

How to take over your town

They adore their community, know what people care about - and are sick to death of party politics. **John Harris** meets the people seizing control of their local councils



local authorities, whose numbers increased nearly threefold. Tangled up in that is the proliferation of organised groups, such as BIG, that reject traditional party labels and seek control of the lowest tier of government - town and parish councils - where creative possibilities have tended to be lost in a sea of protocol and tradition.

Councils at this very local level may be associated with parks, allotments, bus shelters and litter bins. But, thanks to the Localism Act 2011, they can - in theory, at least - do whatever they like, within the limits of the law.

Many of the people inspired by this growing mood of local assertiveness are looking to one

A quiet revolution has begun in the Devon town of Buckfastleigh. Its compact high street, functional-looking industrial estate and population of 3,300 suggest a place modestly getting on with business. But, while it may go unnoticed by those whooshing past on the A38, or tourists at nearby Buckfast Abbey, there is something happening in Buckfastleigh.

That something is a radical reinvention of the way that power works at a local level, based on a kind of politics that has nothing to do with the traditional party system. And it is authored not in a Whitehall ministry, but in towns, villages and neighbourhoods - where it is having a real impact on some of the services people most care about.

Pam Barrett is a 50-year-old civil servant who has lived in the town for 12 years and talks with a mixture of breathless passion and fearsome expertise. Her political biography begins with the local outdoor pool and park, for which she managed to bring in about £300,000 of outside funding - including big donations from Sport England. Saving the pool from closure - and upgrading it and the park - may sound like the most local of issues, but it broadens into a story centred on one key

subject: 10 years of cuts, and what austerity has done to a town with high levels of what politicians call social exclusion.

"It felt to me as if we had a properly depressed town," she says. "The carpet factory here had closed, and loads of people had lost their jobs. All our services were cut. Our buses have been hacked right back and the fares are through the roof. And when the district council said it was going to close the pool, the town council's view was just: 'Oh gosh - there goes another thing.'

"I was furious that we were left here with nothing. It takes an anger to do what we have done."

By 2015, Barrett had joined a loosely affiliated group of local people trying to parry the worst of the cuts - but, she says, they repeatedly hit a wall of obstruction and resistance, not least at Buckfastleigh's town council. "It was almost as if [they were saying]: 'This is none of your business,'" she says. There were 12 seats on the council, but there had not been an election for at least 20 years. In that year's local elections, they challenged the incumbents with the Buckfastleigh Independent Group (BIG).

Promising to make the council more open and inclusive, and to concentrate on solving the town's

problems, nine BIG candidates were elected, meaning they gained control of the council. They increased the local council tax precept (the small share of council tax that goes to town and parish councils), so people in the highest council-tax band paid nearly £2 a week. And they built up an impressive list of achievements: a new Citizens Advice bureau on Friday mornings, floodlights for the football pitch, a new "town ranger" ("Kind of an outdoor caretaker," says Barrett) and a school-holiday activity service for local young people called Hello Summer - all things woven into people's everyday lives.

To make all this possible, they made huge changes to the way the town council operates. For a start, its activities are chronicled on Facebook. People who are not elected councillors are free to join in with the monthly agenda at council meetings. "For the first time, we are able to say: 'We have this amount of money and this is where it goes,'" says the councillor Andy Stokes, who is also Buckfastleigh's mayor.

Barrett also has plans to widen the bounds of what the council can do. Similar new political groupings have materialised in a handful of nearby towns and villages. This, she says, will lead to sharing resources, so

A mixture of passion and expertise ... Pam Barrett in Buckfastleigh

that vitally important but expensive services - health and safety provisions or child protection - can be shared. She thinks that would open the way to a model of running everything from youth services to buses.

Buckfastleigh is not alone. This kind of local uprising has started to occur all over the country. At the May local elections in England, one of the most noticeable changes was the huge increase in the number of independent councillors elected to

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town that stands as the crucible of this new movement: Frome, in Somerset (my adopted home town), where a group called Independents for Frome took power in 2011, kicking out the Tories and Liberal Democrats to take all 17 seats on the town council. The group has since introduced a new town hall, a publicly funded food bank, electric charge points for cars and a vehicle-sharing scheme. The group's modus operandi was turned into a manual for radically changing communities, written by the council's one-time leader Peter Macfadyen, and titled Flatpack Democracy. Some 4,500 copies have been distributed; a sequel will be published this year.

Macfadyen reckons there are between 15 and 20 town and parish councils being run along the lines of the Frome model, "with a non-confrontational way of working and a participatory approach to democracy". They include a large number in the south-west, places in Yorkshire and County Durham, and even New Zealand. Another 20 similar groupings, he says, have taken seats, but are yet to assume local power.

Why does he think the idea is spreading so fast? "Every other system of so-called democracy is now totally dysfunctional and non-representative," he says. "And with Brexit, and what's happening in central government, that is bound to have an impact downwards; people thinking: 'My voice is not being heard in any way.'"

Down the road from Buckfastleigh is Dartmouth, a picturesque place on the Dart estuary, which attracts thousands of tourists. But beyond the half-timbered buildings clustered around the harbour is

a community laid low by cuts, whose problems are worsened by the fact that Dartmouth is too big to be a village, but not sizeable enough to merit many of its own public services.

In May's town council elections, 11 of its 16 seats were won by the new Dartmouth Initiative Group (DIG). Its most vocal representative is Dawn Shepherd, who moved there from Wolverhampton 15 years ago. Her journey to public office began when she started the local food bank. "There's a lot of poverty here," she says. "And, on top of that, where we are is like an island. We have no jobcentre, so it is £6 each time on the bus. Having to go somewhere else for everything adds to the poverty."

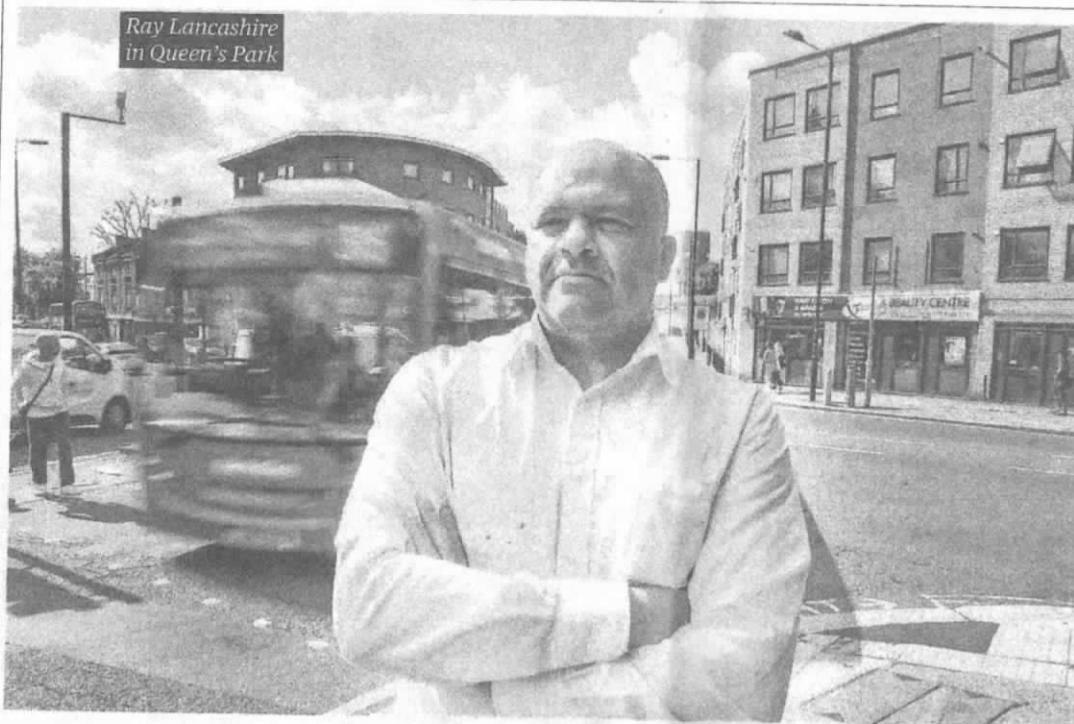
The new political grouping was mentored by Pam Barrett from Buckfastleigh. "We didn't understand how the process worked. The only access we had was going to the council meetings and having 15 minutes to put questions to the mayor," says Shepherd. "Pam told us that we could make a difference; nothing was set in stone. We could run the council."

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While the makeup of the old town council was disproportionately male, 10 of DIG's candidates were women. This diversity extends to the group's mixture of party politics. As with all the independents I meet, they insist that orthodox party divides have no relevance to politics at the most local level. "If you look at our 16 candidates, we have got leftwing people and we have got a supporter of the Brexit party," says another DIG councillor, Ged Yardy. "We have not been elected on the basis of our previous politics."

It would be easy to think of the new wave of independently run town and parish councils as something of a non-urban trend - but there is at least one shining exception. Queen's Park in west London sits on the outer edge of the City of Westminster, and has a population of about 13,000. Almost a decade ago, a group of residents began to work towards making their area the first part of London to have a parish council in 80 years.

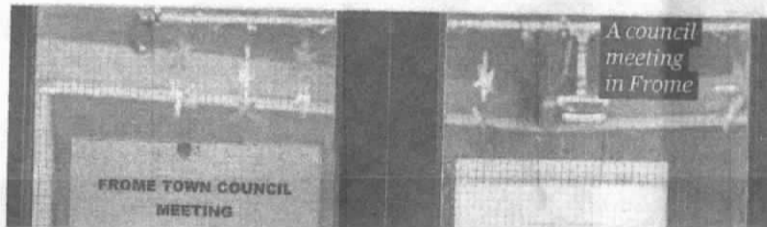
Two years later, their idea won a local referendum - and, in 2014, the first elections for its 12 seats were held. Although insiders are quick to point out that starting a council from scratch has hardly been a breeze, the informal grouping of people (none of whom has a party label) now in charge of an annual budget of about £150,000 have an array of achievements to their name. They include funding a youth centre blighted by cuts, bringing disused park back into use, starting new annual festivals and creating a befriending project to support isolated and lonely older people. Ray Lancashire, 54, has been



Ray Lancashire in Queen's Park



Andy Stokes, mayor of Buckfastleigh, in the park he helped save



A council meeting in Frome



Frome councillors Peter Macfadyen, Kate Bielby and Mel Usher, pictured in 2015



We're passionate about our environment, and we know what the issues are

a Queen's Park councillor for just over a year. Since the age of 10, he has lived on the Mozart estate, where any ideas of the city of Westminster being synonymous with wealth and privilege give way to a much more complex reality. His path to holding public office was defined by his work on air pollution, which local surveys have found to be well above legal limits.

Westminster council, he says, tends to understand pollution in terms of "main roads and trunk roads", rather than "areas that don't have high traffic, but are still really affected". (The council says that it

focuses air quality monitoring on "roads that we know are pollution hotspots, as this has the biggest knock-on effect".) Queen's Park's grassroots councillors are now doing in-depth pollution studies, blazing a trail for temporary car-free "play streets" and pushing the authorities to take drastic action. "We are at ground level," he says. "We're passionate about our environment and we know what the issues are, and how to sort the problems out. And we're enthusiastic. That's why our council is important."

Perhaps the most unlikely example of the new local democracy is in Alderley Edge in Cheshire. The de facto capital of the north-west's footballer belt - at various times, the home of Posh and Becks, Cristiano Ronaldo and Peter Crouch - is a remarkably affluent place: on the day I visit, the Barnardo's charity shop is selling a pair of Christian Louboutin shoes for £150, while Marie Curie has an Alexander McQueen dress for £200. Local people regularly complain about super-rich football stars parking on double yellow lines because they think that the fines are chump change. But recently, even here there were rising complaints about the state of the public realm.

These complaints led to the rise

of Alderley Edge First, whose tagline is "people before party". On a hot Tuesday afternoon, I meet three of their prime movers in the local Caffè Nero: Mike Dudley-Jones, Geoff Hall and Rachael Grantham, whose family has run a grocery business here going back five generations. "When you came to Alderley Edge not so long ago," says Dudley-Jones, "it was shaky at the edges: weeds in the pavement; the whole thing just looked rundown. A one-horse town. And there was no one saying: 'It doesn't need to be like this.'"

Alderley is traditionally, solidly Tory - its MP is the Tory leadership hopeful Esther McVey. Until 2015, the Conservatives held all nine seats on its parish council, most of which had long been uncontested. But that May, a near miracle happened. Alderley Edge First won every single one. Since then, its councillors have radically upgraded the local park, completed work on the village's trouble-plagued new health centre, saved allotments the old parish council wanted to turn into a car park, kept the local library open for an extra afternoon every week and made good on their pledge to spruce up the place - self-watering flower

installations pepper the main street.

When I mention party politics, all three members bristle. "It's so irrelevant at this level," says Grantham. "For me, it's a realisation that normal people want to make a difference in their areas. There is a real feeling of people saying: 'We can make a real difference in our patch.' That is snowballing."

Four years ago, as well as aiming at control of the parish council, Alderley Edge First also put up a candidate for Cheshire East council, the big local authority until recently run by the Tories, and dogged by allegations of misconduct, some of which are being investigated by the police. Against formidable odds, Craig Browne - who also sits on the parish council - beat the Tories; after being re-elected a month ago, he became Cheshire East's deputy leader. Something very striking, he says, now lurks among the champagne, expensive shoes and international hotspots: a revived sense of community spirit. "It was always there, but it was latent," he says. "What we have done is encourage it. If people see councillors who are prepared to get their hands dirty, they think: 'If they're doing it, I'll do it as well.' That has been the biggest change."