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SHOULD THE WHOLE OF ENGLAND BE PARISHED?

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Abstract

This original research asks two interrelated questions. Should the whole of England be parished and does the creation of large unitary authorities diminish community engagement?

Secondary research, in the form of an extensive review of academic literature about unitary authorities, found that the existence of unitary authorities diminishes community engagement, and that the larger local government becomes, the greater the demise to local democracy.

Secondary and primary research demonstrated the benefits of parishing the whole of England. However, primary data (collected via an online questionnaire) did not support this claim.

The research did not support the hypothesis that the whole of England should be parished but supported the hypothesis that the creation of large unitary authorities diminishes community engagement, with evidence clearly showing that the larger local government becomes, the greater the demise to local democracy.

This research has highlighted gaps in evidence which will be important to the first tier of local government : the town and parish council sector. Although there is extensive supporting literature on the many benefits of a parished area there is very little academic research on unparished areas and consequently what real benefits the addition of a parish and town council could bring. It has also highlighted a need for further investigation into alternative forms of governance in urban areas. Peer reviewed evidence shows there is an urban-rural divide, with a need for Central Government to investigate how unitarisation is affecting local community engagement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

4

DECLARATION:

This dissertation is the product of my own work.

I agree that it may be made available for reference and photocopying at the discretion of the University.

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October 2023
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Contents

Glossary of Key Terms and Acronyms

DMU	De Montfort University
CGR	Community Governance Review
CiLCA	Certificate in Local Council Administration
CLG	Communities and Local Government
DLUHC	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
HOC	House of Commons
HOCL	House of Commons Library
JRF	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
LGPIHA	Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007
LGA	Local Government Act 1972
LGAs	Local Government Association
LGRA	Local Government and Rating Act 1997
MHCLG	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
NALC	National Association of Local Councils
SLCC	Society of Local Council Clerk
TLA	The Localism Act 2011

Chapter 1 : Introduction

1.   Introduction

This dissertation examines two questions, namely whether the whole of England should be parished and does the creation of large unitary authorities diminish community engagement. It will use primary and secondary research to address the aims and objectives outlined later in the chapter.

Secondary research, in the form of an extensive review of academic literature, found that that the whole of England should not be parished and the existence of large unitary authorities diminishes community engagement, evidencing the larger local government becomes, the greater the demise to local democracy.

The research will only focus on England due to fundamental differences in political structure between England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, making the research more focused on one level of governance, primarily England.

1.1   Author's interest in the Study

The author is Parish Clerk to three rural parish councils, working at the coalface and has witnessed the many benefits that parish councils can bring to their own communities. With the majority of urban England not having this first tier of local government, the author's interest is to ascertain whether they are in fact missing out on this level of local government. Jones, (2020:P.11) states, "parish councils are an essential feature of local democracy."

1.2   Explanation of Town/Parish Councils and Unparished Areas

Parish councils were created by the Local Government Act 1894[1](LGA). Their governance, shape and form were consolidated in the LGA 1972[2]. Jones (2020:P:89) cites, " their primary role as elected bodies is to represent the needs and concerns of the local community. They function as sounding boards for local opinion and are an expression of the most natural and fundamental political identities." (For the purposes of concision, both parish and town councils will be referred to simply as "parish councils").

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[1] The Local Government Act of 1894, also known as the Parish Councils Act, completed the reform of local government in England and Wales in the 1800's. This Act gave all women, despite their marital status, the right to vote and serve on parish, rural district, and urban district councils.
https://editions.covecollective.org/chronologies/local-government-act-1894

[2] An Act to make provision with respect to local government and the functions of local authorities in England and Wales; to amend Part II of the Transport Act 1968; to confer rights of appeal in respect of decisions relating to licences under the Home Counties (Music and Dancing) Licensing Act 1926; to make further provision with respect to magistrates' courts committees; to abolish certain inferior courts of record; and for connected purposes Legislation.gov.uk:2021)

Emeritus Professor Copus (2016:P.174) eloquently sums up this tier of local government positing, "it is safe to say if it was not for councillors our democracy would be far less rich, our political culture far less vibrant, our system of government far less reflective of the views of the local citizenry, our democracy far more centralised, the opportunities for involvement in politics far more limited and our local papers far more boring". Democracy recognised by Leach et al (1996:73) as "the local community is the well-spring of democracy and citizenship; it is out of politics that the legitimacy and viability of broader government systems grows. Local government, therefore, is an expression of the most natural and fundamental political identities."

Parish councils are the first tier of local government, at the time of research there were over 10,200 parish councils in England (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government:2021) (MHCLG). Parish councils vary enormously in size, activities, and circumstances, and are traditionally associated with rural areas and small towns (Bevan: 2003:9). For clarification, the Office for National Statistics define an urban area as, "the connected built-up areas identified by Ordnance Survey Mapping that has resident populations above 10,000 people. Whilst rural areas are those that are not urban i.e., consisting of populations less than 10,000 people or are open countryside. The Rural-Urban Classification is shown below, consisting of six rural and four urban settlements/context combinations" (Government National Statistics: 2021).
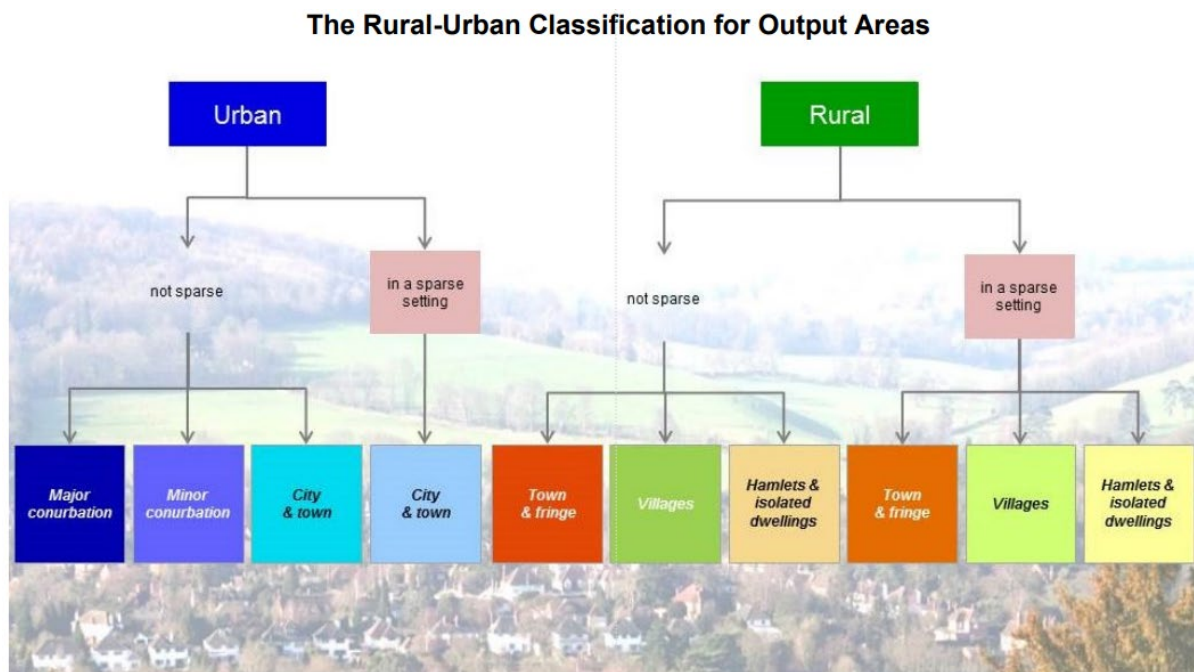

Figure 1: Office for National Statistics: 2021.:

In contrast, an unparished area is an area not covered by a civil parish[3]. Parish councils cover some 91% of the geography of England, but only 36% of the population. This is because, while most rural areas in England are 'entirely' parished – have a parish council, many urban areas do not and are therefore said to be 'unparished' (House of Commons Library:2022) (HOCL). Although, some towns and cities in rural districts have charter trustees maintaining an historic charter[4], such as city status (Bath being an example) or simply the mayoralty of a town[5] (Gov.UK: 2021).

1.3   Rationale

The rationale of this dissertation is to explore, in depth, a question that has not yet been researched, namely whether the whole of England should be parished and whether the creation of large unitary authorities diminishes community engagement? The study aims to address gaps in existing knowledge and literature aiming to establish whether a parish council would be beneficial in an unparished area.

Recently, we are seeing the creation of larger parish councils, in the form of unitary councils. For clarification, "unitarisation is a type of local government reorganisation that replaces county and district councils in 'two-tier' areas with a single tier of 'unitary authority" (Institute for Local Government: 2023). The Research will seek to ascertain why this is the case and whether the residents of these large unitary authorities are missing out on community governance at the local level. Community governance defined as, "community level management and decision-making that is undertaken by, with, or on behalf of a community, by a group of community stakeholders" (Totikidis, Armstrong & Francies: 2005:P.3).

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[3] In England, a civil parish is a territorial designation which is the lowest tier of local government below district and counties, or their combined form from the unitary authority. It is an administrative parish, in contrast to an ecclesiastical parish. (Definitions.net)

[4] In England and Wales, Charter Trustees are set up to maintain the continuity of a town charter or city charter with the status of a borough or city has been abolished, until such time as a parish council is established (Association of Charter Trust Towns, no date)

[5] The Office of Mayor was brought to this country by the Normans, having existed on the continent at least since the fifth century. The first English Mayor was the Mayor of London appointed in 1189 by Richard I. The first 'Mayor Town' was Thetford which established its Mayoralty in 1199. Winchester, Wallingford, Gloucester, and Exeter followed this. In the thirteenth century several Boroughs were granted Royal Charters that granted them the same privilege (Macclesfield Town Council, (2022)

1.4 Hypothesis

The research begins with two hypotheses, defined by Dayanand (2018) as, "a statement of the researcher's expectation or predication about relationship among study variables. The research process begins and ends with the hypothesis. It is core to ensure procedure and, therefore, is of the upmost importance." The hypothesis on which this research is based on is:-

Hypothesis

"The whole of England would benefit from being parished?"
and
"The creation of large unitary councils diminishes community engagement."

The author aims to either reject or support the above hypothesis by researching and presenting evidence to this effect.

1.5 Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of the research are:

- **To establish** whether having an extra layer of local government in the form of a parish council would be more democratic.

- **To establish** whether parish councils should perform in urban areas.

- **To investigate** whether the creation of large unitary councils affects community governance at local level.

- **To determine** whether the whole of England should be parished.

1.6 Author's Positionality

The author, a Parish Clerk since 2007, has taken every precaution to avoid or address any bias while conducting this research. The author's interest for this subject started 15 years ago when taking on the role of parish clerk and responsible financial officer. During an extensive career in the parish council sector, bearing witness, on a regular basis, as to how parish councils were able to shape and ameliorate the lives of the communities they were elected to serve, culminating in a passion for this tier of local government.

1.7 Summary

This chapter has introduced the dissertation question as to whether the whole of England be parished and whether the creation of large unitary authorities diminishes community engagement? The next chapter will use secondary research to analysis critically the extensive academic literature available on the subject.

Chapter 2 : Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Aveyard, Lecturer at Oxford Brookes University states a literature review demonstrates:
***"Comprehensive study and interpretation of literature that addresses a specific topic"* (Aveyard:2010)**

This literature review employs secondary research to examine available academic literature, journals, government reports and study documents to establish the current knowledge base surrounding the dissertation question of whether the whole of England should be parished.

The term 'parished' refers to the presence of a parish or town council in a given geographical area, described as the first tier of local government closest to the electorate in England, parish councils are democratically elected bodies, collectively, referred to as 'local councils. County, district, and unitary authorities, by contrast, are referred to, in legislation, as 'principal authorities.'

This chapter will review the reorganisation of local government at parish level. Reorganisation defined by Copus (2023), as, "central government seeking opportunities to restructure local government by making reorganisation a condition of devolution. Policies towards devolution have so far been focused on an economic growth agenda (see, Wall and Vilela Beesa: 2016) but have resulted in the creation of larger structural units: combined authorities. It is likely that any devolution offered to local government will, in some way, be linked to reorganisation."

This reorganisation has subsequently seen the creation of larger units of local government through the amalgamation of district councils and county councils into single unitary authorities. Thus, creating a two-tier system of unitary authorities and larger parish councils, often having greater remit than parish councils in non-unitary areas. A key tenet of this dissertation is to question in what ways the changes affect community representation at local level. Little (2002:9) explains how the value of community can be traced as far back as Aristotle's[6] writings of 322BC, "the intellectual heritage of the key principles of community can clearly be traced back to Aristotelian thinking on the nature of good polity (a form or process of civil government or constitution). Thus, many of the virtues of community are based upon classical visions of the values that characterised the public sphere." Further, this chapter considers if reorganisation of local government is, for the greater good or if it hampers local democracy? It interrogates whether the increases in local government units on a geographical scale are having a detrimental effect on community representation and engagement at parish level.

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[6] Aristotle (384BC – 322) was an ancient Greek philosopher and scientist, one of the greatest intellectual figures of Western History (Britannica: 2023)

Community governance review's (GCR's) will also be researched to investigate whether this bureaucratic process is suppressing the creation of more parish councils, which in turn is leading to a constriction of the voice of the community? For definition, "CGR's provide the opportunity for principal councils to review and make changes to community governance within their areas. The Government has made clear in its 2006 White Paper and in the 2007 Act its commitment to parish councils. It recognises the role such councils can play in terms of community empowerment at the local level. The 2007 Act provisions intended to improve the development and coordination of support for citizens and community groups, so that they can make the best use of empowerment opportunities" (Communities and Local Government: 2010).

2.2   The difference between a parish and unparished area

Established by the Parish Councils Act 1894, elected parish councils cover some 91% of the geographical area of England. This Act removed all non-ecclesiastical (not relating to the Christian church) functions from church parish councils and passed them to newly established elected bodies, which became known as 'parish councils' (HOCL: 2015). This is the case as while most rural areas in England are entirely 'parished' many urban areas are not. Those that are not thus unparished (HOCL:2022).

Although there is no longer any connection between parish councils and the church, "attention has been drawn to confusion between the church, parochial church councils and local councils" (Coulson:1998). History shows, parish councils date back much further than the 1894 Act. The 1811 census noted "over 15,000 parishes, townships and similar division" (Fletcher:2013:521), with Professor Jones (2020) noting their existence as far back as the 15th century. Functions, powers, and boundaries have significantly changed over the centuries, but their existence and longevity are clear. "Parish Councils are an inherent part of England, not just English local government." (Jones, A :2020)

The next paragraphs will explain the geographical coverage of parished and unparished areas.

With reference to the previous section, not all of England was parished at that time. Jones (2002) cites this could be linked to lack of parish councils in urban areas, yet that is to misrepresent some of their spread. If you examine an ordnance survey map, you will see that all rural England is technically 'parished.' The geographical coverage of parished and unparished areas is explained in the next paragraphs.

The present reality of local government today is that there are a lot of gaps between parished and unparished areas. In a paper produced by the Commons the following reasons are given:

- The area may have had a county borough council or an urban district council before the reorganisation of 1974[7], and no successor council established.
- Most of the surrounding county area will be parished, but a small number of gaps exist.
- In many smaller urban council areas, no councils have been created under the relevant principal council.
- Parish councils have existed in the past but have been abolished in wider reforms.
- A parish council has existed but has been abolished, leaving the area unparished (HOCL:2022).

Although there are over 10,000 parish councils in England, according to the HOCL, they are largely absent in large cities and urban areas. There is a desperate need to change the perception that parish councils only exist in rural areas and the urban areas could be in danger of being overlooked. Their geographical coverage varies greatly. In rural counties, all or most of the area may be served by parish councils. In large cities and urban areas, they are largely absent (HOCL: 2020). Why is this the case?

Commentators have highlighted that the full potential of local councils has not yet been realised due to their absence in most urban areas (Coulson:1998). This belies the potential contribution local councils can make in terms of enhancing both local democracy and delivery of services in their areas, particularly in the context of regeneration (Bevan:2003). The idea of developing local councils in urban areas is certainly not new (see Young:1970) but is perhaps higher up the agenda given the current policy of reorganisation. Characteristics of new local councils established by residents include that they represent an opportunity for residents to initiate and lead the development of their form of representation in their area, independent of any other government structure (Bevan:2003).

The next section will investigate the benefits for and against the presence of parish councils.

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[7] A reference to the Local Government Act 1972, which saw significant reorganisation follow in 1974.

2.3 Benefits for and against a parish council

The policy initiatives "Modernising Local Government and Neighbourhood Management" is encouraging residents to have a voice in their community and shape the areas and services they require. This is done by joining up local services and making them more focused on local needs (Burgess *et al:* 2001). Parish councils giving community empowerment at the local level. Academic Mark Bevan cites that, "emphasis has been placed on grassroots development and community self-help in meeting the central government agenda of reinvigorating local democracy[8] and civil renewal"[9] (Joseph Rowntree Foundation:2013[10]). "The overall aim of these policies concerned with the need for local communities to identify problems in their areas, by collaborating with other stakeholders and government agencies" (Burgess *et al*: 2001).

The Localism Act 2011 (TLA)[11], aims to devolve more decision-making powers to communities, allows parish councils to formulate Neighbourhood Development Plans and Orders[12], allowing residents to petition for a new parish council to be created. However, is the current process is hampering their creation? (HOCL: 2018).

Another form of community self-help is the development of resident-led new parish councils. Since the Local Government and Rating Act 1997 (LGRA), the Act's aim to confer additional powers on parish councils. Residents who live in any area that is not already wholly or partly parished may petition for a parish council to be created JRF:2013).

There is evidence of an urban rural divide between parished and unparished areas. Analysis by the University of Cambridge suggests, "political division is 'opening up' across the country with an increasing level of disenchantment and mistrust in democracy, which arises from lower level in urban centres, but goes up through suburbs, towns and villages and is at its highest in the open country. But research found that people in more rural areas of the UK have the lowest level of trust in their national's current political system, they are significantly more likely than their urban area counterparts to vote in elections" (Independent:2021). Rural areas, therefore, having more engagement with their local level of governance.

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[8] local democracy refers to the decentralisation of power and responsibility to democratic institutions at village, municipal, city, town, district, county, and equivalent local levels—typically, but not exclusively, through elected mayors, councillors, and other local officials (International Idea:2015)

[9] Civil Society (i.e., a space or body which represents the local community) has long been celebrated as an important arena for creating a more democratic and vibrant society (Leeds University Business School:2017).

[10] The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is a charity working to support and speed up the transition to a more equitable and just future, free from poverty, in which people, and the planet can flourish (JRF:2013).

[11] Act to make provision about the functions and procedures of local and certain other authorities; to make provision about the functions of the Commission for Local Administration in England; to enable the recovery of financial sanctions imposed by the Court of Justice of the European Union on the United Kingdom from local and public authorities; to make provision about local government finance; to make provision about town and country planning, the Community Infrastructure Levy and the authorisation of nationally significant infrastructure projects; to make provision about social and other housing; to make provision about regeneration in London; and for connected purposes (Legislation.Gov.UK:2011).

[12] A document that sets out planning policies for the neighbourhood area written by the local community. A powerful planning tool ensuring the community gets the right types of development in the right areas (Neighbourhood Planning:2023)

With the Act to allow for the formation of parish councils, is the current process hampering their creation? The process is set out in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 (LGPIHA) and in the DCLG 'Guidance on CGR's', published in 2010 (DCLG: 2012).

The DCLG feel there are several problems for residents petitioning for a new parish council, namely: -

- It is demanding for campaigners – they must obtain 10% of the electorate to trigger a CGR.
- A good working understanding of the local authority's procedure may be required.
- The process does not allow designated neighbourhood forums for neighbourhood planning a distinct role in the process of creating a new parish council.
- The 2007 legislation removed the requirement for the consent of the Secretary of State to create new parish and town councils. The government believing these should remain local decisions (DCLG: 2012).

The bureaucratic process of holding a local referendum, combined with the lengthy CGR process is stopping the creation of more parish councils, thus halting the voice of the community. A report by (Onward: 2021[13]), suggests "we should let the people decide. The government should hold an automatic ballot in every local area currently without a parish council. This would address democratic deficit in nearly two thirds (63%) of the population of England where the most immediate form of governance is at district or unitary level. Such a ballot should be held alongside the next cycle of local elections, eliminating costs, replacing the bureaucratic process of holding a local referendum[14] and lengthy CGR's"[15] (UK Onward.com: 2021).

Onward goes on to say that in some cases this process, used by local government, frustrates community self-determination. Griggs, Head of Policy, and Communication at The National Association of Local Councils (NALC), agrees, writing in The Guardian that, "removing responsibility from district or borough councils for the creation of a local council, can help eliminate an obstacle. Reducing costs and time incurred by the principal authority, ensures there is no unnecessary blocking (Guardian: 2012). "The government is currently in the process of holding a review of neighbourhood governance in England which could make it easier to set up a parish council under new plans revealed in the Levelling Up White Paper. The review specifically looking at the role and functions of parish councils and how to make them quicker and easier to establish" (Local Government Chronicle: 2022).

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[13] Onward is a modernizing think tank whose mission it is to develop bold and practical ideas to boost economic opportunity and strengthen communities in all parts of the UK (UKonward.com)

[14] Local Government Act 1972, Part 3, Sch12, Para 18

[15] A Community Governance Review is a legal process where the council will consult with those living in the area, and other interested parties, on the most suitable ways of representing the people in the parish identified in the review (Dorset Council)

There is also the added challenge of negative responses to the introduction of new parish councils. A civic leader in Manchester described the desire to set up a new parish council as, "they would be more like the bungling parish council in the Vicar of Dibley[16] than a truly representative body that can be taken seriously" (Manchester Evening News:2007).

Then the sector had the nationally reported debacle of the Handforth Parish Council meeting, at which councillors bickered between themselves and harried the stand-in clerk, resulting in parish councillors being seen as farcical and did much to damage the reputations of both parish councils and the clerking profession. Sir David Aronovitch, British writer, broadcaster, and newspaper columnist wrote an article in The Times entitled, "The Jackie Weaver effect won't last for ever," citing that "traditional politics is dysfunctional and lacks processes that have the trust of electors, threatening the future of democracy itself" (Citizens Conventions on UK Democracy: 2021). Such negative incidents have done little to promote professionalism in the sector and done much to detract from the compelling case to make the whole of England parished.

The next section investigates why unitary councils are being reorganised and thus creating parish councils.

2.4   Why is Local Government being reorganised into unitary councils?

A report commissioned by Price Waterhouse Cooper estimated that the merger of unitary authorities on county boundaries in all two-tier areas in England would save £2.9billion over a five-year period (HOCL: 2020). 2019 saw the first elections held after a merger, these first mergers were of the district councils of West Somerset and Taunton; East Suffolk; and West Suffolk; and two new unitary authorities - Dorset, and Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole (HOCL: 2019).

In 2020 there were rumours that the Devolution White Paper would bring with it plans for structural reorganisation of England's local government. However, parish councils are already in existence in many areas of England. An additional tier of local government, which does not seem to be at the forefront of Whitehall's mind. The two-tier system terminology used by Whitehall therefore suggests that parish councils are almost invisible to some legislators and bureaucrats.

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[16] The Vicar of Dibley is a British sitcom that ran on BBC about a small fictional village in Oxfordshire (The BBC, 2022)

Over the past thirty years, there have been sporadic moves to reorganise local government in various parts of the country – mainly creating unitary councils in places which were previously two-tier (Centre for Governance and Scrutiny: 2020). "The reorganisation of local government in England has been a long-standing objective of the centre – among civil servants and both main political parties. It appears, however, that since the major reorganisation of local government in 1974 (1972 LGA), the centre has shielded away from another whole-scale reorganisation, preferring to introduce unitary councils by mergers and with a clear preference for county-based unitary councils (Local Government Association: 2023) (LGAs).

In England, there are 128 unitary local authorities, covering 59% of the population (Institute for Government: 2022). Pink on the map is in the process of becoming unitary, green is a two-tier area, and blue is a single-tier area.
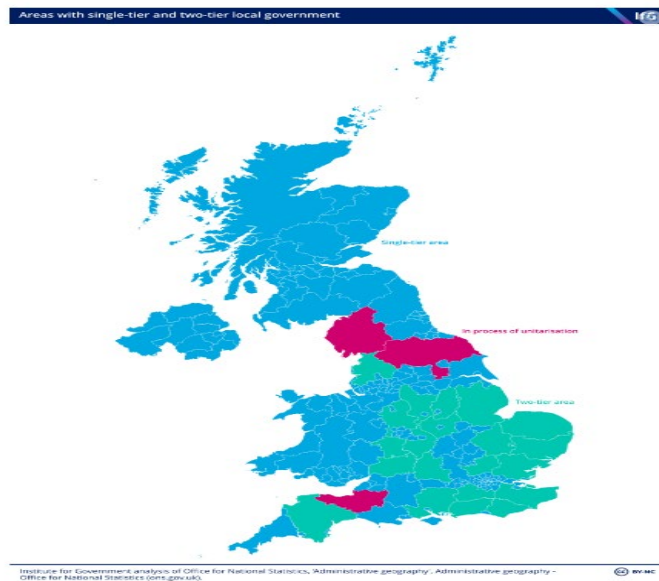
Figure 2. Map showing single-tier and two-tier areas in the UK.

Copus (2020) cites that, "unitarisation found little justification in the evidence collected by the commissions, nor did it attract significant levels of public support. In only nine of the 39 shire counties concerned were unitarisation recommended and in only five were they introduced by the Government. In 2005 the Labour Government requested bids from shire county areas to propose a unitary system of government in 2005, which led to two judicial reviews. Nine new unitary councils were established including two sub-county unitaries in both Cheshire and Bedfordshire." (Copus, C: 2020). The next section will examine how unitary restructuring is affecting local communities.

2.5   How are unitary councils affecting local communities?

Many new parish councils have been created following the move to unitary councils. At the time of research, Taunton Town Council is the newest of these. Following the CGR some of the comments in favour were:

> - Local matters should be covered by those they directly affect, not by a remote organisation.
> - Local communities will have clear local government arrangements and representatives who are focused on addressing their needs.
> - With a unitary council it is vital that Taunton has its own voice and the community enabled to make decisions for the town.
> - Taunton needs to be represented at local level (Somerset West and Taunton: 2019).

Salisbury city area was parished in 2009 as part of the unitary process when Wiltshire Council was created. The public was less enthusiastic about losing their district council and the argument is continuing today as to whether South Wiltshire should go back to having a district council. When Salisbury councillors stood for election voters were promised cleaner streets and enhanced services, but these would come at a higher price. "Twelve months after the election, the average band D precept has gone up by 69% to £208. Sailsbury now raising just over £3m per year from council tax compared with £1.7m in 2017/18. Council Leader Matthew Dean is proud of what he sees as a major devolution, nine years after the reorganisation saw Salisbury lose its district council powers with most services passed to Wiltshire. The drive for change may well be financial, with higher tier authorities capped and prioritising statutory services. But Dean, who also sits on Wiltshire Council says it makes sense for Salisbury to take charge of devolved services" (LocalGov: 2018).

New parish councils in urban areas might be distinct in character from most existing parish councils. For instance, they cover comparatively large populations and therefore manage larger budgets. This in turn may mean they deliver a broader range of services than small parish councils (HOCL: 2022). In April 2019, Dorset created two new unitaries, one covering the urban areas of Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole, and the other the remainder of the county. The unitaries saved money, but this argument is not sustained by evidence. The experience of creating two new parish councils in Dorset provides the freshest insight into the permutations and potential pitfalls of large-scale restructuring at a time of acute financial uncertainty and political unpredictability. So, was the reason for financial benefit? (Local Government Chronicle: 2019).

Leach and Copus, Emeritus Professors at De Montfort University believe so, "the primary justification for the 'bigger is better' perspective being that large unitary authorities save money, once the substantial and typically underestimated transitional costs have been borne – a familiar 'economics of scale' argument. But that position is not sustained based on a comprehensive review of Europe-wide evidence" (LSE: 2021).

"The Rationale for replacing existing councils with a single unitary council is founded on two assumptions, which are erroneous. Namely, that 'bigger is better' for local government, and that unitary authorities are better than a two-tier system of district and county councils. The evidence shows that the larger local government becomes, the greater the damage to local democracy" (LSE: 2021). "This is on a range of indicators of democratic viability, including trust in councillors and council officials, public engagement and participation, community identity and cohesion and voter turnout. In almost fifty years of independent academic research neither of these assumptions are supported consistently and conclusively, and both have unacceptable consequences for the health of local democracy" (LSE:2021).

"Surprisingly, the last major evidence-based structural review was conducted in the mid-1990's by the Banham and Cooksey Commissions. Their principal conclusion was, with a limited number of exceptions, the two-tier system was not broken so did not need fixing" (LSE:2021).

The LGAs agrees that the drive towards unitary authorities is motivated by a belief that this will save money. "However, it is also an increasing motivation for redesigning local delivery of services in a way that empowers parish councils. Over the last decade, and as part of their approach to delivering with reducing resources, many principal councils have sought to delegate or devolve assets and services to parish councils. At best, this is highly empowering, enabling communities to exercise fine control of factors that affect the wellbeing and appearance of their places" (LGAs: 2021).

"Although parish councils were created due to a change to large unitary councils, the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) prefers new parishes to reflect the identity of a community at the village or neighbourhood level, as opposed to the larger scale of a small town, contradicting the creation of a large-scale parish councils following unitarisation" (Hertfordshire Association of Local Councils: 2022).

"Whilst there have been more parish councils created due to a change to large unitary councils, preference for unitary authorities is often based on the presumption that large unitary local government is more efficient, effective, and cost-effective than smaller units of local government. But evidence has proved there is no consistent nor guaranteed benefit to the creation of large unitary councils" (Copus, et al:2020).

2.6 Summary

This broad literature review has revealed: -.

- Parish councils were established by the Parish Councils Act 1894 to remove non-ecclesiastical functions from church parish councils. However, although there is now no connection to the church, there is still confusion between the church, parochial church councils and parish councils.

- Parish councils cover 91% of the geographical area of England but only 36% of the population. Evidence showing the bureaucratic process of GCR's is stopping the creation of more parish councils, and the negative image portrayed via the media does little to promote the professionalism in our sector.

- There are many gaps between parished, and unparished areas, with most urban areas remaining unparished. Evidence showing (Bevan: 2003), "a desperate need to change the conceived perception that parish councils can only exist in rural areas".

- With the introduction of the Localism Act, Government policy has focused on encouraging residents to have a voice in their community, aimed at allowing more devolved decision making to local communities via the introduction of newly established parish councils.

- Parish councils have been portrayed negatively in the media, with this negative image doing little to promote the professionalism in our sector.

- Local government is being reorganised with the creation of larger units of government in the form of unitary councils. Research has found that the primary aim for this reorganisation is that 'bigger is better.' But evidence has shown this assumption is not supported consistently in academic research. "Evidencing the larger local government becomes the greater the damage to local democracy" (LSE:2021).

The research found in the literature review has provided the basis for my SWOT analysis found in Appendix 1.

The next chapter will present and explain the research methodology chosen for this research.

Chapter 3 : Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The research methods for this paper included: a literature review, a questionnaire sent to all principal authorities and interviews with parish councillors.

3.2 Research Methods

3.2.1 Literature Review

Denscombe (2017) writes that, "the literature review established the current knowledge base surrounding the matter of research". The literature review in Chapter 4 used secondary research examining available academic literature, journals, government reports and study documents to establish the current knowledge base surrounding the matter of whether the whole of England should be parished and does the creation of large unitary authorities diminish community engagement? The research found in the literature review provided the basis for my SWOT analysis and subsequently the primary research questionnaire.

A specific search strategy was devised for Google Scholar, a free academic search engine to find peer reviewed papers, books and articles relating to local government in England.

Following this, searches were conducted using Google, De Montfort University online library and published books. Sources were individually screened before being considered for the literature review. Amongst the relevant sources used were: 29 government websites, 25 other websites, 13 published books and 25 peer reviewed journal articles.

Sources identified through Google Scholar (n=165,000)	Sources identified through Websites (n=54)	Sources identified through Published books (n=13)	Sources identified through journal articles (n=25)

Sources identified after duplicates removed (n=115,092)

Sources identified after inclusion and exclusion criteria applied (n=92)

Sources used in literature review (n=22)

PRISMA diagram

3.2.2 Structured Questionnaire

A questionnaire was conducted using the online Google Forms platform, chosen as it is a free survey site producing accurate and secure data with a user-friendly interface and easy sharing function. (Isaac and Michael:1997) define questionnaire research as being used to "answer questions that have been raised, to solve problems that have been posed or observed to access needs and set goals, to determine whether or not specific objectives have been met." The survey was distributed to 317 members of principal authorities via email. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and opened-ended questions allowing for both qualitative and quantitative data to be captured. Thus, enabling participants to express their opinions whilst also collecting data which could be statistically analysed. The survey comprised of 25 questions, 8 being quantitative and 17 being qualitative. The survey was piloted by a small sample of my cohort and a full copy of the questionnaire can be found at Appendix 2.

Primary research is defined as, "the generation of new data to address a specific research question, using either direct methods such as interviews, or indirect methods such as observation. Data is collected specifically for the study at hand and has not previously been interpreted by a source other than the researcher" (Hewson:2017).

Primary research has been categorised into 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' approaches. These approaches seen as forming two distinctive clusters of 'research strategy' where research strategy refers to a "general orientation to the conduct of social research" (Bryman: 2001:20).

Denscombe (2017:6) quotes, "the terms 'qualitative research' and 'quantitative research' are widely used and commonly understood within social research communities and have come to represent contrasting alternatives that signify distinct approaches to research." These can be broadly summarised as follows:-

- Quantitative research uses numbers as the unit of analysis.
- Qualitative research uses words or visual images as the unit of analysis.

3.2.3 Interviews

The interviews of nine parish councillors were conducted via telephone to provide an insight into how different parish councillor's opinions. The data was transcribed and analysed to identify key repeating themes and ideas. Participants were initially contacted via email and invited to partake in a voluntary interview. All ethical considerations (outlined below) were adhered to. A series of eight questions were formulated relating to the aims and objectives of the research.

Using this methodology, individual opinions could be better canvassed, and this information helped to reach a range of conclusions in respect of the research question. The results were anonymised to protect participant confidentiality and reduce the performer bias.

3.3   Ethics

"Research ethics are a set of written and unwritten rules, which govern our expectations along with other behaviour. These rules help steer us as to how we behave and expect others to behave" (Denscombe:2017:P.339). Ethics were adhered to throughout the questionnaire and telephone interviews, and to abide by these ethics, the author completed De Montfort University Faculty of Business and Law stages 1 and 2 forms together with gaining consent from participants and the research was assessed as low risk. Denscombe, (2017:P.339), describes, the importance of ethics, in the context that, "social researchers are expected to approach their task in an ethical manner. On moral grounds, this expectation stems from the belief that the public should be protected from researchers who might be tempted to use any means available to advance the state of the knowledge on a given topic."

"Integrity, ethics, morality, and honour are closely related concepts, but they are not the same. Integrity is the adherence to standards of ethics while honour is demonstrable integrity and honesty" (Drucker:2008).

3.4   Limitations

A questionnaire was used to collect data from every principal authority in England, however, just over 12% responded, so the results could be considered illustrative rather than necessarily representative. Data can be collected remotely without the involvement of the interviewer. Despite this, recruiting participants for the questionnaire was challenging, as it was necessary to trawl the internet in search of email addresses, some of which were redundant or outdated.

If the survey had been face-to-face, the response rate could have been higher as emails are easier to miss or ignore. When conducting an online survey, it is difficult to ensure all the participants interpret the questions in the same manner.

The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis via arranged telephone calls. This process had its own limitations as it was difficult to arrange convenient times that fit with both the participants and my own schedule.

This chapter has identified the research methods used to determine whether the whole of England should be parished. The next chapter presents the results of my primary research.

Chapter 4 : Results of Primary Research

4.1 Survey Results

317 principal authorities were surveyed from data held on Homes England government website. 40 responses were received, equating to a 12% response rate which is considered low, as a smaller sample size fails to accurately represent the entire target audience.

Denscombe (2017:P.23), cites, "response rates are important because if a survey has a low response rate, then its findings will miss data from those who have chosen not to respond. At one level this will be disappointing for the survey researcher since fewer responses means less data. However, it is not simply the sheer amount of potential data that is lost which worries researchers; it is the fear that a (low) response rate can lead to non-response bias. This bias occurring when there is a pattern to the responses in which it becomes clear that those who have not completed the survey tend to be different from those who have." "For bias, the assumption underlining the relationship between response rate and data quality is that the higher the response rate, the greater the likelihood the sample will represent the population and thereby accurately reflect results that would have been derived from the entire population Graves et al (2009).

Of the 40 respondees, their position within the principal authority were: -

9	Chief Executive
7	Leader of the Council
10	Councillor/Member
8	Democratic Services Officer/Monitoring Officer
3	Deputy Leader
1	Director of People
1	Head of Strategy and
1	Healthy Communications Manager

Figure 3: Do you have a town or parish council in your Principal Authority?

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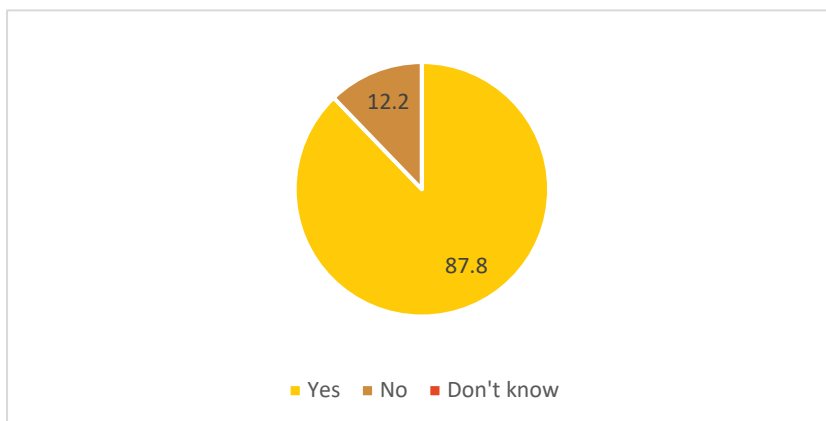
[17] All graphs and images are the authors unless otherwise stated.

Figure 4: Does having different layers of local government lead to greater democracy?
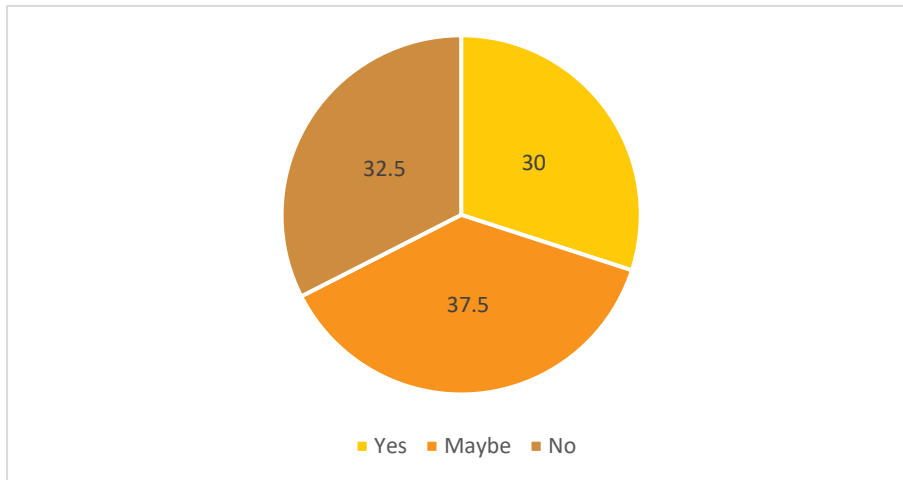
When asked to expand further on the reasons why:

	Responses
1	"I think you need an upper tier to have the skills to run the bigger services like education, highways and planning."
2	"Engage more people in local matters."
3	"Officers at principal authorities do not understand how parish councils work."
4	"Parish councils don't solve problems."
5	"District councillors are more in touch with their communities than the cabal of self-appointed people on the parish council."

What are the advantages of having a parish council in your area?

	Responses
1	"Better community engagement."
2	A custodian for public assets with a statutory funding stream."
3	"Local people taking ownership of their communities."
4	"None that I am aware of."
5	"Greater representation of local issues."
6.	"Local democracy and services at a local level."

Please briefly describe any disadvantages to a community in having a town or parish council

	Responses
1	"Cost on top of council tax in the form of a precept."
2	"Double taxation."
3	"Parochial layers of extra government."
4	"Additional council tax burden."
5	"Parish councilors are too big for their boots."
6.	"Slowing down of key decisions affecting the community."
7.	Confusion as to which authority has responsibility for which topic."
8.	"Higher council tax."
9.	"Dependent on how engaged the parish council."
10.	"Lack of professional CiLCA[18] qualified clerks."

Figure 5: Overall, how would you describe the relationship between principal authorities and parish councils?
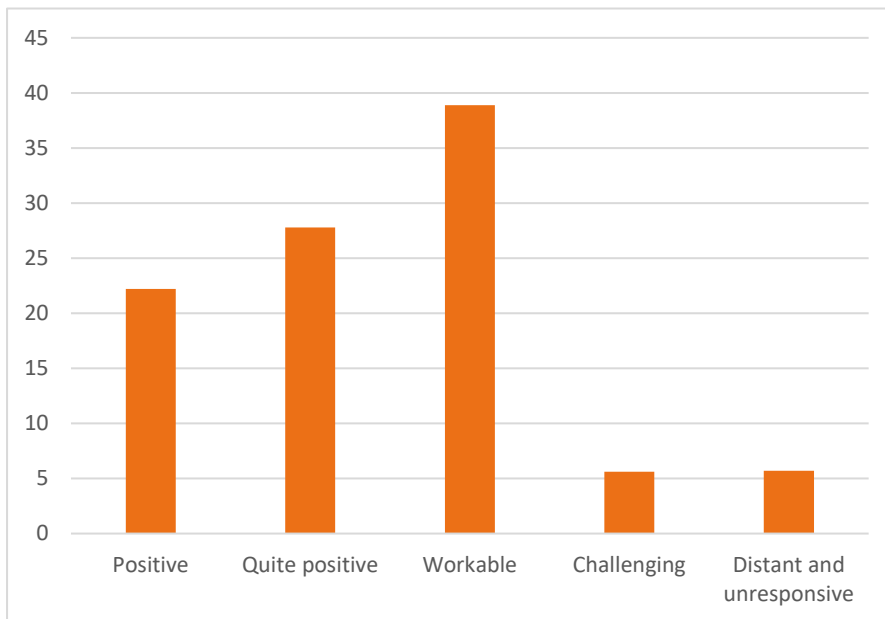
When asked to expand on reasons for a negative response:

	Responses
1	"Misunderstanding of each by the other regarding powers, capacity and priority."
2	"Parish councils create an additional tier of decision making."
3	"Too small, too parochial and too little power."
4	"Principal authorities do not appear to be interested in parish councils."
5	"A lack of understanding from both parties."

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[18] Certificate in Council Administration (CiLCA) is an entrance level qualification which tests whether you have a broad knowledge of all aspects of a Clerk's work roles and responsibilities, the law, procedures, finance, planning and community engagement (SLCC:2023)

Figure 6: Do you think large unitary councils give the same community representation at the local level as town and parish councils.
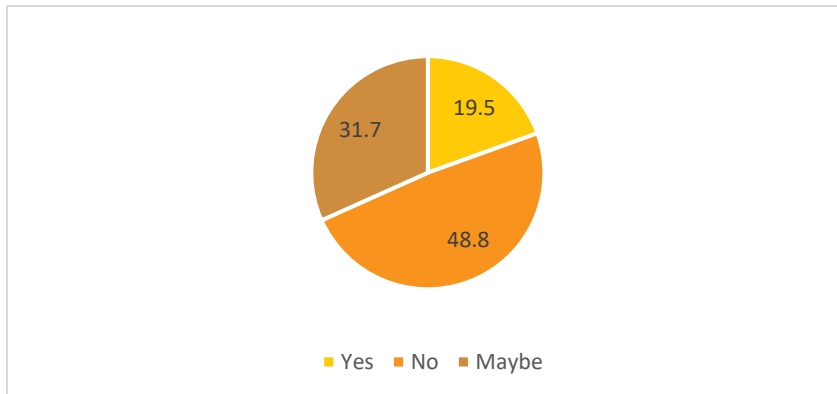
When asked to expand further on this response.

	Responses
1	"Other community and voluntary sector initiatives are more effective at serving local needs than unitary councils."
2	"There is a lack of community cohesion as tiers progress."
3	"Think it allows for one council to be in complete control."
4	"As a cost cutting exercise."
5	"Local people make better decisions, with better value for money. Little is beautiful."

Why do you think large unitary councils were created?

	Responses
1	"As a cost cutting exercise."
2	"Financial scale."
3	"To save money."
4	"Thinking they are economies of scale."
5	"Better value and able to deliver larger services."
6.	"To simplify local decisions making providing one point of contact for residents when accessing services."

Figure 7: Parish councils are predominantly in rural areas. Do you think a parish council could enhance community engagement in urban areas?
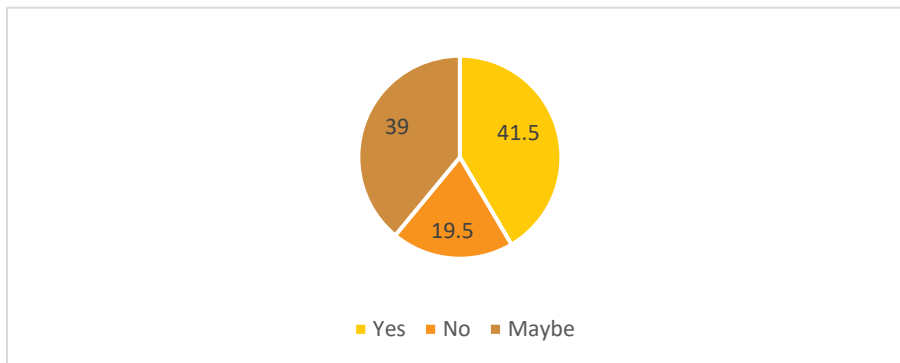
Why do you feel urban areas have fewer parish councils?

	Responses
1	"Because they are not necessary."
2	"Because they are not historical."
3	"I think it's an historical, legacy situation where urban areas have not had a previous structure to utilise and therefore have designed their offer without help."
4	"History – it's that simple."
5	"Cost of setting up and maintaining an additional layer of local government."

Are there barriers to setting up a new parish council and if so, what do you feel they are.

	Responses
1	"Extra costs to residents when cost of living is already high."
2	"Cost of availability of suitably competent people to serve."
3	"Enthusiasm, lack of demand or people advocating for it."
4	"They are a terrible idea."
5	"Community Governance Reviews are time consuming and bureaucratic."
6.	"Don't see any barriers."
7.	"Reluctance by political leaders to give up power to other bodies."

Are there any key points you feel are relevant as to whether the whole of England should be parished.

	Responses
1	"Parishes are a pretty alien concept in most modern cities and do not reflect modern neighbourhoods."
2	"Parish councils should be abolished everywhere."
3	"They are expensive parochial and inefficient."
4	"The community is not sold on parishes."
5	"The cost is an additional and unnecessary extra tier of government."
6.	"It brings an additional and unnecessary extra tier of government."
7.	"It brings democracy more local and accountable."
8.	"Sit as a member on all three tiers and there remains frustration at parish council level at the number of times they are ignored by principal authorities."

A full copy of all the survey results can be found in Appendix 4.

4.2   Interview results

Following the completion of the questionnaire by principal authorities, nine parish councillors were interviewed to gain a unique perspective. Parish councillors were carefully chosen as a cross section of the first tier of local government, including rural, urban, and unitary. Of the selection, one was dual hatted, serving as district councillor as well as a parish councillor and one interviewee, a triple hatter, served as a parish, district and county councillor, holding additionally the position of Leader of the District Council.

Figure 8: Should the whole of England be parished?
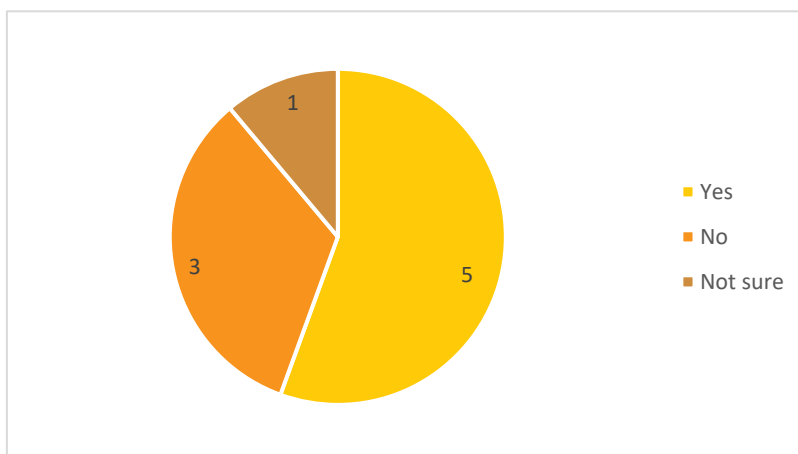
Do you feel an extra layer of local government in the form of a parish council could be more democratic?

It was a resounding 100% yes to this question.
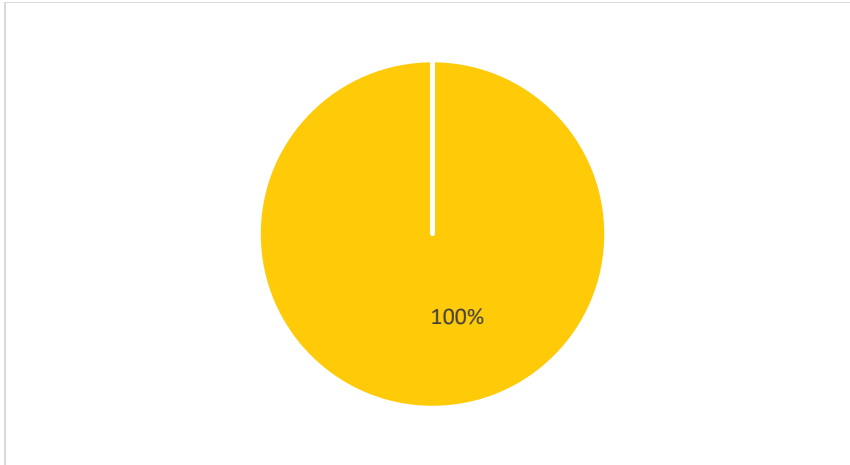
Figure 9: Do you feel there is an animosity between principal authorities and parish councils?
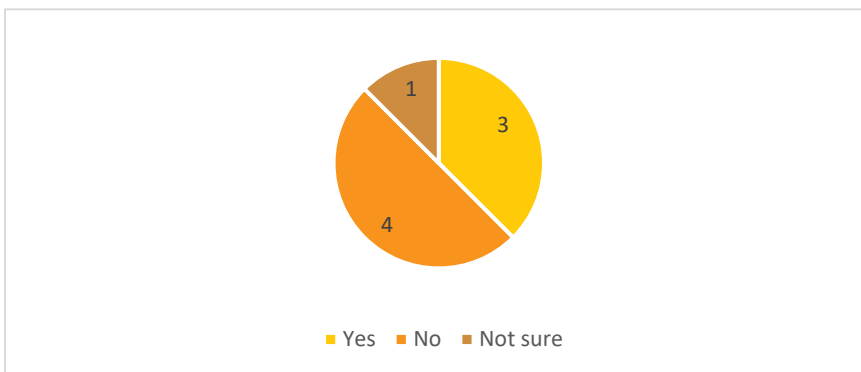
Figure 10: Do you feel parish councils could perform in urban areas?
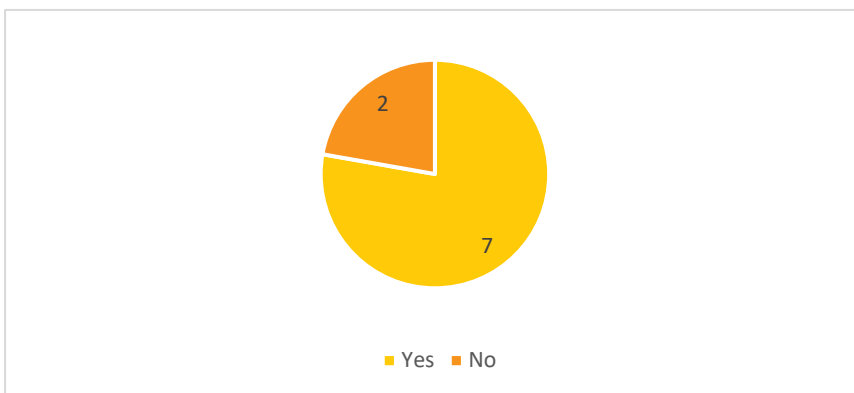
When asked to explain further on their response:

	Responses
1	"Provides a level of communication not presently there."
2	"From benefits seen in my own parish council, councillors are closer to decisions that affect residents."
3	"More local with more access to local issues but large towns and cities would need to be cut into smaller chunks to give the same community presentation at the local level."
4	"Urban areas should be no different to rural areas, people need to know what is happening and feel part of something."
5	"Towns would have their own dynamics but at present expects the whole district to contribute through tax, they could be made more self-efficient raising their own precept aimed at the people living in towns who would use the services."
6.	"Would be the enabler for community connection, covid being a prime example teaching us some important lessons about community."
7.	"Parish councils are the center of a community central to enabling greater socialisation and impact on people's health and social isolation."

A full copy of the interview responses can be found at Appendix 5

Chapter 5 : Analysis of Primary Research

5.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out and discusses the results of the primary research evidenced back to my aims and objectives outlined in chapter 1.

5.2 First Aim and Objective

The first aim and objective of the research was to establish whether having an extra layer of local government in the form of a parish council could be more democratic.

87.8% of participants surveyed indicated they had a parish council in their principal authority, not a surprising result as parish councils cover 91% of the geography of England. The results indicated confidence, that the respondees had a knowledge of how this tier of local government operated. When asked if this extra tier led to greater democracy, the quantitative result was difficult to draw conclusions from. 37.5% answered "maybe" which was the highest incidence, of all the questions asked, where a clear opinion could not be determined.

When asked to expand further, some responses were in favour of parish councils, however the overwhelming responses contradicted the above, indicating that upper tiers of local government have far better skills to run bigger services.

5.3 Second Aim and Objective

The second aim was to establish whether parish councils could perform in urban areas.

The survey asked whether the introduction of parish councils in urban areas could enhance community engagement, 41.5% said yes, 39% of respondent's opinions cannot be determined. However, 100% of parish councillors felt that parish councils could perform in urban areas citing a level of communication that is already in existence. Put simply, parish councillors are more local to the community they serve and therefore have experience and knowledge of local issues.

One of the key words reiterated in the responses was "historical." Respondents believing the reason urban areas are not parished at present is because parish councils were never formulated in the past. Further, respondents did not express a desire to change the status quo nor to take on the costs of maintaining an additional layer of government again in the form of a precept, double taxation being a strong indicator against.

5.4   Third Aim and Objective

The third aim was to investigate whether the creation of large unitary councils affect community governance at local level.

Most respondents believed large unitary councils could not give the same community representation at local level as parish councils, with 31.7% responding "maybe" and only 19.5% "yes." This was not a surprising result as a key theme identified in the question relating to the benefits of parish councils was their ability to work at a "local" level. This result collaborated in the literature review by Leach, Copus, LSE and the LGA, positing 'bigger is not better' for local government,' but that large authorities can be damaging to local democracy.

When asked why large unitary councils are formed, most respondees felt the creation of large unitary councils was primarily a cost cutting exercise to save money. However, some respondees felt unitary councils were better value for money. Again, this was also identified in the literature review. Although there were some responses in favour of unitary councils as being better value for residents with the ability to deliver larger services, thus simplifying the decision-making process, and providing one point of contact for residents when accessing services. This was evidenced by Price Waterhouse and Cooper(2020) in the literature review, but this finding was not substantiated by most responses.

5.5   Fourth Aim and Objective

The fourth aim was to determine whether the whole of England should be parished?

Overall responses were not in favour of parishing the whole of England. The key reasons cited were cost and double taxation, with some comments on the unsavoury images sadly portrayed in the media.

Another phrase, evidenced in both primary and secondary research was the use of the term "parochial," having two definitions, the first as relating to a church, further drawing attention to the confusion between parochial church councils and local parish councils. The second, "showing interest only in a narrow range of matters, especially those that only affect yourself, your town, or your country" (Cambridge Dictionary:2023). Both definitions derogatory to the parish council sector.

In both primary and secondary research, 66.7% of respondents found the relationship between principal authorities and parish councils "positive/quite positive." This question was particularly important in this research because there would need to be a positive relationship if the whole of England was to be parished.

The bureaucracy surrounding CGR's would also hinder the parishing of England. The survey responses found that the extra costs involved in creating another tier of local government was halting their creation as opposed to the CGR process. "Extra costs to residents when cost of living is already high.," coupled with, "enthusiasm, lack of demand or people advocating for it and "they are a terrible idea." Then the bureaucratic process involved in a GCR, "time consuming and undemocratic."

Chapter 6 : Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This chapter offers conclusions from both secondary and primary research. It aims to investigate and critically analyse whether the whole of England should be parished and whether the creation of large unitary councils is diminishing community engagement, by linking back to the aims and objections in Chapter 1, to either support or reject the hypothesis.

6.2 Conclusions

The research aimed to evaluate and analyse whether the whole of England should be parished? To either support or reject the hypothesis: -

Hypothesis

"The whole of England would benefit from being parished."
and
"Creation of large unitary councils diminishes community engagement."

The results of my research have tested the hypothesis and have found that: -

- Although much evidence found benefits to a first tier of local government with parish councils giving community empowerment at local level. The overall results showed no benefit to parishing the whole of England. It was evidenced that parish councils could work in urban areas and enhance local democracy, giving a first point of contact for residents and being a voice of the community. However, further education is needed to remove the problems associated with the historical aspect. Whitehall seems to overlook the first tier of local government; parish councils and the whole of England should not be parished. However, the interviewees stressed the importance parish councils make to their community.

- There is a need for Central Government to investigate how unitarisation is affecting local community engagement.

6.3   Recommendations

The research has been undertaken within the limited exploratory constraints of the dissertation, but several key recommendations have been raised and further investigation should be undertaken. Namely: -

- Parish councils are delivering vital services, giving communities empowerment and a voice at local level. But are residents aware of what the parish council does? They need to engage fully with their residents to highlight the valuable services they currently provide and ultimately what they could provide to help place-shape a community.

- Dependable peer reviewed evidence has shown there is an urban-rural divide and that further study into alternative forms of governance for urban areas should be undertaken. A significant research finding was that while people in rural parts of Europe have the lowest level of trust in their nation's current political system, they were more likely than urban counterparts to vote in elections. (Independent: 2021). In this way rural residents were seen to be imperative in maintaining democracy.

- Research has shown some animosity between principal authorities and parish councils. Central government should play a part in enabling principal authorities and parish councils to collaborate and work together for the greater goal of delivering quality services and representing the views of the local community.

- Further research should be conducted to establish the benefits of parishing the whole of the United Kingdom. Professor Jones from De Montfort University is currently in the process of writing a book on the dissertation question. This should provide more academic research. Although when the author asked Jones (2023) at The Society of Local Council Clerk's (SLCC) National Conference as to "whether the whole of England should be parished?". His response was, "No, it would not work for the whole of England. Citing Leicester City as an example, it does not have a clear identity and therefore would not succeed in community buy-in. There is a need for some form of community governance below the principal authority tier, but that does not necessarily have to be a parish council, ward meetings could be an alternative." Hopefully, other forms of community engagement are something Jones will cover in his current research project.

- Expanding the survey - the survey focused on feedback from only principal authorities. Expanding the survey to all tiers of local government would help the accuracy of the results.

- NALC should be lobbied to make it compulsory that all parish clerks are professionally qualified to at least CiLCA level or above. This would ensure the parish council sector has a professionally qualified clerk at the helm to steer the parish council. There is also a massive problem with the perception of how parish councils are perceived by the public. More recently exacerbated by the media coverage of the Handforth Parish Council meeting. NALC should also lobby to make training compulsory for councillors to allow this scenario not to happen again.

6.4   Reflection

- Qualitative and quantitative data were collected in the form of a survey. Results were transcribed and analysed. The collection of this data allowed participants to share specific recommendations and opinions. A survey was created and distributed to selected members of my cohort for feedback, resulting in excellent responses for amendment/improvement. Collecting data from principal authorities has enabled parish councils to be seen from a different viewpoint as the author has no experience of that tier of local government.

- The survey was only distributed to principal authorities, not parish councils which could have negatively skewed the data and provided biased results not in favour of parish councils. The sample size was 12% due to the low response rate and results could be biased as not representative of the whole electorate.

- The quantitative results gathered were also difficult to analyse, as there were no significant differences between the results collected in response to certain questions which means these results are likely due to chance and therefore cannot prove my hypothesis.

- A lot of research had to be undertaken using mainly government websites which, although not peer reviewed, were less likely to be biased. It was generally difficult to find a body of academic research on the benefits for parishing unparished areas.

Word Count 8,798

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Appendices

Appendix 1   Literature Review SWOT Analysis

Appendix 2   Survey – Should the Whole of England be Parished?

Appendix 3   Participant Information Sheets

Appendix 4   Questionnaire Responses

Appendix 5   Interview Responses

Appendix 1
Literature Review SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
- Parish councils are democratically elected as opposed to co-opted where the electorate has no voice (Woods et al, 2002). - Parish councils are an inherent part of England, not just English local government (Jones, A, 2020). - They are the closest tier of local government to the community (CLG, 2010). - Unitary authorities can deliver a broader range of services than small parish councils (House of Commons Library, 2022)	- Lack of parish councils in urban areas. Parish councils only cover 36% of the population with many large cities and urban areas unparished (HOCL, 2022). - Confusion between parish councils and parochial church councils (Coulson, 1998). - Full potential of parish councils has not been realised due to their absence in most urban areas (Coulson, 1998). - The current process of Community Governance Reviews is hampering the setting up of new parish councils thus halting the voice of the community. - Large unitary authorities damage local democracy on a range of indicators of democratic viability including trust in councillors and officials, public engagement and participation, community identity and cohesion and voter turnout (LSE, 2021).
Opportunities	Threats
- Central government is showing more of an interest in parish councils (CLG, 2010). - The importance of parish councils is increasing with the move to unitary authorities (Coulson, 1999). - Central government policy of decentralisation and shift of power to the people (CLG, 2010). - Parish councils are the well-spring of democracy and citizenship (Leach, 1996). - Emphasis has been placed on grassroots development and community self-help in meeting the central government agenda of reinvigorating local democracy and civil renewal (JRF, 2013).	- There is a desperate need to change the perception that parish councils only exist in rural areas as the urban areas could be in danger of being overlooked. - Terminology used by Whitehall suggests that parish councils are almost invisible to some legislators and bureaucrats. - Creation of large unitary authorities is for financial benefit not to benefit the electorate. - Evidence has proved there is no consistent nor guaranteed benefit to the creation of large unitary councils (Copus, et al 2020)

Appendix 2

QUESTIONNAIRE: SHOULD THE WHOLE OF ENGLAND BE PARISHED?

I am a student at De Montfort University undertaking a BA Hons Degree in Community Governance. I am researching whether the Whole of England Should be Parished? To assist with my research, I am undertaking an anonymous online survey with Principal Authorities of District, County and Unitary. There is extraordinarily little research in this area, and it could help shape local government in the future. Please answer all questions as honestly as you can; responses please by 30th June 2023. Thank you for your help with this research.

1. I agree with my data being analysed and stored. I agree to it being shared in a relevant archive in this form. I understand that the data collected during the study may be inspected by a supervisor from De Montfort University. I give permission for the supervisor to have access to my data. No individual will be identified in the research responses.

   Mark one oval

   Yes

   No

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary. I also understand I am free to withdraw at any time – without giving my reason and without there being any negative consequences. Please ring the full details in the Participant Research Information.

   I am aged over 18 years old and agree to take part in the above research project.

   Mark one oval

   Yes

   No

3. Your name

4. Your email address

5. Your role in the organisation

6. Your location

   Northeast

Northwest

North

Midlands

East

Southeast

Southwest

Introduction – Should the Whole of England be Parished?

Parish councils in their current form were created by the Local Government Act (LGA) 1894. They help shape their locality, and function as sounding boards for local opinion, although the range of services and amenities provided varies enormously. They work with local voluntary organisations and other tiers of local government, playing a role in providing and improving local services and amenities.

As the first tier of local government, they are elected bodies, with discretionary powers and rights laid down by Parliament. At the time of the research there were over 10,200 town and parish councils in England. Parish and Town councils vary in size, activities, and circumstances.

Most urban districts of England are entirely or partly unparished. Many towns and cities in otherwise rural districts are also unparished.

The aim of this research is to establish whether there would be a benefit in the whole of England being parished.

7. Please tick which authority you represent.

   Tick all that apply.

   Unitary Authority

   County Council

   District Council

   Town or Parish Council

8. Does having different layers of local government lead to greater democracy?

   Yes

   No

   Maybe

9. Please briefly explain your response to the question above.

10. Do you have town or parish councils in your authority's area?

    Mark only one oval

    Yes

    No

    Don't know.

11. What are the benefits to the community in having a town or parish council?

12. Please briefly describe any disadvantages to a community in having a town or parish council.

13. Please briefly describe the benefits for and against having parish and town councils.

14. Overall, how would you describe the relationship between principal authorities and town and parish councils?

    Mark one oval

    Positive

    Quite positive

    Workable

    Challenging

15. If you feel there are negative aspects in the relationship between principal authorities and town and parish councils, could you explain why?

16. Why do you think large unitary councils are created?

17. Do you think large unitary authorities give the same community representation at the local level as town and parish councils?

18. Please expand further on your answer to the above question.

19. Parish and town councils are, predominantly, in rural areas. Do you think parish councils could enhance community engagement in urban areas?

    Mark only one oval.

    Yes

No

Maybe

20. Please explain your response to question 12.

21. Why do you think that urban areas have fewer parish councils?

22. Are there barriers to setting up new parish and town councils? If so, what do you think these are?

23. If you would be willing to take part in a small focus group, please provide your email address.

24. If you would like to receive a copy of my research, please supply an email address.

25. Any other key points that you believe are relevant to whether all of England should be parished?

Thank you for your help with this research.

Appendix 3

Participant Information Sheet

Title of Project: Should the Whole of England be Parished?

Name of Researcher(s): Ruth Mullett

You have been invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with friends and relatives if you wish to. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part or not. Thank you for reading this.

What is the research about?

Parish and Town councils in their current form were created by the Local Government Act (LGA) 1894. Their governance, shape and form consolidated in the LGA 1972. Parish and town councils function as sounding boards for local opinion, although the range of services and amenities provided varies enormously. They work with local voluntary organisations and other tiers of local government, playing a significant role in providing and improving local services and amenities.
 As the first tier of local government, they are elected bodies, with discretionary powers and rights laid down by Parliament. At the time of research there's over 10,200 town and parish councils in England.
In contrast, an unparished area is an area not covered by a civil parish. Most urbanised districts of England are either entirely or partly unparished. Many towns and cities in otherwise rural districts are also unparished areas, therefore no longer have a town or city council.
The aim of this research is to establish whether there would be a greater benefit if the whole of England is parished.
I am a BA (Hons) Community Governance Student at De Montfort University and as part of my final year I am required to complete a research study.

What does the study / participation involve?

You are invited to participate in a brief survey which should take no longer than 10 minutes. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions and they are your personal views/interpretation. But my contributing to the questionnaire it will help my research into establishing whether there is in fact a benefit for the whole of England being parished. By participating you are consenting to having your data anonymised, used, and stored.
The voluntary basis of participation means you can withdraw from the study at any time, but as the questions are anonymous once a questionnaire is submitted it will not be possible to withdraw your submission. All data is stored on a password protected database. As you are sharing your details with DMU, we want you to know

how we use your personal data and what your rights are. You can find this information at http://www.dmu.ac.uk/policies/data-protection/data-protection.aspx'

There will be an opportunity for participants completing the questionnaire to volunteer to participate in a small focus group held via Zoom. The information collected during this focus group will be collected and stored on a password protected database and will be strictly confidential.
Please be aware that as the data collected forms part of my dissertation, it may be reviewed by my Supervisor at DMU Dr James Derounian. Any concerns about this research you may contact him at James.Derounian@slcc.co.uk

Who is funding the research?

There is no external funding for my research. If you would like a copy of the dissertation, please request it in the questionnaire and provide an email.
The results of the research will form part of my dissertation submission.
Thank you for participating in my research as this has never been researched before and will enormously help our sector.

Appendix 4

DETAILED RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Does having different layers of local government lead to greater democracy?

- Additional layers cost money.
- The areas in my ward pay higher council tax along with parish precepts. The town council pays a low precept. But the borough council makes the town council pay for things that the borough should really pay for.
- I think it depends on each local authority, but where there has been a commitment in time and funding to develop closer working relationships with local groups, voluntary section/faith organisations and partners, a unitary can and often do provide local services to meet local needs well.
- Most important issue in my view is whether local government areas reflect community make up. The number of layers itself is not the only measure of increased democracy.
- Reduced infrastructure costs because of less organisations to service. Less variation in decisions as consistency is applied to a larger footprint. Single organisation for partners to deal with, e.g., Police, NHS etc.
- Many officers at principal authorities do not understand how parish councils tick, assuming responses and decisions on what they consider 'operational' matters should be able to be made swiftly under delegated powers. Conversely parishes are often frustrated when their local concerns do not seem to be sufficiently influential on the actions of the principal authorities.
- I think it depends upon the area.
- And make life easier for central government.
- Parish councils don't solve problems.
- I would suggest that the more layers there are the more complex and bureaucratic the systems are that are required to support them.
- In our area district councillors are more in touch with their communities through regular door knocking and casework rather than the cabal of self-appointed anonymous people on the parish.
- I think you need an upper tier, to have the skills to run the big services like Social Services, education, highways, and planning.
- It is easy for the public to be swayed by purely economic arguments, rather than seeing some of the potential benefits.
- Engage more people in local matters.
- It depends on the needs of the area. No governance structure will be the same. As long as there is public engagement and opportunities for engagement into the democratic process, there is no reason larger unitary authorities cannot give the same community representation. Unitary organisations will still consist of councillors that represent the various wards/areas, and that should capture the community representation as well.
- Depending on the extent of the duties of the town/parish council, there may be a need for qualified professional staff, and my experience of this is that there is a national shortage of good, qualified clerks, residents might also see the introduction of another tier of local government as unnecessary and

bureaucratic and there would also be additional costs (council tax) to residents to fund.
- Lots of paperwork but nothing impossible.

What are the benefits to the community in having a town or parish council?

- Better community engagement.
- None that I am aware of.
- I have three parish councils in my area, one large and two small. The small do what they can but have limited funds once insurance etc. is paid. The larger one can afford to pay a Lengthsman to do some jobs that the local council no longer does.
- At their best they can shape the future of a community.
- Local people understanding local views having a stronger voice.
- Can feel more connected to local issues.
- Very local view on minor issues.
- Councillor representation is likely to be very local to the area, so the councillor is likely to be familiar with the very local issues.
- Closer decision making, strong understanding of local issues.
- A custodian for public assets with a statutory funding stream. A focus for engaged people to come together.
- Greater representation of local issues.
- In a larger rural area, can ensure there is better provision of services.
- Better decision making, less waste, more accountability.
- There are none.
- In a rural area, they fill a need.
- Closest to grassroots decision making, making a real difference, understanding, and knowing the local community, reactive to issues, understand the local dynamics and the demands and needs.
- Can provide input to decision making at a very local level.
- Local democracy and providing services at a local level.
- Helping the community really get things done at a local level. I live in a village with a very active council and see benefits every day.
- Not much in my view.
- Local people taking ownership of their communities.
- Very local representation that can focus on the community and their needs.
- More hyper local decision making. Additional precepting authority able to take on services/initiatives from district who can no longer afford them.
- More detailed local knowledge and understanding of requirements and issues.
- Greater access and awareness of community issues, that a unitary may not necessarily be aware of. Also, greater contact with the local community potentially.
- Empower communities to take control of local assets, deliver local services and influence decision-making and priorities. Gives local people a closer input into council decisions.
- Reference point for community action.
- Greater local connectivity and an opportunity to tailor services to the needs of the communities at a more granular level.

- Greater local accountability, local knowledge in decision making.
- Can operate at a more localised level.
- I cannot think of any.
- A stronger voice for their area. More responsive, truly local government.
- Local level of democracy, local community pride and local services e.g., parks, benches, cleanliness. In some areas where there is a large unitary e.g., Cornwall, town and parish councils are absolutely vital.
- An additional sector for the public to air their concerns and pass onto higher tier authorities.
- It provides a more local 'on the ground' tier of local government which is closer and more accessible to residents and communities, especially in rural areas.

Please briefly describe any disadvantages to the community in having a town or parish council.

- They must pay for it.
- Some parish councillors can become too big for their boots and upset residents.
- None, unless the parish council is there in name only and does very little.
- I am not sure I would say there are disadvantages, where they exist and operate well, they successfully support residents. There can be confusion for residents between the town and parish and borough council responsibilities but nothing that cannot be overcome.
- Can become very parochial in consideration of issues.
- Cost on top of council tax precept.
- There is sometimes elector confusion not understanding which authority is responsible for which functions.
- The cost of the parish precept can be significant, and many parishes lack a democratic mandate as many members are co-opted through lack of interest. The majority of councillors and therefore the majority of standards complaints relate to parishes but there is a significant administrative burden for the district or unitary council.
- Especially in rural communities there is often a democratic deficit where parish authorities want to avoid the time and expense of elections.
- Extra cost.
- There are none.
- Parochial, layers of extra government, stop anything being done. Not representative of the community, bad for democracy waste of money.
- Additional council tax burden, confusion over which tier provides which service.
- Capacity of parish council to fulfill the more complex and involved tasks. Generally viewed as being small without the necessary skills and 'Vicar of Dibley' characteristics and volunteer councillors viewed as being unskilled and unable to make informed decisions.
- An extra layer of taxation.
- Some would say, extra costs to council tax, self-serving councillors there for show.

- Further confusion over decision-making and lack of accountability.
- Cost and lack of ability to attract people to stand for election.
- There can be confusion over who is responsible for what. This can especially be true if there are three tiers of local government – county, district, and parish councils.
- They are sometimes too small to be effective. Run by volunteers, with insufficient resources and a lack of staff to deliver on ambition – makes achieving anything difficult. Also, additional cost on council tax bill, particularly an issue during a cost-of-living crisis.
- Another layer of bureaucracy.
- Council tax can be higher, but people have a choice every four years on who to vote for – or to stand for themselves if they do not like it.
- None.
- Cost and sometimes differing objectives.
- Slowing down of key decisions affecting the community. The conduct of parish/town reflects badly on the local community who elected them. Leads to more confusion as to which authority has responsibility for what topic and who oversees the running of a town/parish council.
- Potential lack of professional support (officers), another tier of local government administration, in some cases there would be three different tiers of administration (county, district and town/parish).
- Cost to the taxpayer through precept.
- Very NIMBY – say no to most things. Do not have a strategic view. Have very little power to place shape.
- Pride of place, primary agent improving street-scene e.g., hanging baskets, Christmas trees, attention to local detail, being on top of local issues, advocate for local services and facilities, recipient of community assets transferred due to upper tier authorities being unable to afford them, e.g., civic hall, public toilets, CCTV, Christmas lights, staging events, local parks, and sports provision.
- Could be more expensive, precepts are not limited. Also, sometimes there are toxic atmospheres on parish councils.
- Costs. Most cost between £20 and £200 per council tax bill, and only have statutory powers over allotments I believe.
- It can aid representation but can lead to needless conflict with other tiers.
- In some instances, parish and town councils can be dysfunctional due to breakdowns in relations between councillors and the additional tier of local government can be confusing to some people as they do not know who is responsible for different functions.

If you feel there are negative aspects in the relationship between principal authorities and town and parish councils, could you explain why?

- Principal authorities often do not appear to be interested in local parish councils.
- Additional cost for little benefit.
- Depends on which political party is in charge of the council and how they run the council. They do not really support the smaller local parish councils. As a borough councillor have had to help them fight for help.

- I think it is down to a lack of understanding both ways, this leads to frustration on roles and responsibilities and priorities for each organisation.
- Parish councils create an additional layer of decision-making and can cause confusion for the public in terms of who is responsible for what and confusion as to whether councillors are borough, district, or parish.
- This varies depending on local issues and whether parish clerks can support elected parish councillors appropriately.
- In reality there is no clear answer to this. It depends on the people involved.
- Misunderstandings of each other by the other regarding powers, capacity, and priorities.
- Can confuse matters for the public, who are unclear who does what.
- Parish councils are a bad idea.
- They tend to have a lot of arguments, disagreements, and power battles.
- Uneducated perspective of parish councils from non-parished areas.
- Very much dependent on the individuals' councils.
- I often feel that parish councils feel 'done to' by upper tier authorities and feel that they are too far removed.
- Parish councils often feel ignored by principal authorities and principal authorities often question the usefulness of a parish but this all depends on the parishes themselves.
- No one wants to accept responsibility for certain things,
- Each can be antagonistic on issues such as planning control for example a local plan where parishes are typically anti-development.
- From the monitoring officer's standpoint lots of complaints on councillor behaviour related to parishes. In areas with lots of parishes there is not the time to build working relationships.
- Present system of distribution of funding is dependent on latest emphasis e.g., regeneration, levelling up, environmental, youth projects. Ticking right boxes and inclusivity etc.
- Differing opinions, often a lack of understanding from parish councils linked to local plans and their purpose, all rules linked to committees that must be followed.
- I think there are positives and negatives. Town and parishes often directly know the people in their area, and can help them quickly, or alert districts to the fact that assistance is needed. COVID was a great example of this.
- Confusion over the power's principal authorities have over day-to-day running of parish councils. Monitoring officers at principal authorities only have power to investigate code of conduct matters for elected parish councillors. Principle authorities do not often have the resources or time to effectively support town clerks.
- In my experience the quality of parish councils across the country varies enormously, some are very professional and well run, others less so, so there can be a tendency for some parish councils to rely on their principal councils to provide free support either legal or constitutional, and it can become a burden on the principal authority.
- Two small, two parochial and two little powers.
- The pursuit of power.

- Normally lack of communication. I try and talk to all of mine one to one by rotation. Some of it excessive party politics at parish level
- I think there are sometimes tensions between the different tiers of local government for a number of reasons.

Why do you think large unitary councils were created?

- Adult social services, children's social services, vital safeguarding services cannot be dealt with by lower tier government.
- Efficiency.
- Financial scale.
- They work. Economy of scale. Can afford to run strong services.
- To provide an efficiency of delivery in relation to spend across core services.
- Government has a view this drives efficiency.
- To ensure a local response to local need but on a size and scale that takes a whole borough view and is value for money.
- Improve the consistency and rigour of decision-making, better use of resources, stronger partnership across a larger geographical footprint.
- More efficient and resilience in times where resilience is important. Smaller unitaries struggle. Two tiers of principle councils can be inefficient. Some large unitaries have successfully remained local without parishes e.g., Durham.
- Benefits of a one stop service. Ease of understanding by the public.
- To improve democracy.
- Local government reorganisation and in some cases, a desire for better local government.
- To save money.
- Large unitary authorities are a bad idea. But there should be a range of smaller unitary authorities.
- Believe in some circles that there are economies of scale.
- To bring decision making closer to the grassroots and to reduce overhead costs and improve democracy and accountability.
- To simplify local decision making providing one point of contact for residents when assessing services or advice.
- Deemed efficient.
- Primarily for economies of scale and the ability to work on bigger pictures for example transport infrastructure.
- Better value and able to deliver large services.
- Central government believes that these are more efficient and easier for them to deal with.
- Government likes to deal with less organisations. Budget and capacity constraints at district and county level might make unitary councils an attractive consideration.
- To simplify services. All under one council.
- Because Whitehall is fixated on structural solutions to problems and "bigger is best." The social services tale is allowed to wag the reorganisation dog far too much. Many of the large unitary authorities created in recent years have involved realisation that they are not well placed to run local services and that

has led to many town councils being created or having additional functions allocated to them in places such as Shropshire, Cornwall, and Wiltshire.

- To ensure efficiency and one authority in control of the area, rather than it being shared amongst so many different bodies that all want to pass the blame.
- Streamlining governance and making it easier for public to identify who is responsible for a certain service. Unitary councils are responsible for the full range of council services.
- To reduce cost and reduce overlap and complexity.
- Financial savings.
- To save money.
- More intimate than county councils.
- Misguided disbelief that they are more "efficient," desire by central government to have a limited number of people for them to talk to, centralising tendencies of central government.
- To make it easier for government but also so that all principal services are delivered by the same organisation.
- Mainly to avoid the silo mentality but also so that all principal council services are delivered by the same organisation.
- To crush minor political parties.
- Primarily to save money, not necessarily to provide a better service for residents.

Do you think large unitary authorities give the same community representation at the local level as town and parish councils?

- Depends on the community involvement of the council.
- We have had a counsellor and the Clerk leave the parish council in a bad state and has had to go into special measures. Leaving new councillors to sort out the mess.
- I disagree. They are great where there is energy, commitment, and ownership in a community. However, many existing parish councils do very little. They can work in urban or suburban settings, but other community or voluntary sector initiatives are often more effective at serving local needs, often focusing involvement on vulnerable or excluded groups.
- Personally, I have worked with and without parish councils and in my experience, when working effectively as colleagues rather than partners, this can be an effective way of delivering services to the community we serve.
- There is limited capacity in workforce availability so having fewer organisations assists.
- Local people make better decisions, with better value for money. Small is beautiful.
- There are too many layers of local government, residents get incredibly frustrated when there are two or even three layers of council. They want to contact a single representative to deal with their issue.
- There is a lack of community cohesion as tiers progress, this could also be felt by the people who live in two tier authorities.

- In Hertfordshire about half the residents have parish councils and half do not. In Watford we do not have parishes and there has not been any great push for this.
- It's fine, could be better, could be worse.
- A requirement to elect a council would attract interested citizens and raise awareness of being able to contribute and make a difference.
- Yes - the area I work in is fully parished apart from one small rural parish that voted to abolish its parish council many years ago. The benefit of having parish councils for all towns and parishes is clear - ensures that there can be a local control of local assets and services, a civic focus for each area (chairman or mayor), and a voice for each area. Many district and county councillors represent only part of a town and therefore for towns there is often no single individual or organisation who can give them a distinctive voice. Following a community governance review, my council established a town council for Kidderminster in 2015 so I have direct experience of the process and benefits.
- I think it allows for one council to be in full control, rather than a mismatch and arguing who is responsible for what.
- I do not believe this should apply across the board. Each community area is different and for the most part, streamlined governance and council services tend to be more efficient and less bureaucratic in getting decisions made and impacting on the local community. I also consider the conduct of elected councillors at parish level too often fall short of the standards expected and consume a lot of the monitoring officers time in investigating complaints. The range of sanctions dictated by national legislation makes it difficult to deter councillors from similar behaviour.
- We work closely with parish councils generally and on specific subjects. COVID and cost of living are good practical examples of topic areas. We also have positive networks where we can engage on common issues.
- Too many tiers weaken local government negotiations with central government.
- Some of the larger parish councils provide a wide range of local services.

Town and parish councils are predominantly in rural areas. Do you think a town or parish could enhance community engagement in an urban area?

- It is the tier of local government closest to the local community and therefore more engagement with the community.
- There are no parishes in London.
- Parish councils have been around for a very long time. Some urban areas residents could not afford the extra precept especially in the more deprived towns.
- My area is two tiers. Parish councils are good at ultra local issues where they are well established, but many are weak. There is a responsibility for upper tier councils to understand local needs and views, regardless of more local structures. Most local government services are very local in their delivery, particularly social care at individual level.
- Where town and parish councils exist, they are critical to being able to strengthen community cohesion and engagement. They are already

established in their communities and therefore well placed to support a wider reach on engagement and support.

- Unitary councils are responsible for the whole of the borough and ensure equality in the distribution of resources across the borough, based on need.
- Around half our population live in parished areas.
- Increased accountability and local control.
- In some cases, large unitary authorities are a long way from communities, however good local councillors in smaller parishes are not. Allowances generally do not support full-time counsellors and therefore getting the attention you would in an urban authority is difficult.
- In a previous role I was aware of fractious relationships within and between parish councils, and between some parish councils and the local authority. This took a great deal of the monitoring officer's time.
- It tends to be people from the more local area, acting as the community's representative, so more chance to be known by more people and be more visible.
- Many parish council elections are not contested so it is moot as to whether they are entirely democratic. For the first time this year, some town council wards did not have contested elections, a worrying development.
- Helping to gain an understanding.
- Challenging to align different levels of governance to different challenges to get the benefits of scale and locality.
- One local government model does not suit all areas of the country, while single tier unitaries may work in some areas, there are other areas where it is less suited. But as a general principle I would say that differing layers of local government do not lead to greater democracy.
- Unitary authorities are a great size that have intimacy with their residents but also power and strength to place shape and do much of the strategic things along with tactical local initiatives.
- Local District Council focuses far too much on the local economic centre, and seat of the council, there is an uneasy relationship. To a lesser extent, much of the county resource is concentrated in the county town, but it notably happens.
- This needs to be a local decision.
- Although it would provide a consistent approach, I am not convinced that parishing across the whole of England is entirely necessary or justified. It really needs to be a case of looking at each area and judging on its own merits whether a parish or town council is called for.

Why do you think that urban areas have fewer town and parish councils?

- Because they are not necessary.
- Cost.
- Because they are not historical.
- More transient populations. Other community capacity does it better.
- I think it is a historic, legacy solution where urban areas have not had a previous structure to utilise and therefore have designed their offer without it. This means much stronger relationships and access to data are needed with community groups and other partners to be successful at a more local level.

- Cost and purpose.
- Usually for historic reasons.
- Too many people involved could prolong things.
- Reflection of successive local government reorganisation, and impact of economies of scale in delivering services across small areas.
- Because they are a bad idea.
- Because the sense of community identity tends to be different and multi-layered compared to rural areas.
- Political and historical disengagement with the communities they represent.
- More opportunities for community groups to operate in different forms/under different structures.
- In many areas it has probably not even been thought of and urban areas may question the benefit of having a parish council.
- No real need as councillors on district councils close to their constituent anyway.
- I suspect that this is largely historic.
- Perhaps they feel better served by the existing public service offer. Maybe a historic quirk from previous local government organisation – in my area when various urban and rural district councils were merged one retained a town council, but all the rural areas retained their parish councils.
- Blurred boundaries, historically less reliance on the parish.
- Because district councils in particular do not want a competitive voice for their towns/wards – especially if that competitive voice might be of a different political color.
- Larger to manage.
- Cover bigger areas.
- I would consider that it would not be required in urban areas. Parish councils normally are formed of smaller villages, where the communities are more isolated from the wider geographical area. Urban area's governance is streamlined and clearly defined. Urban areas also tend to innovate and be as modernised as possible to move with the city economy.
- Legacy of arrangements, but perhaps different models of community engagement.
- Costs, setting up and maintaining an additional layer of local government in urban areas would come at a cost which would be passed onto the residents. Geographically urban principal council areas are much smaller, so residents would undoubtedly still contact the principal authority. I would suggest that urban town councils may well take on additional roles that are traditionally undertaken by principal authorities in more rural areas (i.e., street lighting), so there may not be the will to create town councils to take over services that are currently provided elsewhere.
- Fewer distinct and separate communities.
- Density helps community intimacy.
- Parish councils have been carried forward from when they were a key part of governance in rural areas.
- That is not the same geography issues that there are in rural areas - things are a lot closer together.

- Due to legislation (affectively prohibiting them in great London for many years) plus the history of the reorganisation in the 1970s.

Are there barriers to setting up new town and parish councils? If so, what are these?

- No idea – I have never worked with parish or town councils.
- Extra cost to residents when the cost of living is high.
- A lack of a blueprint and investment that outlines how the councils work together to achieve community led outcomes.
- I perceive that some areas cannot find those wishing to stand as a councillor – I am not sure if this is due to people having busy lives with lots of commitments, lack of knowledge of the role of parish councils, or not wishing to get involved in something that they perceive may have legal implications following their democratic decision making.
- Cost, availability of suitably competent people to support.
- Enthusiasm, lack of demand or people advocating for it.
- No.
- You need a governance review with an agreement in progress, followed then by a referendum.
- Principal council resistance, lack of clarity on natural boundaries.
- They are a terrible idea.
- Naivety and deemed too much like hard work to implement.
- Community governance reviews need to be looked at.
- Cost – both the actual cost of the process and also to residents the perceived extra taxation. Last time we tried the answer was no. Also, finding councillors is increasingly difficult at all levels as the abuse is so difficult to deal with.
- Boundary Commission.
- Community governance review process, with public consultation requirements, may mean some of the benefits of a new town/parish council are lost behind a very easy council tax increase argument.
- Allocating which areas to which parish or district.
- Yes – depends on willingness of district council to conduct community governance review. Is the threshold for requiring a review set sufficiently low? We have left the EU – a massive decision – based on a first past the post vote. Thus, any approval to create a parish council should be based on a binding, first past the post – that is, if legislation is not brought forward to require town and parish councils everywhere or for communities above a particular size. The process for merging smaller parish councils is perhaps too complicated.
- I guess cost is an issue, together with people often being unwilling to become councillors. I understand this as sometimes they can experience tremendous abuse for what is effectively a voluntary role.
- I do not consider any barriers, and this would be considered as part of a community governance review.
- Practicalities/process for set up.
- Other than the legal requirements, finding residents willing to stand for election can be challenging particularly as they are in most cases volunteers.

- Cost.
- Not insurmountable barriers.
- Reluctance by political leaders to give up power to other bodies.
- You need to have a community governance review, consult and then when you have an agreement set up a precept. It is all doable though, but it is resource intensive for the principal authority.
- The only point in having one is if it can do something. This would involve higher tier authorities releasing a tiny amount of power or influence. As the former are full of empire builders, this could be challenging.
- Cost at the moment.

Appendix 5

INTERVIEW RESPONSES

To establish whether parish councils could perform in urban areas.

- No – cities lose demarcations as they are too big.
- Yes – in principle they are the same as rural area, same basis, needs and make-up.
- Yes – provided there is a level of communication. At present this communication is not present and it would need to be worked upon.
- No – the density of the population of an urban area would prohibit and there is less cohesion in urban areas compared to rural areas. Rural areas are like a little micro town and city and that allows parish councils to work effectively.
- Yes – I witness all the time the benefits from my own parish council. Parish councils, being closer to the community, decisions are taken for the benefit of the parish.
- Yes - because more access to local issues. Towns and cities would need to be cut into bite-sized chunks, in effect small towns to allow the same level of local governance as rural areas. Too big wouldn't work.
- Yes – should not be any different to a rural environment and people would know what is happening in communities and thereby being a part of something.
- Yes – Bromsgrove is a prime example. The town has its own dynamics which expects the whole of the district to contribute through taxation. It would allow the town to be more self-efficient, raising a town precept aimed at the people who live in the town who would use it. Not the surrounding rural areas having to contribute when they do not use the services.
- Yes – would be the enabler for community connection. COVID taught how important communities are. Parish councils are at the heart of communities and work to enable greater socialisation and have a major impact on improving people's health and wellbeing.

To investigate why parish councils are created when unitary councils are formed.

- To try and achieve a greater economy of scale for more resources and responsibilities to be transferred from central government.

To investigate whether the creation of large unitary councils affects community governance at local level.

- Pressure on Clerks depends on who the councillors are at the time. There would need to be a new structure. Two tiers give more power at the point of need.
- Yes. Place shaping is done at district too far removed from the residents, losing location injection of interest and comments.