British attitudes towards democracy. Where they exist, these local entities are a vital part of the British state and with that, the local place landscape and their related eco-system.

We suggest this could be reimagined to meet today's social and economic challenges, as well as empower parish and town councils to (re)define their role in the changing political and administrative landscape. The next phase of local democracy and planning must focus on supporting regenerative systems change, moving beyond sustainability toward practices that actively restore and enhance community and environmental wellbeing.

In the appendices, we offer some questions to spark debate about potential add-ons to the existing governance of town and parish councils, illustrate the position within current Government proposals, and how they might link to existing VCSE organisations.

Devolution won't fix distrust in politics through administrative efficiency measures and top-down neighbourhood convening. There is a democratic deficit risked through the delivery of public services by cash-strapped large unitary authorities. This can be ameliorated by the empowering, where they exist - and creation, where they don't - of a layer of government at the scale of towns, neighbourhoods, communities, and parishes. Town and parish councils can be the democratic voice and mechanism for delivery for action from communities, being the hand that reaches up to grasp that which is reaching down from the 'meso' level of unitary and strategic authorities created in Local Government Reform. As a convener of action, town and parish councils support the voluntary and democratic lifeblood of our places.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Suggestions for reflective questions for town and parish councils

Some of these questions could be added to the existing Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) - which asks about compliance and procedural issues. They could follow a line of enquiry such as 'Community Governance Reviews' that have been used by some county and district councils such as Cornwall, Wiltshire and [Hart District Council](#).

- How many people from the community attended meetings?
- What was their profile (ward, postcode, gender, age, employment status)?
- How many were new attendees at meetings?
- What other engagement methods were used to support community inclusion and voice (digital platforms like Parish Online, outreach in public spaces, connections with VCFSE partners)?
- Do roles have a public or community engagement element as part of their remit), or can they be recalibrated to do so?
- How were policy or actions shaped by engagement with communities? Were communities involved in the implementation of these ideas?
- Are councillors from principal authorities present at full council meetings?
- How many times were councillors or staff invited to attend principal authority or central government meetings and events?
- Were any particular governance strategies and decision-making tools used to enhance reflection (after-action reviews, six hats thinking to encourage different views, more open-ended funding for community groups etc.)?
- How has technology been used to assist the work of the council in involving and engaging the community and what felt impacts are there of how technology is changing communities and engagement with (local) government?
- What did you learn from your experience of engaging the community and the methods you used?
- What resources do you need to further local priorities, and how can you kick-start this locally by using financial and non-financial resources that already exist in the community?
- How many formal and informal partnerships are there with VCSEs? How is this enhancing social value and resourcing and what tools are being used – or could be used – to measure different types of value?

Such questions could work within the contours of other community initiatives to support principle and value-based alignment to core place-based principles. For instance, the [Social Action Hub framework](#).

Appendix 2 – What words count? The presence of town and parish councils in the devolution proposals

Although it is recognised that single words alone do not tell the whole story, they are at least indicative of the strength of the focus of narrative on particular ideas and concepts. Further analysis on the co-dependencies between phrases would be required to provide a more in-depth analysis, which is beyond the scope of this paper).

Key word	White Paper	Bill
Mayor	392	1,824
Power	178	691
Community	45	650
Council	144	486
Strategic	397	427
Empower	34	371
Value	26	168
Asset	15	142
Democracy/democratic*	0	74
Growth	147	54
Represent	35	30
Without	17	23
Community groups	11	16
Control	33	13
Finance	11	12
Parish Council	3	11
Inclusion/inclusive	6	10
Participate/participation*	0	9
Town	14	8
Governance	17	6
Resource	12	6
Influence	5	4
Fair	5	4
Freedom	4	4
Resilience/t	17	0
Take back	7	0
Autonomy/autonomous	5	0
Incentive	2	0
Social value	1	0
VCSE	0	0
Civil society	0	0
Voluntary	1	0

Analysed from the 1st reading of the Bill, unless otherwise indicated.

* Bill 318 2024-26 (as amended in Public Bill Committee)

Appendix 3 - Analysis of the Devolution White Paper and the implications for town & parish councils and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprises (VCSEs)

Excerpt	Assumption	Implication for supporting civil society
<p>Transferring power away from Westminster means strengthening the ability of Local Authorities to set proper strategic direction to address the challenges facing their areas and respond to the hopes and aspirations of the communities they represent</p>	<p>Local authorities currently do not sufficiently set ‘proper strategic direction’ Local authority approaches do not sufficiently respond to “the hopes and aspirations of the communities they represent”</p> <p>Local authorities will have the skills and/or access to resources and skills needed to upscale strategic interventions in line with community aspirations</p>	<p>There may be issues with how local authorities support VCSEs in their areas and may (or may not be) divorced from understanding the needs of communities and civil society</p> <p>Sufficient resource exists to include VCSEs in local supply chains and invest in them in other ways</p>
<p>We know people value the role of governance at the community scale and that can be a concern when local government is reorganised</p>	<p>Local-level governance is valued and needs to be conserved (and enhanced) and policy measures will continue to support them</p>	<p>That the town, parish and local authority levels are embedded in local governance, of which VCSEs play an important part</p>
<p>Local government plays an essential role in convening local partners around neighbourhoods to ensure that community voices are represented and people have influence over their place and their valued community assets...We want to work with the sector to ensure that the existing structures and mechanisms for community partnership enable them to fulfil this role</p>	<p>Local authorities already convene local partnerships (especially neighbourhood-level approaches) to influence place and community assets</p>	<p>Local government can be active partners in identifying ways to strengthen the VCSE sector, including town and parish councils</p>
<p>We will also work with the town and parish council sector to improve engagement between them and local authorities...We will therefore want to see stronger community arrangements when reorganisation happens in the way councils engage at a neighbourhood or area level... We will also rewire the relationship between town and parish councils and principal Local Authorities, strengthening expectations on engagement and community voice...</p>	<p>Governance at the community scale is valued and should be strengthened through a “rewiring” of the relationship between town and parish councils and local authorities</p>	<p>Community voice is tied to the perspectives and support of town and parish councils at the hyper-local level and town and parish council perspectives need to be understood in any ‘rewiring’ of relationships across local government and the impact this will have on the VCSE sector</p>



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