

The implications of the post-Covid -19 and Brexit worlds for England's town councils - views from the town hall, and beyond

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Abstract

Parish/Town councils are the third - some would say, first - tier of government in England, hierarchically below central government in London, and county/district/borough councils. Their councillors represent the approximately 11,000,000 people who live in these, mainly smaller, towns; one-fifth of the population of England. These places will be affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union ("Brexit"). To what extent is not known, but councillors will have roles to play in determining how their towns respond. Their views about councils' possible future roles were gathered via an online survey and interviews, and are presented and discussed. Clerks, academics, and interested individuals with policy and practical and professional experience of the sector, also contributed. Although participants' views differ (e.g., as to whether councils should have more powers), most want to do more, especially in relation to planning, housing and transport. They are, however, uncertain about how to achieve their aims, given the constraints of time and resources on a mainly volunteer body, their partial dependence on higher authorities, and the need for effective monitoring of standards, performance, transparency, and accountability.

Introduction

The research was conducted with the approval of the Ethics Committee of the University of Exeter's College of Social Sciences and International Studies¹. Its main purpose was to encourage town councillors in England's small towns to think about their councils' post-pandemic roles, and the effects of Brexit on their towns.

There will be financial, social, cultural, health/wellbeing and political challenges for all levels of government and governance structures. Concerns about the UK's poor initial handling of the pandemic (NAO, 2020; Trigg, 2021) suggest the country will be a more sober, reflective, and, in terms of the wider Union, possibly less united place. Unsurprisingly, thoughts have begun to turn to the future (Corbett, 2020; Davidson *et al.*, 2020; Marlow *et al.*, 2020; OECD, 2020; LGiU, 2021).

This paper summarises and comments on nearly 25,000 words contributed by 156 respondents. The quotations used to illustrate the range of views expressed are necessarily representative, rather than comprehensive. However, all the contributions can be found here:

<http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/research/centres/crpr/research/publications/researchreports/>

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The majority of participants want their councils to have a greater role in local policy development and implementation. A minority, however, have strong contrary opinions in relation to councils' capacities and competencies. The views expressed are realistic, pragmatic, and tinged with scepticism and doubt that devolution on their terms will, or in the views of some, should, happen.

Data were gathered via an online survey, primarily of councillors, but also clerks, academics and other interested professionals. Follow-up telephone interviews were held with twelve self-selecting interviewees.

Background

The political landscape is dominated by Covid-19 and Brexit. After a decade of government-imposed austerity, public sector preparedness has been found wanting (Davies *et al.*, 2020; Frowde *et al.*, 2020). The government is committed to “levelling up” Britain (Conservatives, 2019), in what appears to be the latest version of regeneration-led “localism”; ie of devolution (DCLG, 2006; BIS, 2010; DCLG, 2011). The term is ill-defined (Tomaney and Pike, 2020), but powerful (Jennings *et al.*, 2021, p4). Although Davenport and Zaranko (2020, p329) suggest that only district and higher tier councils, “... *have some administrative capacity to manage levelling-up ...*”, some town councils are responsible for aspects of higher tier roles such as planning, housing, regeneration, and youth work (LGC, 2016, 2017).

Town councils are the direct, but generally less powerful successors to the urban district councils² that - together with rural district councils - were replaced in 1974 by today's larger district councils (Parr, 2020, p6). The reorganisation was predicated on the desire for fewer, higher calibre councillors, and a more corporate approach to government (Stevens, 2006, pp30-31). However, there were concerns - throughout England - about the changes, possibly because many of the new district/borough councils, “... *contained several towns that anywhere else in Europe would be seen as separate communities requiring their own local authorities.*” (Stewart, 2014, p838). This is an important point, given that Northampton, population more than 200,000, is served by a town (ie, parish) council (Fordwich, Kent, population approximately 400, lies at the other end of the scale).

Irrespective of population, the 2011 Localism Act gave councils considerable freedom, via the General Power of Competence³ (GPC), to do, “... *things that are unlike anything that a local authority - or any other public body - has done before, or may currently do.*” (DCLG, 2011).

² These, often based in the same “market” town, were distinct - relatively small - authorities, although they could share staff such as, for example, medical officers of health (see Sherborne UDC & RDC, 1970).

³ “*In simple terms, [the GPC] gives councils the power to do anything an individual can do provided it is not prohibited by other legislation.*” (LGC, 2013, p8).

The Local Government Association noted, however, that, “... *use of the [GPC] is limited by significant constraints set by central government.*” (LGA, 2013, p1).

The difference between these two statements explains why the GPC has been widely adopted, but not widely used, although, according to Copus and Leach (2020), “*There have ... been some imaginative and effective uses of the [GPC] and such a power needs to be a major tool in responding to... crises, and in building devolution.*” They also note, “... *the centralised nature of our system has restrained local government by lack of funds and for the want of freedoms and powers to act without Government approval.*” A report by Carr *et al.* (2020) reflects this, recognising “... *the challenges of uniting people in towns behind any particular vision of the future.*” (p7). It recommends that town councils’ autonomy be preserved, so they can, “... *implement decisions made at a combined authority level in the way they see fit.*” (p51).

The debate about where and how to devolve powers and responsibilities is longstanding (Owen *et al.*, 2007; Pearce and Ellwood, 2002; CRC, 2008), and current (LGA, 2019). For example, since the 1990s, governments have been keen to create unitary councils, and, rhetorically, at least, strengthen, “... *the role of parish and town councils*” (Clarke, 2020). Copus *et al.* (2020) recognise that some town councils will be willing and able to take on additional responsibilities, but note, “... *some counties will try to shift some ... responsibilities to town and parish councils, with little understanding or concern for parishes’ desire or ability to carry them out.*” (p19)⁴. This observation reinforces the point that small towns have been largely ignored in relation to strategic rural policy (Morris, 2012, 2014; Shepherd and Waples, 2009).

It is more than a quarter of a century since the 1995 rural white paper referred to small “market” towns (DoE/MAFF, 1995, pp57-58). Its successor built on this with the community-led⁵ Market Towns Initiative (MTI) (DETR/MAFF, 2000, Ch.7). By 2004, however, with the MTI coming to an end, the government’s rural strategy referred to it only once (Defra, 2004a, p17).

In 2008, the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) published the results of its inquiry into the role of rural councillors (CRC, 2008), together with supporting documents (Kambites and Moseley, 2007; Morris and Nichols, 2007). The separate Independent Councillors’ Commission’s inquiry (DCLG, 2007) noted, “*The CRC is making similar discoveries to our own, including lack of public understanding of the roles and responsibilities of councillors at all levels and an overwhelming public view that councillors need to be visible in the communities they represent.*” (p26). Neither inquiry seems to have resulted in significant change.

⁴ The report draws on the work of the Centre for Towns (www.centrefortowns.org/about-us). This new organisation conducts research into settlements with populations ranging from less than 5,000 to more than 75,000.

⁵ NB Not **council**-led.

Indicative of the lack of post-MTI government interest is the fact that, by 2014, relatively little was remembered of the rural white paper 2000's community-centred programmes (Morris, 2014, p80). Later research by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) concluded:

... there is a lack of [an] accurate and robust evidence base of what the situation and picture is ... NALC should press for funding to conduct national research to develop an evidence base for public policy and to properly assess the democratic health of our most local level of government. ... an evidence base and accompanying analysis is now absolutely vital as parish and town councils become increasingly important ... leading on neighbourhood planning ... delivering services no longer provided by principal councils (NALC, 2015, pp1-2)

In their exploration of local democracy regarding citizen participation and engagement with town and parish councils, Willett and Cruxon (2019, p325) conclude: “... *Towns and Parishes are ideally placed to reinvigorate representative democracy at a local level, but bringing these structures to fit the twenty-first century lives [sic] requires new ways of doing things.*”

Despite repeated statements of intent by governments, it seems, “*Ministers are not ... interested in creating a powerful system of sub-national governance, rather their undeclared aim is to super-centralise the English state.*” (Hambleton, 2017, pp4-5). Hambleton's discussion is mainly about devolution to the sub-national level. If government is reluctant to devolve to this level, other than in limited, complicated ways, town councils will struggle to make their claims heard. Also of possible concern to town councils are research findings from Cornwall, which found that, post-Brexit, some people do not, “... *imagine returning control over the local to the local level, but to a national tier of government.*” (Willett, 2020).

However, as the last ten years have seen closures of youth clubs and libraries, as well as the loss of shops and pubs, the need for the “local” remains important, politically as well as personally (Malik, 2021).

The research discussed in this paper reveals that many councillors believe, with reservations and degrees of caution⁶, that, given resources, their councils could do more to help their constituents. Before discussing their views, the methodology for selecting the towns is explained.

⁶ With good reason, in view of the recent public and media interest in the workings of town councils (Handforth PC, 2021; Gibson, 2020; The Guardian, 2021)

Methodology

The research was conducted via two online surveys⁷ conducted between 28 August, 2020 and 28 February, 2021, and interviews; specifically:

1. an initial online survey of town councillors and clerks, and three subsequent telephone interviews⁸;
2. the main survey, developed from the initial trial survey;
3. twelve interviews (ten councillors, two officers).

The surveys comprised:

- limited choice multiple answer questions (eg yes/no, more/less, selection lists), with free text options available;
- broader, wide ranging questions designed to encourage free text contributions.

The initial survey was completed by two academics, the ex-Leader of a major borough council, four town councillors from two counties (one from one town, three from another), and a town clerk from a third county⁹. The information gathered from the survey and three subsequent discussions with a councillor, the clerk, and the ex-Leader, informed the design of the longer, more detailed, main survey. The two surveys were combined for analysis.

The towns selected for the research are identified in the next section, after which the response to the invitation to participate, and information about the participants, are discussed.

The “target” town councils

The towns selected have populations between 2,000 and 30,000¹⁰. Their locations are illustrated on Map 1.

⁷ <https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/about/>

⁸ As the research took place during the covid-19 pandemic, face-to-face interviews were not permitted.

⁹ The ex-Leader and the two academics are personally known to the writer.

¹⁰ Many appear in the lists of “hub towns” and Centre for Towns’ villages, communities and small towns categories (Bibby & Brindley, 2017, p12; CfT, 2019).

Map1 - participating councils (blue) and non-participating councils (red)



Responders, non-responders and rate of return

In all, 1484 emails were sent to councillors and clerks in 133 towns; ie 133 clerks, and as many individual councillors as were contactable by email.

Responses were received from 78 councils. In total, including non-council affiliated respondents and respondents to the trial survey, 156 people contributed. This return (10.5%) is disappointing. However, during the survey period (August, 2020 to February, 2021), the covid-19 crisis was ever-present. Consequently, a request to contribute to a survey was unlikely to be the primary concern for councillors who, as well as being accountable to their constituents, have

other responsibilities; as do council staff. Therefore, it is likely that Covid-related restrictions exacerbated the already low online survey response rates attributable to survey fatigue. Nevertheless, the number of contributors with varied backgrounds, beliefs and experience, is, as discussed next, sufficient for analysis.

Respondents' roles, affiliations and lengths of service

Respondents' roles and affiliations are summarised in Tables 1 and 2. Although 92 of the councillors are town councillors only, some also represent other local and public authorities. The insights of "non-council" respondents, all of whom have studied and/or worked in, or with, local/central government, have broader relevance.

Table 1 – respondents' self-described roles

Respondents' Roles (combined data from trial and final surveys)			Number of Respondents	Total
Primary role	Other roles			
Town Councillor	>>>>>		92	123
Town Councillor &	County Councillor		10	
Town Councillor &	County Councillor &	National Park Member	1	
Town Councillor &	Unitary County Councillor &	formerly District & County Councillor	1	
Town Councillor &	District Councillor		6	
Town councillor &	Town Team		1	
Town Councillor &	Neighbourhood Planning team		1	
Town Councillor &	Planning Chair		1	
Town Councillor &	Parish Councillor		6	
Parish Councillor			3	
District Councillor &	Member of Town Forum		1	
Town Clerk			20	
Assistant Clerk			1	
Local resident &	community development academic		1	
Town Market Manager			1	
Chair of town community group			1	
Chair of local charity			1	
CEO of a national government-related organisation			1	
Academic	CEO of a public governance body		1	
Academic researcher			1	
Academic &	Community activist		1	
Academic			1	
Ex-leader of a major borough council	Chair of local Community Partnership/Development Trust		1	
Resident & ex-rural practitioner			1	

The majority of councillors are Independent (Table 2). This is consistent with the literature. Although most town councils are not party political (LGA, 2018, p5), the Conservative party's

dominance in those that are is consistent with the historical conflation of English “rural” and conservatism/Conservative (Woods, 2005, p88), and its contemporary reality (Morris, 2018).

Table 2 – councillors’ political affiliations and time in post (where given)

Councillors’ affiliations	Total number	Time in post (years)			
		<4	4-8	8-12	>12
Independents	57	24	13	9	8
Conservatives	23	6	7	2	8
Labour	16	10	3	1	1
Liberal Democrats	15	8	1	0	4
Green	4	1	2	0	1
UKIP	0	0	0	0	0
“None”	7	2	4	0	1
Clerks	19	6	5	2	6

In relative terms, Conservative and Liberal Democrat councillors **appear** to have the most staying power. Labour councillors **appear** to serve for fewer years overall, but this might be because they are newly-elected/co-opted. Although little can be inferred from the reported lengths of service, it says much about respondents’ commitment that 22 councillors and six clerks have served for more than twelve years.

Before discussing the findings, the data, described in the next section, were tested for influences arising from, for example, respondents’ party political loyalties.

The data - possible influences

Invitations were sent to councillors serving towns unique in character, location, economy, demography, and history. As any of these factors could influence beliefs, opinions and party affiliation, the data were checked for relationships between **councillors’** contributions and their:

1. town’s population;
2. political party membership;
3. town’s Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) rank.

Relationship between the number of contributors, and their town’s population

The total number of emails received from individual town councils varied from one to five (Table 3). For example, the town from which five emails were received has a population of approximately 19,000, whereas another, population approximately 26,000, produced only one return.

Table 3 – Number of emails received from town councils compared with population

Number of emails received from councillors in individual town councils				Population range
5	emails received from ...	1	council	19,000
4	emails received from each of...	7	councils	4750 - 17,000
3	emails received from each of...	11	councils	3,300 - 27,000
2	emails received from each of...	18	councils	3,600 - 22,000
For information: number of councils from which only one email was received				
1	email received from each of...	37	councils	3,900 - 26,100

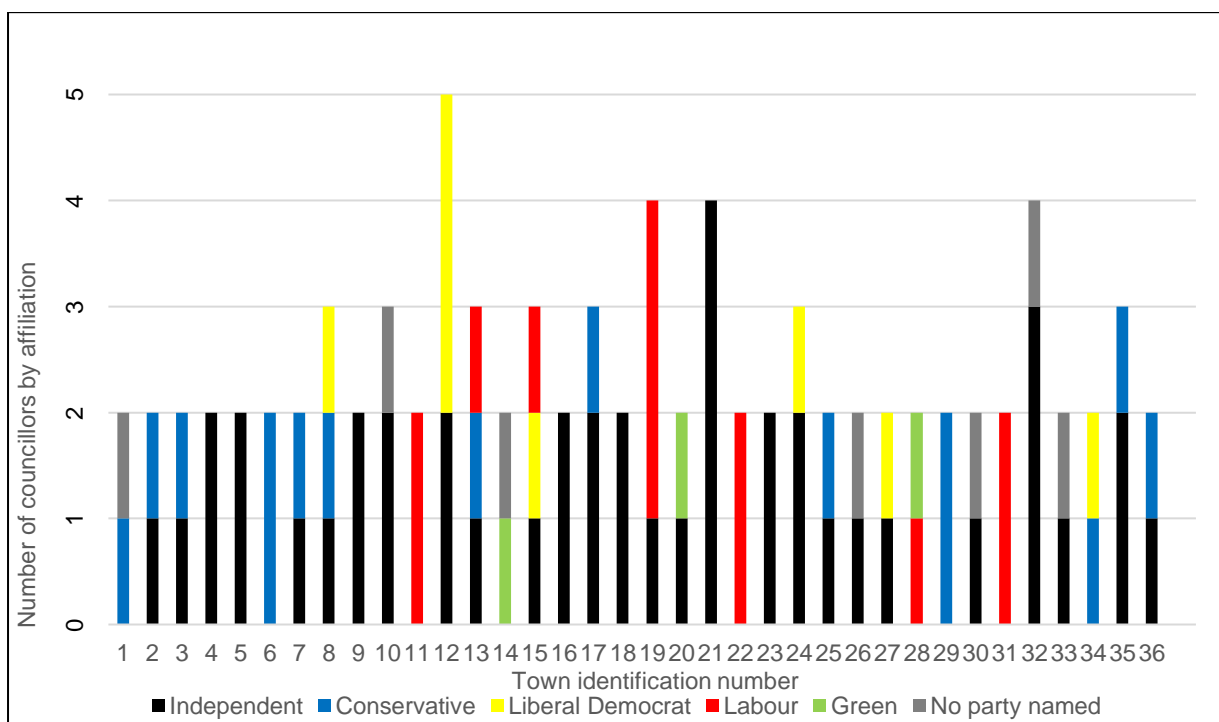
The twelve towns from which three emails were received range in population from 27,000 to less than 5,000. The population bands for the towns from which one or two emails were received are similar.

The data suggest there is no relationship between the number of emails received from a town council and its town’s population.

Relationship between contributors and political party affiliation

Although the number of multiple submissions from **councillors** serving in the same council is small (Table 3), there is nothing to suggest that political or non-political beliefs influenced decisions to contribute. This is evident from Figure 1: of 36 councils, only five responses were from members of the **same** party (ie, towns 6, 11, 22, 29, and 31).

Figure 1 – party affiliations in councils from which more than one submission was received



Of the 32 councils from which only one contribution was received, twelve councillors are Independent, seven Conservative, four Liberal Democrat, five Labour, and one Green. Three are unaffiliated.

Analysis of contributors' written comments revealed no obvious party or place-related common views, or propensity to participate. Commonly-held views, such as the desire to have more influence over planning decisions, were expressed by councillors from across the country, irrespective of political persuasion, or town "type".

Variation in views with IMD rank

IMD ranks were obtained for each town council office postcode¹¹, and checked for possible correlations between IMD rankings and contributors' views (e.g., for/against Brexit). In addition, three towns, from each of which more than one contribution was received, were selected (randomly) for analysis: one each from the least, middle, and most deprived parts of the index¹². There is little to suggest that respondents' views are significantly skewed by these local factors. However, as highly and less deprived areas can neighbour one another, the finding is illustrative, **not** definitive.

Although views differ, for example as to whether councils should have more powers, there is, as discussed next, broad agreement about policy priorities, irrespective of respondents' political affiliations and locations.

Respondents' views analysed and summarised

Introduction

The following questions were addressed:

1. should town councils have more powers in relation to policy development and implementation;
2. which policies are they well-placed to develop and implement, if any;
3. would local democracy benefit;
4. what resources would they need if given more powers;
5. to what extent does the local government structure make it more or less likely that councils could take on more powers/responsibilities;
6. what might town councils have to do "post-Covid";
7. what effect, if any, will Brexit have on their towns?

¹¹ The data were obtained from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's mapping tool, http://dclgapps.communities.gov.uk/imd/iod_index.html#.

¹² Towns from Wiltshire, Yorkshire and Cornwall respectively.

Should town councils have more powers?

The majority of councillors and council staff believe councils should have more powers. Similarly, eight non-council-connected respondents are supportive, with only the chair of a charity and the ex-leader of the major borough council opposed¹³ (Table 4). As will be discussed, however, views are caveated.

Table 4 – should town councils have more powers in relation to local policy development and implementation?

Respondents	Yes	No	Unsure
Town Councillors	99	9	10
Clerks	18	2	0
Assistant Clerk	1	0	0
Parish Councillors ¹⁴	3	0	0
Local resident and community development academic	1	0	0
District councillor	0	0	1
Town Market Manager	1	0	0
Chair of town community group	1	0	0
Chair of local charity	0	1	0
CEO of national government-related organisation	1	0	0
Academic and community activist	1	0	0
Academic	1	0	0
Academic researcher	0	0	1
Academic and CEO of public governance body	1	0	0
Ex-leader of a major borough council	0	1	0
Resident & ex-rural practitioner	1	0	0
Totals:	129	13	12

Of the 154 respondents who answered, eighteen explained their reasoning. Those in favour believe more could be done if councils were given commensurate responsibility, authority, money, time, and experienced, qualified people. The most-mentioned powers relate to aspects of planning and car parks/parking. Comments, measured and cautious, reflect concerns about accountability, experience/competence, time limitations (many councillors are volunteers), doubts that higher tier authorities will transfer the money needed to pay for devolved responsibilities, and the need for appropriate monitoring of council activities by a public body.

¹³ The ex-leader thought that democracy would benefit if town councils had more powers, but is concerned by the way the respondent's unitary council devolves responsibilities, but not resources.

¹⁴ Although correctly self-described as parish councillors, they represent towns with populations between 4,000 and 16,000.

The following give a flavour of the responses:

... if there are any major projects/monies to be spent on a Town the local community and Council should be consulted...always, but particularly during Covid when communication is so difficult. (Independent, east Midlands)

... a review of how Town Councils are funded is required. Policy generated at Town level is far more targeted than projects instigated at county or national level. The capacity of volunteer Council members to fully represent their ward and work full time in many cases excludes many good people from serving. (Independent, south west)

In keeping with the spirit of subsidiarity, I think that the idea of differentiated devolution to community level makes sense - and is entirely in keeping with the UK's messy way of dealing with local government reform! So more powers AUTOMATICALLY for those communities which FULFIL CERTAIN CRITERIA WHICH INDICATE THAT THEY CAN EXERCISE those powers successfully. And a subset of those powers for those communities which can't fulfil those criteria but which WANT to take them on anyway, as rubber-stamped by a local referendum. (academic and CEO of public governance body [respondent's capitalisation])

One of eleven respondents who believe councils should not have more powers, wrote, “As unpaid councillors they lack accountability and usually have little or no experience of the responsibilities they are elected for.” (local charity chairman). This is a relatively commonly expressed, although possibly subjective, concern, for, as (most) councillors are elected, it is hoped (?) that voters believe they have the necessary qualities, or the wherewithal to acquire them.

A clerk from the Isle of Wight noted, “... the powers [councils] have ... are sufficient. It is probably more a case of working in conjunction with local groups, charities, organisations and the community.” Four of the nineteen contributing clerks made this point, suggesting that town councils are in a position to do (much?) more with the powers they have, subject to specified financial and legislative limits; a view supported by NALC (n.d.; Tharmarajah, 2013), and the LGA (2013).

A Labour councillor (Northamptonshire) noted, “Powers without the finance to implement them are purely notional. We can and do raise a precept but this comes on top of Council Tax. So we might dream but cannot realistically expect to implement.” Another contributor, the chairman of a charity in Devon, expressed concerns - also made by four other respondents - about probity:

Again it comes down to accountability. Creating their own standing orders can destroy democracy. There has [sic] to be more powers to oversee and correct misuse of power than at present, this will be especially so if more power is devolved

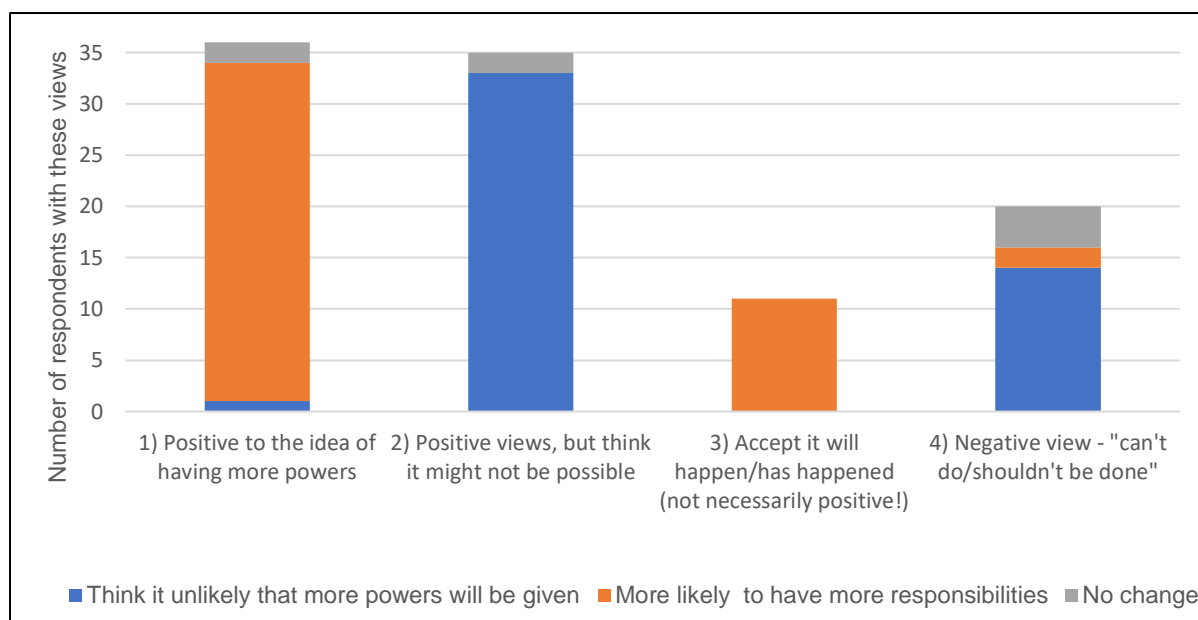
A Lincolnshire District Councillor who represents an **unparished** town with a population of approximately 40,000, wrote, “[No more powers] yet. *Can only ever be based on a rigorous assessment of their competencies. ...*”

An academic with a background in local government research expressed uncertainty, writing, “*I’m not sure they should [have more powers]. In my experience town councils are often very focused on a narrow set of issues and often not very dynamic.*” A community-development academic, uncertain about (some?) councils’ potential to do more, is less negative, suggesting the following powers would be needed: “*Fundraising, planning, housing for locals, environmental sustainability, relevant services development.*”

Two councillors expressed uncertainty and hope. A Liberal Democrat town and county councillor with between four and eight years’ service in East Cheshire (unitary since 2009), thinks, “*It is difficult to anticipate the detail but financial pressures are making it more likely that the local authority will devolve some functions and services to town and parish councils.*” More optimistic is an Independent councillor with less than four years’ service in a three tier area about to be restructured, who hopes that as, “*The District Council will disappear in ... the reorganisation so the ... town council will be able to take responsibility for local issues previously dealt with by the District Council.*” The sense of inevitability regarding devolution is expressed by the councillor from an established unitary authority, while the optimistic view comes from a councillor in the area scheduled for reorganisation. Only time will tell whether the optimistic view will persist post-reorganisation.

In addition to the above snapshot of broadly supportive, but nuanced, views, every comment was analysed thematically (Brennon *et al.*, 2018), as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 - thematic summary of free text contributions as to whether councils should have more powers



Although the majority view is positive (Bars 1 and 2), doubt and scepticism are evident. For example, the positive views in Bar 1 are dampened by the belief that responsibilities (orange colour), not powers, are more likely to be devolved. Respondents believe, therefore, that although they want more power and responsibilities, only the latter will be devolved.

Others with positive views believe devolution might not be possible (Bar 2), or accept that devolution will happen (or has happened), but that the experience will be - or is - not wholly positive (Bar 3). Overall, there are doubts that additional powers (as opposed to responsibilities) will be granted. Nevertheless, despite some doubts about some councils' policy development potential (Bar 4), many respondents believe, as discussed in the next section, their councils **could** develop and implement policies.

Which policies are councils well-placed to develop and implement?

Despite reservations, 133 respondents believe councils could develop and implement local policies. However, of the 22 who commented, only three were definite in their support, with two, a Northamptonshire Labour councillor and a Norfolk Independent, stressing the benefits of local knowledge. The third respondent gave the following examples:

The town council ... has like other Dorset towns been busy in shaping its policies to meet the Climate Emergency. In our case by purchase of electric powered vehicles, looking to install solar panels on buildings on the ... [p]laying fields, energy efficient flood lighting and ... tree planting
 (Liberal Democrat, unitary and town councillor)

The remaining councillors caveated their support, mentioning concerns about accountability (Oxfordshire Independent, Bedfordshire Conservative), relevant experience (Independent, Lincolnshire), and the need for support and investment (community group chairman, Devon). These concerns are reflected by three respondents who disagree with the premise of the question, and those who are unsure. One of the former's concerns is not that councils lack the wherewithal, but the belief that their views are, "... *regularly ignored when planning applications are considered by District Council planning committees.*" (Independent, Hampshire). Others note the lack of interest from surrounding parishes (Independent, Oxfordshire), the self-interest of some councillors (Independent, Devon), and the need for more money and staff with research and drafting skills (Liberal Democrat, Surrey; "no party", Northamptonshire; Independent, Lincolnshire).

Despite these reservations, respondents are clear about their priorities: planning/neighbourhood planning, transport (eg, local/public transport, road safety, parking, street cleaning, highways) and housing (Table 5a). They are familiar, featuring in MTI evaluations (Entec UK, 2004; Moseley *et al.*, 2005; Morris, 2010, pp164-166), earlier research (e.g., RDC, 1993, 1995, 1996)¹⁵, and a recent report calling for a rural strategy (RSN, 2019).

Most respondents think their councils could, if given opportunity and resources, address **new** policy areas. Their suggestions, specific in terms of current and future needs (Table 5b), fit well with the topics listed in Table 5a.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that the MTI was a central government programme. Although centrally and regionally funded, it was led, day to day, by local people. Of relevance to this research is the fact that the preference for MTI work to be community-led resulted in tension between some town groups and their councils. Partnerships worked better when councils were involved and supportive (Morris, 2010, pp166-168).

Tables 5a and 5b – most mentioned powers and associated policies

Table 5a The most mentioned powers called for by respondents		Table 5b The most mentioned policy areas that respondents believe could be addressed if powers were devolved	
Topic	Number of Mentions	Topic	Number of Mentions
Planning	81	Planning	62
Planning decisions	7	Transport (public & local)	19
Planning app's	7	Housing	16
Local planning	7	Economic development	7
Neighbourhood planning	6	Neighbourhood Plan	5
Planning issues	2	Social services/care	5
Parking/car parks	29	Climate change	5
Greater local influence	8	High Street regeneration/street cleaning	5
Business rates	6	Local services	3
Open space	6	Business rates	3
Local transport	4	Crime/closed circuit TV	1
Code of conduct (need for)	2		
Social housing	2		

There were several comments about planning, for example:

... [Councils] need to be able to request the powers ... they feel competent in. This could be through a sort of charter standard that must be reached before they take things on. I'm thinking open spaces management ... delegated planning powers for small projects like extensions, car parks, signage in town, library, fixing minor potholes¹⁶ on town centre streets and pavements, street cleaning in town centre, control of local markets. (Independent, Somerset)

A Devonian Independent councillor is supportive: *“Ownership of ‘common’ land like parks, playgrounds, car parks The ability to negotiate directly with highways departments. The ability to determine [and provide] services ... if possible.”* A non-party affiliated councillor from a Yorkshire town in a national park listed, *“Parking, Events, Markets, Litter penalties”* as priorities. References to cars and parking were also made by contributors from southern towns that are either close to major conurbations, or are in, or near, tourist destinations; the implication being that there are challenging, as well as beneficial, tourism-related pressures.

Climate change is viewed as a current and future priority. Interest in education, low carbon housing, electric vehicle charging points, “green issues”/environment, apprenticeships, anti-poverty work, and health, suggests a degree of ambition that runs counter to some of the more cautious sentiments¹⁷. An Independent from North

¹⁶ At the time of writing BBC News reported that locals in Mansfield are more interested in having potholes fixed, and the town centre improved, than in party politics (Pittam, 2021).

¹⁷ The most mentioned powers and policies were gathered from a wordsearch program (<https://monkeylearn.com/word-cloud>) which listed the 100 most mentioned words. For reasons of space, only the top twenty have been combined, where appropriate, and tabulated.

Yorkshire supplies an effective summary, calling for, *“Sustainability. If the Town Council can provide a lead, it could lead a cultural shift for all residents.”*

It is striking that some contributors are ambitious, while others remain doubtful and determinedly more concerned about current challenges. An Oxfordshire Conservative believes that, *“Until All Councillors prove themselves ... competent, [k]nowledgeable about the needs of the many then I feel nothing can be altered until a Training Program (sic) has been completed.”* This reflects the councillor’s concerns about poverty/hardship during the pandemic: *“Training to understand the enormity of [the current] situation [and need for] Emergency Financial Help For Our Residents.”* Similarly, a Devonian Independent and a clerk (Gloucestershire) summarise, respectively, local priorities as, *“Planning; Flood Control; Social Services; Well Being; Foodbanks; Social Housing; Employment.”*, and, *“Local support for vulnerable people.”*

A minority of respondents oppose town councils having more powers, as this example from another Devonian Independent illustrates: *“To give [councils] more powers without checks and balances is totally wrong. It is almost impossible to remove councillors. [Councils] should be in a position to have an overview of the community but this only works if those involved behave with integrity.”* During telephone interviews¹⁸, two Independents (Dorset, Isle of Wight) emphasised the need for councillors and clerks to be aware of, and to adhere to, the Nolan principles of public life¹⁹, especially accountability and leadership²⁰. They mentioned the need for more training for councillors, and oversight from parent authorities as prerequisites for greater powers. The views of a Conservative town and district councillor (Worcestershire) are particularly trenchant in relation to town councils’ fitness for purpose:

... town councils should in the main be abolished. Parish councils also need to be challenged in their usefulness. ... Simply giving extra powers to parish and town councils is of no use if the will and competence to use those powers is not there.

Another Conservative (Hampshire) identifies the tension at the heart of this discussion: *“I do not believe ... they are in a position to take on more power and, locally, I think that this has been demonstrated during the Covid-19 outbreak. Against that they have demonstrated ... an ability to deal with the more human element of government.”*

Despite these varied views, most believe, as discussed next, that democracy would benefit if town councils were given more powers.

¹⁸ NB All twelve interviews were conversational. Lasting between 15 minutes and 1 hour, they were discursive. Interviewees’ strongly-held diverse views and ambitions contrasted, in most cases, with their frustrations about “the system” they operate in.

¹⁹ Selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership (<https://tinyurl.com/lso4fnj>).

²⁰ Despite concerns, one councillor believes: local democracy would benefit if councils were given more powers; they are **potentially** well-placed to develop and implement policies.

Would local democracy benefit if councils were given more powers?

The majority, 122, believe democracy would benefit. Four believe nothing will change, 26 think things will be more fractious (although that did not necessarily mean worse, simply more challenging), and five did not know. The following examples illustrate this:

Local democracy would undoubtedly benefit, but while greater controversy is probable if not inevitable, this needn't necessarily descend into fractiousness.
(Conservative, unitary and town, Dorset)

Local democracy in a small town can mean 'The usual suspects' having a say. ... Town Councillors come and go Services require committed attention and time.
(Labour, West Yorkshire)

Generally speaking there has always been a failure on the public's part to distinguish which council does what. ... However, as the now gone districts pulled back from having a local presence leaving the town council as the only office where the public could drop in, towns have been assumed [mistakenly] to do everything. ... If the new unitary authority decides to delegate more people may recognise the towns as important decision makers (Liberal Democrat, Dorset)

If done well, then local democracy could definitely benefit because a Town Council can understand the views of the public better at the local level and councillors can play a role in involving local people more (Independent, Suffolk)

Other respondents mentioned: the need to avoid party politics, which can, "... override local consensus." (Labour, Cheshire); the possibility that interest in local elections could increase (Independent, Hampshire); and the need to "educate" the public and increase accountability and training (Independent, Oxfordshire)²¹.

Respondents were asked, irrespective of their views, to identify the resources councils would need if given additional powers.

Resources councils would need if granted additional powers

Respondents emphasised the need for more staff, training for staff and councillors, local support in terms of public understanding, and help for younger people to become involved. Tax raising powers are considered to be less important. Comments made reinforce this balance:

I think ... training should be compulsory ... perhaps a small fee to cover the time this would take (Labour, Derbyshire)

Compulsory training ... stronger legislation for dealing with councillors who would, if in employment, be subject to disciplinary or dismissal due to their behaviour. (Clerk, Dorset)

²¹ Additional comments which did not directly address the question, nevertheless raised pertinent points about, for example, long standing concerns about levels of funding in rural areas (RSN, 2021).

Considerably better control over standards of Councillor behaviour (as per national discussions extant). (Clerk, Sussex)

More local support and understanding (leading to improved local democracy/identity?). (Conservative, North Yorkshire)

The capacity to seek sustainable revenue streams through commercial partnerships, with any new devolved responsibility equating to a proportional increase in funding from the overall council tax money collected by ... Cornwall Council. (Independent, Cornwall)

The residents cannot support council tax as they are going to food banks and working. (Independent, Lincolnshire)

More staff. More training for councillors. Financial/time support to enable younger working people to become councillors. (Green, Gloucestershire)

... I've ticked anything which improves and encourages participation in local democracy If the plan is to do more then it's likely to require more staff with well trained decision makers ... the present tax raising powers are fine as long as central government keeps out of it. At town level ... there is benefit in keeping it a part time evening activity where the whole council plays a full part in decision taking. ... trying to professionalise this tier of representation is quite difficult. (Liberal Democrat, Unitary and Town, Dorset)

Better IT support for councillors More training for Clerks to achieve a minimum standard with succession planning as standard. (Independent, Oxfordshire)

Several supportive comments²² relate to younger people and their ability/willingness to participate, and the need to help them, financially or timewise. Not all agree, however: *"I don't buy into this younger people rubbish. I believe age isn't the important thing, it's dedication and application and an open mind."* (Independent, Lincolnshire)

An Independent from Cumbria noted the adverse financial effects on council budgets of holiday lets and second homes. Others called for control over car parks/parking, planning, business rates, business improvement districts, and the community infrastructure levy²³ (Dorset Liberal Democrat, Cumbrian and Wiltshire Independents, Dorset market manager).

Other comments relate to the need for councillors to be independently and publicly audited (Devon Independent), the risk of assets being devolved without associated funding (Cornish Independent), and the (in)ability of residents to pay council taxes due to poverty (Lincolnshire Independent).

A Dorset Independent believes: *"Current councillors neither sought nor were voted in for increased power... [i]t would depend what those extra powers were, but generally the more democratic the more fractious. But good debate results in better decisions"* Finally, a

²² The ex-Leader of a major borough council; two academics involved professionally with parish councils; two clerks (Gloucestershire, Somerset); a Liberal Democrat and an Independent from Wiltshire; and a Dorset Independent.

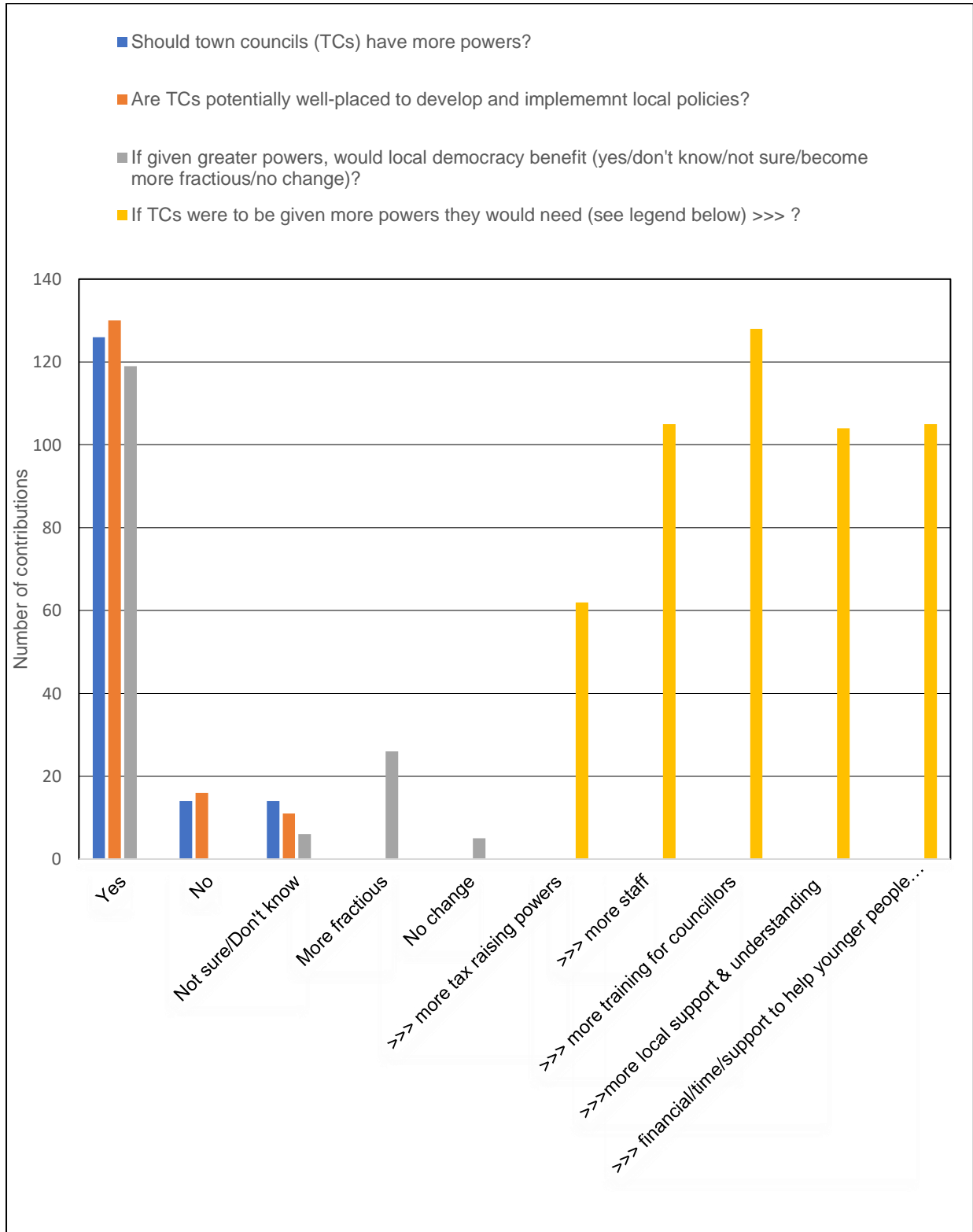
²³ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/community-infrastructure-levy>

clerk from Essex emphasised that, *“Under the [GPC] councils broadly have the power to do all of the above but lack the resourcing to do it. Community services are far better managed by town councils who are best placed to identify local needs and to provide accordingly.”*

This suggests councils have the powers to do more, and councillors could do more, but are limited by time, money, staff numbers, pressures on them as volunteers (usually), and doubts about skills, knowledge, and accountability. Despite the sense that enough is enough, respondents believe that, given support, more could, and perhaps should, be done locally, given the benefits that local knowledge brings²⁴. Their views are summarised in Figure 3.

²⁴ A town mayor from Gloucestershire wrote, *“In my pyramid of democracy national government is across the broad base, then there are ... layers of local authority with [at] the tip town and parish councils which are the most in touch with local affairs.”*

Figure 3 – respondents’ views about town council powers, potential, and needs



Although most respondents believe town councils should have more powers, they recognise, for example, the need for more training. However, even with new powers, town councils will have other authorities above them. At local government level, this is increasingly likely to be a

unitary council. These are more remote from “their” towns, and, therefore, possibly less aware of their needs and circumstances (Baker and Sandford, 2020). Views might, therefore, vary according to local authority structure, and the extent to which structure makes it more or less likely that town councils will take on more powers and responsibilities. The next section explores this.

To what extent does the local government structure make it more or less likely that councils could take on more responsibilities?

Only 21 respondents believe the local structure makes no difference. The majority from unitary council areas (40/63) believe it makes it more likely that increased responsibilities will be given (ie delegated/imposed). The majority from within borough and district councils (44/83) believe it less likely (Table 6). However, “more” does not necessarily mean “better”, and “less” does not mean “worse”.

Table 6 - respondents’ views as to the extent to which the local government structure makes it more or less likely that town councils (TCs) will take on increased responsibilities (with commensurate powers)

LA type makes ...	Local Authority (LA) type ²⁵			Totals
	Boroughs	Districts	Unitaries	
... it more likely ...	4	22	40	66
... no difference ...	2	11	8	21 ²⁶
... less likely that TCs will take on more responsibilities	7	37	15	59
				146

As we have seen (Figure 1), respondents’ views appear to be independent of political affiliation. This also appears to be the case in relation to local government structures (Table 6). For example, of five submissions received from a Dorset town, two Liberal Democrat and one Independent believe the county’s unitary status makes it more likely additional responsibilities will be devolved, whereas another Independent and the clerk believe there will be no difference. Given that Dorset Council was only established in April 2019, the consequences of reorganisation are not yet apparent. However, despite agreement about the likelihood of devolution, the Dorset councillors’ views differ:

“Loss of district tier has meant that unitary (county) tier feels more remote and less responsive to local town information” (Liberal Democrat, negative view)

“[T]hey are now unitary with more to do and less ability to do it all with decrease in finances especially more so following COVID.” (Liberal Democrat, negative view)

²⁵ Data from the main survey only (question not asked in initial survey).

²⁶ Two contributing academics selected “no difference”, but did not identify their council’s status. Their contributions are not included in the table.

“Having removed a layer of Bureaucracy in Dorset allows Town and Parishes to have a greater role in local affairs.” (Independent, positive view)

A Labour councillor (Derbyshire – three tier authority) believes devolution to be more likely, and is supportive: *“We have a large town and town council so it could definitely take on increased responsibilities.”* An Independent councillor from Cornwall (unitary) also believes devolution is more likely, but is far from positive: *“My belief and that of many others here [is] that this is a council in desperate need of reigning in and needs to listen to the many communities that make up the county.”*

Those selecting Less Likely also view things differently.

A unitary supporting Independent councillor (Suffolk, three tier) believes it less likely that responsibilities will be devolved, because, *“... the district often intrudes in things that could be ... better done at a town council level ...”*, whereas a Conservative from Worcestershire (three tier) chooses less likely, because, *“Our town council does not have the expertise, either staff or councillors, to take on detailed extra work of this kind.”* An unaffiliated councillor in East Bedfordshire considers it less likely because the, *“Unitary authority [is] politically dominated and hence some areas benefit more than others. Politics have virtually no role in [town council] agendas.”* They are, however, supportive of devolution, as is a - clearly frustrated - Wiltshire Independent: *“Our [town] council has been trying for 4 plus years to take on responsibility for local services but Wiltshire council have stalled all our attempts.”*

A Conservative councillor (Oxfordshire, three tier) with negative views is dissatisfied with both district and town councils:

... we have a district Council which is led by the Majority Party... the purse strings are always kept tight. ... I have had to beg fellow Councillors to pass a grant for the Charity who helps School Children. We know families will be struggling to buy uniforms due to this pandemic, unfortunately the Council ... passes it off as it's not that bad! I think [town should] be re named The Land Of Rainbows and Unicorns!! Because COVID FAMILIES WHO ARE FINANCIALLY SUFFERING DONT EXIST HERE!! ... Until we have total democracy in all Town, Parish and District Councils, the people will carry on suffering. (respondent's capitalisation)

A clerk from a Kent town (population >25,000²⁷) is frustrated:

[Our] Council produced a draft post-covid Town Recovery Plan in consultation with many businesses and local residents and was not able to pursue due to views from other tiers of local government... . The local community was very disappointed and disillusioned. ... The District Council holds the 'Charter' for the ... market which it charges the Town Council to use

²⁷ Once the centre of an urban and a rural district council.

In some cases it is difficult to discern whether reasons given are viewed positively or negatively. For example, an Independent (East Sussex, three tier) selected more likely because, *“With the likelihood of more Unitary authorities, and the disappearance of District Councils, more powers will be devolved to Town/Parish councils.”* Whether this is considered good or bad is unclear.

Those selecting No Change also have a range of views. An unaffiliated councillor from Warwickshire writes, *“The whole structure is complicated, paternal and difficult to navigate. Perhaps we have too many layers”* A Dorset Liberal Democrat town and unitary councillor with many more than twelve years’ service, explains:

... I feel [the] jury is still out... with a still new unitary ... finding its way. ... What is clear ... is that the members come from very different backgrounds. I don't mean socially but those who came from West Dorset have a different mindset to those from other districts where there was no or little opposition to the ruling group. Throw the former county members into the mix and it becomes an odd set of bedfellows.

There is, therefore, optimism, caution and realism/scepticism/cynicism as to whether devolution of responsibilities is to be welcomed or feared, depending on whether sufficient resources are devolved to enable responsibilities to be discharged effectively.

Although difficult to capture the full range of 146 written opinions, the quotations and discussion above reflect respondents’ views. However, the world will be different, with Covid endemic, and Brexit’s consequences clearer. The next two sections consider the implications for town councils.

What might town councils have to do “post-Covid”?

The most mentioned topics identified by the wordcloud program²⁸ are presented, in rank order, in Table 7. They are grouped by theme; for example, support for local businesses, start-ups, and change of use. High street support, key infrastructure and street furniture are similarly well-matched. The inclusion of public toilets - a contentious topic - will surprise no one. Relief, however, may be at hand if the Non-Domestic Rating (Public Lavatories) Bill passes into legislation (Clarke, 2020).

Table 7 - the most frequently mentioned topics respondents believe will have to be addressed

Support for local businesses, including small producers, start-ups, high street businesses, premises, “change of use”
“High Street” support, street furniture, key infrastructure
Public toilets
Open spaces
Young people
Decide/focus on “local issues”

²⁸ More than 8,000 words were analysed using the <https://monkeylearn.com/word-cloud/> program.

Food/vulnerable people/floods
Local rural economy
Surgeries/pharmacies

Sixteen comments relate to the young, but only three to the elderly. This might reflect concerns about problems particular to the young, who have been badly affected by Covid lockdowns²⁹.

Whereas before the pandemic there was at least as much concern about the plight of (some) older people, for example in relation to health inequalities (Haighton *et al.*, 2019), concern appears to have shifted.

It was less easy to identify the changes respondents believe will have to be made. Their suggestions, more wide-ranging than topic-specific, are illustrated in Table 8.

Table 8 – what will have to change to enable town councils to take on additional responsibilities?

Topics mentioned	Changes identified/needed
Powers/responsibilities	Planning – influence over: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighbourhood (eg streetscape) • Traffic • Local character/distinctiveness • Street markets, local businesses • Climate-related (eg solar) • Housing (eg second homes, homes for rent) • Clarity re “who does what” in relation, eg, to community/youth services • Local tax-raising power • Wherewithal to tackle poverty
Hinterland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen relations with outlying parishes • Develop economies of scale in relation to service provision • Resolve boundary problems (eg business parks & housing estates that lie in two authorities with lower precepts/business rates)
Town council changes needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More training - clerk, staff, councillors • Improved governance, management (financial and general), training and qualifications • Use governance/management mechanisms, eg, Charitable Incorporated Organisations³⁰/co-operative models to help achieve community aims • Use school governor appointment method, ie mix of elected and appointed councillors • Transparent decision-making • Modernise (less emphasis on costumes, directly elected mayors ... possible adoption of French system?)³¹ • Coordination with police, schools, education, social services • Remove S137³² expenditure limits (ie the approved sum of money/elector that councils can use for discretionary spending) • Councillors to be Independent, not party-affiliated • Councillors to stand down for at least one term after serving two consecutively • Hold meetings outside working hours to ensure that younger/working councillors can participate

²⁹ For example, a Scottish online survey of 600 18-28 year olds found that respondents felt anxious, worried and lonely (Carrington, 2020).

³⁰ <https://tinyurl.com/jlsk6eh>

³¹ http://www.citymayors.com/france/france_gov.html

³² Section 137 is a statutory power giving councils the power, “to spend a limited amount of money for purposes for which they have no other specific statutory power” (NALC News, 2019).

National level improvements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadband coverage/speeds and power supplies to cope with home working and local business activity, eg, manufacturing.
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In addition to the familiar topics identified (e.g., planning), six respondents referred to hinterland relationships. This may be a reflection of pre-1974 council roles. One respondent (Independent, Suffolk) recognises that, *“Some aspects of that old approach are now too large for a [town council] ...”* but believes, *“... most of what the [district] does could be passed to a [town council], and the remainder up to county.”* Respondents making this connection come from towns ranging in population from approximately 6,500 to 22,000. Although, clearly, their views are not related to population, a council’s **ability** to take on greater responsibilities could vary with population. To test this, nine towns in three population bands were selected, and their respondents’ contributions compared (Table 8).

Table 8 – policy topics respondents from towns in different population bands think could/should, and/or might have to be done “post-Covid”

Locations	Population	Policy areas identified by respondents (verbatim from survey)	Respondents ³³
Devon	3300	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning; Flood Control; Social Services; Well Being; Foodbanks; Social Housing; Employment. • Highways management • Play parks and open spaces • Having developed strategies for youth engagement, crime prevention and environmental management. • Alternative economic strategies • Revitalising democracy • Social enterprise important for rejuvenation, jobs and wealth creation 	Two councillors & one community group chair
Warwickshire	4500	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibility for their own planning decisions, without the need for a panel made from councillors who are not from the area under consideration. 	One councillor
Cumbria	4700	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parking; Events; Markets; Litter penalties 	One councillor
Cornwall	9500	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Planning Determination • Operate local Transport • Road safety and road improvement • Control of Sport facilities • Rubbish and recycling collection 	One councillor
Northamptonshire	10400	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Road and property maintenance • Greater input into local planning decisions 	One councillor
Cheshire	11800	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More say on planning issues and more influence when it comes to Active Travel initiatives - walking, cycling etc. • Anti-social behaviour, dog fouling and litter fines 	Two councillors
Lincolnshire	17000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small planning applications and a louder voice to influence policies • Assisting with economic development ideas and planning policy development • More say in planning and social service requirements. • Planning authority; Markets; Planning; Roads/pavements; Traffic; Assets 	Four councillors
Cornwall	20000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning, Small Businesses, building control are all main complaints of local people • Power to raise money. Power over planning and highways. • Power to decide on lock down dependant on risk. Decide on car parking charging in towns. Retain business rates. 	Two councillors
Somerset	27000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They need to be able to request the powers that they feel competent in. This could be through a sort of charter standard that must be reached before they take things on. I'm thinking open spaces management including church yards, licences, delegated planning powers for small projects like extensions, car parks, signage in town, library, fixing minor potholes on town centre streets and pavements, street cleaning in town centre, control of local markets • Sustainability, licensing, economic development, planning, environmental. 	Two councillors

Planning, together with transport and traffic, local environments and economies are important, irrespective of population. Priorities are not limited, or defined, by population, but are shared across the range. Although no respondent recommended returning to pre-1974 arrangements,

³³ Three of the respondents are “double hatted”: two are also county councillors, one a district councillor.

the policy areas identified hint at past responsibilities, suggesting a desire, albeit cautious, and with little expectation, for more power/influence/recognition for councils³⁴.

Turning now to Brexit. Its effects have been masked by Covid. They will, however, become apparent (Tetlow and Pope, 2020), and so the opportunity was taken to ask respondents for their views.

Respondents' views about the possible effects of Brexit on their towns

Views (158 contributions, 4,000 words) were analysed and themed. The majority, 54, are unclear as to the likely impact, while 51 respondents believe effects will be minimal. Six respondents believe it will be beneficial; 38 believe the opposite, as the quotations in Table 9 illustrate.

³⁴ When governments have devolved powers these have mainly been to the regions; eg the Major and Blair governments' creation of government offices and regional development agencies, neither of which lasted, and, more recently, the mayoral system (Higham, 2021).

Table 9 - Possible effects of Brexit on town councils

Respondents' views and number of comments received under each heading	Comments (verbatim)
<p style="text-align: center;">Beneficial 6 comments made</p>	<p><i>Opportunities in tourism and community business support. Bring it on!</i> (Rutland, no party membership given)</p> <p><i>Pro-Brexit; give us more control of our small market town.</i> (Conservative, Yorkshire)</p> <p><i>I am not aware of any implications for our council. Personally, the sooner the better!</i> (Conservative, Worcestershire)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Minimal 51 comments</p>	<p><i>On the [council] very little except maybe a need to reduce the precept and some of our more ambitious projects like improving the public realm. On the community it could be massive hitting employment hard - a vicious circle not helped by Covid-19.</i> (Independent, Wiltshire)</p> <p><i>Possible increase in fuel prices but little change in Town Council activities as such. We have two large international employers here. They may be affected.</i> (Liberal Democrat, Dorset)</p> <p><i>None of any immediate consequence, beyond the wider implications nationally.</i> (Conservative, Warwickshire)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Damaging 38 comments</p>	<p><i>Nothing directly, though it will have an impact on the town's main manufacturer and everyone else as the result of higher costs if deal or no deal. There is nothing better than what we had.</i> (Liberal Democrat, Cumbria)</p> <p><i>I think the implications are the same for the whole country...more expensive foods and goods. Less jobs.</i> (Labour, Derbyshire)</p> <p><i>Brexit will damage our local economy - the farmers are very concerned. My business (retail) is closing next month and Brexit has already had a negative impact on it and then COVID came So the impact will be indirect i.e. the local economy being affected which then reduces the funds for the Council etc.</i> (Independent, Cumbria)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Don't know/Uncertain/Unclear 54 comments</p>	<p><i>Politically ... Brexit is not a concern ... the Town Council may have a part to play in supporting those ... who will lose the most as a result of this extraordinary backward step. Covid 19 and Brexit will lead to a number of fundamental changes in how much can be done for whom and by whom. Keeping in touch with those we represent ... and being ready to assist ... will become a basic part of the Town Council's role in the future.</i> (Independent, Dorset)</p> <p><i>Who knows, but probably not positive. We were founder members of European Charter Towns but that has sadly gone.</i> (Labour, Northamptonshire)</p> <p><i>If you can answer that you are a better man than me. Here we are with days to go and still nobody knows what is actually happening. Which ever way you voted it's an absolute shambles.</i> (Independent, Yorkshire)</p>

Views range from the succinct, such as, "*Get it done*", from a Conservative Brexit supporter (Isle of Wight), to the following from a Surrey Liberal Democrat who believes Brexit will be bad, but makes a broader point:

If we do not have a deal with the EU then I expect goods coming into the country will be delayed and more expensive. Likewise exporting will be ... more bureaucratic ... The time is limited and there are insufficient experienced people to do this in the UK. ... If we do not have a deal with the EU then a deal with the US

would be more necessary but I fear the poorer quality of food products (hygiene) and higher prices for pharmaceuticals from the US - crippling the NHS budget.

An Independent from Rutland thinks some towns will be unaffected:

We are a rural community with 20% of our population comprising of the staff and pupils of a well known Public School ... our largest employer. Their pupils are drawn from all around the world so Brexit is unlikely to be that much of a negative impact. Our second largest employer imports mainly from China and sells in the UK so again little negative impact. Our local farmers may be negatively impacted on any exports but most seem to sell within the UK at present.

A Dorset Conservative councillor recognises potential adverse effects: “[Brexit] Probably has more implications for the larger employers in the town regarding licenses, logistics and import Tax.”, but supports the decision to leave the European Union, being, “... a strong supporter of Brexit ... [hence] ... bring forth the day we cut away from the Apron Strings of Europe.”

The polarised, binary nature of the Brexit debate is evident from these comments. The views of those in favour are expressed pithily and confidently, in contrast to the generally longer comments made by those who are uncertain/worried about the eventual effects on towns and country. The majority view, broadly one of uncertainty, is probably a fair summary – we must wait and see.

Concluding remarks

Small towns are the bedrock of rural England. Not all are traditional market, county, cathedral or abbey towns. There are small seaside towns and industrial/ex-industrial towns. Whatever their histories, economic, cultural and social make-ups, they are often, to some extent, service centres for their hinterlands (Morris, 2003; Powe *et al.*, 2007, pp29-33; Shepherd, 2018).

As this research illustrates, the views of councillors and staff are as varied as the towns they represent. Most believe their councils should have a greater role, and more powers, in relation to local policy development and implementation, with planning, housing and transport dominant. They believe democracy would benefit, and that, locally, things would become more fractious, but not necessarily the worse for that.

There are caveats. Although keen to have more powers (and money and staff), respondents believe it more likely that responsibilities will be devolved; especially in unitary areas. Also recognised, and much mentioned, is the need for training and monitoring of performance and standards.

The 24,500 words of opinion contributed by respondents are a mix of ambition, hope, and realism. Underlying it all, I sense no obvious expectation of significant change, and an acceptance, from some, that this is as it must be, given the demands of the work, and the implications of the caveats discussed above. The potential for town councils to do more via the General Power of Competence is acknowledged, as are its limitations, and the unwillingness, of some, to use it.

And yet the trend towards unitary authorities, the centralised, top-down, nature of English government, and complicated local governance structures (Morris, 2018, p57), strongly suggests a need for accessible, accountable, relatable, elected **local** councillors. A recent report, commissioned by the British Prime Minister, with the aim of sustaining, “... *the community spirit we have seen during the coronavirus pandemic*” (Kruger, 2020, p7), proposes that, “*Decisions on what is done in local places should be taken by people as close to the ground as possible, ideally the people who actually live there.*” (p14). The

report emphasises the important contributions that local volunteer-led organisations and charities can make to help achieve, “... a more plural, local, bottom-up system ...” (p7). It mentions, *inter alia*, a scheme that, “... would multiply current community infrastructure investments by local authorities many times over, and put real power in the hands of local people to direct how that money (currently allocated by councils behind closed doors) is spent.” (p46). The reference to “councils behind closed doors” is revealing, suggesting a lack of confidence in (and/or support for), local government/councillors.

In this it is reminiscent of a previous Conservative-dominated government’s community-orientated programme, the Big Society (The Cabinet Office, 2010), which was viewed by some in the UK (Coote, 2010) and Australia (Whelan *et al.*, 2012) as a mechanism to shrink the state. Although Kruger acknowledges the Big Society’s connection with austerity (*op. cit.* p12), and is clear his proposals require state investment (p39), the implication that councils cannot (or should not?) lead **their** communities, remains.

There is a contradiction between intentions around devolution, the push to establish new parish (town) councils, the democratic processes central to our tiered, centralised, government structure, and the policy preferences towards privileging non-elected volunteers over elected (mostly volunteer!) councillors. Brexit could further complicate matters. In a recent paper, Hadfield and Turner (2021) note that there are doubts as to whether central government will centralise or devolve, and that only time will tell if, “... Brexit will prove a fillip or a foil for English local authorities.” (p19).

Nevertheless, town councils, such as Frome (Somerset) and Woodbridge (Suffolk) are preparing for the post-Covid world (Wheelhouse, 2020; NALC, 2021). In Louth (Lincolnshire), the livestock market, once at risk of redevelopment, is, thanks to town-led pressure, a successful centre for a wide range of activities³⁵. These examples make the point that local leadership matters, and exists.

As this research has shown, there are many town councillors willing to do more, despite any evidence, beyond rhetoric, that central, or the higher tiers of local, government, are prepared to support them in their ambitions. Given low voter turnout, a lack of trust in government (Baxter, 2021; Curtice and Montague, 2020), and the remoteness of unitary councils, the present system cannot be said to be working well.

Change is needed; change is wanted. The question is, do those who want it have the determination and wherewithal to acquire it, and will those with power ever allow it?

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Any errors or admissions are mine, and mine alone.

³⁵ <https://www.louthmarket.co.uk/About-Us>

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