

Institute for Public Policy Research



HANDFORTH IN HINDSIGHT

THE FUTURE OF HYPERLOCAL
GOVERNANCE IN ENGLAND



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SUMMARY

Hyperlocal governance has huge potential. It can give people a greater say in their areas, helping them determine and deliver what is needed in their neighbourhoods, and bring social benefits to communities as well.

In this report we set out what is needed to renew and expand hyperlocal governance across England.

We recognise the potential and merits of the existing parish council model but highlight that there are issues with it - some of which were illustrated by a viral video of a Handforth council meeting in 2021 that unfortunately played to the stereotypes of the worst of parish council meetings.

Such issues concerning the existing parish model include questions about democratic participation and accountability; the extent to which parish councils are representative of their communities; the degree to which they may be further empowered; funding; the coverage of parish councils across the country; and relationships with other levels of governance, particularly local authorities but also combined authorities.

These must be addressed to reform and expand effective and democratically empowered hyperlocal governance across the country and make good on promises made across political parties to empower communities through 'double devolution'.

To this end, we recommend the following.

PARTICIPATION

- The government should introduce of votes at 16 for parish council elections to widen the franchise and encourage long-term positive impact on political participation. We estimate this would enfranchise an estimated 472,000 voters aged 16 to 17 for the first time in England. This would place parishes at the forefront of democratic reform in England.
- Government should explore introducing remote electronic voting for parish council elections to make participation easier.
- Parish council elections should be held on the same day as other elections, be they local authority, combined authority, or general elections wherever possible.
- In conjunction with the community, parish councils should review their practices and cultures, making them more open and accessible with all meetings being open to the public at locations and times that are convenient to different groups in the local community.

REPRESENTATION

- Parish councils should have 'due regard to the diversity of representation' as a basic, minimum requirement for the appointment of non-elected parish councillors. This would require the secretary of state for the Department of Levelling Up, Communities and Housing to issue regulations as to the appointment of co-opted councillors, under section 16A of the 1972 Local Government Act.
- Parish councils and local authorities should do more to raise awareness of their work through reaching out to residents and providing news on hyperlocal activities and opportunities.

- Local and regional government should support the development of a talent pipeline for community representatives, fostering a hyperlocal democratic culture through providing increased opportunities for citizen engagement and participation in local democracy.
- Government should review the financial support available to those becoming parish councillors and explore more consistency in contributions towards expenses between councils.

POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- Parish councils, local authorities and mayoral combined authorities should increase their cooperation to ensure that parish councils can best utilise their statutory powers as well as other rights introduced under the 2011 Localism Act including the ‘listing’ of ‘assets of community value’ under the Community Right to Bid, being able to bid to run local public services via the Community Right to Challenge, leading the development of a neighbourhood plan or a Community Right to Build order and taking on responsibilities under a General Power of Competence.
- Parish councils should explore the potential of and expand joint working across parish areas in places where hyperlocal capacity is a barrier to utilising powers.
- In areas where parish councils want to take on more responsibilities, the remit of hyperlocal governance should be broadened in agreement with the local authorities with parish councils working in partnership with local authorities with a ‘right to request’ to take on more responsibilities.

FUNDING

- To both protect and facilitate reform at the hyperlocal level, government should offer a long-term financial settlement for local government based on a fair, needs-based funding formula.
- As part of a wider reform of local and regional funding, there is a need to explore the potential revenue raising opportunities that might be afforded at the hyperlocal level – in partnership with other local tiers of government – through forms of fiscal devolution.

COVERAGE

- Local authorities should work in conjunction with residents to establish a clear framework and set of principles for how existing community groups at the hyperlocal level can practically transition to establish a parish council where there is not one currently but is a desire amongst residents for more powers.
- In the most disadvantaged places, investments from the Community Wealth Fund could be used to build the confidence and capacity of people to encourage participation at the hyperlocal level, by supporting initiatives aimed at the development of social capital, seeding new community institutions and enabling people to build skills in community leadership and advocacy.

Our vision is that hyperlocal governance – far from the Handforth council stereotype – could instead become a place of democratic innovation and engagement. Our recommendations address issues of participation, representation, powers, funding and coverage, and highlight the need for improved cooperation across different tiers of government. It is time to empower democracy by fostering democratic innovation and change at the most local level.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years cross-party consensus on the direction of devolution in England has emerged. So far action on English devolution has largely focused on mayoral and county combined authorities. Progress in these areas is welcome – regional and local leaders know their areas best and decisions taken locally can be more responsive to the needs of different places. But for devolution to deliver more, it must also empower communities at the hyperlocal level.

There is a compelling case to hand more powers down beyond the local authority level, to the hyperlocal level. Effective governance at the hyperlocal level is important democratically, in giving communities a greater say in their places. Democratically empowered hyperlocal governance can result in better policy outcomes for places, with local communities often being best placed to determine and deliver what is needed in their neighbourhoods. And effective models of hyperlocal governance can bring social benefits to communities and bolster civic life at the community level.

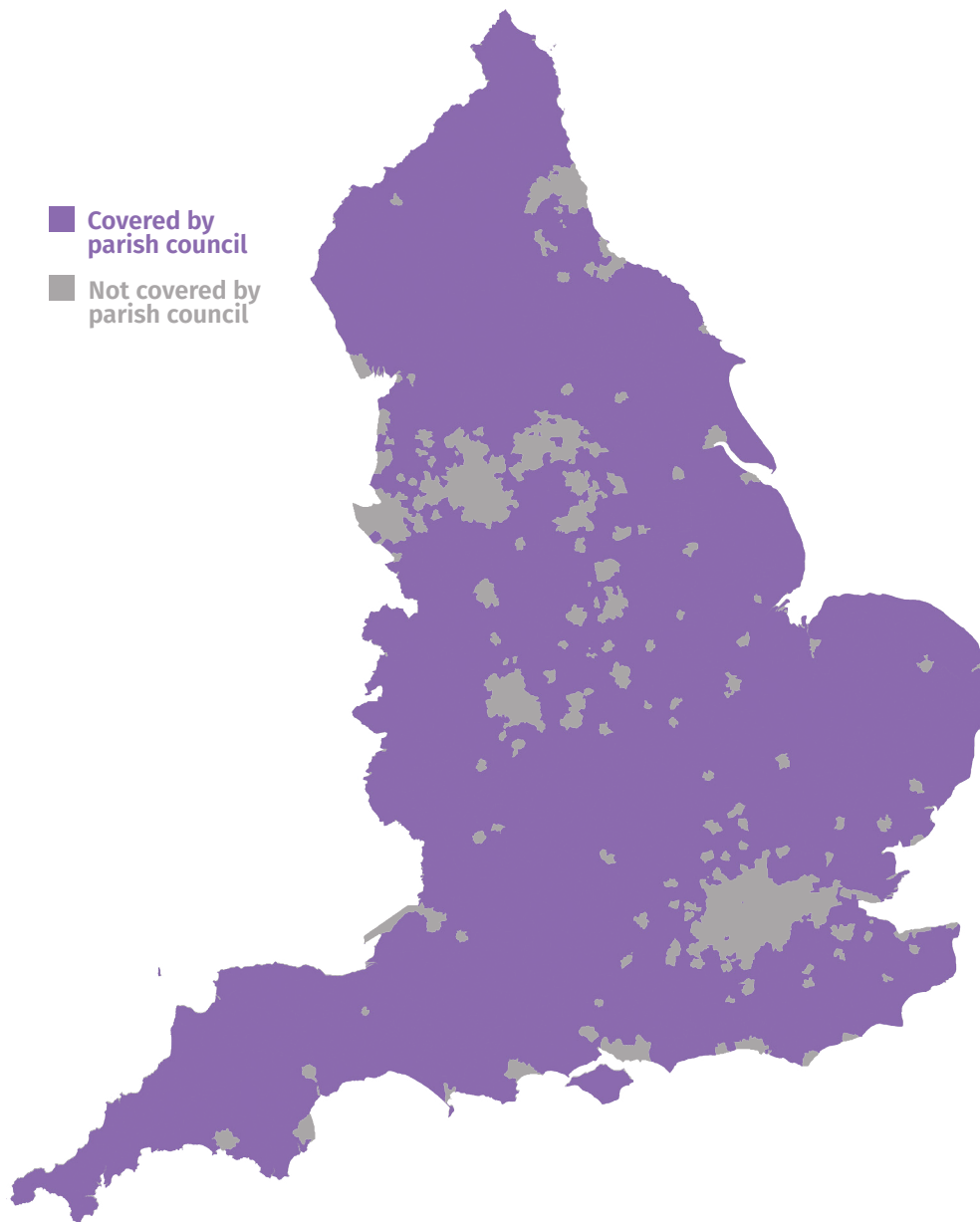
There are a number of different governance models at the hyperlocal level. The most well-known and widespread are parish councils – which can also be called ‘town’, ‘community’, ‘neighbourhood’, or ‘village’ councils, and in a few specific cases ‘city councils’. The ‘style’ these councils choose to take does not have a bearing on their status or the legal powers available to them (Sandford 2021). There are many merits to the existing parish council model of hyperlocal governance and many positive examples of it being effective and delivering positively for communities across England.

Nevertheless, there are issues with the parish model that must be addressed if the government is to reform and expand effective and democratically empowered hyperlocal governance across the country, as revealed by this research. Such issues include questions about: democratic participation and accountability; the extent to which parish councils are representative of their communities; the degree to which they may be further empowered; funding; and relationships with other levels of governance, particularly local authorities but also combined authorities.

Additionally, hyperlocal governance in England is extremely patchy. While 91 per cent of England’s landmass is covered by parish councils, only 36 per cent of England’s population live within them (Sandford 2022). This is because parish councils tend to be concentrated in more rural areas. In contrast, much of urban England is unparished. This means that some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country may be missing out on community representation and democratic empowerment (Local Trust 2023a).

FIGURE 1.1: PARISH COUNCILS COVER 91 PER CENT OF THE COUNTRY, BUT ONLY 36 PER CENT OF THE POPULATION

Parish council coverage in England, 2021 boundaries



Source: ONS (2022b)

There is a need to reform hyperlocal governance to address issues around participation, representation, and democratic empowerment. By doing so, it is hoped that both existing hyperlocal governance is improved and that a reformed model of hyperlocal governance will be taken up more widely across England.

The current political context makes focus on the hyperlocal level extremely timely. Both the Conservatives and Labour have pledged to look into the issue of hyperlocal governance. In the Levelling Up White Paper, the Conservative party committed to undertake a review of neighbourhood governance in England (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities 2022) which is yet to start. Meanwhile,

Labour's Commission on the UK's Future (2022) led by Gordon Brown spoke of the need to push power as close to communities as possible through a process of 'double devolution'. Labour has also pledged to hand more power to communities through a proposed Take Back Control Act within their first hundred days of government should they be successful at the next general election (Rayner 2023).

With another round of local and regional elections, including of eight metro mayors, in the coming months, the time is ripe to make recommendations that can be taken forward locally, regionally, and nationally to further empower communities through improved and expanded hyperlocal governance.

The research and recommendations outlined in this report are focused on England, given the differing approaches to hyperlocal governance in other parts of the UK, but draw on lessons from the devolved nations. The findings draw on research and insights gained from desk-based research on hyperlocal governance, discussions with key stakeholders and practitioners, and a policy roundtable discussion on the current state of hyperlocal governance in England as well as potential options for reform and expansion.

2. WHAT IS HYPERLOCAL GOVERNANCE?

Hyperlocal governance covers a wide range of governance types and community-based approaches below the local authority level. The most well-known and widespread are parish councils. They are a well-established form of governance in England and were formally recognised by the Local Government Act in 1894, although with a much longer pedigree stretching back hundreds of years (Sandford 2021, Wills 2016). There are around 10,000 parish councils across England, although they are largely located outside urban areas (Sandford 2021). They can vary significantly in size with some parishes covering a population of hundreds to others with a population of tens of thousands (Willett 2018). Parish councils are made up of elected members with elections taking place every four years. When the parish council cannot be filled through elections, members may be co-opted onto the council.

When it comes to powers and responsibilities, there is a diverse range of powers open to hyperlocal councils. Parish councils have responsibility for things like recreation areas and allotments, public infrastructure, litter and bins, small community grants, bus shelters and some other transport responsibilities, entertainment and art, and some powers to deal with crime, traffic, housing, youth services, and wellbeing (CDALC 2024;NALC, 2024;Local Government Association 2021). Additionally, parish councils can request the 'listing' of an 'asset of community value' under the Community Right to Bid. This means that the local authority must inform the community if the asset is listed for sale within the five-year listing period. They can also bid to run local public services via the Community Right to Challenge, and they can lead the development of a neighbourhood plan or a Community Right to Build order (Sandford 2021). Parish councils also have the ability to raise their own revenue through levying a precept on council tax. At their best, parish councils are democratic, accountable forms of governance, with some powers and resources to respond to and deliver on their community's needs.

Beyond parish councils, there are a variety of other approaches to governance, or to community management and organising at the hyperlocal level. Other formal, statutory approaches include neighbourhood forums which have certain powers to influence local neighbourhood planning. Many communities across the country are also home to less formal organisations and bodies such as community groups that play a vital role in organising and delivering for their areas. In some places across the country, communities may have a Big Local project, an initiative funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and managed by Local Trust, which has supported 150 communities across England with at least £1 million funding each to invest in their neighbourhoods and local outcomes. Learning from the positives within each of these approaches and forms of hyperlocal governance or community management is important.

Our research suggests, however, that many involved in such organisations would like to have more powers and more resources and to be able to work on a longer-term and more sustainable footing akin to parish councils. Making sure that they are empowered to do so is essential. It is for this reason that, while recognising the significant value of small-scale and less formalised groups at the community

level, this report focuses primarily on the reform and expansion of the formal, institutional form of hyperlocal governance, namely the parish council.

First, parish council governance has the potential to offer the most to communities in terms of the powers and resources that can be utilised, and it does so on a more long-term and sustainable footing. Second, informal and formal structures are not independent of one another. Evidence suggests being part of a more informal structure such as a community group can contribute to the likelihood of someone participating in a more formal structure that has more direct democratic power like a parish council (Local Trust 2023b). Third, reforms of parish councils have the potential to improve the uneven distribution of formal hyperlocal governance structures across England which creates asymmetries and puts many – often the least well-off communities – at a disadvantage, depriving many communities of powers and democratic voice that are enjoyed elsewhere. None of this, however, is to overlook the important work and contribution to civic life that other forms of hyperlocal governance and community activity can have.

2.1. THE CASE FOR HYPERLOCAL GOVERNANCE

Strong and effective hyperlocal governance which is democratic and representative, with the powers and resources to enact positive change, as well as a good relationship with other local levels of governance, has the potential to bring significant benefits to communities.

First, strong and effective governance at the hyperlocal level can be important democratically, in giving communities a greater say in their places. At present, too many feel that they lack a sense of control. Recent polling suggests that 71 per cent feel they have ‘no’ or ‘not much’ control over important decisions affecting their neighbourhoods and local communities (Locality 2023). Meanwhile, 79 per cent of people think Westminster and Whitehall are making decisions about people and places they know little about (Sarling 2022). The same percentage of people think the best decisions are made when the people who will be affected are closely involved in the process (ibid). At a time when trust in national politics is low (Quilter-Pinner et al 2021), evidence suggests that local and hyperlocal political institutions are often much more trusted in by citizens (Travers 2023, Sarling 2022).

Hyperlocal councils in England “are the closest and most accessible tier of government for citizens” and it is at this level that people have the potential to have the greatest say in their communities (Willett 2019). Indeed, governance at this level has the potential to “provide an effective antidote to a growing sense of political alienation and powerlessness amongst citizens” and has the potential to “allow for direct, more meaningful forms of participation of citizens in public affairs” (Denters 2017). Polling suggests that rather than sweeping reforms, many people want to be better empowered through existing local and hyperlocal structures such as parish councils (Sarling 2022). The reform and expansion of hyperlocal governance at this level therefore has significant potential in the strengthening of place-based democratic voice that many wish to see.

Second, empowered hyperlocal governance can result in better policy outcomes for places, with local communities often being best placed to determine and deliver what is needed in their neighbourhoods. When decisions are taken closer to communities, they can be more responsive to local needs and challenges and can reflect the things that makes each place unique (Giovannini and Johns 2021). Indeed, “facilities and services developed by and with the communities at which they are targeted tend to have greater traction and achieve better outcomes” (Local Trust 2023c).

Empowered hyperlocal governance should be seen through the principle of subsidiarity, whereby as much power as is practically possible should be passed down to the lowest level possible, bringing it closer to communities (Giovannini and Johns 2021). Subsidiarity is also a democratic principle. Handing down more powers to communities chimes with the democratic value of hyperlocal governance, with empowered hyperlocal institutions allowing communities to “exercise democratic control over public spaces and amenities in line with community needs” (Sandford 2022).

Third, effective models of hyperlocal governance can also bring social benefits to communities, bolstering civic life at the community level. Drawing on the work of Robert Putnam, Willett (2018) highlights that “vibrant communities with strong levels of civic participation are good for localities, good for the individuals that make up communities, and carry benefits for the much wider body politic”. Moreover, there is evidence that empowered hyperlocal decision making and improved community outcomes can have a positive impact on levels of social trust (Treadwell et al 2021). Additionally, Willett (2018) suggests that “strong civic inclusion can have the ancillary effect of supporting well developed local economies, with a wealth of material connecting the social capital of civic participation to regional economic development”.

2.2. THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Political parties across the spectrum have increasingly come to recognise the positive potential that developing devolution at the hyperlocal level could have. There has been varying degrees of policy focus at the hyperlocal level for several decades. In the New Labour years, the focus was primarily on initiatives at the ‘neighbourhood’ level, such as New Deal for Communities and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund rather than on institutions like parish councils (Durose and Lowndes 2010, Jones 2007). Evaluations highlight the positive impacts that such programmes had for communities (Crisp et al 2023). In the latter era of New Labour there also became an increased focus on ‘community engagement’ (Jones 2007). This can be seen in the 2007 reform of community governance reviews for the creation of parish councils.

Under the Coalition government, focus on the hyperlocal level came primarily as a result of the Localism Act in 2011. This created new opportunities for powers to be devolved from government to communities, local government, and individuals, introducing rights such as the Community Right to Bid, the Community Right to Challenge, Neighbourhood Planning, and the Community Right to Build (Local Trust 2023a). Rights around neighbourhood planning gave rise to Neighbourhood Forums. Meanwhile, the act empowered hyperlocal councils to be able to assume more responsibilities (Local Government Association 2021, Willett 2018). Despite the positives of the Coalition and latterly the Conservative governments approach to localism, however, implemented, as it was, alongside the austerity agenda and a squeezing of local government, its full potential in terms of enhancing effective governance at the hyperlocal level has been somewhat hamstrung (Jupp 2021, Lowndes and Pratchett 2012).

In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on the hyperlocal level from each of the main political parties. The government has noted the importance of hyperlocal governance in the Levelling Up White Paper which committed to a review on neighbourhood governance in England and work with local partners “to put in place a bold new approach to community empowerment” (DLUHC 2022). Amongst other issues, the review would look at the role and functions of parish councils in England and consider how to make them quicker and easier to establish. Currently, however, we are still waiting for this review to be undertaken.

The Labour party has also been considering the role of hyperlocal governance. Labour's Commission on the UK's Future led by Gordon Brown, highlighted the need to push power as close to communities as possible through a process of 'double devolution' with the aim of giving people and their communities "the right to have more of a say on the issues that affect them, the services they use and the places they live" (Commission on the UK's Future 2022). The commission suggested that this commitment to pushing power as close to communities as possible should be enshrined as a constitutional principle.

Subsequently, Labour has stated that if it were to win the next election, it would introduce a 'Take Back Control Act' within the first 100 days of the next parliament aimed at ensuring that "the decisions that create wealth in our communities, economic wealth and civic wealth, should be taken by local people with skin in the game" (Rayner 2023). This is a very welcome development and reformed and expanded hyperlocal governance could have a key role to play in it if paired with clear accountability arrangements.

The Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, have a well-established policy position on expanding democratic representation at the hyperlocal level through removing barriers to creating parish and town councils and neighbourhood forums (Liberal Democrats 2018). Rightly, they emphasise the need for more competitive elections at the hyperlocal level (often seats are uncontested), and the potential for existing hyperlocal institutions to take on more powers, reinforcing a sense of civic involvement at the hyperlocal level (ibid).

Despite this consensus on the importance of the hyperlocal in our politics, significant actions on expanding, further empowering, and democratising governance at this level have not materialised. As Diamond (2022) notes, despite rhetoric on the need to strengthen localism, there is "a recurring gap between promise and performance" and "the pledge to pass back power to communities is never quite fulfilled". In part, he suggests, this is down to 'hyper-politicisation' whereby national political objectives take precedent over longer-term policy thinking, and by 'hyper-innovation' whereby one new policy initiative after another is layered upon existing institutions resulting, more often than not, in confusion and disjointedness rather than effective and sustainable reform.

There is a need to take a clear-eyed, long-term view on the future of hyperlocal governance in England, building on what is already in place, improving what is not working, and expanding this to communities across the country based on an improved model. This will widen access to hyperlocal governance that is democratic, representative, has the power and resources to enact positive change, with a good relationship with other local levels of governance.

3.

THE FUTURE OF HYPERLOCAL GOVERNANCE

There are many strengths in the existing parish council model of hyperlocal governance and many positive examples of it being effective and delivering positively for communities across England. Nevertheless, there are several issues with it that must be addressed if we are to reform and expand effective and democratically empowered hyperlocal governance across the country.

Our research has uncovered concerns about democratic participation and accountability; the extent to which parish councils are representative of their communities; the degree to which they may be further empowered; funding; the unequal coverage of parish councils; and relationships with other levels of governance, particularly local authorities as well as combined authorities. Some of these issues were keenly illustrated by a viral video of Handforth council meeting in 2021. While this clip exposed the wider public to the workings of a parish council, it unfortunately played to the stereotypes of the worst of parish council meetings: that they can be unrepresentative of society at large as well as being deeply divided forums.

We have developed policy recommendations aimed at reinvigorating the hyperlocal tier of governance whilst addressing issues with the existing model and building on existing strengths and encourage its expansion as a place of innovation, not stagnation. Our recommendations aim to:

- improve democratic participation and accountability at the hyperlocal level
- make hyperlocal governance more representative and bolster civic society and democratic capacity at the hyperlocal level
- enhance the powers available at the hyperlocal level
- reform the funding model of hyperlocal governance
- increasing coverage of hyperlocal governance
- protect and strengthen the role of the hyperlocal level and its relationship with other tiers of governance in England.

3.1. PARTICIPATION

When it comes to participation and accountability, the democratic nature of parish councils is questioned by some experts and other community groups. Largely, this is due to the proliferation of uncontested seats at parish council elections (Sandford 2021). Parish councils must fill at least one-third of their seats through elections, even if uncontested. They can then co-opt additional members on to the council. As Sandford (2021) notes, the practice of co-option is controversial “due to the perception that it permits parish or town councils to operate as ‘closed shops’”. Some estimates suggest that as few as one in five seats are contested (Willett 2018). More recent figures from The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) suggest that in 2021 38 per cent of councillors were elected through contested elections, 27 per cent were elected in uncontested elections, and 35 per cent were co-opted (NALC 2022). Given that parish councils must cover the costs of elections themselves out of their limited budgets, it is suggested that many are comfortable with many seats

being filled without elections (Willett 2018). However, this situation is democratically problematic. In many cases, local residents lack choice and lack the ability to have their voice heard. This can result in questions about the accountability of parish councils (Local Trust 2023a).

To address this, we must make it easier and more worthwhile to participate in the democratic process at the hyperlocal level and instead turn the hyperlocal tier of governance into places of democratic innovation.

- National government should allow for the use of innovations to encourage democratic participation, including the **introduction of votes at 16 at the hyperlocal level**. We estimate this would enfranchise an estimated 472,000 voters aged 16 to 17 for the first time in England (ONS 2022a).¹ Evidence suggests that when given the chance to vote 16- and 17-year-olds have higher rates of turnout than 18- or 19-year-olds (Eichhorn and Bergh 2021). Moreover, evidence from Scotland where 16 and 17 years olds have been able to vote in hyperlocal, local, and Scottish parliament elections since 2015 suggests that lowering the voting age can have a long-term positive impact on political participation (Eichhorn and Hübner 2023).

IPPR have previously called for the introduction of votes at 16 for all UK elections (Quilter-Pinner et al 2023). There is already a precedent, however, from both Scotland and Wales of local elections (as well as those to the Scottish parliament and Welsh Senedd, respectively) allowing 16-year-olds to vote (Johnston 2023). In other European democracies such as Germany it is also the case that sub-national elections can have a lower age of franchise (Huebner and Eichhorn 2020). This could be taken forward in England for all local elections, including those at the hyperlocal level, through reforming the Representation of the People Act 1983. Doing so would put the hyperlocal level at the forefront of democratic reform.

- Government should explore other ways of expanding participation at the hyperlocal level through making it easier to vote. This includes **exploring the potential of introducing remote electronic voting at the hyperlocal level**. Work by the Electoral Commission (2021) finds that introducing online voting would be popular with the public, particularly younger voters. While there would be a number of challenges to consider including costs and security, introducing remote electronic voting would likely bring benefits in terms of participation, particularly for younger people, those who work long hours, and people who find it more challenging to leave the house (Electoral Commission 2021). Again, introducing this reform at the hyperlocal level in the first instance would put it at the forefront of democratic reform.
- A further way of boosting participation in hyperlocal elections would be to ensure that, wherever possible, **parish council elections are held on the same day as other elections, be they local authority, combined authority, or general elections** (Leininger et al 2018).
- Extending the franchise and making it easier to vote is not enough alone; local residents must also feel that participation in governance at the hyperlocal level is worthwhile. Making **hyperlocal governance more representative of local communities and, even more importantly, ensuring that more powers and resources can be drawn upon at the hyperlocal level** is the key way to do this. It has long been the case that turnout in perceived lower salience elections such as those to local institutions tends to be lower. It is commonly suggested that turnout is lower in contests to local institutions because they have less powers and responsibilities and less political salience than national government. As such, there is a perception that there is less at stake in the

¹ We have applied Sanford's (2022) estimate that 36 per cent of England's population live in a parished area to ONS (2022a) population estimates.

outcome of an election and consequently, less incentive to vote (Henderson and McEwen 2010). Yet, there is evidence that when local, regional, and devolved national institutions have greater powers and more autonomy, election turnouts tend to be higher (Henderson and McEwen 2010). Applying this to the hyperlocal level to increase the importance and salience of it in the minds of residents would be significant.

- When it comes to accountability, in conjunction with the community, **parish councils should review their practices and cultures to ensure they are more open and accessible with meetings being open to the public at locations and times that are convenient to different groups in the local community.** In the course of our research, we heard of innovative approaches being used by other hyperlocal groups such as Big Locals about how they host meetings at accessible times for younger people and those with caring responsibilities including at weekends, and how they emphasise an element of fun and participation within them. Moreover, meetings are purpose-driven and rather than overly procedural. These approaches point towards interesting ways in which engagement and participation can be improved at the hyperlocal level which parish councils could learn from. Connected to this, hyperlocal councils may also explore better utilising participative approaches with citizens to ensure that more voices are brought into hyperlocal decision-making (Billingham et al 2023).

3.2. REPRESENTATION

Connected to issues around participation, there is a view that parish councillors are generally unrepresentative of their wider communities (Willett 2018). While the data on parish council make up is far from complete, it does appear that this may be the case. As with other levels of government, it is likely that the participation of more women and people of colour would improve representation (Fawcett Society 2023, Sobolewska and Begum 2020). We also know that working-class people are underrepresented at other levels of our politics (Quilter-Pinner et al 2022). Making sure that this is addressed at the hyperlocal level is important. The issue of age and the representation of younger people is also important with the majority of parish councillors tending to be over the age of 55 (NALC 2022)

Based on research with residents in Cornwall, Willett (2018) finds that the unrepresentativeness of parish councils can result in a “self-perpetuating cycle... [whereby] a lack of diversity on parish councils means that community issues are approached from a narrow set of perspectives and possible solutions, which then amplifies the perception that parish councils are less relevant to the lives of many citizens”. To rectify this, we must both increase the awareness of the potential to be involved in governance at the hyperlocal level and make it easier for people to do so, particularly those from underrepresented groups.

- To improve the representation of parish councils, **we propose that for co-opted councillors, parish councils should have “due regard to the diversity of representation”** as a basic, minimum requirement for the appointment of non-elected parish councillors. This would require the secretary of state for the Department of Levelling Up, Communities and Housing to issue regulations as to the appointment of co-opted councillors, under section 16A of the 1972 Local Government Act.
- **Parish councils and local authorities should be encouraged to do more to raise awareness of their work** and opportunities to become involved. Previous research by IPPR North based on citizen conversations found that many people feel that they lack adequate awareness of things going on in their local communities and an understanding of the opportunities and means by which they may become more involved in their places (Billingham et al 2023).

Developing local news strategies to address the issue of the stark decline in the number of local newspapers over recent years should also be considered (Billingham et al 2023). Parish councils have the right to produce and distribute newsletters to residents. While many do so and are active in other ways too such as through social media, it remains that some parish councils are not (NALC, 2022). In existing parished areas, therefore, parish councils should take the first step in seeking to raise awareness of their work and the potential and routes for residents to become more involved. The work of Stoke Climsland parish council in Cornwall and its awareness raising campaign for residents on ways to help achieve net zero emissions by 2030 highlights the potential (Cornish Times 2024).

- The education system can also play a key role in raising awareness about politics and opportunities to be involved. There is a strong case for expanding citizenship and political education in schools to improve awareness and engagement (Billingham et al 2023, Quilter-Pinner et al 2023). Within this, the role and potential of the hyperlocal level should not be overlooked.
- Local and regional government should play an active role in engaging civic society at the hyperlocal level and in doing so **develop a talent pipeline for community representatives through fostering a hyperlocal democratic culture** through providing increased opportunities for citizen engagement and participation in local democracy. Existing parish councils should also go further in seeking to actively engage local residents in the parish council decision-making.
- As well as raising awareness and working to develop talent, more must be done to address the costs associated with becoming a parish councillor. As such, there is a need to **review the financial incentives available to those becoming councillors and explore more consistency in contributions towards expenses between councils**. This is particularly important to encourage those from less wealthy backgrounds to become involved in hyperlocal governance. Examples could include contributions towards childcare.

3.3. POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

When it comes to powers and responsibilities, there is a diverse range of powers open to hyperlocal councils. Parish councils have responsibility for things like recreation areas and allotments, public infrastructure, litter and bins, small community grants, bus shelters and some other transport responsibilities, entertainment and art, and some powers to deal with crime, traffic, housing, youth services, and wellbeing (CDALC 2024, NALC 2024, LGA 2021). Additionally, parish councils can request the 'listing' of an 'asset of community value' under the Community Right to Bid, they can bid to run local public services via the Community Right to Challenge, and they can also lead the development of a neighbourhood plan or a Community Right to Build order (Sandford 2021). Parish councils can also take on responsibilities under a General Power of Competence. This is 'power of first resort' which gives councils the power to do anything that an individual may normally be permitted to do such as run a community shop or set up a company to provide a service (SLCC no date).

When it comes to exercising the powers that they have at their disposal, there are many positive examples of parish councils taking on responsibilities for important community services and infrastructure such as libraries, green spaces, car parks and public toilets (Willett 2019, Wills 2020). On the other hand, some parish councils tend to be very small and have few major responsibilities (Local Government Association 2021, Sandford 2021). Even in the most limited cases, it was suggested by many who participated in our research that parish councils can play an important role in shaping a positive sense of place, undertaking activities that

enhance a sense of pride in place in their areas through organising local events and taking on responsibilities to protect or enhance the built environment.

In many cases, the responsibilities that hyperlocal councils take “reflect their local appetite and capacity” (LGA 2021). Yet, there is evidence that many would like to take on additional powers and responsibilities. Survey research suggests that hyperlocal councils would like more powers in the following areas in particular: providing activities for older people; for economic growth and business support; for highways and for traffic calming measures; and for youth services and activities (ibid). Given the importance that more empowered hyperlocal governance can have on improving levels of participation and representation at the hyperlocal level, in addition to the benefits that it can bring to communities in terms of delivery and outcomes, ensuring the hyperlocal councils can fully utilise the existing powers they have at their disposal, and can take on additional powers if they wish, is essential.

- **Making sure that parish councils can make the most of the current powers available** is important. Working with local authorities and other tiers of governance where relevant such as county councils and combined authorities, there is a need to consider how parish councils can best utilise their statutory powers as well as other rights introduced under the 2011 Localism Act, including the Community Right to Bid, the Community Right to Challenge, and the Community Right to Build. This should also involve taking steps to ensure that parish councils are able to utilise their General Powers of Competence to take on further responsibilities or to protect and run community assets.
- In areas where capacity at the hyperlocal level may be preventing parish councils from exercising many of the existing powers that they have at their disposal, **the potential for more joint working across parish areas could be explored and expanded.**
- In areas where parish councils want to take on more responsibilities, **the remit of hyperlocal governance should be broadened with parish councils working in partnership with local authorities and having a ‘right to request’ to take on more responsibilities** including for community buildings, social infrastructure, and small scale projects at the hyperlocal level that can play an important role in community building such as youth projects and projects to address loneliness and isolation.

3.4. FUNDING

In terms of the financing of hyperlocal councils, the vast majority of parish council funding comes from levying a precept on principle authority council tax within the parish area. This is the only source of tax revenue available to hyperlocal councils. In addition, parishes may seek to raise money through gifts from parishioners, by setting up a parish lottery, through crowdfunding, by bidding for funding, or in some cases they may borrow money from the Public Works Loan Board, although this must be approved by central government (Sandford 2021). These options are all rather limited and some are short-term rather than long-term funding solutions that would enable improvements in representation (by being able to more consistently support participants), the taking on of additional powers, or implementing democratic innovations suggested in this report. Moreover, the reliance on funding from the council tax precept can be seen to create inequalities in parish councils reflecting differential fundraising abilities in affluent and poorer communities.

As highlighted in the recommendations above, deepening levels of cooperation between the hyperlocal level and local authorities could unlock many benefits, yet the potential for this is severely hamstrung by the current crisis in local government funding. Recent research suggests that four in 10 councils are at risk of going

effectively bankrupt over the next five years (Woolley 2024) and nearly one in five council leaders in England now say they are likely to declare bankruptcy in the next 15 months (Harris 2024). As it stands, this would risk any handing of further powers and associated resource to the hyperlocal level subject to the same financial pressures being felt by local authorities.

- The fate of hyperlocal government is tied to that of local authorities, if we wish to reform or expand their role. To both protect and facilitate these changes by hyperlocal authorities a **long-term financial settlement for local government based on a fair, needs-based funding formula is needed**. This would also help ensure that neighbourhoods that have least do not continue to miss out and would provide greater consistency and fairness across the country.
- When it comes to raising their own revenue, hyperlocal councils should have more options beyond the precept and other limited levers. Again, as part of a wider reform of local and regional funding, **there is a need to explore the potential revenue raising opportunities that might be afforded at the hyperlocal level – in partnership with other local tiers of government – through forms of fiscal devolution**. For example, a tourist tax, health taxes, and land value tax.

3.5. COVERAGE

In addition to improving participation, representation, and power and resources at the hyperlocal level, we envisage that the bold reform to hyperlocal governance outlined above would encourage its expansion across England. As already pointed out, parish councils rarely cover urban areas (Sandford 2022). For example, there are very few parish councils in Greater London or other urban areas around Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, or Newcastle (Wills 2023). Similarly, many smaller urban areas are unparished like Hull, Blackpool, Hastings, and Stoke (Sandford 2022).

In part, this asymmetry in parish council coverage is a legacy of various waves of local government reorganisation. It may also be that parish boundaries and identities are not as fixed in urban areas, and that higher levels of population churn make it more difficult to establish long-term governance arrangements. Additionally, it was suggested by some of the stakeholders that we engaged with that in many urban areas there may be a lack of awareness about the benefits that hyperlocal governance can bring with many citizens not having witnessed it firsthand.

The uneven coverage of hyperlocal governance across England is a problem. For one, it creates asymmetries in the ability of local communities to have their voice heard within formal structures and take on responsibilities to improve their places. This forms a democratic deficit with some communities able to exercise their democratic rights at the hyperlocal level while others cannot. Second, the disproportionate impact of a lack of parishes in poorer urban areas and so-called 'left behind' places puts these areas at a further disadvantage compared to more affluent communities. Again, this contributes to the view that there is currently a 'two-tier system' in place when it comes to hyperlocal community power (Local Trust 2023d).

An obvious way to redress this would be through establishing new hyperlocal councils in the places where they are currently lacking. At present, however, there are a number of barriers. First, many of the least well-off communities lack the critical social infrastructure and social capital that often underpins successful hyperlocal governance (Local Trust 2023d, Hickson 2024). Building that up – and in other places building on the positive community attributes that are already in place – in order to empower communities is therefore vital (We're Right Here

2022). Existing local government and community groups should play a key positive role here.

- To bring those already involved in community organising into hyperlocal governance – and as a means towards expanding the coverage of parish councils across England – local authorities should work in conjunction with residents to **establish a clear framework and set of principles for how community groups at the hyperlocal level can transition to establish a parish council**. This would help other existing models of hyperlocal governance such as neighbourhood forums, and groups in Big Local areas in taking on more powers and transitioning to become community councils, if desired. This would enable residents already involved in some degree of community governance, but that had perhaps not considered being involved in more formal, statutory approaches, to take on more powers and responsibilities.
- In places where hyperlocal activity is currently lacking, **investments from the Community Wealth Fund could be used to start to build the confidence and capacity of people in the most disadvantaged areas to establish and stand for elections to new hyper local councils** by supporting initiatives aimed the development of social capital, seeding new community institutions and enabling people to build skills in community leadership and advocacy.

3.6. RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER LAYERS OF GOVERNANCE

As the reforms discussed above suggest, hyperlocal governance does not operate in a vacuum and the success of hyperlocal governance rests heavily on the approaches of other tiers of government. Many of the stakeholders we engaged with highlighted the importance of the relationship between the hyperlocal level and local authorities in particular. It was recognised that they can play a key role in sharing powers and resources down to the hyperlocal level. However, it was suggested that there are barriers that often prevent this including political barriers and a desire on the part of local authorities to retain control, as well as concerns about delivery and accountability at the hyperlocal level (LGA 2021).

On the other hand, there are many positive examples of effective working relationships between the local level and the hyperlocal level (ibid). Jane Wills (2020) has highlighted the case of Cornwall where, in recent years, parish councils have worked cooperatively with the local authority to take on more responsibility and run more assets like libraries, parks, and public toilets. This highlights that hyperlocal councils can play a key role in taking on management responsibilities for assets and institutions once more commonly associated with other tiers of government. In part, this situation has emerged out of necessity with parishes stepping in to run and fund services through the hyperlocal precept (ibid) and this is part of a broader trend across the country (LGA 2021). Nevertheless, it is a notable example of successfully reconfiguring governance at the hyperlocal level with positive cooperation between different levels of government that should be used a model with the creation of an increasing number of unitary councils. Cooperation between Adur District Council and Lancing Parish Council is another notable example of cross-tier working, with a welcome focus on including the voice of residents in decision-making too (Adur and Worthing Councils 2023).

More broadly, the evolution of local and regional governance across England with the continued roll out of combined authority and county-level devolution alongside a continuing shift towards unitarisation in some areas gives further opportunity for considering the role of the hyperlocal level within a multi-levelled approach. Over the last decade, local government reorganisation has resulted in the creation of a number of new parish and town councils, particularly in larger towns (Sandford 2021). As other areas look to reconfigure their governance arrangements, hyperlocal councils are increasingly being viewed as a positive route to bringing certain powers

and responsibilities closer to communities (LGA 2021, Minting 2022). There is a need to build on this and go further in reforming and expanding the coverage of hyperlocal governance.

Central government has a significant role to play too. As Diamond (2022) notes, “a viable localism means a reform agenda for the whole of government”. Central government must ensure that local authorities and by extension hyperlocal governance is properly funded and empowered to ensure that long-term decisions can be taken. Moreover, there is a need to enshrine the powers of devolved levels of governance, including the hyperlocal, through constitutional guarantees including a commitment to seed its development in the most disadvantaged areas. Ultimately, the successful reform and expansion of hyperlocal governance rests heavily on the success, maturity and formalisation of these relationships between different institutional tiers.

4. CONCLUSION

The benefits of devolving power to the regional level in England have increasingly been recognised by parties across the political spectrum. There is now a need to go further in empowering the hyperlocal level.

As our research sets out, this is important democratically in order to give communities a greater say in their places. It is also important in terms of outcomes, with local communities often being best placed to determine and deliver what is needed in their neighbourhoods. Additionally, improved and expanded hyperlocal governance can play a key role in bringing social benefits to communities and bolstering civic life at community level.

While we recognise the merits and potential of the existing parish council model, our research has identified a number of issues with it. To address these we have set out recommendations in this report that aim to improve democratic participation and accountability at the hyperlocal level, make hyperlocal governance more representative and bolster civic society and democratic capacity there. We also recommend enhancing the powers of hyperlocal councils, reforming local government funding, increasing the coverage of hyperlocal governance across England, and protecting and strengthening the role of the hyperlocal level and its relationship with other tiers of government in England. They will not be the end of the reform that is needed, but instead help parishes pivot away from out-of-date practices and cultures.

Our vision is that hyperlocal governance – far from the Handforth council stereotype – could instead become a place of democratic innovation and engagement. It is time to empower democracy by fostering this innovation and change at the most local level.

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