

What are local elections for?

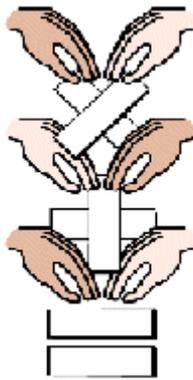
Three questions, ten problems, and a democratic solution

Stuart Wilks-Heeg and Andrew Blick

Democratic Audit

4 June 2009

Democratic Audit
Eleanor Rathbone Building
Bedford Street South
Liverpool
L69 7ZA



<http://www.democraticaudit.com/>

Introduction

Today, around 18 million electors will have the opportunity to cast ballots in English county council, unitary council and mayoral elections. Before the votes have even been counted, three things can be predicted with almost complete certainty. First, around 50-60 per cent of registered voters will fail to cast ballots. Second, the results will be analysed mainly for what they tell us about the electorate's view of current national political events and as a basis for predicting a possible general election outcome. Third, the electoral outcomes will make only minor difference to the delivery of local public services in the councils where local elections are taking place.

Depressingly, the above paragraph could have been written on the day of almost any local elections since the mid-1970s. Unless there are dramatic constitutional changes in the near future, it could be recycled for many local election days into the future. As such, few would deny that local elections have a far greater impact on national government policy than on the policies of the local authorities to which candidates are elected. This is such an obvious truism, that most would wonder why it even needs to be pointed out. We might even ask why we have local elections at all. As an editorial in *The Times* put it, back in 2003, local elections are 'the Christmas tree lights of British politics – one has to have them every year and they undoubtedly add colour to the scene, but are rarely that illuminating'.¹

Perhaps something is a little different this year. This year's council elections might be better compared to fireworks than Christmas tree lights. The results are likely to be Labour's worst county council elections since 1977, when Labour took 26 per cent of the votes and a mere 14 per cent of the seats. The only real question for the pundits to consider as the results filter in will be whether Labour loses its remaining four county councils (Lancashire, Nottinghamshire, Staffordshire, and Derbyshire) to 'no overall control' or whether the Conservatives will add these to the extensive list of counties it already controls. The issue of whether the Liberal Democrats hold on to Cornwall and Somerset will be a side-show. Indeed, things are so bad for Labour that some Cabinet ministers have opted not to wait for the inevitable Friday reshuffle after the results are announced.

In a sense, it helps that the implications of the local elections for national politics were obvious even before the voting had started. We know that it will be local councillors who will be held to account for the misdemeanours of members of the House of Commons, just as we know that the same fate awaits British MEPs. With such matters already dealt

¹ *The Times*, 3 May 2003, cited in David Wilson and Chris Game (2006) *Local Government in the United Kingdom*, 4th edition, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p.225

with, we can perhaps ask what local elections are really supposed to be for. Or more precisely, we can ask three questions about local elections:

- What is the purpose of local elections?
- What evidence is there that local elections serve this purpose?
- What can be done so that local elections better fulfil their purpose?

What is the purpose of local elections?

The reason that the purpose of local elections is not immediately obvious is, quite simply because their function has become increasingly blurred over time. In the period since the early 1970s, the autonomy of local government in the UK has evidently declined. Local fiscal autonomy has been reduced, central controls over financial inputs and service outcomes have proliferated, and a variety of functions have transferred to unelected public bodies, voluntary agencies and private sector companies.² Yet, over the same time period, local government elections have become an increasingly important battleground in party politics. In the early 1970s, as many as half of local councils in England and Wales could be described as ‘non-partisan’, meaning that a majority of their elected members resisted party political labels and most local authorities operated without strict party discipline.³ In 1974, 109 local councils were controlled by Independents, but by 2006 the figure had fallen to just 14.⁴ So important are local elections to the main political parties, that the number of uncontested seats in local elections is now significantly lower than it was in the early 1970s, despite the fact that local political parties face an increasing struggle every year to find the 5,000 or so necessary candidates nationally.

The straightforward explanation for these contradictory trends is that local elections are increasingly treated as glorified opinion polls, by the media and national political parties alike. As David Wilson and Chris Game put it, the results of local elections ‘are analysed mainly for what they would mean *if* they had been produced in a General Election, rather than for what they *actually* mean: namely, council changing political control, policies altering, councillors winning and losing seats’.⁵ On the occasions when there are significant variations in voting patterns relating to specific local issues, they tend to be ignored in general coverage of the results. In a context where each party’s votes in local elections will be aggregated to provide a figure for a national share, it clearly pays for

² Stuart Wilks-Heeg and Steve Clayton (2006) *Whose Town is it Anyway? The State of Local Democracy in Two Northern Towns*, York: JRCT.

³ Wilson and Game, p.303.

⁴ Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher (2007) *British Electoral Facts, 1832-2006*, Aldershot: Ashgate, p.225.

⁵ Wilson and Game, p.225.

political parties to stand as many candidates as possible. As early as 1975, Ken Newton had described local elections as the de facto 'annual general election'.⁶

However, the problem is not just that national issues tend to dominate local election campaigns, and therefore tend to be the principal influence on voting behaviour. Turnouts in UK local elections are generally very low, especially if compared to general elections or to local election turnouts in other European countries.⁷ There is also widespread evidence of confusion among voters about what functions are controlled by local councils rather than by unelected local bodies or even central government.⁸ To William Miller, these patterns raise the question of whether local elections are, in fact, 'irrelevant elections':

If the majority of electors ignore local elections altogether and refuse to vote, while most of us that do vote use the local election to pass judgement upon central government, we can argue that local elections are meaningless and irrelevant – both for local government and for central government. The message that local elections then send to local government is almost completely irrelevant because few voters are evaluating local government's performance when they vote. And the message they send to central government is not much better in quality since the majority of electors simply do not participate in local elections, and amongst the minority who do a few, at least may be influenced by their attitude towards their local council.⁹

Of course, there are instances where local voting patterns buck both national trends and the outcomes of parliamentary outcomes in the same locality. To take one remarkable example, at the time of the New Labour landslide at the General Election of 1997, Liverpool City Council was won by the Liberal Democrats after almost 15 years of continuous Labour control. One way of gauging the extent to which voters behave in this way is to analyse 'split-voting' in areas where elections to local councils and parliamentary seats are held on the same day, based on boundaries which are coterminous. Such analysis reveals that across 33 such constituencies in 1997, the average Liberal Democrat share of the vote was 19.2 per cent for parliamentary seats and 26.3 per cent for local council seats. Conversely, the Conservative and Labour shares of the vote were lower in council elections than parliamentary elections by 2 and 4 per cent respectively.¹⁰

⁶ Kenneth Newton (1976) *Second City Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Wilks-Heeg and Clayton, 2006, p.175.

⁸ Wilks-Heeg and Clayton, 2006, pp.47-9.

⁹ William Miller (1988) *Irrelevant Elections?* Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp.3-4.

¹⁰ Wilson and Game, 2006, pp.242-3.

It is also important to note that national reforms of local government over several decades have tended to assume that the accountability of local political leaders to the electorate is far from irrelevant. Enabling voters to hold councillors to account was the principal intention, however misguided, of the Poll Tax, which had initially been proposed alongside all-out annual elections for local government. Via a different approach, the concern to promote accountability through local elections has been at the heart of New Labour reforms of local government, especially the encouragement of elected mayors. That New Labour's efforts to promote mayoral elections have had a limited impact does not detract from the fact that there remains a belief, however weakly realised in practice, that local authorities should be accountable and responsive to a local electorate. That there is a gap between intention and reality mostly underlines the fact that there is no corresponding belief that heightened accountability to local voters must mean a corresponding reduction in the degree of intervention from central government.

Given these tendencies, it is clearly important to define what local elections *should* be for in a liberal democracy. Fortunately, not only can the point of local elections be easily derived from established democratic theory, their purpose can also be expressed in the form of recognised international standards. Assessing how well UK democracy adheres to these accepted international standards for democratic self-government is the established Democratic Audit approach to assessing all aspects of democracy, including local election and local government.

The key question posed by the Democratic Audit framework in relation to local government is whether decisions are taken at the lowest practicable level of government for the people most affected. This concern to ensure the maximum degree of decentralisation is strongly grounded in democratic theory, which points to the fundamental importance of sub-national political units. There is a wide-ranging body of empirical evidence to suggest that the quality of democracy is enhanced significantly where it operates at a smaller scale. For instance, regular engagement in the democratic process (i.e. participation beyond voting in periodic elections) is far more likely to be provided for by local government. Similarly, local government is more likely to be responsive to citizens, and is more accessible. In reality, of course, there are significant trade-offs involved between local and national democracy. If local autonomy is strong, enormous variations are likely to emerge in the choices made by local government. Moreover, if local government controls a wide range of functions and is well-resourced, such variation can result in significant differences in the provision of public services between localities within the same nation-state. The result of radical decentralisation, therefore, may be that the principle of political equality is quite seriously undermined.

In order to assess whether democracy is underpinned by such forms of decentralisation, the Democratic Audit framework therefore poses three further questions relating to local and regional government which seek to take account of these dilemmas:

- How independent are the sub-central tiers of government from the centre, and how far do they have the powers and resources to carry out their responsibilities?
- How far are these levels of government subject to free and fair electoral authorisation, and to the criteria of openness, accountability and responsiveness in their operation?
- How extensive is the co-operation of government at the most local level with relevant partners, associations and communities in the formation and implementation of policy, and in service provision?

However, other parts of the Democratic Audit framework are also directly relevant to the consideration of local elections. Questions designed to assess the extent and influence of democratic participation, or the role of political parties and the media, are also significant. For example, the Audit framework asks, among a host of other questions:

- Does the party system assist the working of democracy?
- How far do women participate in political life and public office at all levels?
- How equal is access for all social groups to public office, and how fairly are they represented within it?
- How accessible are elected representatives to their constituents?

It is not possible, in this short review paper, to provide a comprehensive assessment of local elections using the Audit framework. However, in what follows, we offer a summary of the key concerns arising from the application of these criteria to the elections being held on 4 June 2009.

What evidence is there that local elections serve their purpose?

Before tuning directly to the available evidence, it is important to note that there are significant differences between the councils which have elections in June 2009. In total, there are just 38 councils with elections taking place, of which 27 are county councils, eight are unitary councils, and the remaining three are mayoral contests. Just as importantly, it is crucial to note that these different types of local election arrangements have been created by different phases of local government reform since the 1970s.

County councils: the bulk of the votes cast in these local elections will be for England's remaining 27 county councils. The product of local government reforms introduced in

1973, each of these counties contains within it a number of districts, with the county and district councils operating in a two-tier local government structure. Under two-tier local government, functions are split between counties and districts, with the former taking charge of tasks such as education, social services, libraries and highways, while districts are mainly responsible for refuse collection, leisure facilities, public parks, and so on. The rationale for the introduction of this system in the early 1970s was that county councils would enable significant economies of scale and scope to be achieved in key welfare state functions such as education and social services. However, two-tier local government has consistently been criticised for creating confusion among voters about which tier is responsible for which services and for creating coordination problems between the county and district levels, particularly since some functions, notably those associated with waste management, economic development, planning and regeneration, cut across the two tiers.

Unitary councils: eight of the councils with elections are unitary councils, in which the two-tier system has been abolished, so that a single council is responsible for the full range of services. The creation of unitary authorities has been the favoured option for government since the mid-1990s. The case for unitary councils has been that they enable the achievement of economies of scale while avoiding the blurred accountability associated with the two-tier system. Until recently, this was achieved by dividing counties into unitary authorities or by ‘carving out’ unitary authorities from the existing counties. However, policy in more recent years has favoured the creation of ‘unitary counties’, in which all districts within the country are abolished, with their functions passing to the county level. Of the eight unitary councils up for election, five are new unitaries, of which three are unitary counties (Cornwall, Wiltshire and Shropshire).

Mayoral elections: The Local Government Act 2000 required local authorities in England and Wales to establish a separation executive function in place of the traditional committee system, with the intention of making it clear where responsibility for decisions lay. Councils were provided with three main options for instituting such arrangements, two of which involved the creation of directly-elected mayors. While the mayoral options were clearly favoured by government, because of a belief that mayors would make political leadership more visible and render the executive more accountable, there was little enthusiasm for it, either within local government or amongst electorates. By 2002 only three per cent of local authorities had introduced directly elected mayors. Of the 11 local authorities with elected mayors, Doncaster, Hartlepool and North Tyneside will have mayoral elections in June 2009.

As is evident from the above, these contrasting arrangements for local government exist in large part because of the introduction of reforms intending to remedy the deficiencies

of previous reforms. As such, there will be significant variations in the extent to which each type of local council/local election provides for democratic self-government against the various criteria used. Such variations in ‘democratic qualities’ are reinforced, moreover, by the enormously different geographical scales which these elections relate to.

Taking such variations into account, the Democratic Audit criteria lead us to raise ten key concerns about the democratic quality of the local elections taking place in the UK in June 2009. Some of these concerns are well known, especially to councillors and senior local government officers, but are still worth repeating. However, some of the concerns we would highlight are perhaps less immediately obvious and, in many ways, are only revealed because of the application of the Democratic Audit criteria.¹¹ The ten concerns are as follows.

1. Local government is not local enough: it has long been argued that the basic units of local government in the UK are too large to realise the democratic advantages associated with decentralisation. The large geographical and population size of local authorities renders them remote from the electorate, with many county councils and some new unitary councils occupying territories larger than Luxembourg, an independent nation-state within the European Union; and some serving populations larger than four EU member states. This is a particular concern in relation to the new unitary councils, since there are no districts to mitigate the scaling up of local government.

Table 1: The geographical size of selected local authorities in England, compared to Luxembourg (km²)

| Local authority | Type of authority | Area covered |
|-----------------|-------------------|--------------|
| North Yorkshire | County council | 8654 |
| Cornwall | Unitary county | 3563 |
| Wiltshire | Unitary county | 3476 |
| Shropshire | Unitary county | 3197 |
| Lancashire | County council | 2903 |
| Luxembourg | Nation-state | 2586 |

As Democratic Audit has previously noted, as measured by population, the UK has the largest units of local government in Europe, and possibly in the OECD, and the ratio of citizens to elected local politicians is higher in the UK than in any other European country. The average population per local authority in the UK is four times greater than in Sweden, 24 times greater than in Germany and 74 times greater than in France.¹²

¹¹ Much of the evidence discussed in this section is derived from Wilks-Heeg and Clayton (2006).

¹² David Beetham, Ian Byrne, Pauline Ngan and Stuart Weir (2002) *Democracy Under Blair: A Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom*, London: Politicos.

2. Local election turnouts are too low to provide sufficient democratic legitimacy for local government: as figure 1 shows, turnouts in English county council elections tend to vary from 38-42 per cent, unless artificially boosted by being held simultaneously with a general elections (as in 1997, 2001 and 2005). The pattern is similar for unitary councils in England, as figure 2 demonstrates, except that turnouts tend to range from 28-38 per cent when not held at the same time as a general election.

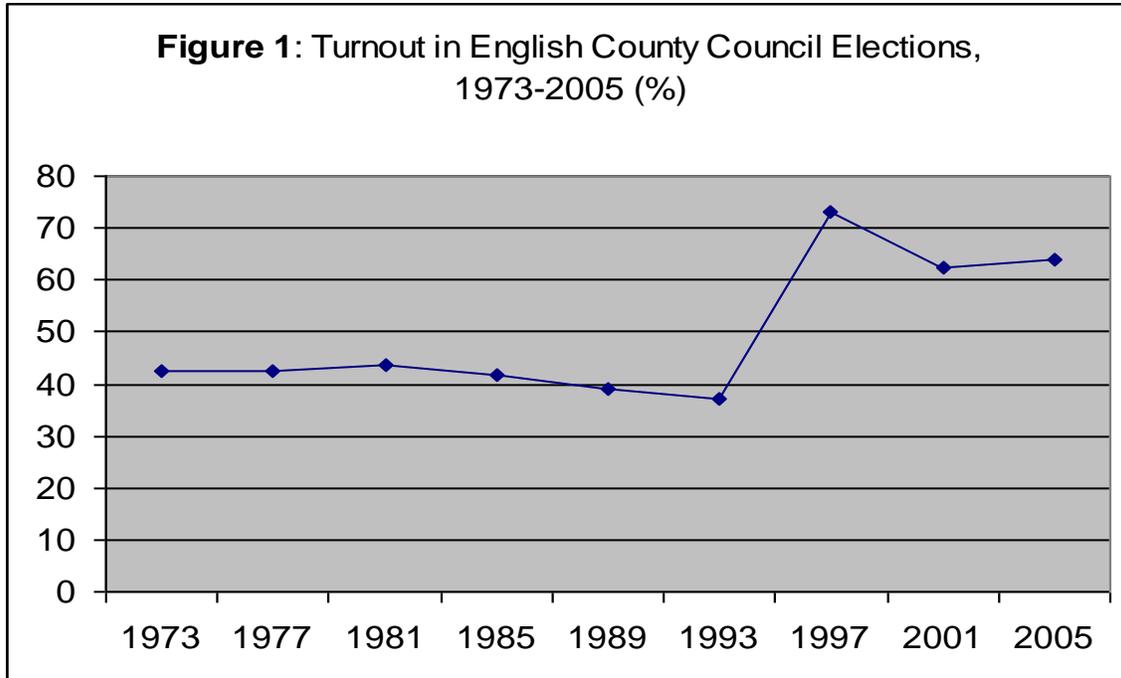
Table 2: Average turnout at sub-national elections within the EU

| | Before 1995: mean | After 1995: mean | Change |
|----------------------|-------------------|------------------|-----------|
| Belgium | 93 | n/a | n/a |
| Luxembourg | 93 | 92 | -1 |
| Italy | 85 | 80 | -5 |
| Austria | 82 | 79 | -3 |
| Sweden | 85 | 79 | -6 |
| Denmark | 80 | 72 | -8 |
| Spain | 65 | 72 | +7 |
| Germany | 72 | 70 | -2 |
| Portugal | 60 | 62 | +2 |
| France | 68 | 59 | -9 |
| Ireland | 60 | 50 | -10 |
| Netherlands | 54 | 47 | -7 |
| Great Britain | 40 | 35 | -5 |
| Mean | 72.1 | 66.3 | -4 |

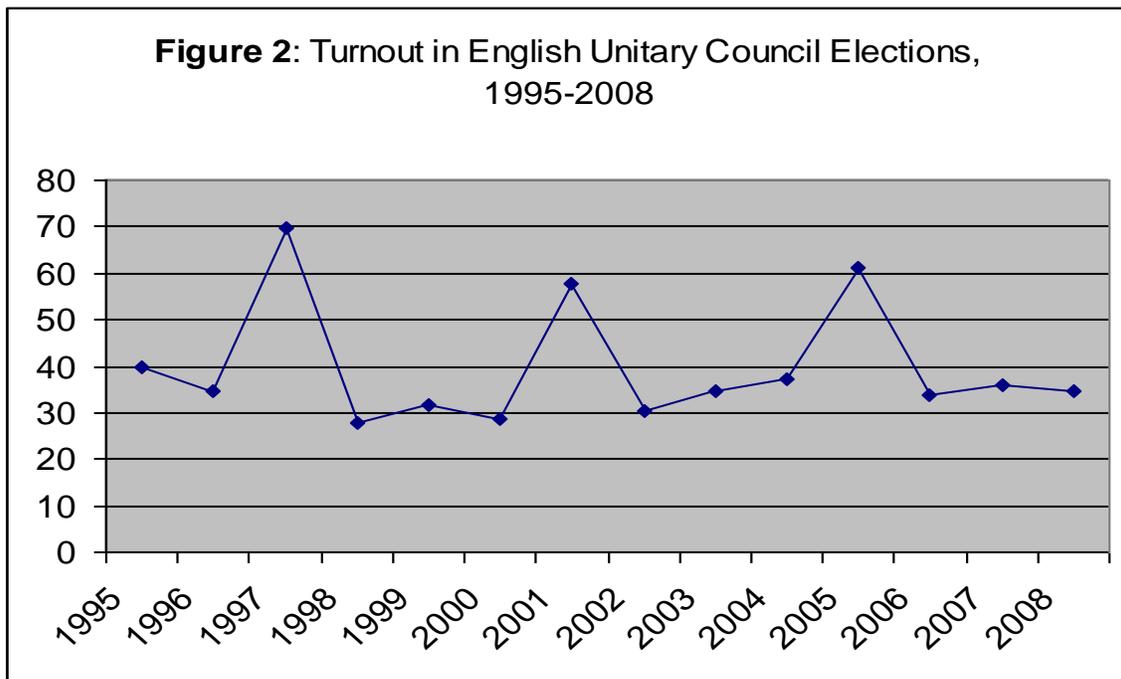
Source: ODPM, 2002, cited in Wilks-Heeg and Clayton, 2006, p.175.

The UK has by far the lowest rates of turnout in local elections in Western Europe. As table 2 shows, even accounting for a general decline in turnout across the EU, the proportion of citizens voting in sub-national elections in Britain remains a full 30 percentage points below the European average. Even if we discount turnout in countries where some form of compulsory voting is in place (Austria, Belgium and Luxembourg) or where strong negative sanctions apply for non-voters (Italy), turnout in British sub-national elections is around 40 percentage points adrift of the Scandinavian countries. The stark contrasts between the UK and other European countries raises the issues of the relationship between size and democracy and the possibility that low turnouts are related to the large size of English local authorities. This is particularly relevant to county council elections, which tend to have lower turnouts than district council elections.¹³

¹³ Wilks-Heeg and Clayton, 2006.



Source: Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre, University of Plymouth.



Source: Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre, University of Plymouth.

At the same time, there is no evidence to suggest that elected mayors boost turnout. The average turnout in the 37 referenda offering local electorates the option of elected mayors has been about 30 per cent; and it has been below 20 per cent in six cases. Turnout in mayoral elections has been similarly unspectacular. While turnouts were boosted

artificially when a number of polls were held on General Election day in May 2005, on other occasions it has often struggled to pass 30 per cent.

3. Local accountability is too blurred: two-tier local government tends to prompt confusion among local residents about whether districts or counties are responsible for particular services. However, an even greater sense of public confusion about the roles and responsibilities of different agencies emerges if we add to this picture the 30 or more different organisations, many of them ‘quangos,’ which have some role in local governance. The fragmentation of local governance has undoubtedly clouded local accountability and rendered the source of local democratic leadership increasingly unclear. In particular, in the two-tier structure there is a popular tendency to view ‘The Council’ (i.e. the district council) as the primary local public agency, regardless of the actual division of responsibilities for services. In addition, democratic accountability in local government is further blurred via the growing tendency for local policy to be shaped through partnership mechanisms.

4. The majority of local public spending financial is controlled by unelected agencies: one recent estimate comparing the spending power of local and regional agencies found that the share of public expenditure under local democratic control was likely to be around 40-50 per cent at most. Moreover, in two-tier local government structures, it was found that district councils account for at little as 5 per cent of total public spending within their own territorial boundaries.¹⁴

5. Electoral mandates are lost in translation: local elections not only send poor quality signals from the electorate to local councils, because of the influence of national politics, they also mistranslate them. Under the first past the post system, there is a relatively high deviation from proportionality and even quite large swings in the vote may leave party control of a local authority unaffected, especially in county councils. Since their creation in 1973, the majority of county councils have not changed hands more than twice. As such, the combination of the geography of county councils and the non-proportional electoral system tends to mean that local authorities are over-insulated from change brought about via the ballot box.

6. Local autonomy is too restricted: even where a clear mandate for change is discernable, a lack of local autonomy severely restricts the scope for local councils to respond to the electorate. The balance between central government direction and local control has been a constant theme of local government debates since the late 1970s.¹⁵ In

¹⁴ Wilks-Heeg and Clayton, 2006, pp. 39-48.

¹⁵ John Dearlove (1979) *The Reorganisation of British Local Government: Old orthodoxies and a political perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

more recent decades there have been progressively tighter controls over local public spending, through centrally-defined caps, the tendency to 'ring-fence' elements of budgets, and to allocate funds on a competitive basis for specifically defined purposes. As well as these forms of restricted local autonomy, it is also important to recognise that the scope for policy to change following an election will be restricted by the terms of various binding agreements made by the previous administration, including Local Area Agreements, contracting out of services under Best Value and long-term financial commitments arising from contracts under the Private Finance Initiative.

7. Targets have taken over: The emphasis on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of local government creates performance assessment systems that further erode the scope for local democratic accountability. While these developments began in the 1980s, in more recent years, local autonomy has been curtailed via the introduction of centrally-defined performance criteria and targets, driven in part by attempts to define and achieve national standards. This shift to increasingly comprehensive systems of performance management over the past decade has profound implications for local democracy. Performance targets not only result in over-dominant central government but also diminish the scope for local choice. The defining purpose of the monitoring systems is to push all local councils, and other public bodies, towards prioritising the same set of issues. While there has been a recent shift towards enabling local areas to choose their own particular sets of indicators to work with, it is from a menu of options determined and handed down by national level government. Since many performance targets carry some form of wider implication for the organisation concerned – whether a reward, such as additional resource or greater autonomy, or a punishment, such as financial penalties or 'naming and shaming' - there is an inevitable tendency for public bodies to focus their efforts on meeting central targets, thereby eroding the scope for local choice.

8. More democracy is not always a good thing: there is an uneasy relationship between the different forms of democracy which have been layered on top of each other at a local level over the past 40 years. Traditional forms of representation democracy were first augmented by the growth of participatory democracy during the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, in more recent years there has been a shift away from collectivist notions of citizen engagement towards more individualistic notions of 'customer responsiveness'. There are clear limitations to more consumerist approaches to participation. Only a minority of local residents respond to consultation processes or use 'customer feedback' mechanisms. Moreover, 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’. Indeed, while recent reforms have required local councils and other public bodies to ascertain, and respond to, the views of local people through consultation exercises, more often than not, these mechanisms create a democratic paradox. The resulting plethora of consultation and engagement processes are inherently flawed because citizens’ expectations are raised, while the capacity of local government to respond remains tightly restricted.

9. Local democracy is decaying at the core: there is growing evidence that many of the local foundations of UK democracy have reached an advanced state of erosion. Local party membership and activism are falling, and meaningful party competition is declining – with many candidates being put forward as nothing more than names on a ballot paper. In some cases, it is remarkable that local elections happen at all, given the perilous state of local political parties. In most districts, the local electoral process depends upon a few party activists, operating with extraordinarily limited resources. In some parts of the country, local parties have effectively died. The local press is currently facing a similar fate. By 2002, some three-quarters of the UK’s regional titles were owned by just five large corporate groups. Circulation figures have since begun to plummet, in no small measure due to the growth of regional ‘free sheets’ and many local titles are now making large scale redundancies or under threat of closure. There is also evidence of a fall in both the quantity and the quality of local press reporting of local government affairs. With surveys suggesting the local press is the principal source of information about local councils for three-quarters of people, the decline of the local press could have profound repercussions for local democracy across the country.

10. Local councils remain unrepresentative: local elections have had negligible impact in increasing the representation of women and ethnic minority communities in British political life and little has changed to enhance their attractiveness as a form of engagement in political life. The proportion of female candidates and councillors has been more or less static since the early 1970s and, in some councils, has actually declined.

What can be done so that local elections better fulfil their purpose?

Given the problems identified with local elections in this paper, there is a clear need to consider what could be done to ensure that local elections come closer to fulfilling their expected democratic functions. In the broadest sense, there are possible options for the future of local elections: maintain the status quo, abolish local elections, or engage in radical reforms of local democracy.

1. *Maintain the status quo*: if our concern is with the democratic quality of local elections, then the overwhelming evidence that local elections are no longer fit for purpose should rule out the first option of maintaining the status quo. Not only is there very little evidence that local elections currently have any real democratic function, but it must also be recognised that the status quo is not a neutral position. Without some form of policy shift, local authorities will continue to become larger bodies, ever more directed by central government targets and controls, and increasingly difficult for local citizens to influence or hold to account. In reality there is no status quo, since local government is subject to continuous reform and the ‘direction of travel’ has been very obvious for decades. As such the status quo means, in effect, a gradual drift towards option 2.

2. *To abandon or tightly restrict the scope of local representative democracy*. If local elections have such little impact, why not simply get rid of them? The option of abolishing local elections and bringing local authorities into line with the rest of the local state deserves consideration mainly for the reason that it might, at first sight, make little practical difference to the quality of democracy in England. Such a vision is, in effect, the logical extension of Nicholas Ridley’s proposals in the late 1980s that the ideal local authority would only need to meet once a year to agree on which private sector providers to award service-delivery contracts to. Such a ‘depoliticised’ version of local government, would mean discontinuing local elections and bolstering other forms of citizen engagement, such as consultation exercises, as typify other local public bodies. Local authorities would have executive boards, made up of appointees. The role of MPs offices in dealing with local affairs (especially case work, appeals) could be bolstered to take account of any resultant ‘democratic deficit’. Taking this ‘vision’ to its logical conclusion reveals very serious implications of such an approach, not just for local democracy, but also for national democracy. Local political parties would have no obvious functions other than to support general election campaigns, and there would be no supply of experienced politicians from local to national government. In short, taking this option through to its logical conclusions is shown to raise serious questions about the implications for the viability of representative democracy at a national level.

3. *To renew local democracy, with local elections at the heart of the project*: the case for renewing local democracy has been made consistently over decades, for example in the 1995 Commission on Local Democracy report and the 2005 Power Inquiry reports. Given the evidence presented above, this option presents itself as the only viable means of ensuring that, when voters cast ballots in local government elections, they can be confident that their participation in the political

process is meaningful, rather than purely symbolic. Given the drift away from local democracy over so many years, the changes required are profound. That there are significant political and institutional barriers to such a change taking place should not, however, cause us to lose sight of the implications of continuing on the present path. The main question is not whether reform should be attempted but whether a ‘big bang’ reform would be preferable or a series of ‘nudges’ could redirect local democracy so that local elections ultimately do begin to matter.

What might such a reform agenda consist of? There is no shortage of concrete proposals for measures to revitalise local democracy. A series of recent inquiries, commissions and research projects have put forward recommendations relating to the future of local government, local councillors and local political parties.¹⁶ The extent of basic agreement among these reports about proposed reforms is remarkable. There is consensus that revitalising local democracy will require a radical reversal of centralising tendencies in British politics, and that various forms of improved support for elected councillors will be required to attract a new breed of high-calibre, socially diverse locally elected representatives. There is also a widespread view that reinvigorated political parties will be an essential component of any attempt to bolster local democracy. As the report of the Councillors Commission argues ‘Parties are essential to a functioning democracy: they provide clarity of choice based on values, ensure a healthy degree of electoral competition and play a crucial role in upholding ethical standards and providing clear lines of collective accountability.’¹⁷ Given the perilous state of many local parties, as well as the main three parties nationally, it is recognised that new forms of state funding for political parties may be required to inject much-needed resources into local party politics.

One possible measure would be to earmark state funding to support local political parties in the task of producing and distributing election materials, perhaps by match-funding the income generated locally through donations and membership fees.¹⁸ Similarly, the Councillors Commission proposes ‘a dedicated fund (...) to provide public money to political parties, specifically for projects aimed at improving the recruitment, training and selection of candidates’.¹⁹ Such a fund might be used to support the initiatives proposed by Paul Wheeler to push parties into embracing a more open and pro-active approach to

¹⁶ LGIU (2005) *Equipping councillors for the future*, London: Local Government Information Unit; Michael Lyons (2006) *National Prosperity, local choice and civic engagement: a new partnership between central and local government for the 21st century*, Lyons Inquiry into Local Government, London: HMSO; Councillors Commission (2007) *The Report of the Councillors Commission*, London: Department for Communities and Local Government; The Power Inquiry (2006) *Power*, York: Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust/Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust.

¹⁷ Councillors Commission, 2007, p.46.

¹⁸ Wilks-Heeg and Clayton, 2006.

¹⁹ Councillors Commission, 2007, p.93.

recruiting councillors, by advertising available opportunities and through ‘talent scouting’ locally.²⁰

However, none of these proposals will make a significant difference to the erosion of local democracy without two further elements. The first of these would consist of measures to address the growing dislocation between local party politics and local political participation. The recommendation of the Power Inquiry that local authorities establish ‘democracy hubs’ to provide information and advice to local citizens and local groups seeking to navigate the complex structures of local governance is an important step in this direction. Democracy hubs could also be a practical means of taking forward the proposal of the Councillors’ Commission that a duty be placed on local authorities and political parties to promote local democracy.

The final element is enhanced local autonomy. This is, in fact, a pre-requisite for all the others. There can be no meaningful basis for local democratic renewal unless local autonomy is increased. This will be a bold step, as greater local autonomy will almost inevitably prompt public service variations across England. In many ways a radical shift in thinking is required, in which: national political debate will be expected to promote local differences; local variations in public services are seen as the natural consequence of vibrant local democracy; and occasional local failures are tolerated. Such variation can, we would argue, be entirely consistent with notions of choice in the public services. Moreover, other north European countries have demonstrated there is no necessary tension between local autonomy, on the one hand, and the goal of reducing inter-regional and socio-economic inequalities on the other. As such, government efforts to reduce inequalities must be rooted in fiscal policy rather than in the imposition of targets on over-burdened local agencies. Perhaps more than anything else, it must be recognised that local democracy will only be able to flourish if national policy frameworks take some of the pressure off local public agencies to deliver ‘more for less’.

²⁰ Paul Wheeler (2006) *Political recruitment: how local parties recruit councillors*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.