levelling up begins at ground level

James Derounian reports on the findings of an audit that charted changes in activity in English and Welsh parish, town and community councils over the past 30 years—and considers what they might mean for levelling up

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Over 30% of England is parished—'the sheer scale and historical pedigree of town, parish and community councils should give citizens, policy-makers and politicians serious pause for thought'

If it wasn't for Jackie Weaver, and her 2021 spat in a Handforth Parish Council Zoom meeting that went viral, I probably wouldn't get your attention with this article. She single-handedly did what many of us have tried and failed to do—namely recast the term 'parish pump' from a pejorative term to one that deserves genuine attention as a contributor to intended UK government 'levelling-up'.

The sheer scale and historical pedigree of English and Welsh town, parish and community councils—collectively termed 'local councils'—should give citizens, policy-makers and politicians serious pause for thought. For example, the umbrella body (the National Association of Local Councils—NALC[1]) represents 9,000 parish and town councils and 80,000 councillors. Local councils are the first tier of local government and are statutory bodies; over 30% of England is parished. Together they form an influential grouping of grassroots opinion-formers.[2]

Over 200 such councils have been created over the past decade, including the first in London (serving Queen's Park).

Furthermore, these councils have far outlived other agencies and quangos: they came into being

in 1894, as a result of a Local Government Act, and most of the civil functions of the Church of England and other bodies were transferred to these new councils. What is immediately apparent is that local councils — unlike so many political structures — are sustainable democratic units that continue 128 years after birth.

It is now 30 years since *Parish and Town Councils in England: A Survey* was published.[3] The report was commissioned by the-then Conservative government to assess the activity or sleepiness of this tier of local government, and the research was based on a sample of 1,000 parish and town councils across England. In response, the Rural White Paper of 1995 promoted the role of local councils. More statutory powers were awarded in 1997 and, following a second Rural White Paper in 2000, the Labour government invested in training for local councils and a 'Vital Villages' scheme, and promoted community-driven parish plans.

Most significantly, the coalition government's Localism Act 2011 gave a general power of competence to eligible local councils and introduced a series of 'community rights' that such councils are enabled to initiate action — for example, the production of community-generated Neighbourhood Plans must be led by a local council, where one exists. Other community rights include the better delivery of services, protection of community assets, and development of social enterprises.

'The survey … may encourage more of these ultra-local councils to emulate others already active in delivering for communities. It has shone a light on aspects of localism that constitute a plank of government policy, especially focused on levelling up'

It is clear that over time parish and town councils have undergone a sea-change in terms of their numbers, finance, duties, and capabilities. In 1992, the first survey identified 8,159 local councils, with populations of less than 100 to over 40,000 — 83% represented under 2,500 people. There were 70,600 councillors (13,600 more than in 1967) — 27% of whom were women, 23% were under 45 years old, with only 17% aged over 65. Only 4% of local councils were run on party-political lines.

Local councils are self-financing bodies. They raise money in order to provide and support community services and projects. Their main income comes from the precept, a tax levied on local taxpayers in each parish. The level of precept depends on whether the council is tiny or big, active or comatose; and ranges from less than £500 to over £1,000,000.[3]

The 1992 *Parish and Town Councils in England* report established the services on which councils spent money in 1989/90: around half of the budget (47–56%) was spent on churchyards and burial facilities, signs and noticeboards, seats and shelters, outdoor recreation, open spaces, greens and commons, and village or community halls. Up to a third of the budget (28–33%) went on lighting, litter, war memorials, information services, local newsletters, competitions, and footpaths. The remainder (19–23%) went on community surveys, allotments, and roadside verges.

Has the scope and significance of local council activity changed over the last quarter of a century? Are councils really taking on more diverse services, such as libraries and youth services, as a consequence of the severe constraints on principal authorities? The estimated income of all local councils in 1989/90 was £123.2 million or 0.28% of all local government income; the average precept of local councils was £9,350, and the average council tax bill per charge-payer was £5.20 in 1990/01. In 2014/15 the government indicated that there were 8,813 local councils in England, raising a total precept of £388.8 million, with the average band D household paying £52.37.[4]

How do these statistics compare with today's figures?

In 2020 I was able to play a role in bringing together the Society of Local Council Clerks and the Local Governance Research Centre to undertake an update of the original audit. A lot of things have happened to UK society, government and policy since 1992 (coalition government, austerity, Brexit, and Covid, to name but a few) which may have impacted on local councils and what they do for their communities. One surprise — at least to me — has been the inability of stakeholders to put their money where their mouths are: the National Association of Local Councils, the Local Government Association and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (and predecessors) have all said, at different times, how useful an audit would be … only to turn out their pockets and plead poverty. An electronic survey was undertaken in 2021.[5]

And so, to the 2021 findings. Compared with the 4% of local councils that reported being run on party-political lines. in 1991, in 2021 parish and town councils were significantly more politicised, with 23% of all councils controlled by national parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats, and Plaid Cymru). And in terms of gender, overall, the representation of women councillors on local councils has stalled: male councillors now outnumber their female counterparts in 76% of local councils.

Just under half of local councils (45%) had councillors who were dual-hatted in 2021, serving also on either a district or a county authority. The overall number of councils with at least one councillor with a dual role has grown from the 34% recorded in 1991. And 11% of local councils had councillors with a triple representative role, holding office on local, district and county councils.

The post of clerk to the council is normally (and increasingly) occupied by a woman (74%); this compares with 1991, when 59% of clerks were women. Around 34% worked as full-time clerks, compared with 96% serving part time in 1991. The sector has become professionalised, with roughly a third of clerks holding an undergraduate (and a fifth postgraduate) degrees. Around 17% of councils had no training budget, and the profession lacks diversity: only 5% of clerks were aged 31–40, while most (39%) were 51–60 years old. This represents an imminent loss of retiring expertise. Shockingly, over half of local councils had experienced behavioural issues from councillors, such as bullying or disrespect towards other councillors or clerks, in the last four years.

On the positive side, 98% of councils had a dedicated webpage, with use also made of Twitter (27%), Instagram (13%), and YouTube (12%). On the other hand, only one in ten local councils live-streamed meetings. Disappointingly, 77% reported that the local press did not attend council meetings.

Local councils today manage the stewardship of extensive community assets, including land-holdings, buildings, and facilities. Approximately seven in ten local councils oversee the use of children's playgrounds (68%) and parks and open spaces (62%), while almost two-thirds manage recreation grounds and sports pitches (60%) and 52% oversee the use of allotments.

Some 31% of local councils have completed a community-based Neighbourhood or Place Plan. Of the two-thirds of local councils who had not completed a plan, a third (32%) were in the process of doing so. Over three-quarters of local councils (77%) worked or collaborated with other tiers of local government, i.e. district, county, or unitary authorities. Local council joint-working with housing associations, clinical commissioning groups, Local Enterprise Partnerships or central government departments was shown to be the exception rather than the rule.

Responses revealed the diverse financial experiences across local councils. Areas of expenditure identified varied from public clock maintenance, pest control and beach-cleaning through to support for a police community support officer and provision of community cafés and libraries, onto to grass cutting, youth services, and delivery of a Covid recovery fund. However, broadly speaking, spending by local councils coalesced around four functional areas: the custodianship of local community assets; management of the public realm; support for communities; and the running costs of the authority itself.

So, what has been the value of such a survey? It demonstrates the value of investing in the improvement and development of local councils, and shows how they have developed over the last 30 years. It may also encourage more of these ultra-local councils to emulate others already active in delivering for communities. It has shone a light on aspects of localism that constitute a plank of government policy, especially focused on levelling up. Furthermore, it provides evidence of work that still needs to be done to improve the performance of the sector.

In a direct parallel to the American poet, Longfellow, who wrote (about a girl) 'when she was good, she was very, very good, but when she was bad she was horrid', the 2021 portrait is of a varied sector — from the very professional good, to the moribund and dire. The update provides evidence to learn from, and disseminate, plus good practice and exemplars of local council activity and actions, to raise the quality of the majority.

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Notes

1 See the National Association of Local Councils website, at www.nalc.gov.uk/?lang=_w
2 See 'Who we are'. Webpage. National Association of Local Councils. www.nalc.gov.uk/about/who-we-are
3 *Council Tax Levels Set by Local Authorities in England 2014–15 (Revised)*. Statistical Release. Department for Communities and Local Government, Jul. 2014. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335851/Council_Tax_Levels_set_by_Local_Authorities__Revised__August_2014.pdf
4 S Ellwood, S M Nutley, M Tricker and P Waterson: *Parish and Town Councils in England: A Survey*. Department of the Environment. HMSO, Dec. 1992
5 *Survey of Local Council Activity in 2021*. Local Government Research Centre and Society of Local Council Clerks. Local Governance Research Centre, 2022