

LOCALISM WATCH RESOURCES NO.3

Another selection of news and views on localism from around the country

Opinion:

[Localism in a hung parliament](#). Andrew Walker draws attention to the gap between how national and local politicians view devolution, decentralism and localism. He sees the 'convoluted' debate over the West Lothian Question as missing the point, and feels that it would be far better to give local government real powers and freedoms that 'make a difference to people's lives'. *LGIU* 10.10.14

[Richard Berry calls for more parish councils in cities](#). He argues that 'local authorities are not very local', with fewer elected representatives per constituent than other EU countries. He also draws attention to provisions in the Localism Act making it possible for local residents to petition their councils to set up parish councils. *Democratic Audit UK* 9.09.2014

Outsourcing:

[The government may intervene in the row over the 'volunteer takeover' of half the libraries in Sheffield](#) – a move that its City Council says has been prompted by the cuts. Culture minister Ed Vaizey wrote to the authority for clarification on how it is implementing £1.6m of cuts to the city's libraries, to make sure it had met its legal obligation to provide a comprehensive and efficient service. Eleven Sheffield libraries were at risk of closure before the council earlier this year offered financial support to allow volunteers to take them over. Mazher Iqbal, Sheffield's cabinet member for communities and public health, said that the volunteers had been "nothing short of heroic". The Broomhill Library Action Group lodged a legal complaint over the council's approach to using volunteers, arguing that its needs assessment was flawed and a quarter of Sheffield's residents had been left without access to a branch. The soon-to-retire local MP and former Labour cabinet minister David Blunkett said that it would be "breathtaking cheek" for the government to launch an inquiry. *The Guardian* 8.10.14

[Lincoln Castle could be outsourced by County Council](#): This is part of a set of major cost-cutting measures, in an effort to save £19m each year until 2019. Other elements in the package include outsourcing the running of 30 of Lincolnshire's 45 libraries to volunteer groups. Tory council leader Martin Hill said, "It's not about stopping services - it's about how can we save the money but make sure the offer is still there." A local Unison organiser commented, "It's desperation yet again. Where's all the innovation? Where's all the future development for Lincolnshire County Council? It's out of the window. It's cuts, cuts and more cuts." *BBC News* 14.10.14

[A 'new future' for Essex Shire Hall](#): Essex County Council has called for expressions of interest from local companies and organisations to take on the responsibility for all or part of Chelmsford's historic Grade 2* building. The County Council will retain the freehold and the prestigious County Room kept for public hire. The rest of the building will be open for commercial use. The marketing exercise is expected to continue until the end of 2014. Cabinet member Dick Madden said, "As the economy is now booming and a number of developments coming on stream in the city centre, it is an ideal time to go back to the market. As a council we have to spend our residents' money wisely and any

scheme must be financially viable. But we want to make sure Shire Hall remains accessible to everyone and are willing to hear

[Birmingham and Wolverhampton City councils are auctioning their buildings to raise money.](#)

These include outdoor learning centres in Wales, used by generations of local schoolchildren, and the 19th century Netchells Library. Jonathan Hackett, head of auctions at CP Bigwood, who are conducting the sale on the councils' behalf, told the Birmingham Post: "There is an amazing mixture – from once stand-out buildings to car parks; garages to a selection of residential investments. There is something for everyone – it is going to be particularly interesting how they go when the hammer comes down." Again, his words, not ours.

[Coventry City Council has entrusted the IT support of Capita's own revenue and benefits IT system to 'public sector specialist' Civica,](#)

who will also handle document management tools from Northgate Public Services. Tim Savill, the Council's head of revenues and benefits, said: "We're in the midst of making some challenging changes, so it was important for us to select the right transformation partner to help us. Civica's breadth of knowledge and understanding of the issues facing local authorities makes them an important partner for automating and transforming critical council services such as revenues and benefits."

[Stoke-on-Trent City Council are to pay Price Waterhouse Coopers £135,000 for 'six money-saving ideas'.](#) In addition, PWC are set to 'receive £1 for every £8' their proposals save the council. *The Sentinel* 3.10.14

[East Sussex have awarded a £2.3m+ integrated adult, early help and children's social care deal to Liquidlogic.](#) However, the council said it was obliged to refer to Brighton and Hove City Council, Hampshire County Council, Kent County Council, Surrey County Council and West Sussex County Council within tender documentation for the agreement in case of their future participation. *Local Government Computing*, 9.10.14

[Unpaid volunteer road wardens could soon be repairing potholes](#) and 'citizen' gritters treating icy roads in Devon. The Council already has snow and flood wardens to act at times of bad weather. Its Cabinet member for traffic management told the BBC: "We are talking about little potholes on small roads which we haven't got time to do straight away. (Volunteers) will be able to go out and fill a pothole and make it safe temporarily until we can come out and make a permanent repair." But the Association of British Drivers say the authority is trying to do the job on the cheap: "Road repairs (are) one of local authority's core responsibilities and the move is just passing the buck to save money." *Torquay Herald Express* 12.10.14

[Here's one that goes against the flow:](#) Liverpool City Council aim to save £30m over the next three years by scrapping its £70m-a-year IT joint venture with BT. The council's cabinet is set to approve the transfer of the ownership of Liverpool Direct Limited (LDL) from BT. An internal report revealed the huge saving that will be made when council takes full control of LDL on October 31. The deal was signed in 2001, by the then ruling LibDem administration, to improve the council's poor IT and back office functions. It has been the subject of numerous reviews and investigations, and critics always maintained the contract was too expensive. But it helped deliver service improvements, such

as the council's call centre and a benefits maximisation service that helped some of the neediest in the city.

Mayor Joe Anderson said: "It has to be pointed out that I inherited this contract (and) was determined to get better value which was beneficial for the city." He re-negotiated the deal with BT in 2011 to achieve savings in subsequent years. *Liverpool Echo* 16.10.14

Governance and Devolution of Powers:

[Ban Scottish MPs from wielding 'platinum card' powers over English laws](#) At the Tory Conference in Birmingham, the Communities Secretary argued that English 'home rule' would stop Scottish MPs exercising power without responsibility. Eric Pickles continued "As we all know - Power without Responsibility never ends well. So the time has come for change – the time has come for English votes on English laws. We can be proud that a Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, is determined to deliver fairness to England and to all of the nations of the United Kingdom." *Daily Telegraph* 29.09.14

[Localism, LibDem-style:](#) LibDem Communities Minister Stephen Williams has told a fringe event at his party's 2014 conference in Glasgow that the current structure of local government is a 'mishmash of shire counties, unitaries and metropolitans' and 'not fit for purpose'. He does not agree with 'regionalism' but feels that many cities should expand their boundaries and become 'city regions' with added powers. Whereas his leader, Nick Clegg, has voiced his enthusiastic support for garden cities, Stephen Williams suggests that "There isn't a single magic bullet, but garden cities are part of it." Whatever that means.

At the same conference, the [National Association of Local Councils](#) called on the LibDems to boost their 'localist' credentials by handing more power to parish councils. Councillor Ken Browse, Chairman of NALC said: "Devolution and more power to the nations must be matched with more power within the nations, to the most local level. It is critical the Liberal Democrats ensure devolution strengthens, not undermines, our most local level of local democracy. Some good work has been done on localism, but it's just a start. NALC's 'Communities in control' manifesto sets out the parish offer and how we can help the Government realise its ambitions for community empowerment, localism and devolution. *NALC Media Release* 10.10.14

[Welsh local government re-structuring:](#) Following proposals by the Welsh Assembly to reduce the number of councils in the Principality from 22 to 12, Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan Councils consider a voluntary merger. *Wales Online* 9.10.14 In the same vein, [Rhondda and Cynon Taf Councils are consulting](#) on the possibility of a voluntary merger to help 'deliver economies of scale' 3.10.14

[LB Croydon has asked the government for devolved tax powers](#) to generate £5.25bn for the borough's economy. This "growth zone" strategy includes a stamp duty pilot that would see Croydon pocket tax on new homes, increased income from business rates, the creation of a town-centre development company and an investment fund. The council wants to capitalise what leader Tony Newman called the "once-in-a-lifetime regeneration opportunity" due to the £1bn overhaul of the Whitgift Centre. *Croydon Guardian* 16.10.14

[Essex County Council have passed a motion calling for devolution of powers](#) to Essex local authorities, fair and consistent funding of public services for the residents of Essex and fairer representation at Westminster for Essex MPs 14.10.14

[Double-click democracy](#): Cllr Baggy Shankar, a Labour cabinet member on Derby City Council, calls for online voting to counter elector apathy *Derby Telegraph* 8.10.14

[Localism can be trans-national, too](#): Despite the threat of the UK leaving the EU, Newry and Mourne Council (N. Ireland) and Louth County Council (Republic of Ireland) have signed up to a 'strategic alliance'. This will see the councils working together on renewable energy and green technology projects, tourism and recreation, sustainable economic growth, job creation, emergency planning and shared resources. Co-operation activities may involve working up and delivering joint projects and funding applications and exploring opportunities for the co-ordination and sharing of services. 9.10.14

Neighbourhood Plans:

[Opposition to neighbourhood plans](#): Contrary to the government's blandishments, it seems as if the approval levels for Neighbourhood Plans at referendum are not always on a par with elections in North Korea. Residents in Rilshaw, in the Winsford Neighbourhood Plan area are actively opposing what if approved, would be the largest such plan in England. They are doing so because of what they see as excessive housing allocations on sensitive greenfield sites. The local Town Council, which is not permitted to campaign for a 'yes' vote prior to the referendum, is apparently trying to drum up local support independently. One reason why Winsford residents are being pressured to approve the plan, which was passed by an Inspector in August, is because this would net Cheshire West and Chester Council a higher allocation of the government's New Homes Bonus funding.

This comes at a time when the [Thame and District Neighbourhood Plan](#), in South Oxfordshire, adopted following a referendum in July 2013, is also encountering opposition. The Save the Elms campaign group is calling to remove the plan's allocation of 75 homes for the Elms Field, part of a local Conservation Area. They are also seeking a second referendum. The local Town Council has, however, turned down the group's demands as it does not feel that there has been a material change in the situation since the plan's adoption. *Planning Resource* 3.10.2014

But others seem happy: Residents in the Cumbria village of [Appleby have applied to Eden District Council](#) to become a designated Neighbourhood Planning area. So far, 26 parishes in the district have been given this status, including Upper Eden, the first area in England to have an adopted Neighbourhood Plan. *Westmorland Gazette* 17.10.14

Urban renewal:

[Regenerating Southwark: urban renewal prompts social cleansing fears.](#) Dave Hill writes compellingly about "the borough (which) contains some of the starkest contrasts between the glistening, gentrifying new London that sucks in global wealth and an older, wearier one that seems at risk of being devoured." The Labour council's 'jobs and growth' agenda includes the Shard and the redevelopment of Elephant and Castle for prestigious high-density residences. But many community activists see this as social cleansing by stealth. The provision of 'affordable' housing

alongside the new developments has been difficult to secure from the development lobby. *The Guardian* 7.10.14

Town Hall Pravdas

[Tory-controlled LB Hillingdon is set to defy the government](#) over the publication of its magazine, which is distributed free to local residents 6 times a year. The *GetWest London* article reports that Labour-controlled LB Newham will also be opposing Eric Pickles' attempt to clamp down on the frequency and content of its newsletter. *GetWest London* 9.10.14

Local Democracy:

[The views of the public in a county council survey are not 'statistically significant'](#). This, significantly, is the view of West Sussex County Council's cabinet member for finance Michael Brown, who suggests that the county will face years of austerity until 2021. UKIP leader Michael Glennon challenged him on why there was currently a public consultation, saying, "It does reinforce this suspicion in the back of my mind that some consultations are verging on the charlatan." *Bognor Regis Observer* 13.10.14

And finally . . . more helpings from the round-bottomed jar of Pickles:

[The abolition of council chief executives was Eric Pickles' worst idea ever](#). Hannah Fearn pours scorn on the Communities Secretary for suggesting that deleting the chief executive role was one of 50 ways in which councils could save money (www.gov.uk/government/news/fair-funding-sensible-savings-and-bill-freeze-right-is-the-right-road-for-councils-says-eric-pickles). She cites the case of LB Harrow, whose Conservative administration voted to abolish the job of chief executive in 2013, splitting the functions between its elected leader and a second-tier officer. This month, they voted not just to reinstate the role, but to re-appoint Michael Lockwood, whose office they had previously abolished: it remains to be seen whether he will accept. Harrow estimate that the whole exercise will cost the authority millions of pounds, not just in hard cash but reputation. The article also makes reference to similar processes in Pendle (Lancashire) and Bradford. *The Guardian* 14.10.2014

[Pickles engages in gutter politics – and not for the first time](#). The Communities Secretary says that people who extend their homes without consideration for their neighbours can cause community tension. However, recent changes to planning procedures that Pickles personally championed to reduce red tape allow residents and developers to make larger extensions to dwellings without planning permission. His current remarks stem from a case in Moseley, Birmingham, where two homes now share a gutter after the owner of one built several inches beyond what was indicated in his planning application. The City Council's officers say, however, that the breach is not significant enough to warrant enforcement action. Pickles remarked, "I am disappointed, as our planning changes were always meant to bring neighbours closer together." When it was pointed out that in this case it had brought the houses literally together - he replied: "That's a very a good point." *Birmingham Mail* 1.10.14

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