



Parish councils in London

The recent vote in favour of a community council by residents of the Queen's Park ward in North Westminster paves the way for the first new 'local authority' in London for more than 75 years. This briefing looks at the implications of this development in the wider context of an evolving localism and whether or not it might signal the start of a revival of parish councils in London.

Overview

On May 28, residents of the Queen's Park ward in North Westminster voted 'yes' to a community council. Their decision means that, for the first time in over 75 years, London is likely to see a new 'local authority', able to raise funds via precept, directly commission services and provide an independent platform for community leadership.

Although the council won't be formally constituted before 2014, the move comes just as the government is on the verge of publishing guidance to make it easier to establish new forms of neighbourhood governance. With the future shape and size of local government hotly debated, these proposals are expected to spark further interest in questions of representation, power and financial control.

In London these discussions will be followed closely. The capital's size and urban complexity mean that community governance structures form part of an extensive and fluid network of formal and informal associations. These are often supported by local authorities responsible for meeting a level of public service demand greater than anywhere else in the country.

It is too early to tell whether the decision of Queen's Park residents marks the beginning of a great revival of parish councils in London. Yet the attention generated by their campaign provides an opportunity to explore its significance, highlight the successes of borough-supported community governance and raise questions regarding the direction of the government's policy of 'localism'.

Analysis

Established by the Local Government Act 1894, London's parish councils ceased to exist more than 75 years ago. Following a county review order, North Ockendon, on the far east of the capital's fringe, was the last to be abolished in 1936. With the civil parishes these councils represented formally abolished in 1965, it wasn't until the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 that the prospect of new parish-style councils in London once again became a possibility.

“This is an exciting day for London. The Queen's Park Community Council's referendum success points to a long awaited reform of local government and [the] transfer of fiscal power to local people - Neil Johnson, chief executive, Paddington Development Trust”

Outside of London there are currently some 8,500 parish councils. These cover approximately 35 per cent of England's population and have a combined annual expenditure of over £400 million. More than 150 of these have been created since 1997, yet the passing of the 2007 Act did not lead to a surge in enthusiasm for community councils in London and the progress of residents in Queen's Park stands out as a notable exception.

Campaigners have suggested that this is largely down to a lack of awareness on behalf of the public. Others have suggested that this is due to the fact that the processes involved in setting up a council require a great deal of organisation, support and funding. In London, as with other urban centres, there are also additional factors. The capital is a famously diverse city, with dispersed communities often linked by interest rather than geography. Its population is younger and more mobile, with communities lacking the consistency and capacity to build new platforms for independent governance. As the economic hub of the country, London's population swells and shrinks daily as people travel from across the world to work and visit.

The government has indicated that at least some of these issues will be tackled in its forthcoming guidance. This guidance will be framed by the Localism Act 2011, which enabled the establishment of neighbourhood forums for planning purposes and has the potential to encourage the spread of neighbourhood governance structures.

However, many London boroughs already have well-developed sub-borough decision-making structures and it is unclear how the push towards parishes will fit with these arrangements. Ward forums, local committees, area partnerships - these structures take on a variety of forms, reflecting local priorities and decisions. Some have only a consultative role, but many more have power and financial resources delegated to their control. Ward councillors often play a strong role in these groups, providing a vital link between a neighbourhood and the borough council and ensuring clear governance and accountability.

For example, in Lewisham local assemblies have organised a whole range of activities from computer training for older and younger residents, to the Sydenham Arts Festival, to benches outside Lee Manor Primary School, which provide shelter for waiting parents. The Lewisham Central local assembly gave £5,000 to the Hither Green Community Association in 2009 to organise volunteers to improve the environment around Hither Green Station. This project was independently assessed by NEF Consulting who found that for every £1 spent, £10.20 was generated in social value.

Similarly, in Islington ward partnerships bring together ward councillors, local partners and community groups to develop a ward improvement plan and co-ordinate a 'local initiatives fund' for allocation to the voluntary and community sector. These are informal groups, but with a link to the council and influence over projects of significant scale and financial scope such as estate improvements, park redevelopment and transport enforcement.

Mindful of the range of activities in place across boroughs, London Councils and the City of London published research¹ by Professor Tony Travers at the LSE that explored the development of Community Improvement Districts as an alternative to parish councils. These informal organisations would address issues of scale and complexity in the city without 'crowding out' well-established local area forums and neighbourhood groups. The government has indicated it is interested in taking forward this idea, yet it remains to be seen how this will be factored into their policy approach in the coming months.

Commentary

To campaigners in Queen's Park the decision by residents on 28 May will be welcome, yet the wider significance of their choice remains unclear. Across London, informal associations such as sports clubs and more structured forms of engagement such as neighbourhood forums demonstrate an

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¹ Engaging London's Communities: The Big Society and Localism, Oct 2011

appetite and ability for people to come together and achieve what they want for an area.

This is not to say that success for a group can be guaranteed; resources are limited and there will always be differences of opinion. Rather, it is to contend that by and large people demand outcomes and associations for their tangible benefits. Few see bureaucracy as a good in itself and many would be mindful of the need to balance the size of an institution with its purpose and intrinsic value.

In a complex and highly mobile city like London, the prospect of a return to parish councils might be seen as an anachronism. In particular, opponents are likely to be concerned that parish councils have their provenance in a more bureaucratic age, that they risk intensifying disagreements between neighbourhoods that vary markedly in composition and that they are generally unsuited to the vagaries of contemporary urban life. However, it would be wrong to dismiss the outcome of a hard fought campaign, or to underestimate the sophistication and ambition of local communities.

Indeed it is the ambition of Queen's Park residents that prompts a more serious reflection on the government's policy of localism generally. Critically, forthcoming guidance on establishing new forms of neighbourhood governance will be judged not on the basis of how good it is at stimulating demand for parish councils, but rather on how effective it is at increasing the supply of opportunities for residents, workers and visitors to make a positive impact on the places they share.

With the next comprehensive spending review looming large, discussions about the growing demands on councils and their ability to meet these within projected budgets have already begun in earnest. Against this background the open public services white paper has proposed to enhance the role of civic groups in the delivery of services as means of increasing efficiency and targeted responsiveness. Arguably, the 'red thread', which links speculation on future neighbourhood governance structures with the stark budget choices facing council leaders is a question regarding the extent to which this form of 'supply-side localism' is being applied consistently or effectively.

London has changed significantly in the last 75 years. Its boroughs play a vital role in governing and delivering for a sophisticated world city. Crucially, they do this in partnership and with the widespread support and trust of their residents. They are not monolithic structures removed from everyday life, but woven deeply and subtly into the fabric of their communities.

It will be important for the government to be clear with communities about what it hopes to achieve and what it believes new guidance will add. There are few situations where outcomes have been lost due to a lack of regulation. If the government is to take forward policy in this area, it should ensure it is tuned to the tempo of the 21st rather than the 19th century.

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