

Localism Watch Resources No.4

More news, comment, advice and information on localism from around the country

[Tower Hamlets: the unacceptable face of localism?](#)

A £1m report by PWC into the administration of LB Tower Hamlets has revealed a series of malpractices. They include major improprieties in selling the Grade II listed Poplar Town Hall for £875,000 to a political supporter of the borough's elected mayor, Lutfur Rahman; a series of grant payments to ineligible organisations in the face of officer recommendations; public funds 'inappropriately' spent on political advertising for the elected mayor; and obfuscation in the face of calls for these claims to be investigated.

Branding Tower Hamlets a 'rotten borough', Communities Secretary Eric Pickles has sent in a three-man team of commissioners to take over executive functions from the elected mayor. They will have the power to award grants and must approve property sales and senior council officer appointments or suspensions. In the Commons, Pickles said: "Allegations of extremism, homophobia and anti-Semitism" had been allowed to fester in Tower Hamlets without proper challenge. He continued: "Municipal corruption undermines the local checks and balances that are vital in a democracy and which are essential in mayoral systems with their concentration of power. We cannot risk such corruption anywhere." Labour backed Mr Pickles. *Evening Standard* 05-11-14

More on devolution

[Kent County Council have overwhelmingly endorsed a motion](#) that the government "devolve more powers and money, not just to Scotland but to existing levels of local government at county, district and parish level". *Thanet Gazette* 27-10-14

[Cornwall Council](#) meets on how to build trust with districts and localities – but behind closed doors! This comes in the wake of its recent decision to implement £196m worth of cuts to public services. *West Briton* 06-11-14

[Thurrock's opposition Tory group](#) are disappointed by the defeat of a motion that would have seen the current arrangement of council elections by 'thirds' replaced by whole council elections. They argue that the proposal would have saved public money and increased voter turnout. *Your Thurrock* 27-10-14

[A letter in the Swindon Advertiser](#) highlights several ways in which central government exerts control over local funding, and quotes a former leader of Swindon council, who said that behind the label of 'localism' the government had carried out "some of the most serious centralisation of power to date". *Swindon Advertiser* 04-11-14

Renewables, non-renewables and localism

[A petition to declare West Sussex a 'frack free zone'](#) has been turned down by the county council. *BBC News*

[Objections to anaerobic power plant in Sleaford, Lincolnshire](#). Following a knife-edge approval of the application by North Kesteven District Council, a local resident said that he would be writing to Eric Pickles about the decision – as the Communities Secretary was once quoted as saying that views of local people must be listened to when making planning decisions. “During the meeting one of the councillors asked the chairman if the application could be declined on the grounds of localism – but they were just laughed at. “The committee has completely disregarded Eric Pickles’ Localism Act.” *Sleaford Target* 05-11-14

[UKIP says it will scrap recycling targets and landfill tax](#) if it holds the balance of power after the general election. The party’s local government spokesman Peter Reeve says solutions should be developed for local needs under the principle of localism, but would support a more centralised approach to waste collections. *MRW* 07-11-14

Localism and high speed rail

[Stoke-on-Trent City Council says that it will fight for an HS2 station](#), following the announcement by Sir David Higgins that Crewe has been recommended as the North West hub for the proposed new railway. *BBC News* 28-11-14 Not surprisingly, [Cheshire East Council](#), where Crewe is located, has welcomed Sir David’s announcement.

[The North Wales Economic Ambition Board](#), which is made up of representatives from all six North Wales Councils, welcomes the recommendation in the *Rebalancing Britain* report that the HS2 line should be extended to Crewe by 2027 - six years earlier than originally proposed.

[HS2 has agreed to fund a new primary school](#) in Water Orton, Warwickshire, as the grounds of the current premises lie along the proposed route. *Warwickshire News* 28-10-14

[Another council boss who seems to have missed the train is Liverpool’s elected mayor](#), Joe Anderson. Not only has Sir David Higgins no current plans to link his city to HS2, but the Chancellor’s proposed Trans-Pennine route for a ‘Northern Powerhouse’ (HS3) will only run between Manchester and Leeds. In a post on his council website, Anderson said: “I am profoundly disappointed that despite a great deal of rhetoric about a Northern Powerhouse, this announcement offers no new connectivity or capacity to Liverpool. We are once again being by-passed by an investment that will fail to realise its supposed purpose.”

[A cross-party group of London MPs and council leaders have come together](#) to call on the Government to grant “A fair deal for London” on HS2 compensation. It is estimated that over 90% of homes affected by the proposed route are in London.

Localism and Housing

[A Labour Party review led by Sir Michael Lyons has set out proposals](#) to increase the level of new housing supply in England to 200,000 a year by 2020. They include policies such as “use it or lose it” planning permissions and a “right to grow” to prevent councils frustrating development in neighbouring authorities, along with ways of ensuring greater local control and accountability. Responding, Eric Pickles says Labour’s plans would allow unelected officials to disregard green belt protections and dump “rebranded eco-towns” on local communities. *Planning Resource* 24-10-14

[East Lindsey District Council \(Lincolnshire\) could face a Government crackdown](#) amid fears too many new housing developments are being rejected. Its elected members have on several occasions turned down applications by volume builders, against officers' advice. Planning committee chair, Cllr Craig Leyland warned his fellow members that while "Localism would imply that the local view is paramount . . . the (government's) National Planning Policy Framework is clearly permissive." He admitted that he was effectively asking councillors to "get their fingers out" and support the recommendations of officers - even if it meant going against local opinion. He added: "We are in danger of being placed in special measures relating to quality of decisions. There are serious consequences to this." *Louth Leader* 30-10-14

Outsourcing and Procurement – So who actually runs localities these days?

[State-run stovepipes vs holistic PSMs](#) Cabinet Office Minister Francis Maude has praised what he sees as the onward advance of Public Service Mutuals, arguing that the 100 firms 'spun out' from the public sector since 2010 under the government's Mutuals Support Programme had already been able to integrate services in a way the state could not. Interviewed by *Public Finance*, Maude argued that the state "will always tend to be providing services down particular stovepipes, with much less ability to operate holistically." Contracts with mutuals allowed funding to be brought together and used more effectively. "The state could never do that as the provider. You end up with clunky bureaucratic arrangements," he said. "But these organisations have the flexibility to grow the services around the needs of the users and deliver it. The money's coming through different stovepipes but coming into one place, with the same people providing the services." *Public Finance* 28-10-14

[Newham and Havering Councils will join the 'Tri-borough councils'](#) of Westminster, Kensington & Chelsea and Hammersmith & Fulham in adopting the 'capitalSourcing' online procurement system. A spokesperson for system suppliers oneSource put it this way: "It offers us an opportunity to benefit from what promises to be the best in class of electronic tendering suite." As always, their words, not ours. *Supply Management* 27.10.14

[Liverpool Mutual Homes \(LMH\) has won a £4.2m contract](#) with Cheshire West and Chester Council (CWAC) to deliver home improvement services to residents in the area. The five-year deal will see LMH, along with its repairs and maintenance company, HMS, managing the authority's new Home Assistance Hub. Under the contract, LMH will manage and provide disabled facilities grants, minor work adaptations, handyperson services and decent homes loans for owner-occupiers. The LMH spokesperson said: "Residents will have one point of contact and a high level of service that is easy to understand and follow." *Liverpool Echo* 28-10-14

[North Somerset Council has approved transformation and transfer proposals](#) – with the help of Agilysis, their outsourced support services contractor. 22-10-14

[Localism gone west?](#) Nottinghamshire may outsource road repairs to CORMAC, an arm's length agency of Cornwall County Council. *Falmouth Packet* 22-10-14

[Three Wirral council golf courses are now closer to private control](#), just months after the British Open was played at Hoylake. *Liverpool Echo* 28-10-14

[Gloucestershire County Council are in negotiations to sell Cooper's Hill](#), famous as the site of the world cheese-rolling championship, and neighbouring land to a Wildlife Trust in a bid to save £50,000 running costs. *Gloucester Citizen* 22-10-14

[Multi-layered DevoMax](#): the Scottish Borders council is to transfer its adult care services to a new arms-length council owned company (ALEO) from April 2015. 30-10-14

Just occasionally, though, some councils take back what they've given away. [LB Lambeth are set to agree the break up of the arms' length management company](#) Lambeth Living and recover control of the borough's council houses, six years after they were transferred. Justifying this step, they say: "The advantages of reintegrating housing services into the council will allow us to put into practice a more 'joined-up' approach to services, based on the recognised link between housing, health and life chances. The council is very aware that tenant and leaseholder satisfaction with the housing service is lower than it could be and that resident engagement needs further improvement." But, as *Brixton Buzz* reports, it is curious that the Council's November Forward Plan should have contained an ALMO Management Agreement Extension. However, the sudden change of heart can be explained elsewhere in the Council's later report: "The recent announcement of departure of Lambeth Livings' Chief Executive in January 2015, provides an opportunity to review the existing arrangements." *Brixton Buzz* 01-11-14

More localism, fewer libraries

[The Prime Minister has criticised Derbyshire County Council for reducing its mobile library fleet](#) from 10 vehicles to 2 in the face of cuts. In response, council leader Anne Western said David Cameron had no right to criticise: "Was he not listening to George Osborne at the Tory Party conference when he announced £25 billion more cuts to come? Does he think cuts of that scale have no impact on services? He went on to say that we should do what his county, Oxfordshire, is doing and use volunteers to keep the libraries open. So, imagine my surprise when, the very next day I saw a headline in the national press that read 'Sheffield libraries row: government may intervene over volunteer takeover'. It appears that Sheffield, planning to do precisely what Oxfordshire did and run half its libraries with volunteers, is being threatened with a public inquiry by Cameron's own government ministers. Why has Oxfordshire been allowed to do this, but not Sheffield? Is it one rule for Conservative councils and another for Labour?"

Mrs Western said that drafting in volunteers to run council services was not that simple. "There's much more to running a library service than the ability to stack shelves in alphabetical order. Rather than try to pretend these cuts are not happening, or keep blaming other people, it's time the Prime Minister took responsibility. It doesn't take a genius to work out that public service cuts are not really about managing the deficit. They are about pushing services to the brink and then privatising them." *Derby Telegraph* 27-10-14

[For some years, LB Barnet has been a national exemplar in public service outsourcing](#), with all the attendant effects on local residents. As part of its current menu of cuts, the council is now

proposing to close libraries, reduce their size or hand over their running to volunteers. *Times Series Newspapers* 27-10-14

[There's a similar picture in North Yorkshire](#). Community groups there are being asked to take over the running of 20 libraries across the county, or they could face the axe as the council looks to save £1.6m. *Yorkshire Post* 04-11-14

Forgive the pun, but here are two novel solutions: [in Hertfordshire, four libraries are set to move to fire stations](#). *BBC News* 30-10-14 And in neighbouring Buckinghamshire, the [County Council has just launched its first 'click and collect' library service](#) at Lacey Green's community shop.

Shared Services

[Northumberland County Council has been branded 'secretive and undemocratic'](#) over its decision to share HR, IT and audit services with Durham and North Tyneside by its Conservative opposition. *The Journal* 29-10-14

In London, [Richmond and Merton councils have agreed to merge their regulatory services](#), such as environmental health and licensing. *Richmond and Twickenham Times* 10-11-14

But not all council chiefs like the idea of sharing. Mark Pritchard, who leads Wrexham Council, which faces £45m in cuts over the next three years, [has slammed 'Welsh Government dictators'](#) over merger plans and cuts across the Principality. "I am prepared to come out and say what I think and so should they," he said. "They have gone quiet. Some of them need to stop hiding and grow a backbone." Councillors in neighbouring Denbighshire, however, are prepared to agree a merger with Wrexham if money and services can be saved. *News North Wales* 31-10-14

Assets of Community Value

[Villagers in Horpath, near Witney, Oxfordshire have secured a £275,000 funding package](#) to purchase a disused Methodist chapel and convert it into a community hub. They were able to outbid a developer who wanted to turn the building into a four-bedroom dwelling. Horpath has lacked a post office since the previous owner was convicted of fraud in 2011, and the former chapel - which now accommodates a range of community activities – will shortly be providing post office facilities on Fridays. *Witney Gazette* 07-10-14

[A community playgroup and library in Shap, Cumbria are set to be protected](#) thanks to the free transfer of a building and land from the County Council to the voluntary Shap Community Building Group. The group plan to raise funds to redevelop the adjacent Courthouse by selling the sports hall land. They aim to maintain the current library service and playgroup in the Courthouse as well as adding additional amenities including a gym and meeting room. 28-10-14

[A closed female-only gym in Hackney has gained Asset of Community Value status](#). Sunstone Women Community Group nominated the building on Northwold Road, Stoke Newington as a community asset after the gym closed down in June 2014. Sunstone Gym now joins the Chesham Arms pub as Hackney's second ACV listed property. *Hackney Citizen* 23-10-14

Neighbourhood Plans

[Devo-mini as Pickles approves more funding for neighbourhood plans](#) The Communities Secretary has earmarked further funding for these plans beyond the end of 2014. It includes £10.5m from 2015 to 2018 in grants to local communities - a 50% increase in the value of existing support – plus £100,000 to help groups organise workshops on how to embark on neighbourhood planning in their local areas. Local planning authorities can bid for a national £12m funding pot to help them meet their responsibilities. They can each claim up to £100,000 a year to help their communities start a neighbourhood plan, with an additional £25,000 for each plan or order that passes an examination. *The Information Daily* 07-11-14

Unofficial figures show that over 1,000 such plans are at some stage of preparation across England. These cover only a small proportion of England's communities, and most local planning authorities have significantly reduced their professional staffing complements in the face of cuts. It is therefore difficult to see how the sums allocated will significantly improve the geographical extent or quality of spatial planning. There would also seem to be a financial incentive to approve neighbourhood plans, irrespective of their strategic soundness, social inclusiveness or environmental sustainability.

[Villagers in Urchfont, Wiltshire, have attended a consultation meeting](#) on proposals for development sites in the draft Urchfont, Wedhampton and Lydeaway Neighbourhood Plan.

[In Somerset's Cheddar Valley, the local parish council is consulting with residents](#) on an acceptable projected level of new housing up to 2027 in its forthcoming Neighbourhood Plan. By law, this needs to tally with the number of projected new homes in Sedgemoor District Council's draft local plan. Not an easy matter, given the longstanding rivalries within and between rural communities, and the tactics of the housebuilding lobby in using procedural loopholes to gain planning permission for new development. *Cheddar Valley Gazette* 07-11-14

The General Power of Competence and the Law of Unintended Consequences: when the Localism Act 2011 truly hits the proverbial fan

Councillor Robert Brierley, independent ward member for Hindley Green, has been found guilty of [breaching Wigan Council's code of conduct after intimidating a council employee](#). A hearing on 2 November was the last of six hearings held each week since the beginning of October against Cllr Brierley, who failed to attend any of these. Because Section 26 of the Localism Act abolished the Standards Board for England, councils no longer have the power to suspend or disqualify councillors who bully, are rude, or disclose confidential information. 05-11-14

Civic Voice Manifesto: Localism for Real

The built heritage campaign group has [just issued a manifesto, focusing on the 'civic environment'](#). It calls on councils to have up-to-date local plans and strong powers to control development, while citizens would have 'opportunities to actively shape the future of their place'. The foreword by Griff Rhys-Jones argues that "Localism is about asserting distinctiveness. It is about asserting the right to be heard. It is about making the local population aware of their rights and capabilities. Localism is a national issue." An executive summary is here

Town Hall Pravdas

Readers of previous editions will know that Greenwich Council's newspaper, [Greenwich Time, is one of several 'Town Hall Pravdas' threatened with closure by Eric Pickles](#) under provisions in Section 45 of the Localism Act. Indeed, the Communities Secretary has described the publication as "one of the worst examples" of the genre. As a contingency measure, should it be forced to shut down *Greenwich Time*, the council is seeking bids from other newspapers to print its statutory notices. It stipulates that bidders must produce editorial content which "helps to positively inform local residents about the measures that their neighbours and local service providers are undertaking to make the borough a great place to live, work, learn and visit." *News Shopper* 05-11-14

And finally . . . who's creating the bigger stink: Bury of Pickles?

As part of its campaign to encourage greater recycling, [Bury MBC is set to introduce a three-weekly 'residual' waste collection](#). In the last three years, Bury's recycling rate has risen from 29.4% to 47.6%, and the council aims to increase it to 60% by March 2016. It is also predicted that the new system, involving the separation of waste into different bins, will earn taxpayers a profit by early 2015. Eric Pickles, whose forensic interest in weekly waste collection is well documented, is furious. "Bury will stink next summer," he fumed. "It seems to me that the most important thing is to treat your residents with respect and not to treat them like naughty children by taking away their privileges because they're not recycling enough." A poll in the *Bury Times*, however, shows that 78% of local readers support their council's plans, while only 22% want weekly collections – effectively rubbing the Communities' Secretary. *Bury Times* 31-10-14

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