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# Community Elections for Regeneration Partnerships: A New Deal for Local Democracy?

KEITH SHAW and GILL DAVIDSON

*The health of local democracy in the UK is being undermined by the very low turnouts in local government elections. As the recent government pilot schemes for changing the conduct of local elections have recognised, there is an urgent need to get people more involved at the local level, to reconnect voters with the local political system and to help reduce the level of cynicism towards local government. However, there is one area of local electoral politics in which there are clear signs of democratic renewal: turnouts are up, candidates are well-known and clearly identify with their community, young people and minority ethnic communities have a voice and local people are interested and enthused by a distinctively 'local' brand of politics. This area is the 'non-statutory' community elections increasingly used within the New Deal for Communities (NDC) regeneration initiative. This article examines the experience of community elections in NDC areas – particularly focussing on Newcastle's West Gate – and argues that the elections provide examples of good practice and innovation that could be used to enhance the conduct of local government elections. Moreover, community elections could also make a positive contribution to revitalising the overall health of local democracy by providing an 'complementary' channel of representation to that provided by elected local councillors.*

The health and vitality of local democracy in the UK is now increasingly under scrutiny. According to one recent review of local governance, the key concerns relate to the 'very low turn-outs of voters in local elections, the dominance on some councils of a single party over an extended period of time, apparent ignorance about, apathy towards and lack of interest in, local affairs on the part of all but a minority of citizens and the lack of openness and accountability on the part of local non-elected bodies' (Leach and Percy-Smith, 2001: 100).

Of these, the government has become increasingly concerned about the declining turnouts in local council elections. ‘According to the government, public dissatisfaction with weaknesses in local government democratic practices are reflected in the extraordinarily low participation rates in local government elections’ (Brooks, 2000: 606). Indeed, the recently appointed local government minister in the new Labour Government – Nick Raynsford – immediately acknowledged that there are ‘a number of lessons’ to be learnt from the relatively poor level of turnout in recent elections and that there is a need to engage people ‘more effectively’ in the democratic process (Guardian, 2001a).

Despite the recent identification of the problem by central government, local government has long been concerned about the decline in the number of people voting in local elections. Average turnout in Great Britain is now less than half that in other EU countries, including those where there is no system of compulsory voting (Rallings *et al.*, 1996). In the May 1999 UK local elections, turnout was just below 32 per cent – a drop of nine per cent on the average turnout figure between 1976 and 1996 (LGA, 2001).

There is also considerable regional variation in turnout in the UK, with some areas producing spectacularly low turnouts. In the North East of England for example, in the 1999 local elections, Sunderland’s turnout – of 19.2 per cent – was the second lowest in Britain (Wigan’s was the lowest, at 18.3 per cent). The highest turnouts in the North East were mainly in parts of Northumberland, where there tended to be closer contests and where some councils were under no overall control – the highest turnout was in Berwick-upon-Tweed, where 51.6 per cent turned out to vote (see Table 1).

TABLE 1  
TURNOUT IN THE 1999 LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS IN THE NORTH EAST

<b>Unitary Authorities</b>	<b>Turnout (%)</b>	<b>District Councils</b>	<b>Turnout (%)</b>
Darlington	33.9	Alnwick	48.0
Hartlepool	26.4	Berwick-upon-Tweed	51.6
Middlesbrough	36.1	Blyth Valley	29.1
Redcar & Cleveland	42.0	Castle Morpeth	46.6
Stockton-on-Tees	31.4	Chester-le-Street	32.5
		Derwentside	34.5
		Durham City	37.5
<b>Metropolitan Borough Councils</b>	<b>Turnout (%)</b>		
Gateshead	26.0	Easington	28.1
Newcastle upon Tyne	25.0	Sedgefield	33.6
North Tyneside	32.3	Teesdale	43.2
South Tyneside	26.0	Tynedale	49.8
Sunderland	19.2	Wansbeck	32.7
		Wear Valley	35.0

Source: Rallings and Thrasher, 1999: Table 11.

Altogether, turnout exceeded 50 per cent in just 14 of the 432 North East wards contested in the 1999 elections. The ward with the lowest turnout was Sunderland Central, where a mere 12.4 per cent of the electorate voted, followed by Newcastle's Moorside ward with a turnout of 15 per cent (Robinson *et al.*, 2000).

Turnouts are generally lowest in areas of social and economic disadvantage, such as in inner city areas and deprived estates, and concentrated within particular groups – such as young people. Deprived areas may also have lower levels of voter registration on account of high population turnover. It is estimated that between 2 and 4 million people are absent from the electoral register in the UK and, to an extent, this reflects – still – the discouraging effect of the Poll Tax which many sought to evade. Again, concern has been expressed about the number of young people who do not register. Such under-registration means that turnout is even lower than official figures indicate (Game, 2000).

Reluctance to vote may indicate a considerable level of public indifference and perhaps a feeling that the choice of councillors or political composition of the council matters little, particularly because of the limited power of local government. In areas of one party domination, as in much of the North East of England for example, the electorate may sense that change is highly unlikely, if not impossible. Yet councillors – unlike quango appointees – can be defeated at the polls and the composition of councils does matter, as is evident from the considerable variation in policies and performance between local councils across the country.

Many councils, under pressure to re-think their role and how they operate, are initiating changes, both in their structures and in their relationships with the community. Such changes are being strongly promoted by the Labour Government, which is pushing forward a 'modernising agenda'. Following on from six Green Papers and the 1998 White Paper, *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* (DETR, 1998), the Labour Government has proposed a series of measures which will result in potentially far-reaching reforms being implemented as part of the 2000 Local Government Act. The Government wants local councils to be less paternalistic and less inward-looking, to engage more fully with local people and work in partnership with other agencies and communities. Councils are to be encouraged to provide community leadership by working with others to draw up 'community plans', which would be comprehensive strategies for their areas. The Government also wants councils to re-structure and introduce streamlined decision-making by introducing cabinets, scrutiny committees and, in some areas, directly-elected mayors. More specifically, the government has also identified factors that contribute to the low level of participation in local elections. These include infrequent

elections, out of date electoral registers, polling stations that are inconveniently located and even the traditional process of voting (Brooks, 2000: 606).

Thus, the recent Local Government Act contained proposals to allow the government to make more frequent local elections possible, on the grounds that:

This will give people more opportunity to tell their council through the ballot box what they think of its performance and policies. It will enhance local democracy and service delivery, and encourage local authorities to be more open and receptive. More frequent local elections can also lead to greater continuity and stability in local councils, as only a proportion of councillors come up for re-election in any one year (DETR, 2000a).

Alongside increasing the frequency of local elections, other changes to encourage and facilitate better turnouts at elections are also being considered and tested. These include measures designed to improve voter registration – a rolling register which allows the register to be updated at any time during the year has already been introduced – and the use of alternative voting methods. Pilot schemes to improve turnout were tried in 32 selected areas across the country in the May 2000 elections and included electronic voting, postal voting, early voting and mobile polling stations.

In the North East, Sunderland voters were able to cast their vote at early polling stations in main libraries, which were open for six days, and voting papers and ballot boxes were taken to elderly people in residential or warden-controlled accommodation. Gateshead tried out all-postal voting in two wards, with significant increases in turnout in the two wards (26 and 32 per cent). However, other methods seem to have made little difference, ‘A preliminary evaluation of the first set of pilots must be that, with the exception of all-postal ballots, they were generally not successful in raising participation significantly above what it probably would have been anyway’ (Game, 2000: 142).

These innovations have been evaluated by the Home Office and were further tested in the May 2002 local elections, with the use of new technologies and voting methods taking place in 30 towns. While enhancing registration and making voting easier (particularly via postal voting) may help to secure greater participation in the electoral process, the evidence suggests that overall, such ‘operational’ changes will have a marginal impact on the – often deep-rooted – reasons why people fail to get involved in local elections.

Other recent approaches to enhancing local participation, albeit via non-electoral means, involve the increasing use of participatory forms of

democracy including local referenda, opinion polls and surveys, community needs analysis and deliberative forums – such as citizen’s juries (Leach and Percy-Smith, 2001). Such approaches are supported by central government on the grounds that they may enhance local accountability, heighten civic awareness and contribute to more effective local service delivery.

There is clearly an urgent need to get people more involved at the local level, to reconnect voters with the local political system, to engage local communities more fully in the democratic process and to help reduce the level of cynicism towards local councillors and local government generally. However, it can be argued that the Government’s agenda on participation is more suited to enhancing *customer* involvement in the area of *service delivery* rather than promoting the involvement of *citizens* (as voters) in local elections.

However, there is one area of local electoral politics that offers useful lessons for the conduct of local government elections in particular and which, more generally, provides a clear opportunity for reviving democracy at the local level. The increasing use of ‘non-statutory’ community elections within the New Deal for Communities (NDC) regeneration initiative provides at least one example of elections where turnouts are up, young people and minority ethnic communities have a voice and people are interested and enthused by a distinctively ‘local’ brand of politics.

#### NEW DEAL FOR COMMUNITIES

The NDC programme came out of the government’s Social Exclusion Unit and forms part of the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (SEU, 2000). A key objective is to reduce the gaps – the daily examples of deprivation and inequality – between some of the poorest neighbourhoods and the rest of the country. NDC is thus an area-based regeneration initiative that is focused on quite small neighbourhoods (up to 4,000 households) with a central emphasis on local community involvement. Within NDC, local people are supposed to be identifying their own priorities and making their own future, supported by government funding of around £50m per NDC area over a lifetime of ten years. While the problems of each NDC area will be unique, the partnerships must address five key issues: worklessness and poor prospects, improving health, tackling crime, raising educational achievement and housing and the physical environment.

The programme is delivered through partnerships formed between local people, community and voluntary organisations, public agencies, local authorities and business. Such partnerships should be ‘robust and inclusive, each prepared to take responsibility for tackling the problems of social exclusion in order to make a lasting improvement to their

neighbourhood' (DETR, 2001a). The Government's intention is that partnerships harness the active involvement of the local community – not only during the lifetime of the programme, but afterwards as well. It is the communities that have real power and should be in the driving seat. As Government guidance on setting up NDC programmes states, 'the New Deal for Communities places a particular emphasis on involving all elements of the local community from the outset ... Partnerships that don't clearly involve the local community and that don't respond to their needs and aspirations won't be supported' (DETR, 1999).

The Government has already allocated £774 million to support the first 17 partnerships over the next ten years. Twenty-two further 'Round 2' partnerships have also submitted bids for long-term funding in 2001 and this will take the total amount of money committed to NDC to around £2 billion over the next ten years (DETR, 2001a).

As part of the emphasis on inclusive and community-led regeneration, several NDC schemes have used non-statutory elections to provide for community representation on their partnership boards or steering groups. These include NDC schemes in Sheffield (Burngreve), Bradford (Little Horton), Tower Hamlets (Ocean Estate) and Newcastle (West Gate). According to a recent review, the 'elections for community representatives on New Deal regeneration projects are producing striking turnouts much higher than those for local government polls. The trend confirms that people respond positively to postal voting, but also suggests that grassroots issues can seize their interest' (Guardian, 2001b).

Turnout in the three areas that used postal voting was 50 per cent in Sheffield, 43 per cent in Bradford (in the second running of elections) and 41 per cent in Newcastle. Even in Tower Hamlets, where the ballot was not run by post, turnout was a respectable 32 per cent. As well as producing a higher turnout than in local government polls – average turnout in May 2000 in the Newcastle wards covered by the NDC initiative was only 24 per cent – community elections have also introduced several innovative forms of engagement. Thus in Sheffield, young people aged 15 and 16 not on the electoral register were allowed to vote, as were asylum seekers and other non-British citizens. In Tower Hamlets, the single transferable vote system was used for the election, the poll was held over two days, ballot papers were translated into Bengali and Somali and carried a picture of each of the 45 candidates – since many of the local Bengali community speak Sylheti, a dialect which has no written form. The emphasis within the NDC approach to elections on involving young people is very much in line with the recent report by the Carnegie Trust UK. This report argued that the voting age should be lowered to 16, young people should be able to stand as councillors and MPs at 18 (instead of 21) and that young people be

allowed to be school governors, trustees of voluntary groups and members of NHS Trusts (Guardian, 2001c).

While community elections have recently become an important feature of the NDC initiative, the first such elections in the UK were held in Walsall under the auspices of a 1997 SRB Round 2 Programme entitled 'Empowering Local Communities'. Under the proposal community representatives on 22 decentralised local committees were elected on the basis on small electoral districts ('patches') of around 100 households. While the electoral register was used as a basis for voting (and traditional polling methods adopted), people not on the register were allowed to vote in the community elections if they could prove that they were local residents. Moreover, young people of 16 years and over were allowed to stand as candidates and two young people – with full voting rights – were nominated by a Youth Forum to sit on the committees of elected community representatives. The Walsall elections – where turn-out was around 28 per cent in 1999 – aimed to:

give local people in some of the borough's most disadvantaged areas the opportunity to reclaim from local agencies some of the decisions which affect their everyday lives ... to become involved in new democratic structures that can help change the way that the council and other agencies operate, particularly in relation to regeneration funding (Walsall MBC, 2000).

A recent collaboration with BT means the 3,000 community voters in Walsall can now vote by telephone at any time of the day (or night) during the designated election period. Voters are provided with a polling card that invites them to ring a freephone number, where they respond with simple yes/no answers. A coding system prevents voters from registering more than one vote each (LGA, 2001: 8).

The Walsall experience clearly provided a source of innovative ideas for an NDC initiative that aimed to place local people at the heart of the regeneration process. Elections for NDC Partnerships would not only provide an additional opportunity for community involvement in the process of regeneration, but would also serve to legitimate the role of community representatives – and counter traditional criticisms that the same 'self-selecting' group of community activists tend to appear on different generations of regeneration bodies (Duffy and Hutchinson, 1997). Community elections in the NDC areas were also important in that they could help to establish the credibility of a new approach to regeneration. Within this approach, the traditional delivery agents – local authorities – would 'step back' and help facilitate the development of community-led partnerships in which decision-making and accountable body status would be vested in



community-based organisations (such as development trusts) made up of key partners but with local people in the majority (Robinson and Shaw, 2001).

#### COMMUNITY ELECTIONS IN NEWCASTLE WEST GATE

This section looks in more detail at the experiences of running community elections for Newcastle's West Gate Partnership during 2000–1 and assesses the contribution that such non-statutory elections can make to community-based regeneration partnerships.

The NDC initiative in West Gate is situated just to the west of Newcastle's city centre and includes 8,500 people living in the four main areas, Arthur's Hill, Elswick, Rye Hill and Cruddas Park. As well as residential areas, the NDC boundaries also encompass the Newcastle Business Park, Newcastle College and Newcastle General Hospital. The area includes a mix of housing, including pre-1919 terraces and flats and post-1960 estates and high-rise blocks. A large percentage of the housing stock is either council managed (54 per cent) or privately rented (16.5 per cent) with a relatively small proportion (14 per cent) owner occupied. The area also includes a mix of ethnic groups – 16 per cent of the West Gate population is of minority ethnic origin – with a particularly well-established Asian community based in the Arthur's Hill area. According to the Delivery Plan, West Gate:

displays high levels of multiple deprivation and social exclusion epitomised by high unemployment, poor educational attainment and poor health compared with both Newcastle and national levels. The area and particularly the NE4 postcode is stigmatised, especially by employers. Our people represent a wasted resource and given the right support and encouragement they have the potential to contribute much more to the local economy (West Gate NDC, 2000: 2).

The Delivery Plan also outlined plans – for the first year of the programme – to set up a Shadow Board of 23 people. The 23 members include 12 community representatives, five from other public sector partners, four local councillors and one representative each from the voluntary and private sectors. Alongside the Shadow Board, there would be several thematic Focus Groups covering such areas as Jobs and Business, Housing and Environment, Health, and Young People. Since the medium-term aim was to ensure that the Shadow Board was able to acquire Development Trust status during Year 2 of the programme, a Trust Constitution Focus Group was also set up to plan this process. It was within this particular Focus Group that the detailed proposals for holding community elections were worked out.

The initial idea to hold community elections came very much from the community and was proposed by the local residents who were directly involved in the development of the West Gate Partnership. They accepted that the successful running of community elections would achieve several important objectives for the embryonic NDC Partnership:

- It would enhance the legitimacy of the community representatives if they were *elected* to sit on the Shadow Board.
- It would have an educative role, promoting the elections – and the NDC programme in general – to the widest possible audience.
- It would allow for the direct representation of the different areas (and communities) that made up West Gate – areas such as Arthur’s Hill, Cruddas Park and Elswick have different topographies, a different housing mix and distinctive identities.
- It would allow the Partnership to establish NDC as a new (and different) approach to regeneration, with its own basis for representation. Within this approach, the community-led partnership – and not Newcastle City Council – would be the key decision-making body.

Once the idea of holding community elections was accepted by the Shadow Board in April 2000, the Trust Constitution Focus Group (including representatives from the local community, local councillors and other partners agencies) began to draw up the main processes and procedures. To inform this process, the Focus Group commissioned the University of Northumbria to highlight the key aspects of the electoral process for community elections and to identify good practice in the running of local and community elections elsewhere in the UK and Europe (UNN, 2000). After several months of discussion and detailed consideration of different approaches, a scheme was agreed which would begin in September 2000 (Figure 1), with the elections scheduled for the following December. Electoral Reform Services (a branch of the Electoral Reform Society) were appointed to organise the ballot and the University of Northumbria was commissioned to evaluate the first running of the elections.

The first running of the community elections in West Gate can be generally regarded as a success. As the official evaluation concluded, the elections ‘proved to be a very positive experience, with high levels of local involvement and the highest turnout of any New Deal for Communities elections so far’ (UNN, 2001). Numbers attending at the election events varied: 22 people came to the information seminars, 63 attended the hustings and over 100 came to the declaration of results. In the three areas in which elections eventually took place, the turnout rates were 50 per cent, 41 per cent and 29 per cent. This compared to turnouts in the three relevant

wards in the May 2000 local elections of 27 per cent, 25 per cent and 20 per cent. Of the 14 candidates standing for election, nine were successful; of these, four were women and four were from the area's Asian communities. The high turnout was influenced by a number of factors. Clearly, the use of all postal voting had a positive effect as did the fact that the West Gate initiative had high local interest value, both in terms of its long-term nature and the level of funding involved. Another possible factor was the publication of the local authority's city-wide regeneration plan, *Going for*

FIGURE 1  
COMMUNITY ELECTIONS IN WEST GATE – KEY FEATURES

- The area will be divided by neighbourhood boundaries into four constituencies, based in Arthur's Hill, Elswick, Rye Hill and Cruddas Park. Each area contains approximately 2,000 people. There are 12 places for ordinary community representatives (out of a partnership board of 23). Three will be elected from each constituency (one per 600–700 residents).
- Nominees for ordinary community representative places have to live in the constituency they wish to stand for and be 18 or over on the first day of voting. Nominees have to obtain signatures from ten other people who are not related to them and who live in the constituency they wish to stand for. Nominees must appear on the electoral register.
- In addition to the 12 ordinary members there will also be one young people's representative to represent all 16–25-year-olds in the area. The young people's representative will not be voted for in the 2000 elections, but will be selected by methods to be decided upon by the Shadow Board. Nominees for the young people's representative must live in the West Gate area and must be between 16 and 25-years-old.
- Everyone included on the 1999 electoral register will be able to vote. Everyone will be sent a ballot paper in the post, which will allow them to register one vote for the candidate of their choice. They then return this form in a freepost envelope. Voting will take place over two to three weeks.
- The 'first past the post' (FPTP) method will be used; the three elected candidates in each constituency will be the ones who received the most votes. There will be a maximum three-year term of office. People can then stand again for further three-year terms.
- All 12 positions will be directly elected in the first year. In order to set up a staggered system where only a third of places are elected in each following year there will be a special system for the first elections. In each constituency, the candidate with the most votes will serve for three years, the next for two and the one with the third most for one year. In future elections all representatives would get a three-year term of office.
- There will be a seminar for all people considering standing as candidates so they can find out more about what is involved. A 'job description' will be available. This event will be held at the weekend. Another seminar will be held for all accepted nominees where the rules of the elections will be explained. Pre-election publicity and nomination forms will be translated into other community languages.
- A procedure will be put in place to decide on what is and is not an acceptable nomination. A set of rules governing the conduct of candidates will be produced.

*Growth*, in June 2000, which proposed large-scale demolition in parts of the West End adjacent to the West Gate area. Such was the critical response to this document that it is likely local antipathy towards the council provoked people in West Gate into using the opportunity of community elections to take ownership of their Partnership (Shaw, 2000).

The area with the highest turnout in the community elections (50 per cent) also had the largest minority ethnic population; all three representatives elected in this area were drawn from the local Asian communities. These particular results indicate that the elections had an 'inclusive' impact and that the considerable efforts made to target other language speakers were successful. These included the pre-election publicity and nominations forms being translated into six community languages – Hindi, Cantonese, Punjabi, Arabic, Urdu and Bengali – and a translation line being included on the English language documents sent out with a telephone number to ring if other language copies were needed.

Despite the success of the first running of the community elections in West Gate, there are clearly still lessons to be learnt and some improvements to be made. The evaluation by the University of Northumbria made several recommendations for future elections (Figure 2), but also recognised that in the first year at least, the scope for innovation was limited by the tight time scale involved – the key aim was to have the elected representatives in place on the Shadow Board as soon as possible after April 2000. For this reason, the voter database used was compiled from the existing electoral register (current on 10 October 1999). This obviously excluded young people under 18, asylum seekers and people who had recently moved into the area. In addition, there was some shortfall in the number of candidates standing for election. In one of the constituencies only one candidate was nominated. In this area, it was decided that there would be no election and that the sole candidate would serve on the Board for the maximum of three years. Similarly, in one other area, only two candidates stood – both were elected, leaving one empty place. The decision was made to address this problem by co-opting three additional community members onto the Board. This was achieved by asking community members from the two areas in question to nominate themselves as candidates for co-option. A public meeting was held during which those in attendance could cast votes for these candidates. Voting was done using a simple 'show of hands' method, with the three candidates who received the biggest share of the vote being co-opted. In this way the additional three seats on the Shadow Board were filled, although these seats would be the first to come up for election at the next West Gate elections in 2002. This issue clearly indicates that more attention needs to be given to providing specific information and training for potential candidates and that involving and encouraging people

FIGURE 2  
THE FIRST NDC ELECTIONS IN WEST GATE – KEY LESSONS

- The timing of the elections had to be put back several times, they eventually took place between November and January. Since the original dates did not take fully account of the time that would be needed for the wide-ranging preparations, it is suggested that future elections take place within 15 weeks rather than ten.
- When planning the elections and related events, the organisers should take account of the dates of religious events, festivals and holidays. Documents should only be translated into other languages or large print/audio copies made if requests for these are received. Organisers should try to target other language speakers using other means.
- Compiling a specific West Gate voter database distinct from the electoral register would allow under 18s and other potentially marginalised groups (such as asylum seekers) to take part. Targeting local secondary schools, colleges, community groups and services for young people would serve to involve young people.
- Organisers should give greater encouragement and provide support for potential candidates. Rules about candidature should be made as clear as possible on nomination forms. Guidance notes on how to write an election statement should be included and potential candidates should know that further help is available. Training should be provided to help candidates prepare for their potential new role.

at the nomination stage is just as important as ensuring high turnout at the voting stage.

The experience of the West Gate community elections provides evidence that residents of disadvantaged communities are keen to become involved in community-based regeneration initiatives. It also suggests that such an approach (if properly co-ordinated) could be used to provide community representation on other partnership bodies, such as Local Strategic Partnerships. Indeed, Partnerships considering such an approach could potentially access resources for this purpose from the new Community Empowerment Fund, where guidance suggests money is available to support procedures for choosing community and voluntary sector members from deprived neighbourhoods and excluded communities (DTLR, 2001). The appeal of community elections for regeneration programmes can partly be attributed to the fact that they allow for a *continuum of involvement*. While some residents are willing and able to have an active and continuing involvement in the regeneration of their community, others may wish to take a more low-key or intermittent approach. Community elections provide the opportunity for the majority of community members to have a level of involvement (as voters, canvassers or candidates) that reflects the time and energy they are able to contribute to local regeneration initiatives.

## COMMUNITY ELECTIONS AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY

As well providing lessons for the management of regeneration initiatives, it can also be argued that the experiences of community elections in NDC areas provide examples of good practice and innovation that could be harnessed to enhance the conduct of local government elections. These include: all postal voting (in Newcastle), using the Single Transferable Vote (as in Tower Hamlets) and expanding the register to include young people under 18 (including 15-year-olds in Sheffield) and non-British citizens such as asylum seekers.

Community elections could also make a positive contribution to revitalising the overall health of local democracy by providing a 'complementary' channel of representation to that provided by elected local councillors. As one Newcastle councillor (with a ward in the NDC area) has argued, 'We may live in the area and be active, attending meetings and keeping in touch with local groups, but what we are elected to is seen to be a bit removed and beyond people's control' (Guardian, 2001b). While one of the elected community representatives on the West Gate Shadow Board contrasted her role with that of a local councillor by noting that, 'People were voting for someone they can stop in the shops and talk to. Councillors have surgeries, but you have to make an appointment, and they see you when they have time' (Guardian, 2001b).

The benefits produced by the introduction of community elections for local democracy in general – and for elected local authorities in particular – would include:

- Restoring the link between citizens and their local community – community elections can give people confidence that their vote counts and that they can have an impact on the future of their communities;
- Confirming the importance of the electoral process – citizens are more confident of using their vote and engaging in a democratic debate;
- Bringing back into citizenship young people, minority ethnic communities and other potentially excluded groups; and
- Helping develop a pool of community representatives who have the experience and confidence to develop a future community leadership role within elected local councils.

There are clearly potential problems associated with the use of community elections. Too many elections at the local level would create voter fatigue, while placing too great an emphasis on community elections could lead to confusing and overlapping mandates, with a potential conflict between local councillors and elected community representatives in particular. Hence, a

co-ordinated approach to the use of community elections (perhaps overseen by city-wide Local Strategic Partnerships) is needed, as is a clear emphasis that such elections are a useful complement to – and not a replacement for – local government elections. Whatever the particular challenges associated with running community elections, the present poor state of health of local democracy and the level of disengagement from the political process suggest that the greater use of such non statutory elections can begin to help tackle the democratic deficit at the local level.

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