



Local Democracy Proposal Paper

Proposal subject	Local Democracy
Committee chairman	Brian Roberts
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Background to the item	<p>Local Authorities have a statutory duty to promote local democracy.</p> <p>County Council elections were held in May 2013 and turnout was significantly lower than in 2009 (30.2% down from 40.1%, a fall of 24.7%).</p> <p>The Council has a strategic priority to give residents more say over local services.</p> <p>The Local Government Association recently published a report and recommendations aimed at rebuilding democratic participation.</p>
Proposal	<p>This paper seeks support for a committee item on Local Democracy that examines what Buckinghamshire County Council (BCC) is currently doing to promote local democracy and identifies what else BCC could do in this regard. This paper brings together supporting information and research under the following headings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Introduction- Representative democracy (voting in elections)- Participatory democracy (democratic involvement between elections)- Attitudes towards Local Government- Summary of key findings <p>This committee item would lead to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">i) Recommendations being drawn up; orii) Further research/evidence gathering



Outline timetable	18 July 2013 – Proposal paper published in agenda pack 25 July 2013 – FPR select committee discussion item
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1. Introduction

1.1 Statutory duty - *The Local Democracy, Economic Development & Construction Act 2009*:

A principal local authority has a duty to promote understanding of the following among local people-

- (a) the functions of the authority;
- (b) the democratic arrangements of the authority;
- (c) how members of the public can take part in those democratic arrangements and what is involved in taking part.

1.2 Studies of Local Democracy in the UK

There is a widely held view that power is too centralised in the UK and that this needs to change.

The independent **POWER Inquiry** was established in 2004 to explore how political participation and involvement can be increased and deepened in Britain. The Chair, Helena Kennedy, states that evidence presented to the inquiry suggests that voting itself **'seems irrelevant to increasing numbers of people'** and that there is a feeling **'that there is no choice, despite our living in the era when choice is the dominant political mantra'**. Commenting that the world has changed enormously during the past fifty years and that lives are being lived in very different ways she suggests that **'the political institutions and the main political parties have failed to keep up'**.

A quote from *Local Government in the United Kingdom* by David Wilson and Chris Game (2011):

'[W]e have seen a succession of national governments, of both main parties, 'enfeebling' local government [...] through super-centralist policies of control, direction and undue intervention. Local government itself, though, must take some responsibility for any paleness of its image. Partly out of an excessive nervousness of being accused of 'wasting local taxes', councils have too often failed to project themselves in such a way as to stimulate the awareness – let alone the interest or political support – of those they supposedly represent or serve. In fairness, this criticism is one that many of them have acknowledged and, in their differing ways, endeavoured to rectify. However, it is a regrettable commentary on their comparatively limited impact that central government has felt it necessary to try to impose on them a statutory duty to promote democracy and an understanding of the local government system.'

A quote from Cllr Sir Merrick Cockell, Chairman, Local Government Association:

'The current model we have for local government set in the context of a highly centralised national state will not see us through for very much longer...Now, we urgently need to address how councils can better lead economic growth, social care, health and children's services – with all local services putting citizens and not institutions at the forefront. Underpinning this approach is the need to provide strong community leadership through an independent local government that is properly and fairly funded.' – Cllr Sir Merrick Cockell, Chair, Local Government Association, *Rewiring Public Services*, 2013



'People increasingly feel that English Democracy faces a crisis... People tell us they want a reason to care about voting and a reason to feel positive about belonging to their community and its civic life.' - Local Government Association, *Rewiring Public Services*, 2013

2. Representative Democracy

Representative democracy is the idea that officials are elected to represent their electorates. The duty of the representative is to use their own judgement in the exercise of their powers, not simply to communicate the wishes of the majority of their electorate.

2.1 Buckinghamshire County Council elections:

County Council elections take place every 4 years. In 2013 these were held as stand-alone elections. There are currently 49 electoral divisions in Buckinghamshire. Each division elects a County Council representative under the first-past-the-post electoral system, and these 49 elected representatives form 'the council'.

2.1.1 Turnout*

The long-term trend is one of steady decline in voter turnout for all elections. Turnout for county elections is higher when they are held alongside other elections.

- 2013 turnout - 30.2%, down from 40.1% in 2009 (with European elections) - a 24.7% reduction.
- 2013 highest turnout - 40.3% (Chiltern Ridges); lowest turnout - 23.1% (Ryemead and Micklefield).
- 2005 overall turnout - 64.9% (alongside a general election).

**NB turnout rates in the UK do not usually include people who are not registered to vote*

2.1.2 Communications

- The Electoral Commission ran national activity including television advertising
- BCC has no specific budget allocated to help increase turnout
- BCC Communications plan:
 - Key messages include: Register to vote; apply for a postal vote; voting hours; where to return postal votes; reminder to vote.
 - Tactics include: Articles in local publications; press releases; social media; public information in libraries; internal communications; election 'hotline'; 'Your Vote Counts' infographic poster (c£300); town criers (c£300).
- Some district councils ran their own campaigns to promote the county elections e.g. AVDC displayed Electoral Commission posters in car parks, colleges and schools.

2.2 National picture - Electoral Commission summary report of polls held on 2 May 2013

2.2.1 Turnout

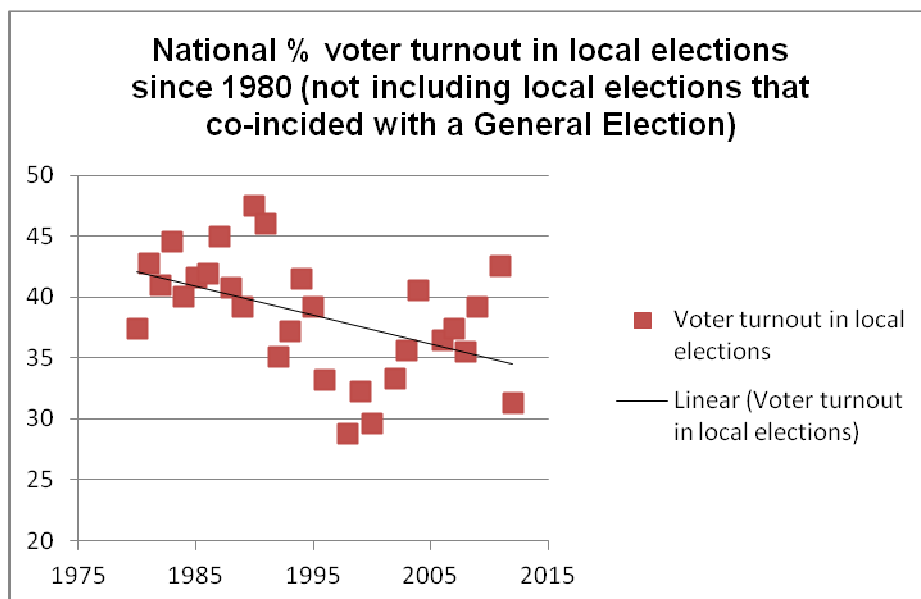
- Overall turnout was 30.9% down from 39% at the last equivalent local elections.
- 14.8% of registered voters were issued with a postal vote – 67% of these used it.
- 24.2% of polling station voters used their vote.

2.2.2 Public Opinion Survey

- 49% said they had enough information to make an informed decision on who to vote for.
- 47% said they felt they knew a great deal or a fair amount about the local elections.



- 53% felt they knew not very much or nothing at all about the elections; 14% nothing at all.
- 88% were satisfied with the process for registering to vote; 65% were very satisfied.
- Most common reason for voting – civic duty (70% of voters)
- Most common reason for not voting – circumstances e.g. too busy, away, forgot (57%)



2.3 Electoral registration – information from The Electoral Commission

To vote in an election, people must be registered on the electoral role (administered by the 4 district councils in Bucks*). Anyone aged 16 or over can register to vote, but cannot vote until they turn 18.

- In 2011 local government electoral registers were 82% complete nationally.
- The lowest levels of ‘completeness’ was for the 17-18 & 19-24 age groups (55% & 56%)**.
- In contrast, 94% of the 65+ age group were registered.
- 44% of those not on the register in April 2011 believed that they were registered.
- The numbers of unregistered voters may be as high as 15% of the eligible electorate in some constituencies and higher among certain age groups.
- Reasons for not registering to vote include:
 - ignorance
 - administrative inefficiency
 - having recently moved
 - alienation from the political system
 - deliberate avoidance of registration in relation to the secondary uses of the register

**NB BCC is currently conducting a feasibility study looking at whether BCC should take on administration of County Council elections.*

***NB the government have announced a £4.2m campaign to target these under-represented groups. Local Authorities and community groups can apply for funding to deliver innovative ideas to engage communities in the democratic process and increase voter registration.*

2.4 Reasons for voting

‘Election turnout figures tell us clearly that democratic engagement rises when voters feel something really is at stake when they vote’ - Local Government Association, 2013

2.4.1 The basic model – Riker and Ordeshook ‘A theory of the calculus of voting’, 1968



Since an individual's vote is unlikely to make any difference to the outcome of an election, people vote if any social or personal gratification they get from voting outweighs the time, effort, and financial cost involved in voting.

2.4.2 Ipsos MORI post-election research 2010

People have many reasons for registering to vote. Why did you decide to register to vote?

Most common answers	
To have my say	15%
Everyone should vote/it's important to vote	13%
It's my democratic right/a privilege	12%
I've always voted/been registered	10%
Wanted to vote	9%
It's my civic/democratic duty to vote	8%
Can't complain about the government if we don't vote	6%
To get the government/party I want/vote for the right person	5%
Because I am eligible/entitled	3%
People fought/died to allow us to vote	3%
It's compulsory/thought I had to	3%
Automatically registered/believe it is automatic	2%
Believe in voting/democracy	2%
Because it came in the post and I filled in the forms	2%
It's a family tradition/husband told me to vote	2%
To affect change	2%
No answer	1%
Other	5%

People have many reasons for not voting in elections. Why did you not vote in the elections on Thursday 6th May?

Most common grouped answers	
Circumstances	31%
Parties/candidates	18%
Administration	13%
Disinterest/no point	13%
Elections not important	8%
No information/indecision/complicated	6%

2 Participatory Democracy

Participatory democracy is the broader involvement of citizens in democratic systems; it maintains democratic pressure between elections. In addition to voting, citizens can participate in local democracy in a number of ways in Buckinghamshire, including:

- Signing petitions
- Contacting elected representatives
- Contacting a newspaper
- Responding to public consultations
- Being part of a campaign/pressure group/network



- Taking part in demonstrations
- Running local services e.g. community libraries
- Viewing/attending public meetings
- Public Questions at a scrutiny/select committee
- Suggesting a topic/issue for a scrutiny/select committee to review
- Membership of a political party
- Standing for election

3. 1 Examples of participatory democracy in Buckinghamshire

3.1.1 Voluntary/Community run services

- 14 Libraries have been transferred to a community partnership model.
- Open-access youth services have transferred to the voluntary / community sector.
- When 22 day centres were replaced by 6 Day Opportunity Centres, first refusal on the use of surplus sites was given to community organisations. Princes Risborough day centre passed to community ownership in April 2012.

3.1.2 Petitions – BCC ePetitions website

Petitions are normally considered at the next meeting which has power to take a decision on the matter.

- 22 petitions were submitted to BCC in the first 6 months of 2013. Respondents varied from 21 (Parking in Beaconsfield) to 3256 (Stoke Poges Secondary School). This compares to 37 submitted in 2012 (2 to 6879 respondents) and 32 in 2011 (18 to 1440 respondents).

3.1.3 Public consultation - BCC Strategic Plan 2013-17

- 6000 hard copies of the consultation were produced and distributed across Buckinghamshire, with an 11% return (17% of those posted to households were returned, 15% handed out at stations, 10% sent to Parish Councils and 4% given to Libraries).
- From the 1156 responses, 497 were online and 672 were hardcopy returns.
- This was the largest response to date and headline results are accurate to within +/-3%
- Results weighted to correct for differences in response to the county's age and ACORN status.

3.1.4 Local Area Forums

The 19 Local Area Forums (LAFs) in Buckinghamshire are wholly resourced by BCC and aim to provide more effective local democracy. Each LAF has a local priorities budget to enable them to deliver the priorities in their local area plan.

3.2 Attitudes towards giving people more say in public services – BCC Strategic Plan 2013-17 consultation results

- 52% of residents surveyed support the Council's priority around **'giving people more say in local services – For example supporting the transfer of council functions and assets to the voluntary and community sector'**. This was relatively much lower than the Council's other priorities. 30% of residents did not agree or disagree with this priority, which was the largest neutral view across the priorities. 11% disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed.
 - Those in South Bucks (61%) are more likely to agree with this priority than those in Aylesbury Vale (47%).



- Those in most affluent ACORN groups are more likely disagree with this priority compared to those in least affluent ACORN groups (17% compared to 10% disagreement).
- 49% of 25-49 year olds agree with this priority compared to 58% of over 65s.
- Those employed in a full time job (46%) are less likely to agree with this priority than those who work part time (63%).
- 15 comments made related to the need for the Council to improve its communication activities so that residents feel better informed about council issues and services provided.

3.3 Increasing participation and voter turnout

3.3.1 'Rewiring Public Services' – Local Government Association (2013)

This report draws on the views of local government politicians and officers and puts forward ten 'big ideas' for changing public services, to help communities meet people's future needs and aspirations; including:

1. Give people back a meaningful local vote on a wide range of tax and spending decisions, to establish a level of decision-making that allows each place to act as its own local treasury.
2. Drive local public service effectiveness and end waste and red tape at all levels by bringing local services and decisions together in one place, for each place.
6. Strengthen the say of local people by reducing Ministers' powers so that they cannot intervene in local democracy, boundaries and decisions.
9. A multi-year funding settlement aligned to the end of the next parliament which will enable councils to invest in economic growth and prevention rather than cure.
10. Put this settlement beyond future Whitehall revision by giving formal constitutional protection to local democracy.

3.3.2 Volunteering

The Pathways through Participation project (2011) was a research project led by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) in partnership with the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) and Involve. It explored how and why people get involved and stay involved in different forms of participation. The researchers conducted over 100 in-depth interviews, enabling people to tell their story in their own words. Key implications were as follows:

- The likelihood of elections changing things affects people's willingness to vote.
- Lack of trust and confidence in the political system can be overcome through the direct engagement of politicians with people and the issues and causes that matter to them.
- People are very sensitive to how their participation is perceived and described. Language referring to 'do-gooders', the 'usual suspects' or 'NIMBYs' is not only pejorative to those it is aimed at, it also creates a negative mood around active participation generally.
- Public bodies need to improve the design and management of formal public consultations.
- Communities/individuals who may be excluded need to be specifically encouraged.

3.3.3 Power Inquiry (2006)

The independent Power Inquiry was established to explore how political participation and involvement can be increased and deepened in Britain, and why there has been a decline in participation in formal politics. The inquiry makes thirty recommendations to reverse this trend; some of which address the rebalancing of power between central and local government to **'allow the freedom for our elected representatives to be the eyes, ears and mouths of British citizens at the heart of government.'** Recommendations that relate to local government are:

6. There should be an unambiguous process of decentralisation of powers to local government.
7. A concordat should be drawn up between central and local government setting out their respective powers.
8. Local government should have enhanced powers to raise taxes and administer its own finances.
12. A responsive electoral system – which offers voters a greater choice and diversity of parties and candidates – should be to replace the first-past-the-post system.
16. The voting and candidacy age should be reduced to sixteen.
17. Automatic, individual voter registration at age sixteen should be introduced.
18. The citizenship curriculum should be shorter, more practical and result in a qualification*
23. All public bodies should be required to meet a duty of public involvement in their decision and policy-making processes.
24. Citizens should be given the right to initiate legislative processes, public inquiries and hearings into public bodies and their senior management.
30. 'Democracy hubs' should be established in each local authority area.

**Citizenship education has been compulsory in the UK since 2002 and is taught at key stage 3 & 4.*

3.3.4 Local Government in the United Kingdom – Wilson and Game (2011)

Wilson and Game propose three reforms that between them could improve voting turn-outs:

1. Reform of local taxation (a clearer relationship between taxes paid and services received locally)
2. Reform of the electoral system (towards versions of proportional representation)
3. Reform of voting methods (examining postal voting and electronic voting options)

4. Attitudes towards Local Government

4.1 Buckinghamshire Residents Survey (2011)

Views and priorities differ by local area and demographic group. Older residents in Bucks are generally happier.

- 31% agree that the County Council provides value for money (33% disagree; 36% neither/nor).
- 42% are satisfied with the way the County Council runs things (25% dissatisfied; 34% neither/nor).
- Satisfaction differs by local area;
 - Most satisfied: Beaconsfield (55% satisfied, 15% dissatisfied)
 - Least satisfied: Chesham (34% satisfied, 35% dissatisfied)
- Nationally satisfaction with councils has been on a general downward trend.
- Nationally 49% agree that their local council does the best job it can do with the money it has available (24% disagree; 27% neither/nor).

4.2 Ipsos MORI Local Government Research (2013)

- 79% of the public trust local councils most to take decisions (11% trust the government most).
- 65% of people believe that, in recent years, Government and public services have tried to do too much, and people should take more responsibility for their own lives.
- 29% say they would be likely to help run or manage a youth club.
- 55% concerned about the impact of council service cuts on them and their family in the next year.
- 61% concerned about the effect of government spending cuts on them and their families (77% for ACORN group E; 55% for group AB).

- 40% agree that they would be personally happy to accept less from their local council in order to help pay off the national debt (57% disagree).
- 34% agree that they would be happy to pay more council tax if it helped their local council maintain current levels of service (64% disagree).

5. Summary of key findings

- The centralisation of power negatively impacts voter turnout and democratic participation.
- Devolving powers (e.g. over taxation) is expected to increase voter turnout and participation.
- Turnout for recent stand-alone local elections has been around 30%. A candidate can therefore be elected to represent a division with the support of around 1 in 10 potential voters.
- People are more likely to vote and participate if they feel it can make a difference to their lives.
- Reform of the voting system and voting methods may increase turnouts.
- Councils are more trusted to take decisions than the government.
- A majority of Bucks residents agree that people should have more say over local services, although fewer would be likely to help run or manage services.
- Younger people are less likely to be registered to vote than older people.
- Nearly half of those not registered to vote believe that they are registered.
- Government money is available to organisations who wish to promote democratic engagement to disengaged groups in innovative ways.
- Some district councils in Bucks are more proactive than others in promoting county elections.
- There is scope to make local democracy more effective by removing red tape.