

# Power to the people

Held up as the embodiment of localism, parish councils are going from strength to strength and becoming an influential voice for local communities, says Andrew McCloy

On the face of it, James Butcher seems just like any other ordinary 21-year-old. He uses social media a lot of the time, enjoys playing the guitar and occasionally goes kayaking. But, rather unusually, he's also chairman of a parish council. 'I know I'm quite young for a parish councillor,' he admits, 'but I'm really keen to help make improvements to where I live, and I see the parish council as the bastion of the community.'

When James first joined Lancing Parish Council in West Sussex he was, in fact, only 19, but existing councillors of all ages welcomed his energy and enthusiasm. He had already served in the county council's Youth Cabinet and, encouraged to get involved locally, he was brimming with ideas. Straight away he set up a community awards scheme and has led a regeneration drive to overhaul council-owned recreation facilities, including the creation of two green community spaces, called pocket gardens. But getting more young people involved in local decision-making is a particular priority. 'We've now got two others under 20 elected onto the council,' he says proudly, 'and I'm using social media, including a regular blog, to explain what the parish council is doing and how you can play a part.'

Lancing is one of nearly 10,000 parish and town councils in England and Wales, which together serve more than 15 million people, or around 35% of the population. Locally elected, they raise a parish tax, called a precept, which enables them to provide a wide variety of services, from allotments and cemeteries to youth projects, community transport and village greens. As the first tier of local government, and the



Above: Lancing Parish Councillor James Butcher

one closest to grass-roots communities, parish councils have been admirably described as 'localism's magic wand' by Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. New powers granted under the Localism Act (2011) have strengthened their hand, including a community right to challenge to run local services and bid for buildings, plus the General Power of Competence, designed to give eligible councils greater freedom to play an active role in their community, even to the extent of setting up a trading body to run a community shop or post office. Already, this has produced results. A CPRE-supported campaign by residents in the Derbyshire

village of Bamford successfully used the new Community Right to Bid to save their last remaining pub and threatened post office. The Anglers Rest is now owned and run by the community and is going from strength to strength. However, at one point their bid seemed scuppered when an offer from a property developer was accepted instead, despite the six-month moratorium on its sale as a registered community asset, which suggests that there is still wriggle room in the Localism Act that needs tightening up.

## Shaping neighbourhood planning

One of the most significant opportunities for parish councils is an enhanced role in the planning system. Over the past 15 years, many have produced parish plans, setting out local priorities and objectives, but new Neighbourhood Plans have the potential to allow for even greater self-determination. The first to be passed was the Upper Eden Neighbourhood Development Plan, approved by 90% of local people in a local referendum in March 2013, which covers the market town of Kirkby Stephen in Cumbria, as well as a cluster of 16 surrounding parishes. The plan sets out the communities' own strategic housing goals through detailed policies, providing the local authority (Eden District Council) with a statutory planning document that it must consider in its future decision-making. It covers the likes of rural exceptions housing for local people, housing on farms and housing densities, so that the parish councils of the Upper Eden can have a direct influence on local affordable housing delivery and make sure it's tailored to the needs of their own communities.

However, Upper Eden's progress doesn't seem to be matched nationally at a parish level. Although around



Above: Ministers Nick Boles and Don Foster (centre) and MP Rory Stewart (fifth from left), locals Sonya Canon and Mark Curr (left) and council candidate Libby Bateman (right), with the Upper Eden Neighbourhood Plan that will give them more of a say in planning matters

700 neighbourhoods have formally designated their area (the first step to creating a Neighbourhood Plan), only a handful have been submitted for formal examination. Feedback suggests that many smaller communities are put off by what they consider an onerous process, while others evidently need more time and support, especially those with little previous experience of community planning. But despite the measured progress, some communities are clearly using the process to consider what they value in their locality and then mapping its future. For instance, the adopted Neighbourhood Plan for Exeter St James designates Hoopern Valley and Queen Crescent garden as 'Local Green Spaces', and any future development will have to conform to new and specific local policy that promotes their conservation and recreation value.

Elsewhere around the country, parish councils are making sure that new affordable houses are actually being built. In 2004, Halberton Parish Council in Devon produced a parish plan in which residents said they wanted to retain the community's rural atmosphere, but at the same time ensure there were enough homes to allow, as the plan put it, 'young connected families to stay or come back to live in the parish to keep our community alive'. The parish council subsequently

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worked with the district council to carry out a housing needs survey, selected a housing association to take forward the scheme, helped secure grant funding to pay for the project, and, last but not least, found a suitable and affordable exception site on which the three new homes will hopefully soon be built. 'We knew that in many rural parishes where wages are low, it is very difficult for young people to get suitable housing at an affordable price,' said Councillor Ken Browse from Halberton Parish Council, explaining their approach. 'If you are passionate about your community's housing needs, then there's help out there to find a solution. Take soundings and advice from other parish councils who have done it. Talk to potential partners, whether in local government, housing, charity or the voluntary sectors, and ask the questions that bother you. Above all, remember that if a local housing need exists, we are

the members of the community that are in a position to take the lead and find solutions.'

## Where local government is growing

Earlier this year, the Government announced new measures to make it easier to set up parish councils. The National Association of Local Councils' (NALC) 'Create a Council' week in May sought to raise awareness of the benefits of neighbourhood representation – in particular among the urban population, where parish councils are still sparse. More than 200 new local councils have been established in the past 13 years, which, according to NALC, makes the parish sector the only growing part of local government. Residents are seeking to establish what will be England's biggest parish council in Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham; while Queen's Park has become London's first new civil parish council for over 50 years. After a four-year campaign, the new Queen's Park Community Council – which has all the powers of a parish council – was formally established in May, and its spokesman said: 'We want to make our public services more locally accountable. This means people in our neighbourhood having access to those in charge of policing, health, schools, transport and social care.'



**Above:** In response to concerns that East Midlands Ambulance Service was to close local ambulance stations, councillors and residents of Youlgrave raised enough money to install defibrillators in the area, including one in this unused telephone kiosk **Below:** The four-year campaign to create a Queen's Park Community Council has now paid off

It might seem strange that a civil parish can range in size from a large town with a population of 100,000 to a single village with fewer than 100 inhabitants. Of course, the vast majority of parish councils are still rural and they remain the representative voice for most countryside communities. However, what's also clear is that today's parish councils do more than simply talk. For instance, seven parish councils in Suffolk are leading on a Quiet Lanes project to make local roads safer for all users as part of the Deben Estuary Partnership, a move supported by CPRE. Meanwhile Greenham Parish Council in West Berkshire is looking to use its new Right to Bid for an asset of community value – in this case, the iconic control tower for the former USAF base at Greenham Common, which it wants to restore and turn over for historical interpretation and community use. In northeast Hampshire, Hartley Wintney Parish Council both owns and runs a community bus service for local residents, partly to replace services withdrawn by private operators following local authority funding cuts. Sustainable transport is also a key theme in the draft Neighbourhood Plan for Walton, near Wetherby in West Yorkshire, where the parish council has successfully campaigned for a new traffic-free route for walkers, cyclists and horse riders, linking the village to the nearby Wetherby Railway Path.

**Communities in action**

In rural Derbyshire, amid concerns at East Midlands regional ambulance service's plans to close local



ambulance stations, and the prospect of longer response times for its residents, councillors in the Peak District village of Youlgrave, near Bakewell, concluded that it was time to help themselves. They decided to purchase a defibrillator, used to treat heart attack victims, via a scheme coordinated by a national charity called the Community HeartBeat Trust. Residents enthusiastically backed their idea and local fundraising proved so successful that four units have now been installed in locations around the parish for the public to use, including a redundant telephone kiosk owned by the parish council. Another is housed at the village garage, which owner and parish councillor Graham Elliott says has excited a lot of interest. 'Customers from outside the village say how impressed they are that we've provided these potentially life-saving facilities. But it was simply a case of the parish council understanding the needs of our rural community and then doing something about it.'

Youlgrave Parish Council has also provided extra grit bins and bulk-purchased bags of salt for resale to residents at a hefty discount, after grumbles at the county council's poor service to the village in winter; and, like other parish councils, it has also developed a website ([www.youlgrave.org.uk](http://www.youlgrave.org.uk)) that provides a round-up of local services for residents, and promotes the village and its businesses to visitors.

Back in West Sussex, meanwhile, Councillor James Butcher is busy organising a 'youth summit' to which he plans to invite local schools, youth clubs and youth council members throughout West Sussex. 'The image of the fuddy-duddy old parish council is wide of the mark these days,' he says. 'Parish councils are all about making a positive difference to your own neighbourhood. For me, they're an ideal way of engaging young people with local democracy and encouraging them to take an interest in where they live and the type of place they want it to be in the future – their future, in other words.' *Andrew McCloy is a freelance journalist and parish councillor from Derbyshire.*



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