

Cultural Village of Europe

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Contribution from A l d e b u r g h



National, Regional and Local Government in England

Local Government

England does not have a written Constitution. That doesn't mean that there are no constitutional laws or rules - but there is no single document setting out the relationships between the government(s) and the governed or between the different elements of government.

That statement has profound implications for local government. Unlike many European countries, English local authorities have no independent status or constitutional position. In England, Parliament is sovereign and can create, change or abolish subordinate bodies (like local authorities) at will. And it does.

If that is the most significant single statement to be made about English local government, the second is that there is no neat pattern - in different areas, you get a different range of local authorities.

So I shall try a simplification, but one which is basically accurate:

In the main, in rural areas you have two or three-tier local government; in the urban areas, single tier local government.

Rural Areas

In most of the rural parts of England there are two tiers or levels of "principal" local authorities - county councils and district councils. County Councils cover larger areas than do District Councils. For example, Aldeburgh is in the Suffolk Coastal District, which has a population of around 115,000, and in the County of Suffolk, which has a population of around 650,000. For simplicity, I'll come back to the functions of principal local authorities when I talk about the urban areas.

Many rural areas also have "parish" or "town" councils. These terms are really interchangeable, except that you usually have a parish council where the area it serves is a village or very rural area, whereas it will be called a town council where the area it serves is (rather obviously) a small town. For example, Aldeburgh has a local council which is called a town council.

The other thing to remember is that although we use the term "parish", there is no ecclesiastical link. These are civil, not church parishes, so the parish council has no role within the church, or vice versa.

Confused? No? You can't have been listening!

Town or Parish Councils have fairly limited powers -and even more limited funding!

Actually, towns and parishes have fairly reasonable powers to do a variety of things, but the financial regime and the fact that certain high-profile activities are the legal duty and responsibility of one or other of the principal authorities, means that most are fairly modest in their ambitions.

Towns and Parishes tend to look after very local amenities -which may be halls, sports pitches, parks and gardens- but most importantly, they tend to be the closest we get to local self government.

Having said that, the range of activities of parish councils is very wide. Some of the more rural ones undertake very limited roles; at the other extreme, there is at least one town council which owns and manages a multi-million pound leisure centre.

Our system of local government is heavily focused on the delivery of services. This has led to the creation of many principal local authorities which have been created to provide effective and efficient service-delivery units, and whose area is not a "natural" one -not one which people associate with, and so we have largely lost the concept of community self-government. In some big towns, this sense of place hasn't been lost, but they tend to be the exception rather than the rule.

And so the town or parish is often the vehicle for the expression of community identity and community pride. Towns or parish councils are also often the focal point for links with other communities -as, for example, through twinning or initiatives like the Cultural Villages of Europe.

The Big Cities

There are no civil parishes in the big cities. Their local authorities are single-tier, "unitary" councils, with the same powers as county councils and district councils combined.

These are, basically:

"County functions"

- Education
- Highways
- Social Care -care for the elderly, young and vulnerable

"District functions"

- Land Use Planning
- Housing -mainly the provision of social housing
- "Benefits" -part of the social security system to do with helping people meet the houseerents
- Environmental Protection
- Waste Management
- Sport and Leisure provision

That's a simplification, and there are others, but those are the key ones.

Central government has always made a significant contribution to the expenditure of principal councils. Originally, this was to even out the burden on local tax-payers. If a local area had particularly high level of deprivation, it would get more cash so that an unfair burden didn't fall on local tax-payers. Over the years this has increased, so that now barely one quarter of principal councils' spending comes from locally raised taxes. For example, there is local taxation of business premises -but the amount of tax is set centrally, and all the revenue raised is paid over to central government, which then re-distributes it to local councils on a per-capita basis.

The impact of this massive dependence on central funding is that any local variation in expenditure has a disproportionately high impact on the local domestic property tax.

We have a saying in England, "he who pays the piper, calls the tune". And this is certainly true of local government. Increasingly, central government sees principal councils as vehicles to deliver central government's programmes as local administration rather than local government.

In a curious way, the populace seems to collude in this; we seem to see differences in the levels of service between different local authorities, or differences in emphasis on different activities as grounds for criticism, rather than as a reflection of differing local priorities.

In addition, as the paymaster, central government takes an increasing interest in how principal councils operate and how they perform. For example, a few years ago, government decreed that all except the smallest of principal councils ought to move to having either a directly-elected Mayor or operating cabinet-style government. Local authorities, therefore, are not allowed to find the system which best suits their circumstances; they must conform with a uniform, national system.

Most significantly, as local authorities are seen as the deliverers of services rather than as representatives of an identifiable community, central government has felt free to create authorities which meet government's view of what's needed for efficient service delivery. Almost uniformly, in England this has led to the creation of bigger authorities, which are self-sufficient, and able "efficiently" to deliver the full range of, for example, education or social care services.

Sadly, local government does seem to be the poor relation in terms of English governance, for whenever central government wants a local body to run some local entity, it creates a new (non-elected) local Quango (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation) to run it. Perhaps this is a consequence of the lack of strong personal links between central and local government. Unlike, say, in France, English local politicians do not operate simultaneously on the national stage; those local councillors who get elected to Parliament give up their council seat. But even those are very much in the minority; the vast majority of national politicians have not started their political career in local politics and have no direct knowledge or experience of local authorities.

Curiously, given these apparently unpromising circumstances, English local government is generally pretty robust and effective!

Regional Government

And you thought our local government was confusing!

We have no regional government in England -but we do have regional government offices, regional development agencies and regional assemblies.

You will note that throughout, I've talked about England, not Britain. This is because there are differences between English and Scottish local government, but, more significantly, because we do have a form of regional government in Britain in that there is a separate Parliament in Scotland and an Assembly in Wales, and certain central government functions in Scotland and Wales are devolved to "executives" (governments), appointed by the Parliament and Assembly.

By the way, just to prove that nothing in British government is simple, the powers of the Scottish Parliament are not the same as the powers of the Welsh Assembly.

But Britain is NOT a federal country. I think our political classes think that federalism is something the Europeans do, and therefore not quite right for us!

But there is a serious side to it. Britain remains a unitary and very centralised country, and although health, education and transport in Scotland, for example, is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, Scottish members of the national House of Commons may speak and vote on matters relating to English health, education and transport.

Consistent with our non-federal structure, our Government Offices for the Regions, therefore, are regional representatives of the central government departments. They administer central government programmes and policies within their area. They are not subject to any regionally-elected political body.

So far as the relationship with local government is concerned, the Regional Offices have important functions with regard matters such as Regional Planning policy and Regional Housing policy, which can and does affect local authority land use planning policies and the availability of central finance for social housing. For example, when a local authority is determining its land use plan, it must ensure that it is consistent with the regional plan. This has been the cause of much controversy recently in England where central government has decreed that large numbers of new houses must be built within the South East and East of England Regions -not always to the pleasure of local politicians within those areas.

The other key regional element is represented by Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). These receive funding from central government (and it is central government which decides how much one region gets as compared with another region), and they have important roles to play with regard to economic development and regeneration. They are governed by Boards of people who live and work within the Region. But the Boards are appointed by central

government, and must obtain central government approval for projects costing more than a specified sum.

Local authorities work with the RDAs to try to secure funding for projects within their areas. Remember I said Britain was a unitary state?

When the Regional Development Agencies were created six or seven years ago, government decided that they should be subject to oversight by "Regional Assemblies". These are bodies made up of representatives appointed by the local authorities in the region together with representatives of other "stakeholders" -from business, the health service, education, the voluntary sector, trade unions and so on.

It was Government' s ambition to see these develop into directlyelected Regional Assemblies, but unsurprisingly public interest in seeing this happen has been limited. Before a directly-elected Regional Assembly can be created, there must be a positive result in a referendum. To date only one referendum has been held, in the north east of England, and in it the people voted against the Assembly.

That is a quick, whistle-stop, simplified and very personal tour through some of the by-ways of English regional and local government, and the relationship between the various levels.