

# ESRC

ESRC Seminar Series

Mapping the public policy landscape

Localism and local governance





## Foreword

There is currently a strong political will for greater local engagement and community involvement in decision-making structures. The governance agenda aims to reduce social exclusion, modernise local government and reform public services.

While the agenda for localism is enabling individuals to take more responsibility for the running of their communities, questions remain about the effectiveness of the developments. In consequence, a debate continues to take place about how people should relate to the state and to one another, and the impact local governance is having on public service delivery and local communities.

This publication is intended to make a positive contribution to the localism and local governance debate. It draws on presentations given by Marilyn Taylor of the University of the West of England and Stuart Wilks-Heeg of the University of Liverpool, for the fourth in a series of seminars entitled 'Engaging Citizens'.

The seminars are organised by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in collaboration with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO). These events provide an opportunity for practitioners, academics and policymakers to examine how people are helping build a society that is both inclusive and cohesive, and to identify the ways in which positive differences are being made in communities.

Localism and local governance is the latest topic to feature in the ESRC's Public Policy Seminar Series, in which we present independent research in key policy areas to potential users in Government, politics, the media, and the private and voluntary sectors. We see such events as an opportunity to establish further dialogue with the users of our research, and we welcome any subsequent contact.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Ian Diamond'. The signature is stylized and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Professor Ian Diamond  
Chief Executive  
Economic and Social Research Council  
March 2007

## Localism and local governance

### The Researchers

**MARILYN TAYLOR**, BA (Hons), is Professor of Urban Governance and Regeneration in the Cities Research Centre, part of the Faculty of the Built Environment of the University of the West of England. Her research interests include: neighbourhood renewal; accountability; community participation and empowerment; urban and democratic renewal; partnership working and governance; and voluntary and community sector roles and development. For eight years, Marilyn was a member of the board of the International Society for Third Sector Research and is the author of *Public Policy in the Community* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). She has published widely and is a frequent speaker on community regeneration and governance at conferences throughout the world.

**STUART WILKS-HEEG**, PhD, is Lecturer in Social Policy in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Liverpool. His research interests include: globalisation and world city governance; the economy, society and politics in contemporary Liverpool; and urban regeneration with reference to cultural policy. He has recently completed a major study of *The State of Local Democracy*, commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Stuart is a recognised specialist in both urban regeneration and local government studies and has published widely in these areas.



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

As a result of low turnout rates in local UK elections, there is a perception that people have little interest or confidence in the democratic processes that impact their everyday lives. In contrast, voting figures for reality TV shows continue to soar, supporting views about electoral indifference and reinforcing prejudices about the population's priorities.

However, views about voter apathy have to be challenged. Turnout rates in local elections are low, but new ways of influencing decision-making are being accessed by the public. Recently, 1.8million signatures were registered on the Downing Street website against national road pricing. Although this was a UK-wide issue, it has considerable local implications and demonstrates a high level of public interest. In addition, with over a third of a million people serving as school governors and almost 20,000 volunteers working in the NHS, the UK's population cannot be described as feckless when it comes to community involvement.

Political leaders have recognised the ways in which engagement with decision-making is changing and are concerned that all sections of the community should be reached and participate. The localism agenda that has been put in place to address the issues is shifting the balance from Government to governance, and is creating new opportunities for people to become more actively involved in decision-making structures and public services.

Changes in governance are generally welcomed by voluntary and community organisations, but as public service providers come under pressure from Government for greater participation, there has been a proliferation in engagement mechanisms, (eg public representation on NHS governing bodies, county council telephone surveys and focus groups drawn from local neighbourhoods). Attention has not always been given to how these all relate to one another; whether their composition is truly representative, or how community feedback mechanisms should operate.

Alongside the introduction of new systems for local participation is the apparently contradictory drive for centralism and divestment of services to specialist agents. Often carried out with the intention of achieving greater efficiency and cutting costs, many public services are being reorganised into larger geographical units and many have been put out to private tender. This is resulting in an increase in the remoteness of services, and risks people feeling alienated and excluded from decision-making. If local governance is to be effective, a wider view should be taken by central Government to ensure 'joined-up' thinking and developments that are mutually supportive.

Well thought out initiatives are always essential. As new mechanisms for engagement are introduced questions have to be asked about their effectiveness. Has participation in local governance improved the quality of public services; and has it led to more inclusive decision-making? Has it had a positive impact on social capital within local communities? Have initiatives to increase participation been successful in attracting previously marginalised individuals and communities, or is there a dependence on a small number of people who have always played a leading role in local decision-making?

The research featured in this publication sets out to answer these questions, to consider the implications of the findings and make recommendations for more effective local engagement in the future.

## Key insights and implications

- Marilyn Taylor explains that although access to Government policymaking has been welcomed by voluntary and community organisations, many are still marginalised in the new governance spaces that have been created.
- She points out that state actors have many advantages; they determine and know the rules of engagement and have better resources and information. In addition, many governance structures are not appropriate for community engagement and are often overlapped and present a confused picture.
- Partnership systems require actors who have knowledge, time, experience and a level of sophistication that excludes many residents. This results in dependence on one or two key community representatives.
- Voluntary and community organisations face a number of challenges as they participate in governance, including ensuring their views are heard, maintaining independence and balancing the demands for leadership and accountability, with the need to engage widely and keep up with policy changes.
- It can be difficult for representatives to reflect their highly diverse communities in partnership working. In addition, there is a balance between ensuring representatives have the skills and experience to contribute effectively, and spreading expertise so more people engage in decision-making.
- Despite this, tensions and challenges can be creative and provide impetus for the development of innovative approaches. The new governance spaces can provide greater transparency, opportunities for residents to influence local decision-making and enhance understanding between the sectors.
- Questions remain about what is desirable and achievable in terms of appropriate partnerships, realistic expectations about levels of engagement, the relationship between representative and participatory forms of democracy and the continuing role of central Government in local affairs.
- Stuart Wilks-Heeg underlines how the pattern of local control over public service provision has changed in recent years and seeks to determine what form mechanisms should take to achieve effective community engagement.
- His research indicates that the media and residents have been slow to acknowledge the shift in local control. A proliferation of consultation mechanisms has been little compensation for diminished democratic accountability and residents continue to feel powerless to influence decision-making.
- For local democracy to thrive, local councillors who are accountable to the electorate and work hard for little reward should have their contribution acknowledged and rewarded.
- While many express concerns about the lack of participation in local affairs and seek still further initiatives and mechanisms to revive interest, the reality is that civic engagement has diversified already, (eg interest groups campaigning on particular issues).
- Contradictions abound; residents' views are sought at local level using a variety of consultative mechanisms, while public service agencies are consolidated to cover wider geographical areas and, in the process, become more remote and limit the choices of those they serve.
- Recommendations for the future include: recognising the problems and contradictions in local governance processes; supporting existing local democratic systems, acknowledging alternative forms of local engagement; and reducing centralised programmes of continuous reform. Above all, adhere to the maxim, 'small is beautiful'.



## Realities of community participation

Marilyn Taylor on research projects carried out into how non-governmental organisations are operating in newly available governance spaces, and the realities of involvement by voluntary and community organisations in the UK's democratic processes

With a global shift from Government to governance, a realignment of relationships between the state, the market and civil society is taking place. It is opening up new 'governance spaces', arenas in which state and non-state actors come together to collaborate on some aspect of the policy process.

People and organisations that in the past have been excluded from the process are now being invited to participate in decision-making about their own communities. The involvement of voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) as partners in governance processes is regarded as an effective way of providing access to local knowledge and resources. In addition, it gives legitimacy to the outcome of the decision-making process.

This article draws on the following:

**Study A:** An ESRC-funded study of the role of voluntary and community organisations in the policy process

**Study B:** An evaluation of the Community Participation Programmes (which became the Single Community Programme) for the then Neighbourhood Renewal Unit

**Study C:** An evaluation of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Neighbourhood Programme

**Study D:** Current ESRC-funded research exploring the experience of voluntary and community organisations in partnership working

*(See box for further details of the studies)*


The article also draws on other work in relation to Compacts, the EU URBAN Programme and the evaluation of the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders.

In the UK, community participation has been a central theme particularly in policy on neighbourhood renewal. The majority of local authorities in England now have some form of participative governance structure, often involving neighbourhood forums and area committees as well as partnerships specific to particular policy areas. Many involve local residents, service users and communities.

*'Effective engagement with the community is one of the most important aspects of local strategic partnerships' work and they will have failed if they do not deliver this'*

The National Strategy Action Plan, 2001





Developments in local government policy over recent years have triggered a debate about the benefits of devolving budgets and powers in order that mainstream decision-making is brought closer to neighbourhood residents. While it is not yet clear how these ideas will be implemented, the expectation is that VCOs will continue to have opportunities to engage in governance processes alongside public and private sector players, not only at city and district level, but also in the management and delivery of services and place-making at neighbourhood level.

A recent White Paper proposes:

*'new responsibilities for local authorities to give local citizens and communities a greater say over their lives' (page 5)*

and more specifically:

*'in the services they receive and the places where they live' (page 2)*

Strong and Prosperous Communities:  
UK Local Government White Paper, 2006

## Research details

### Study A

*Willing Partners? Voluntary and Community Organisations in the Democratic Process* (Ref. L215252049) A two-year research project that was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of its *Democracy and Participation Research Programme*. It took place over the period 2000-2002 and explored the role played by voluntary and community organisations in the UK's democratic process.

The project focused on three policy areas: environment; care of older people; and the national strategy for regeneration and neighbourhood renewal. The author carried out the research with colleagues from the Universities of Brighton and Hull (Gary Craig, Surya Monro, Tessa Parkes, Diane Warburton and Mick Wilkinson).

### Study B

*Making Connections: the Evaluation of the Community Participation Programmes* (ODPM, 2005) presents the findings of a one-year evaluation, that took place over the period June 2003 and June 2004, of the Community Chest, the Community Learning Chest and the Community Empowerment Fund (subsequently merged into the Single Community Programme). The evaluation was carried out by the author along with colleagues from the University of the West of England, Liverpool John Moores University and COGS (Rose Ardron, Nancy Carlton, Richard Meegan, Derrick Purdue, Hilary Russell, Mandy Wilson).

### Study C

An evaluation of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Neighbourhood Programme; a report on the project is published as *Changing Neighbourhoods: Lessons from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Neighbourhood Programme* (Policy Press, 2007). Research was carried out between 2001 and 2006 by the author with Derrick Purdue, Mandy Wilson and Pete Wilde.

### Study D

*Non-Government Actions in New Governance Spaces: Navigating the Tensions* is a current study funded by the ESRC (Ref. RES-155-25-0058) that is being undertaken by the author along with Joanna Howard, Christopher Miller, Mojgan Rahbari and John Lever from the University of the West of England, Rumen Petrov and Antaoneeta Mateeva from the New University of Bulgaria and Luis Serra Vasquez from the University of Central America in Sofia.

## Governance model

As the state creates and invites participation in new governance spaces, an 'ideal model' is implied along the following lines:

- Communities and non-Government organisations are invited in as equal partners who bring local knowledge, resources and legitimacy
- There is a supply of informed organisations (and representatives) ready and willing to take up the engagement opportunities.

These opportunities will not only engage professional and experienced community activists and organisations, but reach beyond such people to those who have not engaged before and to all sections of the community.

This article describes research that seeks answers to the question:

*How is this ideal model working out in practice?*

## New opportunities

The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal was based on an unprecedented two-year consultation with non-state actors in local government, the voluntary and community sector and academia. It also led to a requirement that the sector be represented on local strategic partnerships. (The latter were designed as the key strategic mechanisms for managing neighbourhood renewal strategy at local level, and now have a broader role in relation to sustainable community strategies and local area agreements).

Study A suggested that VCOs welcomed access to Government policymaking – it had opened many new doors, creating significant fresh opportunities and important new avenues for influence as well as driving change at local level. VCOs saw it as a watershed, from which it would be difficult to retreat, with boundaries between Government and the sector more porous and a greater appreciation of the knowledge that the sector could bring to evidence-based policymaking.

## How open are new governance spaces?

However, the reality has inevitably been more complex than this both in terms of the status of VCO actors in the policy process and their ability to engage effectively. A range of research (including studies A, B and C) has suggested that VCO players remain marginalised within these new governance spaces.

- The rules of engagement in these new spaces tend to be made by the state. This happens explicitly insofar as central Government determines the parameters within which partnerships operate and the targets they are expected to meet (Study B). However, it also happens implicitly through the culture that predominates in many of these 'invited spaces'.
- State actors generally come into these spaces with inbuilt advantages: they know the rules; they have better information and more resources; and are more used to the kinds of negotiation that are required. In addition, community respondents in this study feel that many decisions are, in reality, taken outside formal meetings.
- Respondents also feel that a drive to consensus, and the limited time available, often reinforces these advantages, while the need for public sector players to meet central targets often overrides their ability to respond to community concerns.

- Study D suggests that, with the exception of some flagship neighbourhood renewal initiatives, opportunities for widening participation are limited by the fact that many partnerships and governance spaces are citywide or at district level. This is beyond the level that is most likely to engage local communities. In addition, Study C suggests that local authorities and other public bodies are often not structured in a way that can easily operate at neighbourhood level. Often, for example, neighbourhood initiatives and area forums are well beyond the size that the evaluation of neighbourhood management recommends as the ideal population size – 5,000 to 15,000 (SQW, 2006).
- This means that community representatives are likely to be what one of the international team working on Study D called, 'community aristocrats'. Although there are often complaints from state actors about the involvement of 'the usual suspects', partnership systems require a great deal of knowledge, a lot of time and a level of sophistication that inevitably excludes many residents – despite politicians saying that they want to involve the 'real people' (Taylor and Warburton, 2003). This is particularly true at the strategic level, where operating effectively requires considerable previous experience. It takes time for people new to strategic arenas to move beyond their local and immediate preoccupations.
- Partnership working often depends on the relationships established by one or two key people – if one of these people leaves, relationships and trust can be set back considerably (although the reverse can also be true). The pace of policy change, driven from the centre, also puts pressures on both statutory and community partners and makes it more, rather than less, likely that only a few people will engage.
- Study D suggests that opportunities for participation overlap and present a confusing picture. Further, participants are unsure about what hats they are wearing or in what capacity they are being involved: as citizens; as consumers; as communities; as individuals; as representatives; or as organisations. The nature of these opportunities can be even more confused by partnerships that reconstitute themselves as independent community development trusts or, recently, Community Interest Companies, in order to access additional resources.
- There are some concerns about how these opportunities will develop in the future (Study B). The central Government commitment to community engagement has driven change at all levels, but the responsibility is now largely being devolved to local level. Given the variability at this level, does central Government still have a legitimate role to play in supporting local engagement across the board?



## The challenge for community actors

Although the developments offer new opportunities for engaging in local decision-making and for influencing public service provision, they also present challenges for VCOs that participate, especially when it comes to engaging those who have not engaged before.

Study A highlights the following (currently, Study D is exploring this further):

- **Voice and agency** – Ensuring points of view are heard and that they do influence decision-making
- **Autonomy** – Maintaining an independent voice and contribution, without compromise to their distinct perspectives
- **Leadership and legitimacy** – Balancing the considerable demands expected of community leaders and representatives, with the need to spread engagement more widely.

Study A also suggests that there was a tension between effectiveness and legitimacy, (eg leading from the front and taking initiative while, at the same time, ensuring that community views are fully canvassed and a dialogue maintained).

Representatives often do not have the resources or time for effective processes of accountability within the constituency. They are expected by their communities to account for what partnerships are doing, but the partnerships expect them to 'sell' their decisions to the community.

The recent Local Government White Paper emphasises the importance of revitalising representative democracy. It also emphasises the 'community leadership role' of the local authority and of ward councillors. However, reconciling these with appeals for more direct citizen involvement (particularly with the role and legitimacy of leaders from within the 'community') represents a major and important challenge for local authorities, as well as community actors.

## How well equipped are VCOs to address the challenges?

The studies here and elsewhere highlight the expertise and skills that have been developed by community-based organisations in disadvantaged communities, especially where there is a history of engagement and involvement. But Study C also highlights the fragility of many VCOs, especially outside the most high-profile neighbourhood renewal areas, or in the so-called 'hard-to-reach' populations.

- There may be a dependency on a small number of people, who have little time to raise their heads above the parapet, or opportunity to digest the information that is needed to operate effectively. If local strategic partnerships find that representation involves mainly paid VCO workers (Study B), this may be because it is these people who have the time and experience to operate effectively at this level.
- Individuals who have taken a leading role in small neighbourhoods for many years may find it hard to hand over responsibility or share it more widely. Even where there is a will, the resources to do this are often limited. Inevitably, some become gatekeepers who block rather than open up access to the wider community.
- Communities are not the homogenous entities suggested by the communitarian rhetoric. It is difficult for those who are expected to represent a neighbourhood, or even a community of interest, to reflect the range of what are often highly diverse communities. It takes time to work through differences, especially in a climate where organisations are competing for resources and political attention.
- Some VCO representatives were seen in studies A and B, by both sectors, to get 'stuck in opposition', unable to move from an adversarial stance to a collaborative one. There is a difficult balance to be struck between being a critical friend and taking a persistently adversarial stance. For this reason, some organisations may play a more effective role opposing from the outside than blocking debate from within.

- Widening the pool of people who can engage in formal partnership working represents a particular challenge and there is another difficult balance to be struck between ensuring that community representatives have the skills and experience to make a full contribution, and ensuring that this expertise is being spread to new and less experienced people. Study B reports how, faced with new elections for community representatives, one local strategy partnership chair from the statutory sector acknowledged that the partnership group needed to retain its more experienced people for the sake of consistency. This same respondent felt that as community representatives become more experienced, they have greater ownership of the agenda and parity with their statutory counterparts.

## Realising the opportunities

While the preceding concerns appear to present a pessimistic picture, these tensions and challenges can be creative. The governance spaces being outlined here can produce new types of relationship between the sectors. They should also foster innovative new ways of working – as implied by the term ‘governance’. As with all radical change, a long-term perspective is needed, but there are a number of encouraging signs, for example:

- Communities are not homogenous, but neither are local authorities. Local authorities address these challenges in different ways. Even where they are less engaged, there are change agents within them that VCOs can work with effectively.
- VCOs need to be quite sophisticated about negotiating governance spaces and combine insider and outsider strategies effectively to gain influence.

Study A, for example, found that larger more established VCOs were providing smaller organisations who wanted to remain on the outside with ‘docking points’, allowing them to dip in and out of formal spaces and with support and training.

In study B, there were instances where Community Empowerment Networks that were otherwise seen as collaborating effectively within partnerships were able to use the threat to withdraw from the Local Strategic Partnership very effectively to change decisions that disadvantaged them.

- The very messiness of new governance arrangements creates opportunities to exploit. Some experienced VCOs know more about what different departments within the local authority are doing and the opportunities that exist, than do state actors themselves (Study D).
- There are always incremental gains to be made – even the smallest of steps forward bring with them learning and change on both sides.
- Deliberative forms of democracy are providing more information and resources on which decisions can be based.
- There is more transparency; respondents in Study A felt that, ‘power is being made more visible’.
- Relationships are being made which create more opportunities for influence. Informal spaces and contacts can have a significant influence on what goes on in formal spaces.

For instance, the very fact of being in the same room talking has meant a slow development of trust between the council and the voluntary and community sector.

Links with partners on a Health and Social Care Theme group in study B are strengthening, and longstanding members of the health partnership are saying approvingly how different it is now.

- People learn to work in new ways. New participation programmes acquaint people in Government with the business of making accommodations for different perspectives (Cornwall, 2004), while people in the voluntary community gain skills, confidence and understanding of how to work with Government.

Even where institutionalised participation has little or no policy efficacy, there are tactics to be tried, alliances to be built (Cornwall, 2004).

### Some final questions

New governance arrangements pose a number of questions about what is desirable and how it can be achieved, these include:

- 1 Is participating in formal partnerships a useful way forward for the voluntary and community sector to contribute to policy? Are these the right places to engage?
- 2 Given that a recent Demos survey (Skidmore et al, 2006) suggested that only one per cent of the population could be expected to engage, what are realistic expectations of the voluntary and community sector?
- 3 What is the ideal balance between the formal representative system and the various approaches to participatory democracy?
- 4 What are the most effective responses to the tensions identified in this article? Can VCOs engage and yet retain a distinctive voice?
- 5 What, if any, is the appropriate role for central Government in driving participation at local level?





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## Whose town is it anyway?

Stuart Wilks-Heeg on research he carried out with his colleague Steve Clayton, to investigate the state of local democracy in two contrasting northern towns – Burnley and Harrogate

In the UK, local government control over services has diminished in the last three decades in favour of more centralised systems. As a result of the changes, local councils often control less than half of all public spending (Wilks-Heeg and Clayton, 2006).

In parallel with this shift in control, local public service provision has become increasingly complex and fragmented, and there has been a rise in the number of un-elected public bodies operating locally, (eg in health, education and community regeneration). There is also a tendency for service providers to become more remote from residents geographically, since many public agencies have been merged into larger units covering wider areas, with the intention of achieving economies of scale and scope – primary care trusts and fire and rescue services are current examples of this trend (Wilks-Heeg and Clayton, 2006). Invariably, these developments are characterised by the expectation that agencies will achieve rigorous service standards and elicit favourable feedback from 'customers'.

## Where will the people go?

Despite the shift in control and the proliferation of agencies, councils continue to remain the key point of contact for local residents and the focus of most community engagement. At the same time, however, there is considerable resident confusion about which agencies are responsible for the different services and who is accountable for what.

There is little dispute that participation by residents is crucial to the health of local democracy. For the past decade, 'participation', 'engagement' and 'consultation' have been buzzwords for all public agencies (Newman et al, 2004). However, there is very little clarity about which mechanisms are the most effective ones for ensuring local public bodies relate to, and take account of, the views of residents.

At the same time, there are important concerns about the implications of falling levels of public participation in local elections and the ongoing decline of local political parties. Two questions arise from this. Should the decline be viewed as constituting a 'crisis' in local democracy? Or, as there are a variety of ways in which residents can participate locally that do not involve voting in elections, should the shift to other forms of community engagement be acknowledged and encouraged?

### Thumbnail sketch of the towns

Burnley and Harrogate are two medium sized towns in Northern England that are separate from large metropolitan conurbations. At the core, each town is roughly the same size and is part of a wider district that includes urban and rural areas. Both towns are part of a two-tier local government structure, but contrast in the overall affluence of their residents, (eg average property price in 2004 for Burnley was £46,417, compared with £195,887 in Harrogate).





## Local mix

With the increase in participative mechanisms, a broader definition of what constitutes local democracy is necessary when reviewing its state in local communities. To help form a clearer picture, it has been suggested that four distinct forms make up a 'local democratic mix' (Haus and Sweeting, 2006).

These include:

- **Representative democracy** (eg local councils run by elected representatives)
- **Participatory democracy** (eg local referenda, opinion polls and public meetings)
- **User democracy** (eg market research and customer satisfaction surveys)
- **Network democracy** (organised interests, such as trade unions, environmental groups and tenant committees).

### The project

The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust commissioned the study that was carried out during 2004/2005. Fieldwork involved over 100 interviews with politicians, policymakers, local activists and residents. In addition, a range of public body meetings were attended, and surveys were conducted with a weighted sample of local residents – drawing on input from the Burnley Citizen's Panel and the Harrogate District Panel. An advisory group, that included representatives from the three main political parties, supported the project from its inception.

Further details about the research is available at:

[www.liv.ac.uk/sspsw/research/State\\_of\\_Local\\_Democracy.htm](http://www.liv.ac.uk/sspsw/research/State_of_Local_Democracy.htm)

## Findings

The four mechanisms for resident engagement were considered in the analysis of the local democratic mix in Burnley and Harrogate. Extensive in-depth research resulted in the following key findings (see Wilks-Heeg and Clayton, 2006 for further details):

1. **Wider control** – Over 30 different organisations, many of them 'quangos' with no elected community representatives, have some role in governing Burnley and Harrogate. Overall, the elected local authorities control 53 per cent of public spending in Harrogate and, in Burnley, only 40 per cent.
2. **Ignoring the obvious** – Local newspapers are one of the principal sources of news for residents about the activities of local public bodies. However, despite the shift in control, the press in the two towns continues to concentrate on district councils at the expense of news relating to the higher spending service providers locally.
3. **Old habits die hard** – Only five per cent of public spending in Burnley and Harrogate is controlled by each of the respective district councils. In focussing on 'The Council' (the district council), both the residents and the local media are failing to recognise the main agencies of control.
4. **Long hours, small reward** – Elected politicians face the threat of being removed from office by local residents who hold them to account. It is this direct accountability that motivates the average district councillor to spend up to 400 hours a year on constituency work, (eg campaigning and casework), in addition to the time spent on council business. Despite the heavy workload and accountability pressures, the basic allowance for a Burnley district councillor in 2004/2005 was £1,292 per annum. This compared with £5,673 per annum paid to non-executive directors of local NHS Trusts in the same period (who have no constituency duties and are un-elected).

5. **Not representative** – Although appointments to public sector governing bodies have become more transparent and inclusive, recruitment is often conducted in terms of the knowledge, skills and experience that applicants can provide to the organisation. This practice increases the likelihood of board members not being representative of their local communities.
6. **Not answerable** – The lack of democratic accountability of public sector bodies is not compensated for by the introduction of a plethora of public consultation and ‘engagement’ exercises. Local people have no real mechanism for holding un-elected governing bodies to account for their actions. Neither have they a way to remove ineffective members from a board, as can be done with politicians during elections.
7. **Feeling powerless** – Little evidence was found that residents feel empowered by being considered to be ‘consumers’ by local service providers. Only 24 per cent of respondents from Harrogate, and a modest 16 per cent of those from Burnley, ‘feel able to influence local decisions’.
8. **Wider activism** – Despite the preceding, the research suggested that in both Burnley and Harrogate there has been a diversification in political participation and community engagement. Faith groups are playing a particularly strong role in overall activism, (eg Make Poverty History and Fair Trade activities). This diversification in community involvement is contrary to the often-assumed decline in local participation, particularly when set against just one third of the UK electorate exercising the right to vote (as occurred in May 2003).
9. **Party decline** – What cannot be denied, however, is that political parties are losing members and that in consequence their capacity for activism is being eroded. The party system in Burnley and Harrogate continues to operate with just 100 people in each of the districts. If the downward trend in interest continues, local electoral democracy in its present form could be severely jeopardised.
10. **Bigger, but lowest** – Comparison with our EU counterparts indicates that local participation and civic engagement has a tendency to be higher where local government units are smaller in scale. However, British local authorities are up to five times larger than European equivalents and the UK’s citizen voting record in local elections is the lowest in the whole of Europe.



## Key implications

The apparent crisis of local democracy has prompted a collective concern among the media, politicians and community leaders that residents are no longer engaging with the mechanisms of local governance. There is a widespread suggestion that only alternative and/or new forms of engagement will encourage people to take an interest and participate (Bentley 2001; Birchall and Simmons, 2004).

However, while electoral participation has certainly declined in recent years, survey evidence suggests that wider levels of activism have remained virtually unchanged since the mid-1980s (see table 1). Indeed, the reality is that local political and civic participation has *already* diversified into new forms, (eg campaigns about specific national and international issues, or an adverse response to a proposed local infrastructure development, or changes in service provision). The question that arises, therefore, is whether local governance structures have adapted to, and kept pace with, the changes that have occurred.

*'the reality is that local political and civic participation has already diversified into new forms'*

Concerns about the level of public participation in local affairs in the UK are nothing new, and campaigns to promote greater participation have been tried before (Hill, 1970). A response to the situation has been that policymakers have tended to add layer after layer of a variety of mechanisms to encourage engagement – without stopping to consider how they each relate to one another, or the complexity that this presents to the public.

New mechanisms tend to be added because politicians and policymakers are unhappy with the existing ones. For instance, concerns that local community groups and community 'leaders' are not representative has led to a growing tendency to seek the views and preferences of the public as simple aggregations of 'individuals', (eg through market research surveys, complaints mechanisms and wider choice in access to public services). There is little evidence, however, that even highly engaged individuals feel able to influence local decision-making in such atomising structures.



**Table 1: Reported political action, 1986-2000**

% saying they had	1986	1989	1991	1994	2000
Signed a petition	34	41	53	39	42
Contacted their MP	11	15	17	14	16
Contacted radio, TV or newspaper	3	4	4	5	6
Gone on a protest or demonstration	6	8	9	9	10
Spoken to an influential person	1	3	5	3	4
Contacted a Government Department	3	3	4	3	4
Formed a group of like-minded people	2	3	2	3	2
Raised the issue in an organisation they already belonged to	5	4	5	4	5
None of these	56	48	37	53	47
<b>Base</b>	<b>1548</b>	<b>1516</b>	<b>1445</b>	<b>1137</b>	<b>2293</b>

Source: Bromley et al 2001: 201 table 9.1

Most of the community participation that occurs is focused on localised engagement (eg in local neighbourhoods) and works best at that level. However, the move to scale-up systems of governance and a culture that insists on target achievement has diminished local autonomy and policy choice.

Herein lies an irony. People are being asked what they think and want at a highly localised level. Simultaneously, public service reform is driven by an assumption that only agencies serving larger geographical areas can achieve nationally determined policy targets. So, at which scale are community involvement and policy delivery supposed to meet?

For public agencies to make community participation and engagement work in this context, these contradictions need to be recognised and, to a certain extent, built into organisational and decision-making structures.

### Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust

The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust is committed to strengthening the democratic process, and to promoting greater accountability and openness within corporate and political institutions. The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust is a charity registered in England and Wales, number 210037.

Further details about the Trust's work is available at:  
[www.jrct.org.uk](http://www.jrct.org.uk)



## Recommendations for reviving local democracy

- **Recognise the problem** – All political parties have a common interest in reinvigorating local democracy.
- **Promote civic renewal** – The key role for central Government must be to construct an inter-departmental vision of local democratic renewal.
- **Re-imagine local politicians** – Local democracy can only flourish if the contribution made by local councillors is recognised and rewarded. Imaginative steps are required to challenge negative public perceptions of local politicians.
- **Finance local democracy** – If political parties are to be able to continue to run local election campaigns, a means must be found of enhancing the resources available to local parties to support their campaigning.
- **Restore local autonomy** – All efforts to promote local democracy will fail unless there is greater local control and local policy choice.
- **Let go** – Greater local autonomy will mean greater local diversity in service provision. The consequences of the centre 'letting go' need to be regarded as a natural feature of local democracy.
- **Keep it local** – Current agendas promoting, respectively, amalgamations of local councils, police forces and primary care trusts pay insufficient attention to the basic maxim that 'small is beautiful' when it comes to democracy.
- **Start at the bottom** – There is much potential in promoting a greater role for neighbourhoods and parishes. However, only substantial decentralisation to this very local level could compensate for any loss of democracy brought about by merging the basic units of local government, police and healthcare.
- **Support neighbourhood champions** – Active local groups and local residents are too frequently dismissed as 'the usual suspects'. The accumulated knowledge, skills and respect gained by local activists could be utilised more effectively to enable them to act as legitimate 'neighbourhood champions'.

- **Build for local democracy** – The current large-scale public building programme could play a significant practical and symbolic role in reviving local democracy, particularly if new buildings are conceived as 'little icons' within individual neighbourhoods.
- **Make votes count** – Local elections must be the centrepiece of the 'new localism', allowing communities to have a genuine say over the direction of local public services and to choose between competing visions for their localities.

## A plea to reformists

A programme of continuous reform from the centre is perhaps the greatest danger to local democracy. It has a significantly disruptive impact on local services and on the possibilities for promoting local democratic engagement. There is compelling evidence nationally and internationally that local democratic participation and civic engagement tend to be higher where smaller units of local government are retained.

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## Further Information

### The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) is the umbrella body for the voluntary sector in England. It works to support the voluntary sector and to create an environment in which voluntary organisations can flourish. It represents the views of the voluntary sector to policymakers and Government and consults with the sector to inform policy positions on issues generic to the sector. It also carries out in-depth research to promote a better understanding of the sector and its activities. NCVO has a growing membership of over 5,000 voluntary organisations, ranging from large national charities to small local community groups.

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