

London: any place for parish councils?

A discussion paper by Alan Pike

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“Good parish councils engage communities and make a real difference, so we will extend the right to establish parish councils to communities in London.”

Britain Forward Not Back: the Labour Party manifesto, 2005

“In summary, some members of the Commission argue in favour of changing present legislation so that Londoners are given the same rights to establish parish councils as the rest of the country. But the majority of the Commission believes that there is no convincing case, nor actual demand, for the establishment of urban parishes in the capital.”

A New Settlement for London: final report of the Commission on London Governance, February, 2006

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The Government's manifesto commitment to legislate to permit parish councils in London, and the view of a majority of members of the Commission on London Governance against them, are undeniably at odds with each other. They may be less far apart than initially appears to be the case, however, when the broader ambitions of both parties are taken into account.

The pledge to extend the right to establish parish councils to London comes in Chapter 9 of the Labour Party manifesto. Its title, *Democracy: power devolved, citizens empowered* sums up the theme of a chapter which advances the view that "a fully democratic society depends on giving everyone a voice and stake." There is little conflict between such aspirations and the thrust of the Commission on London Governance's final report in favour of devolving more power to London and its call for improved governance arrangements to "secure a stronger sense of local ownership and accountability, which brings public services closer to all those for whom they exist." The core issue should now be whether parish councils in London are likely to help enhance these shared objectives.

New parish councils are set up under section 11 of the Local Government and Rating Act 1997, which does not apply to London. Concerns about some of the possible consequences of introducing such councils to the capital, voiced by the Commission on London Governance, are shared within the Association of London Government. London boroughs are nonetheless taking a variety of steps to empower residents and engage neighbourhoods. Section 1 of this document seeks to identify the Government's core aims and purposes in wanting to introduce parish councils in London. Section 2 provides examples of existing English parish councils, followed in Section 3 by illustrations of initiatives by local government to involve London communities more closely in governance. The remaining sections consider the potential implications of extending parish councils to London.

This discussion paper was commissioned by the Association of London Government, but the views contained in it do not necessarily reflect those of the ALG or its member boroughs.

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Introduction

There are no parish councils in London – the law does not allow them - but that is likely to change soon.

Last year's Labour Party general election manifesto undertook to give Londoners the same right as other English communities to establish parish councils. Proposals for legislation to introduce them may be included in the local government white paper later this year.

The concept of London parish councils contributes to a wider Government drive to empower individual public service users and communities. The Rt. Hon. David Miliband, in his former role of Minister for Communities and Local Government, summed up the Government's aims in the phrase 'double devolution': a process of transferring power from Whitehall to Town Hall, and from Town Hall to individuals and neighbourhoods.

Parish councils are formed in response to petitions from electors in neighbourhoods, villages, towns or similar communities, with decisions on whether to approve applications made by central government. It is, of course, impossible to predict the extent to which Londoners would seek to form parish councils. They are rare in heavily-populated metropolitan areas of England even though the law permits them. This might lead to the conclusion that the response from Londoners would be weak, but a well-publicised Government drive to promote parish councils as part of wider neighbourhood empowerment rights could stimulate interest.

Parish councils range from modest bodies covering small populations to substantial organisations delivering services to tens of thousands of residents; parish councils can by agreement take over many local government responsibilities. Given the size and concentration of London's population it is probable that at least some of its potential parish councils would be large-scale ones based on housing estates, town centres or areas where residents were seeking to protect local amenities. Such parish councils would be likely to seek service delivery responsibilities, with implications for existing local government.

Introducing parish councils to London would equally have implications for borough councils' own area committee structures. Many London boroughs now have area or neighbourhood committees which decide local issues at local level and, in some cases, spend devolved budgets. Such arrangements have some similarities to parish councils.

The Commission on London Governance, a joint London Assembly - Association of London Government examination of the way the capital is run, decided by a majority that there was no convincing case for parish councils in London. This document suggests ways in which the Government could address concerns raised by the Commission and elsewhere in London local government. Legislation could confine the powers of parish councils to prevent them developing into an additional substantial tier of service delivery. It could require parishes to reflect existing public service boundaries and to be socially inclusive; and it could transfer the responsibility for approving new parish councils from central to local government.

A core concern would nonetheless remain. Parish councils are formed only in those places where local residents petition for them. That would almost certainly make them a feature of some parts of London but not others. Settled communities with a strong sense of identity would more probably be attracted to the idea than areas of inner London with exceptionally high levels of population mobility. But London neighbourhoods are not free-standing entities with the obvious natural boundaries of remote rural villages and there is a danger that a self-selecting, patchwork structure of parish councils in London boroughs could undermine attempts to equalise service provision and put community cohesion at risk.

These concerns could be addressed if the Government were to legislate to provide for 'all-or-nothing' borough-wide referendums in London on whether parish councils should be introduced, following the model of referendums on elected mayors. Where votes went in favour, entire boroughs would be parished; boroughs where referendums were lost would have no parish councils. Such referendums would offer voters a choice between parish councils and alternative forms of area arrangements promoted by their borough councils. The choice is a valid and significant one, because the two are different concepts of neighbourhood devolution with different strengths and weaknesses – the parish council is a free-standing local government unit with its own elected members, while the area committee is an integral, connected element of the borough council's overall structures.

This document sets out in Section 1 the context in which the Government is seeking to introduce parish councils in London. Section 2 looks at existing English parish councils, followed in Section 3 by examples of area arrangements and other neighbourhood devolution in London. In the remaining sections issues including the likely nature and location of London parish councils, local government concerns and possible safeguards are considered.

The document concludes by suggesting that there may be circumstances in which the introduction of parish councils to London could prove an effective form of devolution. Yet if the Government's wider efforts to promote neighbourhood empowerment succeed, the need for parish councils in the capital should diminish.

1 – The Government’s aims

The possibility of extending parish councils to London was raised in the ODPM/Home Office document *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter*, published in January, 2005, as part of the Government’s Ten Year Vision for local government. All communities, says the document, should have opportunities to set up parish councils when there was sufficient demand: the Government would therefore seek to remove the barrier to urban parishes in London, and would work with councils to make it easier for communities to form parish councils. The pledge to extend the right to establish parish councils in London was subsequently contained in the Labour Party’s general election manifesto.

Since the election Government policy on the role of parish councils in London was set out in a series of speeches by the former Minister for Communities and Local Government, David Miliband. He condensed his core objectives in the now familiar phrase ‘double devolution’: the need to devolve powers from Whitehall to Town Hall, and then from Town Hall to individuals and neighbourhoods. The introduction of parish councils to London is being presented as a contribution to meeting the second of these objectives. Although Mr Miliband’s speeches contained little about parish councils specifically, he spoke at the New Local Government Network conference (18 January, 2006) of granting new powers to strong parish councils, giving greater right to representation in decision-making and the right to issue fixed penalty notices as examples.

In one of his first speeches in his new ministerial role after the election, Mr Miliband told the Local Government Association conference (8 July, 2005): “Local empowerment means more opportunities for communities to have influence and choice over how their local neighbourhood is run – especially on issues that enhance an area’s ‘liveability’ from community safety, clean streets, green spaces, play areas to other physical improvements.”

In subsequent speeches, Mr Miliband expanded on this theme. He told the New Local Government Network conference there was already a debate about the contribution of more direct election of local leaders, in the form of mayors or executives, and that he was instinctively in favour of a more visible and powerful role for ward councillors. But, he continued: “the power gap will only be bridged if we engage citizens themselves to address specific, local and very practical issues.” Empowering groups such as tenant management organisations at sub-ward level, extending the neighbourhood management model, petitions, satisfaction surveys, delegated budgets, neighbourhood charters and the transfer of assets to community groups were advanced by Mr Miliband as illustrations of potential steps towards greater neighbourhood involvement.

Pursuing the double devolution theme again at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations conference (21 February, 2006) Mr Miliband said the role of the community and voluntary sector, working in partnership with the public sector, was central to achieving devolution of power to individuals and communities. He pointed to the weakening of many institutions – such as families, churches and trade unions - that had once provided care, nurtured trust and fostered co-operation, while greater mobility had weakened attachment to strong, geographically-based communities. “The mission for the 21st century must be to spread power to citizens both to act individually and collectively.” Local strategic partnerships and local area agreements, longer-term contracts with the voluntary sector, and neighbourhood based grant-giving through community empowerment networks or community foundations were among ways in which he suggested the voluntary and community sector could engage with double devolution.

A week earlier at the Local Government Association sustainable communities conference (14 February, 2006) Mr Miliband described local government’s role as to help citizens and communities become the masters of change. Speaking again about the need to consider how to devolve power to the neighbourhood level, he contrasted England’s 350 local authorities with the 36,000 communes in France and the 15,000 municipalities in Germany.

These extracts from Mr Miliband’s speeches demonstrate an obvious Government determination to increasing neighbourhood control over activities which most immediately and routinely affect geographical communities. The minister intends to work with the LGA, voluntary sector and others this spring to produce a joint National Neighbourhoods Framework which will feed into local neighbourhood charters, setting out how public services are delivered and the empowerment mechanisms available to local people.

The proposed charter was another idea raised by the Government in *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter*. This also set out five principles for neighbourhood arrangements which the document says are “likely to be at the heart of any set of key principles about how the various players should act when establishing and operating neighbourhood arrangements.” These are:

- All councils, in partnership with other service providers, should provide opportunities and support for neighbourhood engagement and appropriate arrangements so that they can respond to the needs and priorities of neighbourhood communities
- Neighbourhood arrangements must be capable of making a real difference to the everyday lives of citizens
- The nature of neighbourhood arrangements must be appropriate to local circumstances over time and be responsive to the needs and diversity of the community and its organisations
- Neighbourhood arrangements must be consistent with local representative democracy which gives legitimacy to governmental institutions, and places elected councillors as the leading advocates for their communities, and with the requirements of local democratic accountability
- Neighbourhood arrangements must be balanced with the demands of efficiency and proportionality

2 – Parish councils in England

Mr Miliband has indicated that there will be no single model for devolution to neighbourhood level. He told the New Local Government Network conference: “In some areas and circumstances residents just want a bigger say in how services are delivered. In others they want far more active control over services. It is not possible – sitting in Whitehall – to say what approach will work for what community under what circumstances. That is a matter for councils and other public service providers in consultation with residents.” This reinforces a declaration in *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter* that “it would be wrong for Government to be prescriptive about the forms of neighbourhood arrangements or about the circumstances where such arrangements should exist.” Clearly, however, parish councils to London would introduce an untried new element which would have implications for other neighbourhood arrangements.

Parish councils (usually called town councils in urban areas) were formalised in legislation in 1894; most recently, the Local Government and Rating Act 1997 modified previous legislation. Section 11 of the 1997 Act, which does not apply to London, gives communities at neighbourhood, village, town or similar level power to petition for a parish council; petitions must be signed by 10 per cent or 250 electors in an area (whichever is the greater) and decisions on whether to grant approval are made by the Deputy Prime Minister.

England contains about 8,500 parish and town councils on which some 80,000 councillors serve. Parish councils are rare in any of the metropolitan boroughs, and most of those that do exist are in former rural districts that were transferred to metropolitan government in the 1974 reorganisation.

There is no such thing as a “typical” parish council. They range from tiny, entirely voluntarily-run organisations covering populations of a few hundred to bodies that make a substantial contribution to governance and service provision in their areas.

Although many small ones have little or no involvement in service delivery a parish council can, by agreement with its principal authority, provide almost any service. The example of the prestigiously-named Lichfield City Council – one of the largest parish councils in England – illustrates the extent to which parish councils can undertake services. Nationally, it is estimated that about one-third of parish councillors are also members of their district authorities; parish council elections in some places are party political, in others they are not.

Weston-super-Mare

Weston-super-Mare, the biggest in population terms, covers 71,000 people. It was set up in 2000 as a result of a campaign which started after the town lost borough status in the 1970s.

While London has no experience of parish councils, they are plentiful in the surrounding Home Counties where many London commuters live. Just as there are few parish councils in the English metropolitan boroughs, those in the Home Counties tend to be concentrated in less urban areas. Hertfordshire, for example, contains 117 parish and town councils, but there are none in most of its larger centres including Watford, Stevenage, St Albans, Hemel Hempstead and Welwyn Garden City. This pattern of parish councils remaining absent from large towns even when they are widespread in the countryside is a familiar one around the country. A predominantly rural and coastal county such as Devon, for instance, has 350 parish councils but there are none in Exeter.

Lichfield

Lichfield City Council describes its role as working with Lichfield District Council and Staffordshire County Council to “provide and supplement local government services within the city.” It provides these services to almost one-third of the district council’s total population, and they include maintaining parks, open spaces, highway verges and footpaths, allotments, markets, a museum, street furniture, community halls, grants, twinning and Christmas lights. The council is consulted on all planning applications within the city area and submits observations to Lichfield District Council, which then determines them. Lichfield City Council has a ceremonial mayor, and its 28 councillors are returned after elections contested between the political parties. Half its current members also serve on Lichfield District Council and two are members of Staffordshire County Council.

There are, nonetheless, some well-established parish councils adjacent to the London boundary. Loughton, with a population of 30,000, is located in the Epping Forest district of Essex on the suburban fringes of the capital close to the boroughs of Redbridge and Havering. It is served by the London Underground Central Line and many of its residents work in the Greater London area.

A Loughton parish council first existed in the 1890s but was abolished in the course of subsequent reorganisations which took the town into bigger local government units. Loughton town council was established in its present form in 1996 when this became possible under legislation. It has since taken over some responsibilities from Epping Forest District Council and the town council’s activities include allotments, cemeteries, open spaces and street furniture; a community and youth centre is under development. Revival of a version of former local government units absorbed by reorganisation has proved to be a strong motivation for forming parish councils, and similar pressures could arise if they were introduced in London.

3 – Neighbourhood devolution in London

A majority of London boroughs now have some form of area, neighbourhood or community council structure. Not all were set up for precisely the same purpose and they consequently differ considerably in structure and powers. Some are chaired by councillors, others by local residents. Some are part of a council's formal decision-making structure, others are purely consultative. Some are restricted to the council's responsibilities, while public services such as the NHS and Metropolitan Police participate in others. Regardless of such differences, however, London borough area forums have some similarities to parish councils.

In his New Local Government Network conference speech Mr Miliband singled out neighbourhood management at Broadwater Farm in Haringey as a highly successful initiative which had utterly transformed a previously notorious, crime-ridden, run down estate. "By providing a voice and support to local people, neighbourhood management is building the capacity and self-confidence of local people," he said.

Haringey is, with Tower Hamlets and Croydon, one of three London authorities with Beacon Council status for Getting Closer to Communities. Haringey's Neighbourhood Management Service works with local people to improve the areas in which they live. It links to a system of Area Assemblies open to all residents, each of which has a £50,000 "making the difference" budget to spend on neighbourhood-level environmental improvements. As well as allocating these budgets, area assemblies are forums for addressing issues such as refuse collection, green spaces, traffic and parking. During the past year Haringey's Tottenham and Seven Sisters Area Assembly, for example, has been involved in discussions with Transport for London on realignment of bus stop and pedestrian crossing changes, and has initiated systems for better planning of school places and health provision to support new housing development.

Haringey

Haringey Council has been working for several years to shift its approach to regeneration and neighbourhood renewal from top-down to bottom-up.

The borough's Community Strategy, endorsed by the Local Strategic Partnership, sets the framework for key policies in areas such as housing, employment and neighbourhood renewal.

Partnership boards, chaired by residents, link local people with councillors, representatives of other public agencies, the private and voluntary sectors. Targeted forums address the specific interests of groups such as the elderly, young people and the homeless. Attendances at the forum meetings for elderly people have reached 300.

Seven Area Assemblies are the centrepiece of Haringey's devolved arrangements. These are formal council meetings but are organised in a style to encourage public participation. Each assembly has a £50,000 annual budget to spend on local priorities.

In its successful bid for Beacon Council status for Getting Closer to Communities, Haringey declared that its area-based focus has "led to significant community involvement, even in areas stubbornly resistant in the past."

Croydon

Croydon is divided into ten Neighbourhood Partnerships, but their structure differs from those boroughs where councillors make devolved decisions at area level.

Although the partnerships were set up by the council and initially chaired by councillors, it was later decided that they might flourish better as arms-length organisations. The council continues to fund administrative support but the partnerships have been handed over to independent steering groups. Chairs and vice chairs are elected by the public, with councillors ineligible to stand.

Representatives of other public agencies as well as the council attend partnership meetings which are designed to exchange information, enable residents to contribute to service planning, and encourage the development of local regeneration projects.

Voluntary sector and community representatives have the same number of seats as the public and private sectors on Croydon's Local Strategic Partnership board, emphasising the importance attached to the community's contribution, and the LSP's Community Strategy contains targets for increasing community involvement.

Among Croydon's community initiatives is Street Champions, a volunteering group set up by the council. Street Champions are given basic training guidance on operational issues and legislation relating to environmental problems such as fly-tipping, graffiti, litter and abandoned cars, and report problems to the council.

Waltham Forest introduced Community Council meetings in October, 2003. In addition to councillors and council officials, meetings are attended by representatives of the police and the NHS primary care trust. Each Community Council neighbourhood has a named champion on Waltham Forest Council's cabinet, and Community Councils receive £10,000 a year for local allocation. Projects supported so far include street trees, youth work, flower baskets, litter bins, upgrading street lighting, establishment of an alcohol free zone and the first mobile CCTV camera in the borough.

Kingston-upon-Thames has a long-established structure which divides the borough into four neighbourhoods. Havering's six area committees similarly take decisions on some issues, including traffic management. Islington's area committees, introduced in 2002, have delegated powers and budgets.

In Tower Hamlets, eight Local Area Partnerships feed into the borough's Local Strategic Partnership. Westminster City Council holds surgeries ahead of its Area Forum meetings, enabling residents to raise issues about any of the council's services with officials regardless of whether they are on the agenda for the meeting.

Each of Newham's ten Community Forums, which are also part of the Local Strategic Partnership structure, has its own neighbourhood action plan reflecting local people's priorities. In addition to meetings, the forums are required to hold 'listening days' to talk to local people about their aspirations for the borough's future, and to organise an annual carnival or festival in the forum area. There are also youth forums in Newham, as in some other boroughs, to encourage participation by young people.

In addition to such area committee arrangements, London boroughs offer numerous examples of other initiatives which are similar in nature to some activities undertaken by parish councils:

- Wandsworth has town centre managers in each of the borough's six town centres whose role includes supporting partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors to sustain and enhance each centre
- Changes in Common, in the Woolwich Common area of Greenwich, is an initiative where the council, other service providers and the private and voluntary sectors work together to ensure services meet local needs. Residents can opt for different levels of involvement ranging from taking part in surveys and polls to working with tenants' and residents' associations and serving on the Changes in Common board
- Lewisham and Greenwich are among boroughs that have established friends groups to support the management of their parks
- In recent years central government initiatives, such as New Deal for Communities and Sure Start, have increased the number of Londoners directly engaged with public services in board service and decision-making
- Public involvement in housing is long-established. Lambeth has participation officers who support the growth of residents organisations, with particular efforts in hard-to-reach communities, and a Tenants Council which formally represents the council's tenants and leaseholders.

Kingston-upon-Thames

Delegation of decision-making away from the town hall and into local communities operates extensively in Kingston-upon-Thames.

The borough is divided into four neighbourhoods, each with its own Neighbourhood Committee. Councillors serve on the committee for the neighbourhood that includes their ward. All members of the council take part in the Neighbourhood Committee arrangements, with committees usually chaired by a councillor from the party with the most seats in a particular neighbourhood.

Budgets are delegated to the neighbourhoods – funds totalling about £8 million were allocated to the four neighbourhoods last year. Neighbourhood Committees are responsible for a range of local services, which include traffic, parking, planning, licensing, parks, open spaces, youth services and local libraries. Councillors make decisions at neighbourhood meetings which are held in public at local venues every 5-6 weeks.

Neighbourhood Committees also contribute to Kingston Council's scrutiny process. Chairs of Neighbourhood Committees have the same powers as the chairs of overview panels to call in decisions of the council's executive for review.

Kingston says the neighbourhood system strengthens the council's ability to address variations in priorities in different parts of the borough, as well as making it easier for local people to influence the decision-making process. Public attendance at Neighbourhood Committee meetings exceeds that of other types of council meeting.

4 – Parish councils in London: the terms of debate

In its final report, the Commission on London Governance acknowledged that urban parishes could bring benefits to communities in terms of representation, but questioned whether there would be real value added from introducing another tier of government into London. Specifically, some Commission members argued that:

- Many roles and responsibilities of parish councils were already managed by area committees and neighbourhood arrangements in the boroughs
- There would be confusion over roles and responsibilities of parish and ward councillors
- There was evidence from other parts of the country of antagonism and negativity between the tiers, turf wars and a refusal to compromise
- The structure empowered ‘Nimbyism’ and could undermine attempts to equalise access to local services and advice across London
- There would be significant capital and running cost implications
- In terms of capturing communities, some inner London wards consisted of only a few streets and the Boundary Commission already took into account cultural factors and geographical boundaries when setting up ward boundaries.

The National Association of Local Councils expressed disappointment and surprise at this outcome, believing the Commission had lost a valuable opportunity to shape real local government in London. At an oral hearing of the Commission (14 June, 2005) representatives of the NALC advanced a range of positive attributes to support parish councils. These included the important consideration that parish councillors are, like all other councillors, exposed to election by the full electorate.

In London, where many services are outside local government accountability, parish councillors would increase the number of local representatives with direct mandates from the electorate. Parish councils operate within local government traditions, and as a result have clearer lines of accountability than many partnerships and similar bodies set up in recent decades. Borough councillors are concerned, however, that there would be public confusion between ward and parish councillors. Unlike the county areas where most parish councils are located, London has no recent experience of two-tier local government at neighbourhood service level.

There are fears that such confusion and overlapping of roles between ward and parish councillors could be particularly damaging at a time when ward councillors are being urged to undertake stronger community and neighbourhood duties. The political management changes of the Local Government Act 2000 have had the logic of encouraging non-executive councillors to increase their community involvement. *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter* says: "It should be democratically elected local councillors who are advocates for their communities and represent the views of the public about the services they receive. Clearly giving councillors this role of neighbourhood leadership should strengthen local democracy." A very similar argument is advanced by the Commission on London Governance, which calls for councillors to become true local champions, acting as the human face of all publicly funded local services in their areas.

Efforts to achieve this vision are in progress in London in ways such as Newham Council's Influential Councillor Scheme designed to recognise and support councillors as leaders of their local communities. The extent to which confusion between ward and parish councillors might arise would depend on how similar their roles proved to be. This raises the core question of what parish councils in London would be like.

Neighbourhood, like community, is a term lacking in consistent definition. *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter* refers to the need for any form of neighbourhood arrangements to be complementary to, and integrated with, local representative democracy. It speaks of councillors being "at the heart of neighbourhood arrangements stimulating the local voice, listening to it, and representing it at council level." Neighbourhood leadership, it continues, "must be a central element of every ward councillor's role which should include being an effective partner in his or her ward's neighbourhood arrangements." Such passages imply that the Government

envisages neighbourhoods, for the purpose of its double devolution strategy, as often being quite small in terms of population size and geographical footprint. They appear from this part of the document to be something that is frequently likely to be all or part of a ward.

Another paragraph of *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter* confirms that the ward will often be a key unit of area in establishing and maintaining any neighbourhood arrangements but continues: "This is not, however, to define the ward as the neighbourhood. In some cases a ward might be the neighbourhood, in others the neighbourhood could be either part of a ward or an area consisting of several wards such as a parish."

This paragraph, at least, sees parishes as being likely to consist of several wards. Since existing parish councils in England vary from tiny organisations to ones covering tens of thousands of people, there is no certainty what the average size of a London parish might prove to be. It is possible that some viable, relatively small parish councils would emerge at ward or sub-ward level. Bromley, for example, has more than 80 residents' and community associations: most of these are in distinct localities and some might form the basis for parish councils. There are grounds for suggesting, however, that many London parish councils would be likely to be considerably larger entities. Types of area in the capital where residents might be particularly attracted to petitioning for parish councils include:

- Formerly separate local authority areas in the outer boroughs which were brought into Greater London in 1965 and still retain Surrey, Kent or Essex postal addresses and identities. It is possible that this could also happen in parts of inner London.

- Town centres throughout the capital
- London's "villages" which have distinctive images and outlooks, often differing in social and economic terms from the bulk of the boroughs of which they form part
- Time-expired New Deal for Community schemes where residents' representatives have gained experience of direct involvement in decision-making
- Housing estates
- Areas where the creation of parish councils might be used to strengthen single-issue campaigns for or against proposed developments or other changes. The types of strong-identity locations featuring in this year's Evening Standard campaign to save small shops are examples, but it could equally apply in cases of local resistance to big planning applications or public service changes.

Newham

Newham's Influential Councillor Scheme connects ward councillors and the people they represent to all the council's decision-making structures.

The initiative, introduced in October, 2004, seeks to recognise and support councillors as leaders of their local communities. Newham has ten Community Forums which form part of its Local Strategic Partnership structure. The Mayor of Newham has appointed lead councillors in each of the ten Community Forum areas to work with other ward councillors, residents, the police, NHS, voluntary and private sectors to identify and address both immediate and long term problems.

Under the terms of the scheme, councillors must be consulted – and their local community knowledge taken into account - before any decisions affecting their areas are made by the Mayor, officers or council committees. The procedure includes regular four-monthly area consultation meetings at which senior council officers responsible for activities such as the public realm, housing and anti-social behaviour meet all the councillors from an area.

Each Community Forum has its own neighbourhood action plan, setting out long-term objectives for the area, and lead councillors attend a community forum steering group where the council and other agencies review progress and ensure that communities are receiving appropriate services.

5 – Impact on existing local government

While the existence of parish councils in many of the above circumstances need not necessarily be negative, the implications must be recognised. Such parish councils would usually encompass large numbers of people: The Bridge, the New Deal for Communities scheme at Seven Sisters, Haringey, houses 11,000 people in 4,500 homes. More than 20,000 people live in the Hackney New Deal area. London's size and concentration of population could make it the scene of attempts to form some of the biggest and most ambitious parish councils in the country. Even if residents of Friern Barnet, Carshalton, Hornchurch, St Marylebone or Finsbury did not seek to reopen local identity issues arising from the 1965 Greater London reorganisation, a good many potential parish councils in a city of London's size are likely to be large-scale. Like existing big parish councils elsewhere in England, they could be expected to bid to take over services from the boroughs.

Legislation which simply extended the existing English arrangements for establishing parish councils to London, without taking account of the capital's particular circumstances, could therefore have considerable consequences. There is a distinction to be drawn between Mr Miliband's vision of giving neighbourhoods more influence over liveability issues such as street cleaning and community safety and initiating an approach which, intentionally or not, could lead to parish councils evolving into a new tier of service delivery in parts of London. The latter would obviously have implications for existing service provision which need to be considered in advance of legislation. *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter* acknowledges that "unduly extensive devolution to the most local level is unlikely to be effective or efficient," so this is an area where the Government has recognised the need for a cautious approach. In that case, it would be helpful for any legislation to specifically address the issue by defining the scope of London parish council powers.

The extent to which Londoners might actually wish to form parish councils is, of course, impossible to predict. Overall experience in the rest of England shows that parish councils become more common as areas become more rural. Although some 150 new parish councils have been established in England in the past nine years, few of these have been in metropolitan areas. If this were any guide, it would suggest that quietly removing the barrier to parish councils in London might lead to no more than the creation of a few curiosities. The change, however, will probably not occur quietly since the Government will presumably wish to see some results from its legislation. If the new availability of parish councils is actively promoted, particularly at a time when the Government is focusing attention on neighbourhood empowerment more generally, interest among some London communities is sure to be stimulated.

Area forums, in boroughs where they are established, are the closest thing London currently has to parish councils but staunch supporters of parish councils reject them as a comparable or sufficient alternative because:

- Areas are often very large, which can lead to the linking of communities with little in common into a single area
- Active members of the public involved with area committees do not have the mandate from the electorate enjoyed by parish councillors
- Area committees sometimes lack any decision-making powers
- Some area committees have no delegated budgets for local use, while others have only small ones.

Such concerns raise valid issues but these are capable of being addressed, and in some cases this is happening. Delegated budgets, for example, are a recent innovation in some of the boroughs that operate them. As experience grows it is possible that budgets will expand in size, and be delegated not only from the centre to areas but from areas to a smaller neighbourhood level. Some boroughs have Local Strategic Partnership structures which could accommodate the election of community representatives at central and area levels. Elected tenants' representatives are a familiar feature of housing management and the principle could be extended elsewhere.

The piecemeal introduction of parish councils would obviously complicate the running of London boroughs' area arrangements. Area forum structures cover entire boroughs. Would parish councils, where they existed, replace a council's own area forums in that part of the borough, or sit alongside them as similar but separate institutions? Neither outcome would be ideal and the question points to a bigger issue. Because of the exceptional size, diversity and mobility of London's population and the city's continuous urban character, the existing predominantly rural model of parish councils cannot be transported unamended to the capital. London neighbourhoods do not resemble free-standing rural ones. They flow into each other and share community facilities to an extent that has no parallel in rural locations and small towns. Forming parish councils on boundaries which failed to take account of existing initiatives including area arrangements, neighbourhood management schemes, town centre management, New Deal for Communities projects and Business Improvement Districts would be a recipe for worsening the familiar London problem of non-coterminous boundaries and proliferating governance structures. Borough councils, representing the wider electorate, would also need to be able to take a view on the appropriateness of proposed parish boundaries to ensure that they were not used to artificially exclude any particular sections of a neighbourhood.

Councillors, in London and nationally, are concerned that local government could find itself squeezed between the Government's current interest in promoting both regionalism and neighbourhood empowerment. If this happened the spread of parish councils with weaker powers than local government could, perversely, contribute to greater centralisation rather than devolution. Although such concerns, like London borough councillors' fears that they would find themselves competing with parish councillors for the public's attention, may be regarded by national decision-makers as driven by self-interest, they demonstrate the need for the forthcoming local government white paper to present a coherent and complete vision of the future.

In spite of such apprehensions, some councillors acknowledge that there could be circumstances where parish councils might make a positive contribution in London – for example on housing estates, where all residents have strong shared interests and parish councils could be built upon existing tenant involvement in management.

Equally, however, there are anxieties that in certain circumstances parish councils could be used to promote inappropriate sectional or protective policies against the interests of a borough as a whole. In London's most expensive and exclusive residential areas, this could manifest itself by parish councils being set up primarily to finance private security patrols in public streets. Elsewhere, the main motivation for a forming a parish council might be to protect a leafy oasis from the encroachment of any development. There are also anxieties that, in parts of London, extremist political groups could take advantage of parish councils to promote socially divisive policies.

There are ways in which legislation introducing parish councils to London could address the above concerns and others that exist in London local government circles. These include:

- Confining the powers of London parishes to local neighbourhood issues to prevent them developing into an additional substantial tier of public service commissioning and delivery
- Requiring London parishes to conform to other area and neighbourhood boundaries and arrangements, and giving boroughs powers to ensure that proposed boundaries for parish councils were socially inclusive
- Allowing decisions on applications to form parish councils to be made by London boroughs. Since the Government has said the nature of neighbourhood arrangements cannot be determined in Whitehall, there is logic to the approval of parish councils taking place locally. This could operate with safeguards such as an appeal mechanism to prevent blanket rejection in any borough opposed to parish councils in principle
- Financing parish councils through a separate London neighbourhood fund rather than council tax precept. London borough council tax bills already include the Greater London Authority precept, and there could be merit in a separate fund from which potential parish councils would bid for finance.

Beyond such specifics, however, the proposal to introduce parish councils to London raises a broader question about the extent to which they would contribute to or hinder the Government's goal of greater neighbourhood involvement. This is considered in the following final section.

6 - Towards greater neighbourhood involvement

Turnout in parish council elections in England is similar to other local government polls. Other recent experiments with local-level elections have not succeeded in bettering the local government performance. The latest report of the evaluation of New Deal for Communities, which is being co-ordinated by Sheffield Hallam University for the ODPM's Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (*New Deal for Communities 2001-05: An Interim Evaluation, Research Report 17*), shows that average turnout in New Deal board elections in 2003-04 was 23 per cent, and these elections sometimes took place on wider franchises than the electoral register. As a proportion of the total electorate, participation in the early NHS foundation trust elections has been exceedingly low. So, although the government's aim in proposing to introduce parish councils is to help advance its neighbourhood empowerment agenda, it is necessary to reflect that there is far more to the painstaking, long-term task of promoting community involvement than creating new institutions.

If parish councils were established by law throughout London as a new tier of local government they would no doubt soon become an accepted part of the city's structure, in the same way as the changes that have occurred in school governance. Some parish councils would be more effective, more interesting and better supported than others, but they would all be part of the London-wide governance fabric. All could expect equal attention from their borough councils and other public authorities. Much of the concern about their proposed introduction, however, results from the fact that parish councils will not exist everywhere in London. They will be formed only in those places where residents petition for them. Settled communities with a strong sense of identity are more likely to perceive the benefits than areas of inner London with exceptionally high levels of population mobility.

There are fears that some of the communities most likely to petition for parish councils would use them predominantly as vehicles to agitate for additional attention and resources from their borough councils. The risk of parish councils undermining attempts to equalise service provision was one of the concerns identified by the Commission on London Governance. It is an aspect of the proposal that arises repeatedly in discussions with representatives of London local government, allied to worries that parish councils could become a threat to community cohesion. They could certainly become new weapons in conflicts of interest, for example in town centres where the priorities of residents and businesses involved in the night economy diverge. Even if experience eventually proved such fears to be exaggerated, they are genuine and understandable in view of the fact that London has levels of population density, mobility and multicultural diversity – and a daily influx of commuters and visitors – quite unlike anywhere in England currently served by a parish council.

A radical but effective solution would be to require all-or-nothing referendums in each London borough prior to the introduction of parish councils, following the model of referendums on elected mayors. If the vote went in favour, the entire borough would be parished; if lost, there would be no parish councils in that borough.

Vibrant Local Leadership (ODPM, January, 2005), published in parallel with *Citizen Engagement and Public Services*, indicated that the Government was “interested in the potential for piloting a range of governance approaches which integrate wider locality and community dimensions in a way that is tailored to local circumstances.” The door is therefore open for boroughs to propose initiatives reflecting London’s particular circumstances, including its frequent lack of clear boundaries between neighbourhoods.

Borough referendums could offer residents a choice between parish councils and the local authority’s own area forums, or any new arrangements the borough council chose to propose in response to the Government’s call for greater neighbourhood empowerment. One borough might make a network of small parish councils the core of its area arrangements (Milton Keynes is a rare example of a fully parished authority); others might choose to argue for the superiority of traditional area structures.

Either way, the concept of allowing the public to choose is a valid one. There is one particularly distinctive difference between parish councils and local authority area arrangements. Parish councils are formal local government units in their own right; their members are separately elected on different mandates to the principal authority. As experience shows, however, this undoubted strength can become a weakness if it gives rise to turf wars, disagreements or stalemate between parish councils and principal authorities. The contrasting characteristic of borough area forums is that they are part of the principal authority – they leave the double devolution line of descent from Whitehall to Town Hall to Neighbourhood unbroken. Where area arrangements work effectively, ward councillors can participate in community engagement and local decision-making at area level while at the same time representing an area’s broader interests at borough level.

A number of London boroughs are already responding to the Government’s calls to extend neighbourhood empowerment and it must be hoped that, if parish councils are introduced, it does not happen in ways which complicate these efforts.

There may be circumstances – such as an exit strategy from New Deal for Community schemes, estates transferring from local authority tenure or new housing developments in the London Thames Gateway – where parish councils might prove the most effective form of local devolution. Neighbourhood empowerment, however, will obviously not be confined to places with parish councils. The Government’s proposed National Neighbourhoods Framework, due later this year, is intended to support and facilitate neighbourhood engagement in all communities. If the Government succeeds in its intention of making neighbourhood arrangements central to the way local authorities operate, and giving residents more direct influence over clean streets, open spaces and the quality of the most local services, then all neighbourhoods should begin to share the traditional benefits associated with parish councils. They could, ironically, arrive in London at a time when they should least be needed.

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