



Japan Local Government Centre, London

Monthly Report for June 2011 – London Community Councils

Since entering government in May 2010, British Prime Minister David Cameron has spoken of his central aim to decentralise the state as far as possible to the community level through his 'Big Society', while the Mayor of London Boris Johnson speaks of his 'big idea' for a second term to "put the village back in the city". This report considers why there aren't already parish councils in London to realise these closely related aims.

From 2007, neighbourhoods in London have the right to form councils responsible for their own community governance, under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act. These parish councils, which already exist elsewhere in England, have substantive powers and serve populations of a just a few thousand. Envisaged as a mechanism for residents to take greater control of their lives, there has been a positive response from communities and several new councils are proposed. On the face of it, there appears to be a vague political consensus on the value of these councils, should communities decide they want them. However, there is apparently no political will to systematically create them across London and existing local authorities are at best indifferent to them – London Councils has in fact long opposed them.

Parish councils have existed in rural parts of England since 1894. Their *raison d'être* was to provide some local control for small communities who received the majority of their local government services from distant county and rural district authorities. As inter-war London suburbia expanded across open fields, part of the rural way of life that was swept away were the parish councils, which were all abolished in the outer suburbs by 1935. When Greater London was formally created in 1965 it must have seemed an efficient measure to eliminate parish councils from the legislation, as none had existed for thirty years.

Most of the history of parish councils therefore takes place away from London. Over time they have evolved and are now permitted in urban areas, and their number has been growing since 1974. They are able to go by a variety of names including town, village, community or neighbourhood. The powers available include planning oversight, maintenance of open spaces and provision of community infrastructure. The services they provide are funded by a local tax known as a precept, with a typical charge per household of around £30 a year. In 2007, after 42 years, the prohibition of parish councils in London was lifted following a commitment in the 2005 Labour Party manifesto. The parish experience is not entirely alien to the region as the urban fringe around London is almost entirely served by parish councils. Chigwell, Loughton and Buckhurst Hill, all on the London Underground and part of the urban

area, have parish councils created relatively recently.

There are around ten or so prospective parish councils in Greater London. The vast majority are in the higher density Inner London area. All are at an early stage in their development, with a proposal for Queen's Park in northwest London the most advanced and coherent, having lodged the necessary petition to force the City of Westminster to hold a consultation (known as a governance review under the 2007 Act). The process of creation takes at least a year and requires the local authority to undertake a review of governance arrangements.

The nascent demand for parish councils in London is driven by a number of factors. In Queen's Park, residents fear the loss of vital community facilities under council cuts, other areas feel that their community needs are neglected by the large local government unit at London Borough level. In Hackney, the campaign for a community council for the London Fields area is at a similarly advanced stage. Backed by a (Conservative) London Assembly Member residents feel that the council has neglected this corner of the borough and that its popular local market is under threat from property developers. In the Chingford part of Waltham Forest, local Conservative councillors feel that the Labour-run council neglects it on account of poorer wards in the south. However, problems have arisen in areas where the recognised community is effectively divided by the boundaries between London Boroughs, for instance the campaigns in Kilburn and Thamesmead. Currently the law does not allow for cross-borough community councils, leading some to ponder the creation of two separate parishes and arranging their merger later.

It is important to consider the imperative towards new parishes in London as being concerned with the scale of democracy (or civic engagement in a large metropolis) and the need for community involvement in local planning. The debate over the local tier of London governance has raged since the Victorian era, with a Conservative government introducing the capital's first ever local councils in 1899, in order to keep the radical London County Council in check. Now the imperative is more concerned with the emerging sharing and merger of London Borough services and functions across as many as three councils (see September 2010 Monthly Report). Some argue that in a digital age, the real community involvement tool is local web forums and blogs (see November 2010 Monthly Report), although these could never act as a bulwark against a controversial property development. Some also worry that in the cases of Tower Hamlets and Barking, a community council could become a repository for Islamist or British nationalist extremism, where particular pockets of communal grievance exist. The movement towards a re-parished Greater London is still in its infancy four years on since the 2007 Act lifted the 1965 legislative bar on parish creation. But for those who argued that there was no popular demand for such new bodies, the recent campaigns appear to suggest otherwise.

Any opinions expressed in this report, which is prepared for translation, are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of JLGC or CLAIR.