

New parish and town councils in urban areas

Resident-led new parish and town councils (termed local councils) are an emerging form of community self-help. Residents in several areas have taken advantage of legislation in 1997 to develop such councils. This study, by Mark Bevan of the University of York, concentrates on the experience of three local councils in urban areas. He found that:

-  Local councils have a wide remit for activities in which they can engage. This versatility can lend itself to a focus upon the priorities that emerge from residents in any community. Respondents highlighted funding community development workers, developing a vision for their area, responding to queries from individual residents and representing the needs of residents to other service providers.
-  Respondents noted the hard work required to make the transition from a community group into a new tier of local government. Being members of a new local council represented a steep learning curve for everyone involved. People emphasised the need for information and training, a recognition of the costs involved in setting up new local councils, and that there is inadequate provision to meet these needs.
-  Respondents attached much importance to the independence and permanence of local councils, but the councils are sometimes viewed with suspicion by the principal authority and other stakeholders. It is important to acknowledge the potential for tensions and to explore mechanisms for resolving them.
-  The new local councils were very conscious of the need to achieve credibility in their area by clear demonstration of what they could do and to raise awareness of the potential role that local councils can play.
-  Great value is placed by new local councils on sharing their experience. One way of developing skills and confidence would be to create links with other local councils, and to develop a national network for local councils or a website.

Background

National policy encourages residents to have a greater say about what goes on in their area. Increasing attention is being paid to the role that local councils can play, and residents in several areas are developing such councils.

Local councils are democratically elected bodies, and all residents living within the parish or town council area who are registered on the electoral register are entitled to attend meetings and to vote. The local councils must hold an Annual General Meeting once a year at which residents are entitled to question the council over the conduct of its affairs. Elections are held once every four years. Councils' independent status is enhanced by the fact that they can use on their own resources, for example, by raising tax through the precept (a charge incorporated in the council tax).

A cornerstone of recent policy changes by central government was the introduction of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme in March 2003. Local councils that attain quality status have enhanced capacity and competence within their area over consultation, delivery of services and information. Linked to these developments are ways of enhancing the capacity and competence of local councils. They have more funds to spend under section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972 - up to £5 per elector - which is a general spending power for the benefit and wellbeing of its residents. There is a focus upon developing skills and lifelong learning as set out in the national training strategy for local councils developed by the National Association of Local Councils and The Countryside Agency. About 107 new local councils have been established since 1997.

Local councils are making significant contributions to the governance of communities in both urban and rural areas. In rural areas, they currently have opportunities available for grant funding to provide a vision for their communities or to tackle transport issues. But such opportunities are not available to local councils in urban areas, where similar issues may occur.

Key messages from the new research

The current research focuses on Blakelaw and North Fenham, an urban parish in Newcastle upon Tyne, where residents have recently established a local council. Their experience was compared with three other urban areas where residents have either recently established local councils or are campaigning to develop one.

Community development

In each local council, a key objective was to develop a way for residents to contribute to the regeneration of their neighbourhoods and deal with the effects of disadvantage. Respondents highlighted a diverse range of emerging activities in the new local councils, such as funding community development workers, developing a vision for their area, dealing with litter, responding to queries from individual residents and representing the needs of residents to other service providers. Two of the local councils have employed community development workers using a range of sources of finance including external grants and funding from a Single Regeneration Budget Partnership.

Transition and training

Local councillors have considerable responsibilities, learning how to operate within the specific structures of local government, but also employing staff, budgeting, fundraising, representing communities, case work and service delivery. This highlights the importance of making an effective transition from a group of residents campaigning for a new local council to local councillors. Very few new councillors are likely to have prior experience of working in this type of structure.

Training and guidance needs to recognise the particular requirements of residents working for the first time in a new local council. Such training offers the potential for a continuous and expanding cycle of capacity-building around the issue of democratic renewal, as residents develop the skills and confidence to take on this new role. The costs of this capacity-building, in terms of time and money, need to be recognised. An example of where this already happens is the grant funding available to tenants wanting to explore the options for forming themselves into Tenant Management Organisations.

Trust and tension

Respondents attached great importance to the independence and permanence of local councils. It was felt that they offered a long-term focus for residents in their area, particularly as successive and/or overlapping partnerships and regeneration initiatives are often short-lived. New local councils are often established in an absence of trust, borne of frustration amongst the residents who have campaigned for them.

However, the new councils themselves may be viewed with suspicion amongst existing principal authorities (shires, districts and unitary councils) and

other stakeholders and networks, which may remain to be convinced of the value of a new tier of government.

It would be helpful to acknowledge the potential for tension and conflict between tiers of government and to offer ways that such tensions might be mediated and resolved. The model charter highlighted as part of the launch of Quality Parishes and Town Council Scheme offers one avenue for negotiating agreed partnership-working arrangements between local and principal authorities.

Consideration could also be given for a mechanism for a third party to mediate between these tiers of government and to broker the development of new local councils.

Tensions may also arise over the way an emerging resident-led structure can sit alongside existing community groups and the voluntary sector in the area. It was felt that the new local council could be perceived as a threat to established groups. Some respondents highlighted the value of clearly distinguishing the local council as a tier of local government, rather than as part of community groups and the voluntary sector, particularly in relation to representing the views of residents as a whole in regeneration initiatives or feeding into Local Strategic Partnerships.

Thus a key issue is how an emerging resident-led structure can successfully sit alongside other forms of resident involvement that are established or planned for an area. At root is the issue of how bottom-up and top-down forms of representing communities can be successfully linked and how tensions arising from these developments can be resolved. Some other models (for example, Tenant Management Organisations, Estate Agreements) have taken forward how these issues can be tackled. What is lacking is an overall framework at national level for encouraging, piloting, evaluating and mediating between these different models.

Credibility and awareness

An important element of achieving Quality Parish status is that local councils should be representative of, and actively engage, all parts of its community. A challenge for the new local councils is to be able to sustain interest not only amongst residents at large, but also amongst individuals willing to stand as local councillors, in order to ensure that the council does not become marginalised through apathy and lack of support. The new local councils were very conscious of the need to achieve credibility in their area by clear demonstration of what they could do. In particular,

there was a need to show success to residents, who may be sceptical of the value of the local council, especially when they are paying the new precept through higher council tax.

Respondents noted that considerable effort was required to raise awareness amongst service providers of the role that local councils could play within the neighbourhoods they represent. Since a local council was often a new feature of governance in an area, other urban-based organisations and agencies were often not familiar with working with it.

Just as importantly, it was felt that such organisations may not necessarily be aware of the full range of activities that local councils could become active in, particularly in relation to tackling the needs of disadvantaged neighbourhoods and regenerating urban areas. Indeed, respondents expressed concern that their efforts to promote the potential of local councils were hampered by the word 'parish'. This caused some confusion among some residents and service providers, who thought the local council was connected with the church.

One question which merits further attention is the extent to which the value of the development of new local councils lies in the process, just as much as the structure itself, i.e. that residents have initiated and led the development of the new local council.

Shared experience

Residents involved in setting up the new councils emphasised the value of sharing experience. One way of developing skills and confidence would be an opportunity to learn by making links with other new local councils around the country. This could be taken forward by the development of a national network for new local councils or a website. The existing website hosted by the Improvement and Development Agency could perhaps be developed to facilitate the sharing of good practice between new and established local councils.

Conclusions and recommendations

There is great diversity in the approaches to facilitating resident involvement in the local governance of neighbourhoods. There is no single 'right' way to achieve this. Local councils offer one option for devolving power to the neighbourhood level that is being explored by several principal authorities.

However, there are few instances where residents themselves can exercise a right to demand that a new form of community involvement be established in their area. Significantly, the Local Government and

Rating Act 1997 enables residents to establish local councils if they so choose, enshrining community empowerment as a statutory right.

The researcher makes several recommendations based on the experiences of the new local councils that were the focus of the study:

- Training and guidance should recognise the particular requirements of residents working for the first time in a new local council. The need for transition from a group of residents campaigning for a new local council to local councillors needs to be recognised and effectively supported.
- It would be helpful to acknowledge the potential for tension and conflict between tiers of government and to offer ways that such tensions might be mediated and resolved.
- To maximise the potential of local councils, particularly in urban areas, it is important to raise awareness amongst service providers about their extent and nature.
- The establishment of a national network or website would facilitate the sharing of good practice.
- Policy developments at national level for encouraging and supporting community empowerment should consider the extent to which new local councils can be considered a form of community self-help (local councils, as statutory bodies, are often precluded from sources of funding available to community groups).
- Government and agencies at national level are recommended to consider how the work of local councils in urban areas could be enhanced by allowing them to bid for funding, as is currently available to local councils in rural areas.
- Further research is recommended to explore the views of residents who live in areas where new local councils have been established in order to ascertain what they think about the development of this type of governance in their area.

About this project

This research sets out the results of a small-scale project to monitor the establishment of a new urban local council in Blakelaw and North Fenham in

Newcastle upon Tyne. The research draws upon the experiences of three other areas to illustrate the processes involved in trying to establish new local councils in urban areas: Headland Town Council in Hartlepool, established in 1999; Offerton Estate Parish Council in Stockport, established 2002; and Headingley in Leeds, which comprises a community group in the process of establishing a parish council.

The report describes the process of establishing and running new local councils from the perspective of some of the residents. A qualitative approach was taken to establish the views of a range of residents involved in the process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents who participated in the campaigns to establish the newly formed local councils.

How to get further information

Further information about the study is available from Mark Bevan, Centre for Housing Policy, University of York, YO10 5DD. Telephone 01904 433693, email mab13@york.ac.uk.

The full report, **New parish and town councils in urban areas** by Mark Bevan, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 84263 003 2, price £11.95).