

## Is UK local government really so big?

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It has long been held by academic commentators that the UK has the largest local government units in Europe (see e.g. Stewart, 2000). This orthodoxy is associated with the view that local government in the UK<sup>1</sup> has developed upon instrumental lines, subordinated to the centre in its search for efficiency and scale economies, or to the dominant conception of economic welfare. In comparative terms, the UK it is often grouped with Northern European countries characterised by large local authorities focused on service delivery (see e.g. John, 2001; Hesse and Sharpe, 1991). This contrasts with southern European or Napoleonic systems including countries such as France and Spain, in which smaller, more community focussed units exist, where the primary purpose is representation rather than service delivery.

However, such views have tended to overlook the existence of parish and town councils in England, and community councils in Wales and Scotland, as they are not 'principal' authorities. If these councils are included, a different picture emerges, that brings into question the reputation of UK local government as largest in Europe. This paper revisits the arguments used to exclude these councils and proposes reasons why they may be included in comparative statistics on local government size. The size and scale of UK local government will be compared to that of the 'Napoleonic' system in Spain to raise questions concerning the validity of the orthodoxy and to paint a more nuanced view of UK local government size and scale. Before that discussion, the place of parish/town/community councils in UK local government historically will be considered, including their role in the light of current moves towards 'localism'.

The purpose of the paper is not to argue for the normative value of small local authorities; rather it is to raise some questions about the value of placing countries in what appear now increasingly outdated typologies of local government systems, and also to question the value of simple 'one statistic' comparisons. In addition, a more fundamental question is posed as to 'what counts' as local government, and what criteria do we apply when counting them?

First it is important to clarify the terms we use in the paper. We use the term 'local council' to refer to parish and town councils in England, community and town councils in Wales, and community councils in Scotland. We use the term 'principal authority' to refer to unitary, district, county, and metropolitan and London borough councils in England, and unitary councils in Scotland and Wales. We set out by what we mean by the term 'local government' in the following section. Principal authorities are commonly thought of as local government. The question is, should we consider local councils as part of local government too?

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term UK but in the main limit our analysis to England, Scotland, and Wales.

## 2) What is local government, and why should we be interested?

The issue of the extent to which local councils 'count' as local governments raises some important questions which have become more pertinent in recent times. In 1996 Cole and Boyne were able to remark that it was 'no longer clear what the term 'local government' means in the contemporary British context' (Cole and Boyne, 1996, p.191). This, according to the authors, contrasted with the apparently clear idea of which organisations were part of the local government structure which had been held traditionally amongst writers and commentators. Noticeably, however, they note the lack of attempts to offer formal definitions, leading to some distinctive variance in some of the classic accounts as to what should be included as 'local government', including, in one case, the inclusion of the many unelected 'local' bodies of the nineteenth century. Whilst noting attempts at definitions, Cole and Boyne also noted scepticism as to whether local government could be satisfactorily defined, using classifications which hold firm, given changes of significance and meanings over time.

The lack of clarity over what 'counts' is of more than purely academic interest; in terms of comparison with other countries, the size of local government in the UK is often held up as an argument by those advocating local government reform; the comparison is thus relevant to policy debates concerning local government size, functions, and democratic accountability. It is important, then, that we are comparing like with like. More broadly, in an era when it has become more common to use the term 'local governance', it is necessary to distinguish local *government* from the plethora of organisations, including single and multi-purpose bodies, partnerships, and delivery agencies which exist at local level. Local governance in any area is populated by networks of public, private, voluntary and Third Sector organisations, working at a variety of scales and levels, in which local councils are one player amongst many, a trend to complexity which has been accentuated by the increasing use of direct user and citizen involvement (Bridge, Marsh and Sweeting, 2013). Significantly, some of these bodies have included an elected and/ or representative element (for example Foundation Hospital Trusts and community elections for some regeneration partnerships). The 'modernisation' agenda of the New Labour governments, together with the 'localism' agenda of the Coalition government have further added new scales, sites and meanings of what 'local' areas are and what/ who they should represent - in New Labour's case with an emphasis upon the neighbourhood (Lowndes and Sullivan, 2008), and, in the case of the Coalition, a range of 'local' or 'community' activity of varying and often unspecified spatial range. New categories of local political representation have thus emerged.

The concept of multi-level governance has thus been used to capture the connections and inter-play between levels and scales of government from the local/neighbourhood level to the global. In addition, the complexity has been heightened by new forms of political engagement and the re-shaping of the local public realm, producing new 'geographies of localism', including new forms of participation and civil society organisations involved in issues which cover a variety of scales (Bridge, Marsh, Sweeting, 2013). Local politics cannot easily be defined or contained within boundaries, and to be effective must operate in a range at multiple spaces and scales- a politics of 'place beyond place' (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013). As Clarke and Cochrane note, then, little in this scenario can be identified as straightforwardly 'local' nor straightforwardly 'government'. It could be argued that similar definitional problems have faced us before, and that, for instance, nineteenth-century local governance presented a similarly complex array of Boards, agencies and charitable organisations (Skelcher, 2003). Further, it might be added that official local government boundaries in most cases

always been at best a rough approximation of the local public sphere, however it may be defined. However, it does seem that it is increasingly important to define our terms with respect to local government amidst this complexity - to what exactly do we refer when we use the term; what 'counts' as local government, such that we might know and compare how much of it we have?

Cole and Boyne (1996) argued that local government can be defined as follows:

- jurisdiction over a substantially smaller area than the national government
- elected by popular vote
- have powers of taxation
- genuine discretion over service provision

Loughlin (1996), writing at about the same time, stated local government has four 'defining characteristics'

- multi-functionality
- broad discretion
- powers of taxation
- a representative function

Clearly, Cole and Boyne's definition would allow for single purpose/single service authorities, whereas Loughlin's appears to be more in tune with what we traditionally may be said to expect- a range of services. Loughlin's definition requires a 'representative function' rather than direct election by popular vote, and so could potentially include unelected bodies. Thus, we take our five defining characteristics of what 'is' local government, in this paper, to be

- jurisdiction over a substantially smaller area than the national government
- election by popular vote
- powers of taxation
- multi-functionality
- genuine discretion over service provision

We argue that in the UK, Parish, Town and Community Councils (collectively called 'local councils') meet these criteria, clearly in most cases, and that, where doubts can be raised, they could similarly be raised about local government at County, Unitary, and District level. Naturally there is room for debate as to *how far* local councils meet them. There is huge variation between local councils, with some providing considerably more services, and playing a much greater role in their local communities than others. CLG puts the population range of these councils between 150 and 82,000, with spending between £5,000 and £1m (CLG, 2011, p 149). There is also the thorny question of what counts as 'genuine' or 'broad' discretion. We don't seek to argue that local councils have a free

hand over service delivery. Nor do we argue that their powers of taxation are especially extensive. Yet these same issues can be raised over principal authorities – one could equally debate how far principal authorities fit these criteria. All principal authorities have considerable constraints put on them by central government over finance and function. Therefore the differences between local councils and principal authorities in relation to the question of whether or not they fit a definition of ‘local government’ are a matter of degree, rather than about the fundamental nature of those entities. Note also that we do not include a criterion the need for a type of local government to be uniformly present across a state/nation: as we will outline elsewhere in the paper, we do not consider there to be a convincing case for this condition.

In addition to suggesting that local councils should ‘count’ with reference to definitions of local government, our argument is also based upon a review of the role of local councils historically and their place within the UK local government tradition, together with their relationship with current policy initiatives. It is to this role that we now turn.

### **3) UK parishes in historical and current perspective**

Local councils and ‘localism’ or a concern for the ‘local’ scale are not, of course, necessarily the same thing, but it is important to recognise the ‘thread’ of localism which exists in the UK constitutional tradition- although at times it appears to have been largely forgotten, it has never gone away, and from time to time appears to come back strongly. Orr and Vince (2009) identify it as one of the key ‘narratives’ or ‘traditions’ in UK local government, which has competed over the years with others; it is often argued that other narratives, relating to managerial and technical efficiency, have predominated, (Chandler, 1991, 2007), but, in particular the notion of the parish as the foundation of ‘local’ democracy has persisted. Again, for many, this may be considered nothing more than lip-service paid by successive governments to the always popular but vague notion of the ‘local’ or to ‘community’ sentiment which has been a feature of local government reorganisations. Thus, for example, the Redcliffe-Maud Commission, in its report in 1968, was able to recommend the widespread establishment of ‘Local Councils’ at parish or urban- neighbourhood level, whilst at the same time recommending the creation of large Unitary authorities for the delivery of all local services. For many, this is indicative of what has become the central narrative of UK local government- a move towards centralisation based on a shaky rationale founded on changing social/economic circumstances- precipitating a move from affective to effective community representation (based on travel- to –work areas, working patterns etc)- and on the even more dubious claims that larger units were more efficient and effective in the delivery of the by now essential welfare services. However, in turn, we should note that even at the high point of 1960’s fashion for administrative rationality, the Redcliffe-Maud Report actually could be said to have advocated an expanded role for local councils, advocating their nation-wide coverage and empowering them ‘to do what they pleased for the benefit of their people’ (HMSO, 1969, P.357)- quite wide executive powers were envisaged for these councils (Keith-Lucas, 1977).

Local councils have to some extent doggedly remained through nearly two centuries of reforms and have played a continuing part, admittedly diminishing over time, in the UK local government

narrative. As Chandler points out, parishes, like French communes, have an 'organic' nature which relates closely to the development of the UK constitution, in that they originated along with landed property rights, their origins being the church vestry and land surrounding the manor houses of landowners who had established churches during Saxon and Norman times. By the seventeenth century they had assumed the role of the primary unit of community administration (Chandler, 2007) and finance came via rates charged on property. In 1834 there were 15,600 parishes in England, mostly rural (many Towns had independent status as Boroughs, via Royal charter, but unchartered town areas had parished areas). The introduction of the Poor Law in 1601, administered and financed by Parishes, gave them responsibility for poor relief and effectively established a system of poor relief based on a very small, local scale, in England and Wales, set within and supported by common law (Charlesworth, 2010). Parishes accounted to Quarter Sessions of the County, to Justices of the Peace and to Lord Lieutenants in shire areas, but largely were left, within this framework, to their own devices (Chandler, 2007). The parish was closely identified with 'community' and produced strong ties and attachments- perhaps not the least because relief entitlement was tied to parish residency (Snell, 2012)

However, increased demands, particularly with respect to poor relief, led to parishes amalgamating for service delivery purposes. The 'Gilbert' Acts of 1782 allowed for statutory mergers of parishes for these purposes and could be said to mark the beginning of the demise of the parish as an important local service provider. Certainly for Chandler, this represented 'the thin end of the wedge' and the forerunner to a century of reform, a 'headlong embrace' of centralism (Sharpe, 1988) which would leave parishes 'rendered impotent' (Chandler, 2007). In this, the Poor Law Amendment Act played a key part, laying down a centrally devised and uniform pattern of poor relief, administered not by parishes but by Poor Law Guardians. Similarly, a range of new services emerged which were deemed to be too large for parishes to administer- including provision of sanitation and public health, as industrialisation increasingly weakened the division between town and country. These powers were increasingly given to a range of ad hoc boards, such that localities now became populated with an array of overlapping bodies, including Turnpike Trusts and Public Health Boards. Central government attitudes to parish government remained essentially benign- areas of over 800 inhabitants were allowed to constitute elected parish councils in 1831, and many Acts remained permissive and there remained hostility amongst both landed and the new industrial interests to central interference.

The fate of local councils in the UK is thus inextricably linked to the political settlements between landed and industrial interests, between Whig and Tory, land and capital, which for the best part of the century necessitated compromise. The 1835 Local Government Act established Municipal Boroughs, but county government remained relatively untouched until the Act of 1888 established elected County Councils, alongside 72 County Boroughs (effectively unitary councils). In 1894 parish government was reduced, according to Chandler, (2007, p.107) to the status of 'pressure group' by the creation of District Councils- Rural District Councils essentially being made up of combinations of parishes and smaller towns-including market towns- becoming semi-independent from their rural surroundings via Urban District Council status. By this time, a consensus had emerged between landed and capital interests, who both clearly now recognised the centre and parliament as the focus of their political interests The Act did, however, establish the parish council in its modern form, by formally separating the civil parish from the church (Towlerton, 2013).

By the turn of the century, then, the fate of the parish became inseparable from the further development of state welfare provision and local governments role in locally administering it. Notions of administrative rationality and managerial effectiveness became more influential. Intellectually, here we can see the influence of liberal thought based on the utilitarianism of Bentham which had been present for some time but which had conflicted with more conservative forces during the nineteenth century. The administrative centralisation favoured by Chadwick became the predominant view, leaving appeals to the Anglo-Saxon roots of parishes advocated by Toulmin –Smith looking increasingly outdated (Chandler, 2008).

The twentieth century saw local government increasingly engaged in the development and administration of state welfare. Although the structure of local government actually changed little outside of London until the 1970s, in practice the nature of the central-local relationship changed significantly and parish and local councils were somewhat insignificant in these developments. Chandler (2008) notes that the 'expediential' approach to local government firmly established itself, and by the late 1930s the 'dual polity'- characterised by relative indifference by the centre to local matters - was gone. The period of post-war re-construction and the development of the welfare state, together with urban growth and mobility, required planning and central direction to which 'localism' was potentially a distraction; the new NHS, for example, for Bevan had to be a national service to guarantee equality of service and access. If we can accept that local government in general became more of an administrative adjunct of the centre during this period (and there are many who would argue that this is over-stated), then clearly it would seem to follow that local councils became even more of an irrelevance. The London Government Act of 1963 abolished them in the capital. However, in fact, we know little of the actual activities of local councils during this period from academic or published studies. It seems likely that, at least in areas of Rural District Councils, parish councils continued to be a source of local political opinion formation and debate and certainly a key consultee with respect to important decisions, particularly regarding planning applications; there have always been, and remain, many County and District councillors who are also elected members of local councils and this interplay and potential influence is not one which has received much research attention. There were some steps in the direction of consolidating the role of local councils- the Parish Councils Act of 1957 reinforced town and parish council's role as a 'representative body to be consulted by government departments on local government matters' (Poole and Lucas, 2004, in Towlerton, 2013, p. 12).

It is, however, perhaps the Local Government Act of 1972 and the subsequent re-organisation of 1974 which has served to the bolster the arguments of those who argue that local government in the UK has the largest units in Europe and the lowest number of councillors per head. The Act itself was a compromise solution to the issues of efficiency and socio-economic change which had been deliberated by the Redcliffe-Maud Commission, retaining County Councils and abolishing Urban and Rural District Councils. Parishes with a close relationship with Rural Districts now found themselves in a new relationship with a more remote District, and boundaries often appeared to pay scant regard to 'traditional' community. Moreover, many towns which had had Urban District status similarly found themselves subsumed, reduced to the status of Town Council, effectively a parish. Many market towns, for example, found themselves in this position, such as Matlock, - a town of some 20,000 population and the recognised 'County Town'.

As noted, however, the Act maintained the tradition of at least considering Parishes and local councils worthy of attention and in maintaining them within the system. Some new powers were introduced, some clarified, and the right of unparished areas to demand a town or parish council be established (Towlerton, 2013). Indeed, it could be argued that by creating some 300 Town Councils the 1974 reform left many Towns which were keen to retain as many powers as possible and to make the most use of existing ones- by continuing to deliver on behalf of newly formed Districts within their areas. In addition, market towns, initially disappointed by their demotion in the re-organisation, continued to play a key role in the new Districts, and market towns in general continued to be an important lobby group. Shrewsbury Town Council, for example, had a budget of £2.9m in 2011/12 and employs 60 staff (Dorounian, 2011).

Whether or not the re-organisation of 1974 led to a further diminishing of parish/local council status in the UK, that re-organisation established the system, largely, by which comparative figures with respect to size of local government unit are measured. The events of the 1980s gave further emphasis to the argument and the seemingly irrational and centrally-driven creation of new Unitary authorities in the 1990s and into the 2000s served to further reinforce the established view. Parishes did raise their heads in opposition, often, to proposals made by the Banham Commission and subsequent reviews of boundaries and structures, but largely parish/local councils appeared to be of little academic interest, increasingly associated with rural areas covering a minority of the population- a view reinforced by the unwillingness of urban councils to create parishes and to pursue instead area and neighbourhood decentralisation structures. Mainstream local government academia has mainly (but not exclusively) been more interested in the Urban- the site of more intense conflicts over welfare resources and services, and generally speaking the areas where the need to encourage democratic engagement has been greatest; in general terms, parishes have been the more affluent areas. The perception of parish/local councils being sleepy backwaters has been reinforced, for example, by the National Association of Local Councils expressing the view that local councils should be non- party political (NALC, 2009). To the extent that local councils are mentioned in local government texts, it is in charting their historical role, now long past, and after that to footnotes.

However, there has been revived interest politically and academically in areas which have served, perhaps indirectly at times, to put local councils back into the frame of interest. These included, as already noted, interest in social capital, communitarianism, neighbourhoods, the global/local interface (the 'search for home'), the meanings of locality and place (influenced initially by theories around uneven development, and later by post-structural approaches, a revived interest in deliberative democracy and active citizenship, and associated with this an on-going interest in community engagement and empowerment). Many of these elements found their way into the New Labour programme generally and into the 'modernisation' agenda for local government, and remain within the Coalition government's 'localism' and Big Society agenda.

Coulson (1999) referred to the 1998 White Paper on Modern Local Government and the subsequent proposed legislation as 'steps on the road to putting local councils back where they belong'. In practice the results were mixed, with perhaps local councils making some small gains. Firstly, although the rhetoric of localism abounded, in practice New Labour's 'modernisation' programme was paradoxical and if anything had more centralising than localising tendencies; what freedoms were granted were highly conditional and dependent upon 'good' behaviour (Barnett, 2011).



Secondly, a plethora of initiatives stressed participation and localism, but these were often implemented via the creation of new forms of local representation, particularly in urban areas. Some of these involved election and new claims on representation beyond the parish/ local council- for example the New Deal for Communities initiative, and other area based elected forums- for example Tenant's Management Organisations. Parish/ local councils became to an extent one amongst many with claims to local democratic credentials. The 'neighbourhood' was a focus of attention with respect to social exclusion and the units of engagement did not necessarily coincide with local councils, if indeed any were present. Added to this was the increased tendency for County and District Councils, encouraged by government exhortations for increased consultation and 'democratic renewal', to establish their own devolved area or neighbourhood -based forums. The New Labour programme was then both a threat and an opportunity for local councils- in the opinion of Pearce and Ellwood (2010) it was an opportunity missed.

Despite this it can be argued that local councils emerged in 2010 stronger than they had been. The 2000 Rural White Paper encouraged the development of Parish (or 'Community Led') plans, and of Market Town Plans, in which local councils set out the key aspirations for their areas, and 1,000 of these had been created by 2005. They had no statutory basis and there were issues concerning their relationship to Local Strategic Plans but could form the basis of local opinion formation and sense of place (Owen, Mosely and Courtney, 2007). Between 1997 and 2002, 100 new Town and Parish Councils were formed. In 2001 the then DETR introduced the Quality Parish Council scheme, and in 2003 allowed some enhancements to powers for 'Quality' councils. There was a proliferation of agreements between principal and local councils concerning consultation and services which could be delivered by the local council or shared- Parish Charters of this type became common, together with agreements and models of good practice between the Local Government Association, NALC, and other bodies (Pearce and Ellwood, 2002). The Local Government and Rating Act, 1997 extended the services that a local council may provide, to include traffic management, transport and crime prevention. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, 2008, made the process of creating local councils easier, extended the right to call for the creation of a parish council to urban areas, extended the general power of well-being (granted to principal councils in 2000) to local councils, and re-instated the ability to create parishes in London.

Following on from this, the Coalition government's programme of 'localism' holds out for some the chance for bigger roles and influence for local councils. There is clear political consensus around the concept of localism, perhaps because it is often so vaguely defined. The phrase 'we are all localists now' may to some signify familiar empty rhetoric, but local councils, for good or not, have been the recipients of powers and extended rights which may add to their weight as an important element of the local government structure. The Localism Act, 2011, allowed for parishes, local or neighbourhood councils to produce Neighbourhood Development Plans which can have more statutory weight than their predecessors. These plans have to be the subject of a local referendum and be consistent with any Local Development Framework (LDF) which is in place. In addition, Neighbourhood Development Orders will enable local councils to allow 'permitted development' for projects/ building deemed desirable in their area (subject to independent assessment) without the need for formal planning permission. Gallent (2013) thus argues that the planning role is being 'repositioned' within the local government structure towards local councils, as Regional Spatial Strategies have been abolished. It is certainly this enhanced role in planning which provides the most significant enhancement of local powers, at it comes at a time of particular sensitivity and

controversy surrounding house building, particularly in rural areas, and the viability of market town/ small town retail centres. In addition, the Act extend to local councils the general power of competence granted in 2000 to principal councils. Tying in with the 'Big Society' agenda, other elements of the Localism Act also potentially enhance local council power. The 'Community Right to Bid' offers a possibility that local councils can bid for and retain within their communities facilities which have been 'listed' as of community value- including pubs, shops and other amenities. The 'Community Right to Challenge' allows local councils to potentially bid to be providers of local services.

As with the New Labour agenda, the Big Society and localism agendas have, of course, been the subject of much critique and degrees of cynicism. With respect to local councils, the rhetoric and potential enhanced powers are for many circumscribed by the many caveats which require approval from the centre or from 'higher' authorities- for example, LDF's will remain the most important local planning document. There are inconsistencies in the approach which overall is seen by many to tilt the balance in more in favour of centralisation than local councils (Walker, 2010; Crowe, 2011). We also have to recognise the reality behind the rhetoric- behind the localism agenda is the 'shadow' of austerity and increased financial constraint and control from the centre (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2011; Wilks-Heeg, 2011; Curtis, 2011). On a broader level the issue of granting more powers to local councils has raised/ revived debates and issues which are part of the UK local government tradition. Concern over house-building has, for example, raised the issue of NIMBYISM and pointed to the age-old arguments concerning scale. This is particularly important for the Governments need to be seen to promote economic growth and the lack of willingness for local councils to see developments 'in their own backyard'. The Coalition has attempted to address this by offering an incentive via a Community Infrastructure Levy, effectively a tax on developers, of which local councils may keep up to 25%. Local Councils which have permitted developments, may find themselves in quite a healthy financial position as a result of this ('Planning' Journal, 22/2/2013. for example, reports the case of East Coker Parish Council in South Somerset, which could 'reap' @ £6m in this way- a parish of 750 households.

In other ways, elements of the 'old' debate are being rehashed. For example, local councils may be offered more powers, but there is an issue of scale and capacity to carry them out. It already seems evident, as predicted by some, that only the larger local councils would have the capacity, for example, for Neighbourhood Plan creation (Bevan, 2011). As seen, local councils vary considerably in size and capacity. The first Neighbourhood Plan was approved by a local referendum in March 2013, and was created by 17 parishes acting together in Upper Eden, Cumbria. The estimated cost of drawing up a plan is £63,000 (there is financial assistance for 'frontrunners from the DCLG- the second phase of this assistance makes £7,000 available.) The early evidence also seems to reinforce the popular conception of parish councils, in particular, being predominantly rural. Of 433 requests to draw up Neighbourhood Plans, 124 of these came from the South- East and 13 from the North East. 92 had come from within the 20% lowest deprived areas in the country; 45 had come from the 20% highest deprived areas. 75% of applications had been made to principal councils under Conservative political control ('Planning' 25/3/13)

There are thus considerable barriers to the practical enhancement of local council powers. Research carried out by Towlerton (2012) in Yorkshire revealed a general positive attitude amongst parish councils to the localism agenda, but an overwhelming lack of interest in taking up most of the

powers on offer- particularly amongst smaller parishes- with issues of cost, time, skills and staffing given as the most common reason for the lack of enthusiasm. As noted, however, lack of service delivery responsibilities and formal power in this sense do not necessarily discount a local council from being considered a 'tier' or 'level' of local government. It should perhaps also be noted in this respect that many smaller District Councils are finding it difficult in the current climate to retain their role as service providers and are increasingly forming 'strategic partnerships' with neighbouring Districts for many and sometime all services. Are these Authorities to be no longer 'counted'? In addition, issues regarding planning have at the present time served to enhance the status of many local councils in their role as political/ community representative, with the local council often being the focus of protest against new developments. Whether or not we agree with their stance and consider this NIMBYISM is neither here nor there. At present many planning authorities do not have approved LDF's in place and developers have recognised a 'policy vacuum', giving rise to an increase in applications for developments on greenfield sites. The focus of protest around these controversial applications has often been the local council.

### **Explaining the limited interest in local councils**

We find it curious that local councils, given their history, role, and presence in governance, receive limited attention in local government studies. It would be over-stating the case to say that parish and town councils are always ignored by scholars of local government. Rather, they tend to be overlooked, discounted, or relegated to footnotes.

Wilson and Game, however, do provide a section in their authoritative textbook on local government on 'sub-principal authorities' (2010: 85-88). They explain the 'limited attention' (Wilson and Game, 2010: 87) given to them in their book by pointing out that they are not universal, and cover about only one third of the population, have no specific duties, and importantly have only discretionary powers. Wilson and Game's arguments are interesting as they at least note the existence of, and justify their only passing interest in local councils. They state:

It is this wholly discretionary nature of parish and town councils' work, and not primarily their size, which accounts for the limited attention they receive in this book... they have no *specific* duties to provide services or facilities. They are not to be compared, therefore, with the similarly sized French *communes*, German *Gemeinden*, or Spanish *municipios* that, with their extensive range of powers and competencies, form the basic constitutional tier of their local government systems (2010: 87, emphasis in original)

The basis to exclude local councils on the basis that their functions are discretionary and limited is questionable. First, in the case of limited functions, how many functions need a tier of government to provide in order for it to be deemed significant enough to be included as local government? Where might such a line be drawn? Second, in the case of discretionary functions, why is the fact that functions are discretionary so significant? Isn't it more significant that the councils exist and do carry out functions, rather than the basis on which the functions are provided? Also parishes may have been discharging functions for a considerable length of time – perhaps 100s of years. In the case of town councils they will be carrying out functions which they used to carry out as Districts before 1974. Also, discretionary implies functions can be withdrawn. Yet the same argument can be

levelled at the functions of principal authorities. All local government powers can be taken away by Parliament - and it often does reform the functions of local authorities. Perhaps this makes a more fundamental constitutional point- to what extent is any council 'principal' in the UK?

Other factors contribute to this collective tendency to overlook parish councils in what we commonly refer to as 'local government'. One reason is that parish councils are not 'principal authorities'<sup>2</sup>. Principal authorities have both considerable powers and responsibilities placed on them, and are often the subject of central government reform. For example, the review of the structure of local government in England only directly included principal councils (Chisholm, 2000, 4). Yet by legal definition at least, local councils can be regarded as 'local authorities'. For example, in the Local Government Act 2000, at different points in the Act, the text specifies whether 'local authority' refers only to principal councils or local councils as well<sup>3</sup>.

Another reason for the propensity to skip past local councils may be that they are simply considered not important enough. They don't do or spend enough to be considered worthy of extended attention, and are, by comparison with principal authorities, concerned with relatively trivial matters. For example, Chandler (2001) charts the demise of the importance of the parish as a unit of local government from at least as far back as the 1834 poor law, concluding that 'by 1914 the parish was therefore a vestigial unit of local government with few significant powers' (p20). In the last 100, despite their continued existence years there is little reason to believe that local councils have undergone any renaissance, with significant powers and functions being divided amongst principal authorities. The spending of local councils is dwarfed by that of principal authorities.

Yet the discussion above indicates that local councils do have a place in the local government system. While Scottish community councils are limited to consultative, non-service delivery roles, English and Welsh parish, town or community councils can provide a limited range of services. According to Wilson and Game, they are 'likely to be involved in helping with the provision of meals on wheels, providing recycling facilities, organising community buses, setting up car sharing schemes, installing TV cameras to prevent crime, enabling local post offices and stores to remain open, or arranging local GP clinics' (Wilson and Game, 2006: 81). This is not the stuff of massive state intervention, yet the services that these councils provide will make a difference to the communities that they serve. Moreover, in linking the significance of parish and town councils to the breadth of services they provide falls into the trap of downplaying the representative, democratic functions that these councils, and the councillors on them, play. Parish and town councils, at a level closest to the community, may well be most 'in touch' with local people. Their councillors, especially those that are party members, many also help to link parish and district, or even parish and county, representing those communities in other arenas and at other levels of government. The councillors that serve on them – all 80,000 of them - are often party members and elected (though many of that number may stand unopposed, or may be co-opted).

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase 'principal authority' seems to have come into common usage after the 1972 Local Government Act. The Act designated certain local councils as 'principal councils' (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1972/70/part/1/crossheading/principal-councils>).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/22/section/1>

Another reason to discount local councils from the local government family is that local councils don't cover the whole country, whereas principal authorities do. According to CLG, while principal authorities cover the whole country and all the population, English parishes cover only 37% of the population, or about 19 million people (CLG, 2011: 52). There are no local councils in London, having been abolished by the London Government Act 1963 (CLG, 2011). Hence it is easy to portray and perceive local councils as bit-part players in the wider world of local government, with any significant role in government long in the past, the classic example of 'parish pump' politics.

Yet clearly, despite the fact that local councils are not principal councils, we maintain they are part of the broader collection of entities known as 'local government'. We argue that there has been something of an over-emphasis on principal authorities, and an under-emphasis on the 'third tier of local government' (CLG, 2011: 149). To concentrate only on principal authorities on the basis of their 'principalness' or the fact that they have statutory duties gives too much weight to these facets of these local authorities. The thrust of both the literatures on governance and multi-level governance was to look beyond the town hall and into the world of networks outside elected local government. These literatures emphasise the diversity of the local. The fact that parishes exist and carry out functions in localities trumps the fact that they are not principal authorities, and are not obliged to carry out functions. Similarly, to nudge local councils out of the picture as they do not have full coverage of the country ignores the fact that no single type of local government unit – county, unitary, district – has complete coverage of the country. That local councils have only partial coverage of the nation as a whole gives them something in common with other sorts of local government unit, it does not set them apart from them.

One final comment is worth making. Wilson and Game argued that, small local government units in other countries had an 'extensive range of powers and competencies' (2010: 87). We now go on to consider the comparative dimensions of this debate, including the implication that UK local councils are considerably less powerful than their counterparts abroad.

#### 4) Local government size in the UK and in comparative context

There are three main ways of measuring the size of local government units. The first way is simply to count the number of inhabitants (or electors) per local government unit. The second way is to take the number of inhabitants (or electors) and divide that figure by the number of councillors. This calculation can be made at the level of the municipality, to give figure of number of inhabitants (or electors) per councillor locally, or at the national level, to give an idea of the number of councillors across the local government system. The third way is to examine the geographic size of local government units. The literature is dominated by the first two approaches, and we follow this approach in the sections below. These calculations are important as they connect to questions of democracy. For example, it can be argued that community representation is more difficult for councillors in larger local government units (Rao, 2000).

There are 351 principal authorities in England, 32 Scottish Unitary and 22 Welsh Unitary Councils (see **table 1**). English councils comprise 32 London Borough Councils, 36 Metropolitan District Councils, 27 Counties, 6 Unitary Counties, 201 District Councils, and 49 Unitary Districts (LGBCE, 2013). The smallest of these 351 authorities in voter terms is West Somerset, which has an electorate of just over 28,000. The largest is Kent, with an electorate of more than 1,051,000. There is considerable variation in the number of electors per councillor between councils. West Somerset (again) has the highest proportion of councillors to voters at one councillor per 1,002 voters. At the other extreme, each of Essex's councillors serves on average 13,975 electors.

**Table 1: Principal authorities in the UK - electors and councillors**

	Number	Range of Electors	Range of councillors	Range of electors per councillor (rounded to nearest whole number)
London Borough	32	105,784-259,256	46-70	1,959-3,992
Metropolitan District	36	112,257-762,461	48-120	1,782-6,354
County	27	328,334-1,051,591	45-84	4,682-13,975
Unitary County	6	38,016-501,300	39-123	2,802-3,679
District	201	28,064-156,967	24-62	1,002-3,488
Unitary District	49	28,588-322,387	26-82	1,100-4,606
Total England	351	28,064-1,051,591	24-123	1,002-13,975
Scottish Unitary	32	16,659-493,950	21 -79	1,132-6,253
Welsh Unitary	22	44,115-248,062	33-75	1,337 – 3,308
Total	405			

Sources: LGBCE, (2013); Electoral Commission (2013); Boundary Commission for Scotland (2013)

These figures do not include parish and town councils in England, and community councils in Wales or Scotland. It is difficult to establish precise figures for the number of local councils operating at any one time, or the number of councillors serving on them. A publication by the Local Government Association and National Association of Local Councils estimates there are about 9,000 parish and town councils in England (LGA/NALC, 2013: 2). The latest figures quoted on the NALC website states there are around 10,000 local councils in England and Wales, and about 10,000 councillors serving

on them. (NALC, 2013). The Local Government Financial Statistics report puts a figure of 9,920 for parish or town councils in England, with 80,000 councillors serving on them (CLG, 2011). The Welsh Government states a figure of 730 community councils in Wales, with 8,000 councillors serving on them (Welsh Government, 2013). The Scottish Government website says there are 1,200 community councils, but doesn't put a figure on the number of councillors serving on them, though it does say they are all elected (Scottish Government 2013). In 2010 Wilson and Game (2010: 80) stated that there were about 8,700 town and parish councils with some 75,000 councillors serving on them, and 750 Welsh community councils, and the 1,150 community councils in Scotland. About 70% of the population in Wales are covered by community councils (Woods et al, 2003).

We summarise the latest figures for local councils that we have found in the **table 2**, below.

**Table 2: Local councils in England, Scotland, and Wales**

	Number of councils	Number of councillors	Coverage	Population per council	Population per councillor (inhabitant, not elector)
English town or parish councils	9,920 (CLG, 2011)	80,000 (CLG, 2011)	19m	1,915	238
Welsh community councils	730 (Welsh Government)	8,000 (Welsh Government)	70% of population (Woods et al 2003) (2,1m)	2,877	263
Scottish community councils	1,200 (Scottish Government)	Not known	Universal (5.3m)	4,417	Not known

In overall terms these figures paint a very different picture to that outlined in table 1. They point to a much larger number of councils, and a much higher number of councillors, in large parts of the UK.

### Comparing the Spain and the UK

So far, these arguments are of significance at the level of the UK. This is primarily of interest to UK academics who want to study the entity we collectively refer to as 'local government'. The debate takes on a more pointed angle when we think about the UK in comparative terms.

Much of the comparative literature on comparative local government in Europe puts Spain in the southern or Napoleonic groups of countries, and England, Scotland and Wales in the Northern or Anglo groups (see e.g. John, 2001; Hesse and Sharpe, 1991). It is debatable whether or to what extent these typologies still hold in a world that has since globalised, further Europeanised, seen the collapse of the Berlin wall, and, in the comparative local government studies community at least, seen greater interest in countries from central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Swianiewicz, 2006). Nevertheless, in much of that literature the picture is painted of the UK having 'large' local authorities, and Spain having 'small' municipalities.

In **table 3**, we set out the size of authorities in different countries, according to John (2001) and Norton (1991).

**Table 3: Size of basic local authorities**

Country	John (2001)	Norton (1991)
Belgium	11,000	16,740
Denmark	18,000	18,500
Finland	11,026	10,646
France	1,491	1,500
Italy	7,182	6,800
Germany	7,900	7,240
Greece	1,803	1,600
Ireland	36,100	41,910
Netherlands	2,723	17,860
Norway	9,000	9,145
Portugal	2,342	34,180
Spain	4,997	4,700
Sweden	33,000	30,000
England	-	127,000
Scotland	-	91,620
Wales	-	75,870
UK	137,000	-

Clearly using these figures one would conclude that councils in the UK are the largest in Europe. It is these sorts of statistics that allowed John Stewart to state “the average size of a British local authority is about ten times the average size of local authorities in the rest of Europe” (2000:65-6).

One of the interesting differences between the two tables is the case of Portugal, which according to John has an average local authority size of 2,342, whereas Norton calculates the figure to be 34,180. The difference in the figures for Portugal can be accounted for as John appears to include parish councils in his calculations, whereas they are excluded in Norton’s. Norton excludes these sorts of councils, saying that the Portuguese parishes ‘have a much wider scope than the English parish and Welsh community authorities whose functions are entirely discretionary and not comparable with the other authorities [included]’ (Norton: 1991: 31ff).

Leaving aside Norton’s line of reasoning, it is not possible to simply ‘add in’ the figures for UK local councils into these figures. One issue is that as figures for the UK are relate only to parts of the country. Another is that at times figures are based on voters, at other times inhabitants. There are also issues about double, or even treble counting between local, district, and county councils and councillors. The figures in table 5 are based on the ‘basic’ unit of local government, a term which is left undefined. Yet the point is that, if we accept that local councils are local government, they ought to be taken into account in discussions about the size of local government units. As the case of Portugal illustrates, it is not always clear-cut which unit to include and which to exclude.

At this point it is helpful to compare the UK case with that of Spain, to illustrate some of the issues related to size that we would like to bring out, further bringing into question the idea that the UK has comparatively large local authorities.



Both the functions of Spanish municipalities rise according to population size. Table 4 shows the way that councillor numbers rise according to population in Spanish municipalities.

**Table 2: Number of councillors by population size (Sweeting, 2009)**

Number of residents	Number of councillors
1-99	Mayor only
100 – 250	5
251-1000	7
1001-2000	9
2001-5000	11
5001-10,000	13
10,001-20,000	17
20,001-50,000	21
50,001-100,000	25
100,001 upwards	27 councillors upwards. For municipalities above 100,000, one more councillor is added (to 25) for each extra 100,000 inhabitants or fraction thereof, plus one more if necessary to make an odd number

The smaller authorities are only obliged to provide drainage, pavements, street lighting, cemeteries, waste collection, street cleaning, water supply, and food regulation. Even then such services are actually provided by *provincias* (or provinces the second tier of local government in Spain) or inter-municipal arrangements on behalf of municipalities called *consortia* or *mancomunidades* (Sweeting, 2009). The smallest Spanish authorities are very different from large authorities in other countries, who might provide health services and education. Yet as they are the ‘basic’ unit of local government they are included in comparative statistics and in doing so are deemed ‘comparable’ to local government in other countries. However, their range of competences is not very different from many UK local councils, - they would seem comparable – but they are excluded.

However, the argument is not only about small, rural municipalities. It is about principal UK local authorities and Spanish urban municipalities as well. As **Table 4** shows, about half of the voting population of Spain lives in authorities with more than 50,000 inhabitants each. The ratio of councillors to votes in these municipalities is on average one councillor to every 5,370 voters. By comparison with UK local authorities (see table 1) that is a lower ratio than many of the UK’s principal authorities: lower than all London Boroughs (1,959-3,992 voters per councillor), all unitary counties (2,802-3,679), all districts (1,002-3,488), all unitary districts (1,100-4,606), and all Welsh unitary authorities (1,337 – 3,308). Many metropolitan districts, and even some counties, have lower ratios of councillors to voters than this figure. So on the basis of the councillor ratio, it is not accurate to say that many UK principal authorities are larger than their Spanish equivalents. To give an example, the city of Granada has a population of about 240,000, and therefore has 27 councillors. Southampton, a similar sized unitary authority has 48 councillors – approaching double the number of elected representatives.

**Table 4: Municipalities and councillors in Spain (see Delgado, 2006: 166)**

Population size of municipality	Number of voters	Per cent of voters	Per cent municipalities	Number of councillors	Per cent of councillors
Up to 250 inhabitants	299,491	0.9	28.9	8,680	13.3
251-5000	5,075,436	15.1	57.0	37,348	57.2
5001- 20,000	6,718,903	20.0	10.5	12,306	18.9
20,000 – 50,000	4,119,461	12.3	2.1	3,696	5.7
Above 50,000	17,372,666	51.7	1.5	3,235	5.0
Total	33,585,957	100.0	100.0	65,265	100.2

Of course, this average figure of 5,370 voters per councillor for half of Spain is a measure of central tendency, skewed by the presence of the massive municipalities of Madrid and Barcelona. This illustrates two other issues. The first is that the largest units of local government in Spain are larger than the largest local government units in the UK, if we restrict our view to principal authorities. Madrid has a population of 3.3 million people, and 57 councillors in the city's *ayuntamiento*. Barcelona's population of 1.6 million is served by 41 councillors. These councils are much larger than any principal UK authority, with comparatively fewer councillors. This brings out our second issue. The Greater London Authority is part of London's government, and supports the Mayor of London, overseeing key services for the capital. Yet as it is not a principal authority, and again tends to be excluded in discussions of comparative local government size.

## **5) Concluding thoughts**

The view transmitted by the 'one statistic' comparisons of local government leads to the view of large local authorities in the UK, at odds with the rest of Europe's smaller municipalities, at least in the case of Spain, does not stand up to scrutiny. The way that the average sizes are calculated – simply by dividing the overall population size of a country by the number of authorities, or dividing the population size by the number of councillors captures nothing of the variation in size of local authorities, or how populations or councillors are distributed between them.

Our issue is not that scholars of local government in the UK concentrate on principal authorities rather than local councils. The problem comes when this focus is transferred to the comparative context. This gives the misleading impression that UK authorities are larger than they really are, because these figures routinely ignore the thousands of local councils that exist, and mean scores don't capture the variety of councils in other countries. The conventional wisdom of seeing British local authorities as much larger than their European counterparts is brought into question as illustrated in comparison with Spain

Consequently, we argue that there is good reason to include English parish and town councils, and Welsh community councils, in comparative statistics regarding the size of local authorities. The case for the inclusion of Scottish community councils though recognise that, they serve only representative functions.

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