

## Whose Town is it Anyway? The State of Local Democracy in Two Northern Towns

**This research, carried out by academics at the University of Liverpool, examines the ‘mix’ of ways in which local public services are influenced by the democratic will. Are some aspects of the mix more democratic than others? Who participates in each different element, and what influence do they have on local affairs as a result? The research, which centred on the northern towns of Burnley and Harrogate, resulted in the following key findings:**

- In pursuit of democratic accountability, local residents and media are looking in the wrong direction – only 5 per cent of public spending in Burnley and Harrogate is controlled by each of the district councils. Despite this, many people see ‘The Council’ (i.e. the district council) as the main local agency.
- Local residents rely on local newspapers for information about public bodies – but the local press continues to concentrate on district councils, largely ignoring other, higher spending, local service providers – such as quangos, county councils, and regional government.
- Over 30 different organisations, many of them unelected ‘quangos,’ have some role in governing Burnley and Harrogate respectively. Elected local authorities control only 53 per cent of total public spending in Harrogate and, in Burnley, only 40 per cent.
- The average district councillor spends up to 400 hours a year on constituency work, in addition to time spent on formal council business. But the basic allowance for a Burnley district councillor in 2004/05 was £1,292 per annum, compared to £5,673 per annum paid to non-executive directors of local NHS Trusts (who cannot be voted out of office, and don’t have to carry out constituency duties)
- Recruitment to public sector governing boards is increasingly made on the basis of what an individual can ‘bring’ to the organisation in terms of knowledge, skills and experience. This increases the possibility of board members being socially unrepresentative.
- Agencies run by unelected governing boards lack any real means through which local people can hold them to account, or remove board members.
- Only 24 per cent of Harrogate respondents, and 16 per cent of Burnley respondents, ‘feel able to influence local decisions’.
- The party system in Burnley and Harrogate is effectively kept going by just 100 people in each district. If this trend continues, local electoral democracy may cease to be viable.
- Local democratic participation and civic engagement tend to be higher where there are smaller units of local government – yet British local authorities are already almost five times larger than their European equivalents, and the UK consistently records the lowest local election turnouts in the EU.
- The authors make 11 recommendations for action to revive local democracy.

## Aims of the study

The study aimed to subject the notion of a local democratic deficit to comprehensive scrutiny via an in-depth analysis of the full range of mechanisms through which local public bodies in Burnley and Harrogate relate to local residents. This analysis was built around the notion of a 'local democratic mix', comprising:

- **representative democracy:** elected local councils;
- **network democracy:** functional representation in which decision-making is influenced by organised interests, such as local partnerships;
- **user democracy:** customer or consumer feedback models connecting service providers with users, with a focus on the individual;
- **participatory democracy:** more collectivist means of involving local people in decision-making, such as public meetings and tenant participation.

## Crisis? What crisis?

If local election turnouts are anything to go by, the public doesn't care about local democracy. In May 2003, just a third of the electorate exercised their right to vote. As *The Observer* noted at the time, more votes had been cast in the previous series of Big Brother.

But elections are only one aspect of local democracy. More and more services are delivered by quangos rather than local councils. Maybe this is undemocratic – or maybe it means that we need to think more broadly about what we mean by local democracy. There are many ways – other than voting in local elections – for citizens to express their views on local services. Local public bodies often set up consultation and 'customer feedback' mechanisms.

This democratic 'mix' in local affairs raises important questions. Are some aspects of the mix more democratic than others? Who participates in each different element of the mix and what influence do they have on local affairs as a result? How can leadership be asserted in such a fragmented landscape of local democracy?

## Chalk and cheese? The case study towns

The researchers looked at Burnley and Harrogate. It would scarcely be possible to identify two more contrasting towns in Northern England. Broadly, one is poor and the other affluent. The contrasts between the two offered the opportunity to consider how such different socio-economic circumstances affect local democracy.

At the same time, Burnley and Harrogate have a lot in common. The core towns are roughly the same size, and form part of wider districts, with a mix of rural and urban areas, operating in two-tier local government structures. Both towns

are far enough from a major city to have a distinct sense of identity. Significantly, current debates about local government reorganisation are centring on just such medium sized towns beyond the metropolitan core.

## Main Findings

### Confused? You will be ...

Local services are delivered by different levels of local government. Further, **over 30 different organisations, many of them 'quangos,' have some role in governing Burnley and Harrogate respectively.** Understandably, residents are often confused about which agencies are responsible for which services. They are not clear about who should be held accountable, or about who are the local democratically chosen leaders.

Many people see 'The Council' (i.e. the district council) as the main local agency, regardless of the actual division of responsibilities for services. In fact, only 5 per cent of public spending in Burnley and Harrogate is controlled by each of the district councils. Elected local authorities control about 53 per cent of total public spending in Harrogate and, in Burnley, only 40 per cent.

### The only way is up?

There is a tendency for more local services to be provided at the level of the county and the region, rather than the district. This scaling-up of service provision has largely been driven by assumed economies of scale. But it may also make services more remote from local residents. It can reduce the extent to which local residents can influence decisions affecting their towns.

### Mind the media gap

The research showed that, **while local residents rely on local newspapers for information about public bodies, the local press continues to concentrate on district councils. It tends to ignore other, higher spending, local service providers.** This creates an 'accountability gap'.

### Who's got the power?

National governments tend to carry out 'continuous reform' of local public bodies. It is this, rather than local pressures for change, which has led to the 'scaling up' of service delivery from district councils to the county and regional levels. Increasingly, central government also sets performance criteria and targets. All this diminishes local autonomy. At the same time, as part of the reform process, central government requires local public bodies to ascertain, and respond to, the views of local people. The resulting plethora of consultation and engagement processes is inherently flawed. Citizens'

## Chalk and cheese: socio-economic contrasts in Burnley and Harrogate

	Burnley	Harrogate
Total population (2001)	89,500	151,300
Residential burglaries per 1000 residents (2001)	15	4
Residents educated to degree level (%) (2001)	13	25
Percentage of dwellings classified unfit (2003)	23	4
Average property price (2004)	£46,417	£195,887

Sources: 2001 Census of Population, Local Labour Force Survey, Land Registry.

expectations are raised, while the capacity of local agencies to respond is tightly restricted.

### **'To whom are you accountable? How can we get rid of you?'**

Since 1997, appointments to local and regional quangos have become more open and transparent. But the fact remains that these influential bodies are unelected. People are appointed to them – because they are felt to have relevant knowledge, skills and experience. This increases the possibility of board members being socially unrepresentative.

At the same time, public consultation and engagement mechanisms do not make up for the lack of democratic accountability. Agencies run by unelected governing boards tend to lack any real means through which local people can hold them to account. Perhaps most importantly, there is no way for local people to remove board members.

### **Who'd be a local politician?**

Only elected politicians face the threat of being removed from office by local residents. As a result, the average district councillor spends up to 400 hours per annum in campaigning for re-election, staying in touch with constituents and dealing with casework, in addition to time spent on formal council business. Given this workload, and their exposure to local media and public scrutiny, the financial incentives to serve as a councillor are meagre, particularly in comparison to equivalent 'non-executive director' roles on local quangos. **The basic allowance for a Burnley district councillor in 2004/05 was £1,292 per annum, compared to £5,673 per annum paid to non-executive directors of local NHS Trusts.** At the same time, reforms to local political arrangements in 2000 have left many local councillors feeling increasingly marginalised from decision-making.

### **Keeping the faith**

If considered broadly, there is little evidence that local civic and political engagement is declining. The research suggested that both towns have seen a diversification, rather than simple decline, in levels of political participation and civic engagement. There is particularly strong participation in faith groups in both towns, which constitute a core form of local civic activism. Yet, an increasingly diverse local political and civic infrastructure is being maintained by an 'activist minority', who tend to be drawn from the educated, middle-classes.

### **The party's over?**

Among all local groups, political parties are the biggest losers. They have suffered most dramatically from an erosion of both membership and activism, leading to difficulties in sustaining meaningful local party competition. **The party system in Burnley and Harrogate is effectively kept in operation by just 100 people in each district.** If this trend continues, there is a serious prospect of local electoral democracy ceasing to be viable.

### **Solitaire's the only game in town?**

There has been a tendency to move away from seeing 'the people' as the group to which local bodies should be accountable, towards the idea that 'the individual, as customer, is king'. The rallying cry of 'power to the people' might be said to have been replaced by the cry of 'power to the person'. But there are limits to more consumerist approaches to participation.

Only a minority of local residents respond to consultation processes or use 'customer feedback' mechanisms.

Substantial investment in market research, focus groups, consultation events, and so on, has not prompted levels of participation that might mitigate concerns about levels of electoral participation. Moreover, there is little evidence that local people feel 'personally empowered' via the process of being recast as 'consumers'. Questions put to local citizens' panels revealed that **only 24 per cent of Harrogate respondents, and a mere 16 per cent of Burnley respondents, 'feel able to influence local decisions'.**

### **Where will the people go?**

Despite the 'draining away' of functions and powers from district councils over the past 30 years, lower-tier councils continue to hold a remarkable significance for local residents. District councils have far greater levels of contact with local residents than any other local public agency. Local residents tend to have closer relationships with district and parish councillors than they have with county councillors. Whether in Burnley or Harrogate, local residents are:

- twice as likely to have attended a district council meeting, compared to a county council meeting;
- twice as likely to have taken part in a district council consultation exercise, compared to a county council consultation;
- five times as likely to have made a formal complaint to the district council than to the county council.

### **Eurovision: British local democracy in comparative perspective**

The UK arguably fails to comply with several of the principles enshrined in the Council of Europe's 'European Charter of Local Self Government'. In particular concerns must be raised about: the lack of constitutional protection for local authorities; the scale of the local quango state; central control over local government finance; and the scale of central steering, through targets and performance indicators. **British local authorities are almost five times larger than their European equivalents. The UK consistently records the lowest local election turnouts in the EU.**

### **Is bigger better? Comparing local democracy in Britain and Western Europe**

	People per elected councillor	Average population per council	Average turnout in local elections since 1995
UK	2,605	118,400	35%
European average	814	24,403	66%

Sources: Beetham et al., 2002, p.267; ODPM, 2002, p.122.

### **Reasons to be cheerful**

While the shortcomings of local democracy are enormous, all these play a crucial role in sustaining the local democratic process -

- the resilience of local democratic infrastructure
- a myriad of innovative local organisational practices
- activism in local groups and
- the contributions of individual citizens.

They provide the basis on which local democracy could be rebuilt. Concrete examples include:

- **Parish councils** – despite their minimal powers and uneven coverage, parish and town councils can provide for significant civic and public engagement, particularly in villages and small towns with distinct local identities.
- **Faith groups** – despite declining church attendance, faith groups remain a key form of civic engagement, and are often at the forefront of new forms of political participation, such as those connected with environmentalism.
- **Neighbourhood activists** – the contributions made by a small minority of ‘super-activists’, often at the most local level, can be enormous. Neighbourhood activists often provide a crucial link between local residents, their ward councillors and local public officials.
- **Public buildings** – where they exist, public buildings in individual neighbourhoods often act as a powerful focal point for civic engagement and for contact between citizens and public agencies.
- **The local press** – local newspapers have been a key element of local democracy infrastructure for over a century. Even in the digital age, they continue to act as the citizen’s key source of information about local affairs, and play a critical role in local accountability.
- **Local elections** – although low levels of local electoral turnout are a real concern, the experience of Burnley and Harrogate suggests that there is no more powerful barometer of local feeling. When significant local controversies arise, turnout increases.

### **Give it a rest! The case against reform**

Despite the failings of English local democracy identified in the research, it does not automatically follow that major reform is required. Perhaps the greatest danger to local democracy is the spectre of ‘continuous reform’ from the centre, particularly where this involves the creation of larger geographical units for the delivery of local services. Constant central reform has a hugely disruptive impact on local public services and on the possibilities for promoting local democratic engagement. In addition, **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.** The study therefore advocates a vision of local democratic revival that is facilitated, but not driven, by central government.

### **About the research**

The study was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and carried out from 2004-2005 by Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg and Dr Steve Clayton of the University of Liverpool. The researchers undertook detailed fieldwork in both Burnley and Harrogate, conducting over 100 interviews with politicians, policy-makers, local activists and residents, and attending meetings of a range of public bodies. Survey questions were put to a weighted sample of local residents via the Burnley Citizen’s Panel and the Harrogate District Panel. The project was supported throughout by an advisory group, which included representatives of the three main political parties. Further details about the research, a downloadable version of this summary, and several working papers are available on the project website: [http://www.liv.ac.uk/sspsw/research/State\\_of\\_Local\\_Democracy.htm](http://www.liv.ac.uk/sspsw/research/State_of_Local_Democracy.htm).

Copies of the full report, published in book format (219 pages) can be obtained from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, priced £15 (ISBN-10: 1 90319 609 4; ISBN-13: 978 1 90319 609 0). Please contact Angela Forster, JRCT, The Garden House, Water End, York, YO30 6WQ. E-mail – [angela.forster@jrct.org.uk](mailto:angela.forster@jrct.org.uk); telephone – 01904 627810.

The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust is committed to strengthening the democratic process, and to promoting greater accountability and openness within corporate and political institutions. Information about the Trust’s work on issues of power and responsibility is available at [www.jrct.org.uk](http://www.jrct.org.uk). Charity registered in England and Wales, 210037.

### **Reviving local democracy: 11 recommendations**

1. **Recognise the problem:** all political parties have a common interest in reinvigorating local democracy.
2. **Promote civic renewal:** the key role for central government must be to construct an inter-departmental vision of local democratic renewal.
3. **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.
4. **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 campaigning.
5. **Restore local autonomy:** all efforts to promote local democracy will fail unless there is greater local control and local policy choice.
6. **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.
7. **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.
8. **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 health care.
9. **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’.
10. **Build for local democracy:** the current large-scale public buildings 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.
11. **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.