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The geo-constitution and responses to austerity: Institutional entrepreneurship, switching, and re-scaling in the United Kingdom

Jane Wills (iD)

Centre for Geography, Environment and Society, and Environment and Sustainability Institute, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

Correspondence
Jane Wills
Email: J.Wills2@exeter.ac.uk

A nation's geo-constitution – its spatially uneven political institutions – plays a critical role in mediating change. This paper explores this in relation to local government responses to austerity. The paper presents original research collected in Cornwall, United Kingdom, to highlight the scale and impact of asset transfers to town and parish councils. This degree of institutional switching was possible because of a willingness to use legacy constitutional institutions to mediate the trajectory and impact of reform in response to austerity. Town and parish councils have taken on important assets (public toilets, parks, and libraries) and raised local taxation to pay for them. This has reconfigured relationships between local government institutions while also incentivising innovation in service organisation. The research highlights the role of political institutions and their personnel in mediating responses to austerity, as well as raising broader questions about the rescaling of the social contract, and the scope for further constitutional reform.

KEYWORDS
asset-transfer, austerity state, Cornwall, geo-constitution, institutional switching, town and parish councils

1 | INTRODUCTION

Rather like the furniture in a room, a nation's political constitution provides the background infrastructure that facilitates collective activity. It is often only when this furniture comes to the end of its life that we recognise what it has been doing for us, and we think about whether to replace it or not. Living in the United Kingdom (UK) in the early 21st century, it seems that much of our constitutional furniture is getting worn out, or even collapsing, prompting debate about whether and how we should embark on reform. While this has been accelerated by the decision to leave the European Union (EU), the holes in our constitutional furniture were evident well before this event.

Demands for greater autonomy for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland already had prompted the establishment of geographically differentiated constitutional arrangements from the late 1990s (Bogdanor, 2009). This, in turn, helped to generate the sharp geographical cleavages exposed by the vote to leave the EU that now threaten the nation itself (McCorkindale, 2016). Moreover, granting new freedoms to the three smaller nations has prompted the sleeping giant of

England to stir and demand its own voice in a more federal world (Kenny, 2014). After the New Labour governments (1997–2010) tried and failed to provide acceptable regional bodies in England (Pike et al., 2018; Tomaney, 2000), there was a new round of furniture building to create combined authorities with elected mayors in six city-regions (Ayers et al., 2017a; Sandford, 2019) but this has left much of the country behind (Jennings et al., 2018).

Added to this, the purposes and priorities of national political constitutional settlements have been challenged from above by new international governance rules concerning trade, market access, and competition (Gill & Cutler, 2014; Harmes, 2014). The closer integration of the international economy and the growing power of business have put pressure on national politicians to legislate in favour of marketisation. As Hirschl suggests,

> The new constitutionalism creates a de facto global constitution by erecting binding constraints on domestic politics and social thought, so that any local contestation of its global mantra is either isolated or labelled as deviant, or is simply infeasible and bound to fail. (2014, p. 96)

In the UK, the new international trade agreements being negotiated to replace the rules that have hitherto been determined by the EU are likely to be characterised by continuation rather than change to the pro-market regime.

The impact of the 2008 financial crisis has also put pressure on national constitutions. Lower rates of economic activity have reduced government revenues and many countries have implemented austerity measures, reducing citizens' entitlements to services and welfare support. This partial shrinkage of state activity has very significant implications for the social contract within any polity (Lobao et al., 2018) and it necessarily involves a difficult "re-calculation of consent" when service provision is cut (Buchanan, 1987).

The UK is not alone in this degree of constitutional reform and reconfiguration. In their remarkable overview of changes in sub-national governance arrangements in 81 countries since 1950, Hooghe and Marks argue that there has been a "quiet revolution" as "institutional Fordism has given way to diversified institutional provision" (2016, p. 120). Almost all the non-federal states included in their study have instituted new tiers of elected regional government and many have granted differential authority to these jurisdictions, reflecting divergent geo-histories of community. As Hooghe and Marks explain:

> The changes we have mapped since World War II reverse a centuries-long process of centralization. The development of the national state from the twelfth century was a long, zig-zag process in which central states claimed and gradually gained a monopoly of legitimate coercion, creating national armies, national courts, national taxation systems, national health, national education and national welfare. However, centralization reached its peak in the first half of the twentieth century. It has been superseded by an era of multi-level governance that began in the second half of the twentieth century. (2016, p. 154)

This analysis chimes with recent constitutional change within the UK and central government may yet be forced to grant increased freedoms to local government organisations (Martin et al., 2016; Peters, 2019).

This paper contributes to the ongoing debate about the UK's changing constitution by highlighting the extent to which the geography of existing political institutions makes a difference to the trajectory and impact of any reform. This is already evident in relation to the creation of combined authorities that comprise alliances of existing local authorities that have collaborated to sign devolution agreements with national government in city-regions such as Greater Manchester, the West Midlands, and Tees Valley. A related, if under-reported, process is also happening at the sub-regional scale whereby some town and parish councils are taking on a bigger role in local government. In this paper, I draw on original research conducted in Cornwall in South West England to explore how the rejuvenation of vintage constitutional furniture – town and parish councils – has been critically important in responding to the challenge of austerity. In using these legacy institutions that were long-since abolished in urban areas, the rural areas that have retained them, like Cornwall, have been at an advantage in being able to use them to save and renew service provision. In so doing, these institutions have then gained profile and power through which to take on a greater role in local governance, particularly through their capacity to lead place-based service delivery.

In the case presented, political authority and responsibility moved from the larger body (in this case a unitary local authority that covers the whole county of Cornwall in South West England with a population of just over half a million people) to local town and parish councils (that have much smaller jurisdictions of less than 30,000 people). This institutional switching and rescaling has allowed the development of new revenue streams to save and even improve important social infrastructure such as parks and libraries that have been cut and lost in many other parts of the country

(Locality, 2018a). The process of asset-transfer has been underwritten by a new social contract with the local citizens who have to pay more for the service. In facilitating innovation, institutional switching, and the subsequent rescaling of the social contract, local councils have taken on a greater role in local government and the case therefore has wider lessons for thinking about constitutional and governance reform.

2 | LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO AUSTERITY

It is well known that the greatest reductions in public sector spending made in the UK since the financial crisis in 2008 have been in local government budgets. English local authorities endured real-term reductions in funding of 50% between 2010 and 2015 (Gray & Barford, 2018, p. 542), and these cuts have been uneven in their scale, hitting urban areas particularly hard (Centre for Cities, 2019; Hastings et al., 2015, 2017). Gray and Barford report that while national grants fell by an average of 24% in England between 2009/10 and 2016/17, the sub-national distribution of cuts varied from as much as 46% (for Westminster) to 12% (for East Riding, Yorkshire) (2018, pp. 551, 553).

Such cuts can be understood as a form of "scalar dumping," whereby national governments have squeezed the budgets of local government, forcing local representatives to take the blame for the cuts (Donald et al., 2014; Kim, 2019; Peck, 2012, 2014). In this context, the first line of defence has generally been for the local state to "consolidate" provision around core statutory services such as care for looked-after children, disabled people, and support for older people living at home (Streeck, 2016). Other public goods, or what has been called "social infrastructure" (Klinenberg, 2018), such as libraries, parks, public toilets, community centres, and leisure facilities that underpin the quality of the public realm, have often been the first things to go.

Not surprisingly given the scale of these cuts and associated losses, researchers have generally taken a pathological view of austerity and its impact, condemning national governments and decrying the impact of cuts on the ground. Yet this is not the whole story, and in many cases the cuts have prompted innovation. Researchers have identified a range of measures developed to ameliorate cuts, including making "shavings" from budgets, fostering greater efficiency and partnership working (Lowndes & McCaughie, 2013), the transfer of assets to other organisations (Findlay-King et al., 2018), and new forms of investment in revenue-raising activity (Pike et al., 2019). While some councils have used their assets such as land and property to raise additional funds through sales on the open market (Christophers, 2018), others have developed innovative, if risky, new financial instruments and investments to try and increase their income long-term (Pike et al., 2019). As such, it is clear that local authorities have developed a wide range of responses to austerity and there is no one form of the "austerity state" (Pike et al., 2018). Given the ever-changing fortunes and funding of local government, a certain degree of pragmatism has proved critical to the long-term survival and resilience of local authorities and this has been particularly evident since 2010 (John, 2014; Shaw, 2012).

There is similar evidence of elected politicians and officers experimenting with new ways of organising and financing the state in response to austerity in other parts of the world (Overmans & Noordegraaf, 2014; Steccolini et al., 2017). Aldag et al. (2019) use data from more than 900 local authorities in New York State to advance an argument for what they call "pragmatic municipalism," whereby "local government responses to fiscal stress are broader than just cuts … maintaining public services by sharing services and/or searching for alternative revenue sources" (Aldag et al., 2019, p. 4). A related study using 2012 data from 1,580 municipalities in the USA similarly found evidence of authorities making a pragmatic – and necessarily creative – response to the cuts (Kim & Warner, 2016).

A focus on the ways in which local institutions can mediate the impact of change has a long pedigree in the sub-discipline of economic geography. Scholars have adopted ecological metaphors to help explain the extent to which regional economies have been able (or unable) to adapt to changing circumstances through their ability to innovate, and shift the trajectory of development, reflecting spatially differentiated degrees of resilience (Boschma, 2015; Martin, 2012; Martin & Sunley, 2015; Pike et al., 2010). For Storper, regional institutions provide a "supply architecture" (1997, p. 22) that can facilitate particular responses and activities, and without them these adaptive responses would not be possible, however many individuals wanted to act. Applying this evolutionary approach to political geography likewise draws attention to the uneven inheritance of political institutions that do or do not facilitate successful adaptation to a changing funding environment.

Of course, there is also a requirement that the incumbents working in any political institution are able and willing to act in ways to mitigate change and any such "institutional entrepreneurship" (Moore & Westley, 2011) cannot be taken for granted. Successful adaptation depends on individuals who "manage the context … [so that] innovation has a chance to flourish, widening the circle of its impact" (2011, p. 5). As such, a regional political-economy or local government will rise or fall on the back of its institutions and their associated agents' ability to adapt, and it is critically important to understand

the precise mechanisms involved in mounting a successful response (Rodriguez-Pose, 2013). For Moore and Westley (2011), skills such as relationship building, resource brokering, and network recharging are critically important if institutions are to be mobilised in response to a threat. Mounting a response is particularly challenging in relation to institutions that depend on electoral representation and the need to be accountable to the public. Balancing the social contract between citizens, elected representatives, and officers is also constrained by central restrictions to funding and function (and for England, see Copus et al., 2017).

Responding to Yeung's (2019) plea for greater focus on the causal mechanisms involved in creating particular outcomes, we clearly need to better understand the role of particular institutions (in our case local government) and the actors within them (councillors, officers, and voters) as well as the tools deployed (such as asset transfer), in making something happen or not. In so doing, we need the means to better understand political institutions, their historical trajectory, roles, relationships, and operational cultures. Elsewhere, I have developed the concept of a national "geo-constitution" to capture:

> The extent to which current policy is shaped by the historical-political-geography of state institutions and the divisions of political power between them … [which] in turn, shapes the nature of government and the expectations and practices of citizenship, past, present and future. (Wills, 2019a, p. 428)

There have been distinct phases in the development of the British geo-constitution over the past 500 years that reflect changes in the balance of power between the centre and periphery (Wills, 2016, 2019a). The UK has inherited a complex legacy of institutions, each with different spatial jurisdictions, function, degrees of authority, and scope for adaptive and pragmatic reform. These institutions have different jurisdictional design, reflecting their varied origins, and they are spatially uneven. Adapting the model developed by Hooghe and Marks (2016), these institutions range along a continuum from the more community-focused, bottom-up structures that were created "time-out-of-mind" in order to make local decisions (and in the UK, the need for self-rule was most clearly reflected in the institution of the parish), through to the more rational or technocratic bodies that tend to be designed from the centre and imposed on the ground (with the now-abolished Regional Development Authorities being a very good example of these; see Pike et al., 2018). Hooghe and Marks (2016) contrast the "scale" considerations underpinning efficient public administration with the "community" driven alternative (see Table 1).

In every nation, the mix of institutions will reflect previous struggle over the "right" mix of functionally and/or socially oriented forms of governance. In the UK, the balance has swung away from the community towards larger functional bodies, but devolution reflects a reassertion of emotional attachment and the desire for self-rule. In Hooghe and Marks' (2016) terms, this may look like a swing towards "post-functional governance," but in relation to sub-national reform in England, the reassertion of the parish is a product of their functionality even if it also has other effects. Town and parish councils are able to take over assets and raise taxation to pay for them, thereby regaining functions that they lost due to the drive for efficiency in the past. Reflecting the power of pragmatism, parishes have proved their practical value at a time of austerity.

This "supply architecture" has not been available in urban areas where town and parish councils were enveloped by larger local authorities during the process of urbanisation and subsequent efficiency reforms. Thus, in metropolitan areas asset transfer relies on encouraging members of the community to set up a new organisation to which an asset can be transferred. This takes time, incurs greater risks for both parties, and there is no revenue-raising capacity attached to community groups (Aitken et al., 2011). As such, the geo-constitutional legacy can make a life-and-death difference to the preservation of the public realm.

In the case presented below, town and parish councils have proved decisive in taking up new roles and responsibilities in relation to asset-transfer, itself prompted by the need for the larger local authority to respond to budget restraints. The prior existence of these local councils with tax-raising capacity and leaders who were able and willing to take on the work

TABLE 1 The characteristics of two contrasting types of jurisdictional design

"Scale"	"Community"
Top-down: Design implements a central plan	*Bottom-up*: Design accommodates local conditions
Instrumental: Designed to provide public goods at a particular scale	*Expressive*: Designed to express community self-rule
Standardised in size and authority	Differentiated in size and authority

Source: Hooghe and Marks (2016, p. 66)

saved public infrastructure for the community. There was nothing inevitable about this process being a success and the paper has been written, at least in part, to help reflect on the case and to explore its wider implications. The research raises broader questions about the ways in which the national geo-constitution can provide the infrastructure for future governance reform. The vote to leave the European Union has prompted commentators and politicians to explore ways to better engage the citizenry in governance and place-based working (Jennings et al., 2018), and in this context, given the success of the case presented here, local councils may move to the front line of national constitutional reform in future (National Association of Local Councils, 2017).

3 | THE RESEARCH

The research reported in this paper was conducted to support Locality's *Commission on the Future of Localism* (Locality, 2018b) for which I was a commissioner from 2017 to 2019. In phase two of its work, the Commission conducted case studies in four areas of the country to explore the opportunities and barriers to developing new forms of localism. Projects in Cornwall, Stevenage, Southwark (London), and Wigan were started in 2018 and the overall results were published in late 2019 (Locality, 2019a). Here, I report on work completed in Cornwall that has already been shared with key stakeholders and is now shaping future policy and practice (see Locality, 2019b; Wills, 2019b).

With its roots in contemporary developments and ongoing policy debate, the research provides an example of what might be called "pragmatic" or "phronetic" research (Flyvberg, 2001; Morgan, 2014). Using Aristotle's distinction between epistemic (analytical), technical, and phronetic (practical) forms of knowledge, Flyvberg (2001) advocates a focus on "phronesis" as a way for social scientists to contribute to public debate through engaged research. In a similar vein, John Dewey advocated engagement in "social inquiry" as a way for communities to find the wisdom to solve pressing concerns (Wills & Lake, 2020). In responding to austerity and reflecting long-held pride in local communities, people in Cornwall have been experimenting with new ways of working, and my research and the work of the Locality Commission more broadly, have contributed to local debate and further policy development. Rather than being based on the state of academic research in the field in advance of starting the work, the research emerged from the ground up, being driven by ongoing debate about changes in local government nationally, and Cornwall in particular.

During a briefing meeting held between Locality's staff and senior officers and councillors at Cornwall Council in July 2018, I offered to focus on the experiences of town and parish councils as part of the wider research. I then met with the County Officer of Cornwall's Association of Local Councils (CALC) to find out more about the sector and to ensure that the research had their support. Following their advice and recommendations, I contacted representatives from a geographical spread of the larger town and parish councils that were taking on new activity. I interviewed clerks and then followed up with one or more councillors in their jurisdiction. Once I had successfully interviewed a number of representatives from more than half of the larger councils (Camborne, Carn Brea, Hayle, Helston, Falmouth, Launceston, Penzance, St Agnes, St Austell, St Ives, and Truro), I analysed the material in time to feed back to the sector at a meeting organised by Locality in May 2019. Research interviews sought to identify the nature of the assets, services, and staff that had been transferred from Cornwall Council to each of the local councils, asking questions about the process involved, the reasons for the decisions they made, and the wider implications of this experience for their role and functions in future.

In total, Cornwall has 213 local jurisdictions and they range in size from just 19 voters (St Michael's Mount) to almost 17,000 electors (Newquay), with an average size of just 2,000 people (see Table 2). Most of the councils cover very small communities and the focus of devolution activity has understandably been on the larger communities. As indicated in Figure 1 and Table 3, there are 20 communities that have electoral rolls in excess of 5,500 people, and these are understandably the communities where asset transfer has been focused. These larger councils can generate sufficient revenue to pay staff and provide services, and they provided the focus for the research.

Between October 2018 and March 2019, I interviewed representatives from 11 of the larger town and parish councils in Cornwall. This involved 27 clerks, deputy clerks, and councillors in 18 separate encounters. I also attended a number of meetings that helped to illuminate the issues being researched, including: Cornwall Council's Localism Summits held in

TABLE 2 The range of council sizes, including the median and mean, using electoral roll data (December 2018)

Number of councils	Minimum	1st quartile	Median	Mean	3rd Quartile	Maximum
213	19	391	785	1,989	1,832	16,851
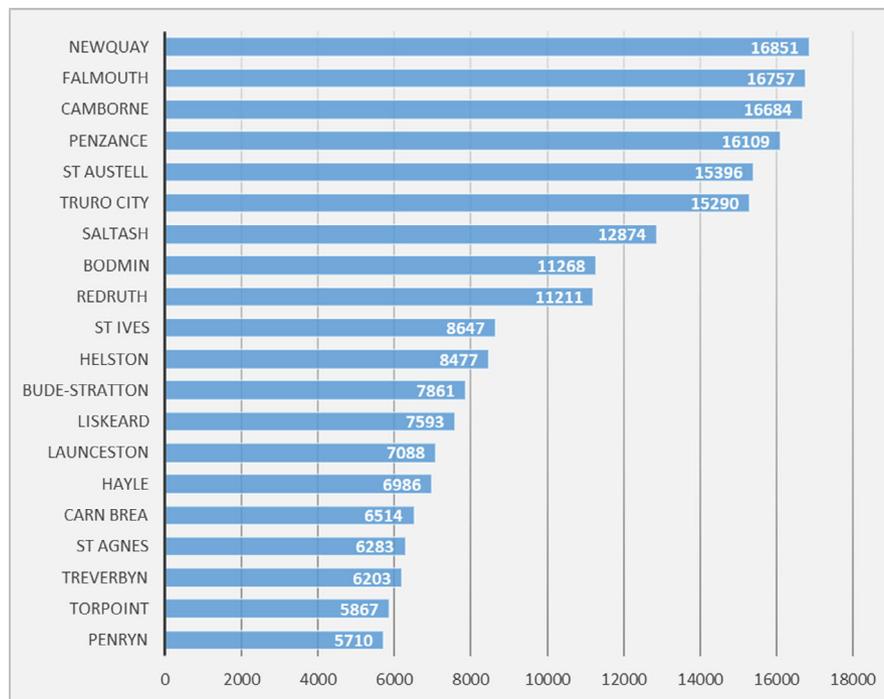
FIGURE 1 Cornwall's 20 largest councils, by electoral roll numbers, December 2018.

TABLE 3 The size of town and parish councils in Cornwall, by group, using electoral roll data (December 2018)

	0–499	500–1,499	1,500–2,499	2,500–3,499	3,500–4,499	4,500–5,499	5,500–6,499	6,500+	Total
Number	66	85	22	9	4	7	4	16	213

Helston on 13 November 2018, Truro on 15 November 2018, and Wadebridge in November 2019; CALC's larger local councils committee meeting in January 2019; and Locality's feedback event in May 2019. While the research was conducted to contribute to Locality's Commission, it was not funded as part of the project and it was designed and conducted independently. The research was subject to ethical review via the University of Exeter's Ethics Committee and all the interviews were recorded and transcribed. I have used the information and quotations presented here with the consent of all those concerned.

Cornwall Council has been on a journey towards greater partnership working with its town and parish councils for more than a decade. The council's bid for unitary status, submitted in 2007, had to provide alternative ways for working with local people if the six intermediate district councils were to be abolished, as planned. Even at this time, the would-be unitary council envisaged a greater role for the lowest tier of local government saying that: "The new authority for Cornwall will, in consultation with the relevant councils, consider the case for the delegation of certain responsibilities to the local councils" (Cornwall County Council, 2007, p. 40). These early efforts were subsequently boosted by Cornwall's nationally agreed devolution arrangement, signed with Government in 2015 (Willett, 2016; Willett & Giovannini, 2014). That agreement also reflected ambitions to increase the role of local councils, and the submission declared "We are committed to the idea of double devolution; many of the increased powers and freedoms that we are seeking will allow us to work with partners to empower local communities to address their needs" (Cornwall Council, 2015, p. 8).

While support for "double-devolution" has been about the principle of subsidiarity and working in partnership with local councils, it only really took off once austerity started to bite. Cornwall Council's revenue support grant was reduced by 90% between 2013/14 and 2019, falling from £105 million to just £14 million (Paynter, 2018). The new financial reality triggered major staffing reductions as well as cuts in support for the voluntary sector, while also accelerating efforts to devolve greater responsibilities to town and parish councils. A very ambitious ongoing programme of asset transfer was developed to shift management and financial responsibility for important services such as public toilets, libraries, parks,

and community centres to local councils. These councils have, in turn, been able to raise their council tax precept to pay for them, moving the financial burden away from the unitary authority. This institutional switching has saved almost all public toilets, parks, and libraries from closure, cuts, and/or sale. Whereas austerity has forced councils to take drastic action in other parts of the country (Locality, 2018a; Robinson & Sheldon, 2019), the existence of local councils, and the willingness of their councillors and officers to take over the assets and services, has preserved them and provided new revenue streams to pay for them. As such, the research has important lessons for thinking about successful asset transfer, double-devolution, and governance reform in other parts of the country.

4 | ASSET TRANSFER TO TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS IN CORNWALL

As can be seen in Table 4, a large number of assets have been devolved to the local councils included in this research. However, there was no uniformity on the ground and each arrangement reflected a bespoke settlement, reflecting the interests of each party, the state of the assets concerned, and considerations of finance (and for parallels with national negotiations, see Ayers et al., 2017b). As might be expected, assets that cost money to maintain were more likely to move than ones attached to an income and a number of respondents bemoaned the fact that car parks were generally not on the table for negotiation, at least in the initial phase of the process.

All the councils had seen considerable increases in their size and responsibilities as a result of devolution. As an example, Falmouth Town Council had increased its staff numbers from 5 to 40 in just 8 years and almost all aspects of public services in the town had been transferred over to them. Even smaller parish councils, like St Agnes, had more than doubled their staffing and income in a very short time. St Austell Town Council was only created in 2009 and yet it had 19 staff in 2019.

As an example of these changes by service area rather than place, the library service remained the responsibility of the unitary pan-county council (and this is a statutory requirement) but most of the buildings and staff as well as day-to-day service decisions had been devolved to local organisations. In 2015, Cornwall Council provided 31 local libraries for local people, but only five of these were left by early 2019. In two cases, Bodmin and Penzance, the unitary authority had agreed to continue providing the service due to recent investment in new or refurbished buildings. In Helston, the library was refurbished as part of a space-sharing arrangement with the Department of Work and Pensions that made it more cost effective. In St Austell, Cornwall Council agreed to retain the listed building but the town council took over the staff and the day-to-day work, and a similar change was agreed in Launceston but only as a temporary measure until the town council constructed a new building. In Liskeard and Par local community groups took on the service and moved it to an existing community building and only in Fowey and Padstow were the libraries likely to close, being replaced by a mobile library service. Thus 29 of Cornwall's 31 libraries were retained, largely due to the way in which asset and/or service transfer had shifted responsibility on to local councils or community organisations that then picked up almost all of the bill for the work.

As would be expected, each council had increased its budget to pay for this work, and in some cases they had increased the precept (or taxation) by more than 100% over a very short space of time (see Table 5). Each local council had engaged in long, sometimes difficult, negotiations over the terms of each transfer, and respondents reported having to learn a range of new skills to take on this work. This included being able to scrutinise the offer being made to them and the legal, management, and financial risks involved. Many felt that Cornwall Council had been trying to "pass the buck," particularly in the early stages of the process, and it was only when the local councils developed more ability to scrutinise the process that relationships began to improve.

Despite such problems, however, almost all the respondents argued that devolving these assets was the "right thing to do." When confronted with the potential closure of public toilets, the degradation of green spaces and parks, or the closure of the local library, clerks and councillors argued that they had to respond. As a councillor from Helston explained:

> You can't not have a public toilet, it's as simple as that … A town like Helston that has, you know, several big events over the year such as Flora Day, and tonight, the Christmas lights turn-on where the town is really stretched to capacity … You need to ensure that there is a proper facility for the people to use.

Similarly, the clerk from St Agnes argued that: "It could be kind of summed up as a case of this is the right thing to do, we definitely need to do it and we'll cross all the difficult bridges of how to do it when we get to them." Given their role on the frontline of local government and the expectations of local residents, it would be very hard for local councillors to do nothing while their public facilities were shut down. Securing what Klinenberg (2018) calls "social infrastructure"

TABLE 4 The assets and services devolved, and changes in staff numbers, in the towns and parishes included in the research

Town/ Parish Council	Assets/services devolved (freehold unless leasehold is indicated)	Changes in staffing (from dates where available)[a]
Camborne	CCTV services Council building that includes library and offices 5 green spaces 1 long-term lease on playing field Allotments Set up a new works unit and workshop	4 in 2010 (2 part-time 2 full-time) 13 (in amenities, library, office) at end 2018
Carn Brea Parish	Land and public sculptures to be transferred in 3 phases including playing field and parks (from 2019) Already owned a community centre and long-term lease to manage the Basset monument, Carn Brea	1 but recruiting 3 parks and maintenance staff in 2019
Falmouth	CCTV services 7 toilet blocks and 1 other on long-term lease Information service Library All parks and green spaces (and 2 car parks being negotiated to provide revenue for this) Roundabouts and weed-spraying Running youth services, environmental education and enforcement Council building Already had an art gallery, allotments and a cemetery	5 in 2010 40 (in 5 departments) at 2018
Hayle	CCTV services Took back 5 open spaces that had been leased to CC after 1974 4 toilet blocks Library Already had swimming pool and allotments	3 in 2012 to 9 in 2018 Increased admin staff, 1 facilities manager, 1 gardener and 1 maintenance technician Use outside contractors for open spaces and cleaning toilets
Helston	CCTV services Long-term lease on 3 toilet blocks Long-term lease on 2 parks and 3 play areas Planting 5 roundabouts Grylls monument and bowling green	3 new grounds/maintenance staff bringing total to 11, including existing roles of town warden, admin, projects officer, caretakers for the town hall Use outside contractors for open spaces and cleaning toilets
Launceston	4 toilet blocks Information service Library service (with plans for new premises and affordable housing) 2 play areas Already had a cemetery, a car park, a museum delivered from a building leased from National Trust, the Ambulance (community) hall, the Town Hall, building leased to the Charles Causley Trust	21 by early 2019 (6 library, 3 TIC, 3 stewards/cleaning, 4 grounds, 5 office)
Penzance	CCTV services Long-term lease on 3 toilet blocks, 3 toilet blocks freehold Already had an art gallery, park, offices and car park	22 (in finance and admin, facilities including gardeners, maintenance, and enforcement, art gallery) at end 2018 Contract cleaning for toilets
St Agnes	Already owned council building, car park, small plot of land, 2 burial grounds, and 2 toilet blocks but took 1 back that had been leased to Cornwall Council Long-term lease on another toilet block (Porthtowan) Library and car park	3 in the office in 2017 to 9 in office, facilities, and library in 2019

(Continues)

TABLE 4   (Continued)

Town/ Parish Council	Assets/services devolved (freehold unless leasehold is indicated)	Changes in staffing (from dates where available)[a]
St Austell	CCTV services 1 toilet block, 2 car parks (one free) 17 parks and open spaces 2 allotment grounds Weed spraying, around highways Grass verges, roundabouts, flower beds Footpaths Library service but not building Have set up a new works unit and workshop	3 in 2008 17 (in tourist info, library, enforcement, facilities, and maintenance, finance and office) at end 2018 Some contract cleaning for toilets
Truro	CCTV services 8 toilet blocks Visit Truro Tourist information and ticket centre shop (also contracted to work for Visit Cornwall) Carrick Sports Hall (run by trustees) Zebedee's youth centre Coosebean cycle track Open spaces including Lemon Quay Allotments Parks and plant nursery Library Cemetery and closed graveyards	71 in early 2019

[a]The staffing figures used relate to head count. Some of these staff were working part-time and the hours worked varied a great deal on the ground.

TABLE 5   Budgets and precepts in the towns and parishes included in the research, (2018/19 and some indication of change)

Town/Parish Council	Total budget from precept in 2018 and change (dates if available)[a]	Precept range (A to H)
Camborne	£941,779 (£215,000 in 2010)	£109.83 to £329.50
Carn Brea Parish	£181,900	£52.96 to £158.88
Falmouth	£1,762,398 (£300,000 in 2010)	£169.12 to £507.36
Hayle	£439,742 (£82,000 in 2003)	£105.21 to £315.62
Helston	£363,890	£69.61 to £208.82
Launceston	£567,062	£131.29 to £393.86
Penzance	£1,337,625 (£570,000 in 2013)	£130.13 to £390.38
St Agnes	£288,200 (£116,000 in 2016/17)	£95.23[a]
St Austell	£591,500	£65.17 to £195.50
St Ives	£568,233	£72.87 to £218.62
Truro	£1,582,836	£163.20 to £489.60

[a]Some councils had additional income from charges such as car parks. This could increase the budget considerably and as an example, St Austell generated a surplus of £200,000 a year from one of the car parks that was transferred. The St Agnes precept given is for a band D property in 2017/18.

was seen as overwhelmingly important to the functioning of local communities with far-reaching implications for social and economic well-being. As a councillor from Camborne put it: "I think that's what town councils need to be all about, keeping the social fabric of the area robust. If you lose that, you lose all sense of community I think."

Going further than this, however, a number of respondents also felt that devolution provided an opportunity for local councils to ensure that "the destiny of the community … is not dictated from county hall" (clerk from St Agnes). As the clerk from Launceston put it:

We should be cutting the grass in the town, it's our town; they're our verges, our parks. We should be running the library. If we're going to have public toilets … they're all of ours and I think all towns have to do that but we have to balance that with explaining to local people that it's only ever going to cost you more money.

In this regard, respondents had consulted their residents about devolution before taking things on. Camborne Town Council consulted local people about its parks and green spaces, St Agnes held a public consultation about the toilets and library, and St Austell hired a firm to conduct a formal consultation process, prior to proceeding with any devolution. In every case, local people supported the moves, albeit that they raised obvious concerns about having to pay more in taxation. Although framed in a different language, the councils recognised that asking for more money demanded a new conversation with local residents, and that this amounted to a new "social contract" with their community.

Indeed, in making the case for greater local taxation, clerks and councillors argued that it was essential to improve the quality of provision and achieve better value for money, to head-off any complaints. As the clerk in Falmouth explained, there is the issue of double taxation. "The more a town and a parish council does, you … [inevitably] see the local tax go up. What you don't see is the Cornwall Council Tax go down. So councillors have to have a conversation with their residents." Going on, he said "We can take on Falmouth Library [but] it's pointless us delivering it if we're going to do it in the same way that Cornwall Council did. So we've rationalised library delivery." Having improved the service after taking it on, by increasing the opening hours and providing additional services in the library building, he reported that while they do "get the odd objection, predominantly what we get now is a lot of positive reaction from residents saying, 'Yes I'm pleased you did that'."

The research highlighted the extent to which councils were in conversation with their residents about the best way to proceed and, given the threat of losing the service, it was generally felt to be worth the risks involved in trying to save it, with the potential to even improve it. This echoes Buchanan's arguments about the way in which individuals engage in the "calculus of consent" to constitutional arrangements such that:

An individual may rationally prefer a rule that will, on particular occasions, operate to produce results that are opposed to his own interests … if he predicts that, on balance over the whole sequence of 'plays', his own interests will be more effectively served. (Buchanan, 1987, p. 1435)

There was no certainty that this consent was secure, as is outlined further below, but there was little resident-led opposition to the increases in tax.

A number of the councils had sought to rationalise their use of public spaces, combining local management of services in the town rather than leaving them as standalone services, as was done in the past. A good example was in St Ives, where the town council had taken over the tourist information centre and its four staff but could then merge this service with the newly devolved library service, in one building, with longer opening hours. As the town clerk explained: "The staff are going to train and cross over disciplines, so [it will be] a better use of resources and hopefully, better for staff as well because they're having new opportunities and upskilling with a more satisfying job." In Truro, the transfer of the library and staff similarly provided an opportunity to bring the City's Business Improvement District team, Citizens Advice Centre, and adult education into one building, with the library, managed by the council on site.

In Falmouth, the council had brought its outsourced labour in-house, arguing that this increased staff flexibility while also improving the quality of jobs as well as productivity rates. Given that Falmouth Town Council now needed to manage a number of parks, public toilets, public spaces, and a large cemetery, they could use generic grounds staff more efficiently than was possible before when each was subject to separate contracting agreements managed by the particular private firm contracted by a separate staff team employed by Cornwall Council.

Given that the larger towns like Camborne, Falmouth, and St Austell were now employing larger numbers of their own grounds and library staff, they had also sought to foster a stronger local branding for their services. They had bought uniforms for grounds staff, branded their vans, and improved their signage, seeking to ensure that local people knew who was doing the work. As the clerk of St Austell explained:

One thing that's really changed and transformed the council is having a workforce with vans that are branded up with St Austell Town Council and they all go out cutting grass and looking after flowerbeds with St Austell Town Council on their backs … they bring back lots of good feedback … they get lots and lots of compliments.

These local staff were also providing the town council with extra "eyes and ears" on the ground, feeding back information and ensuring that the council had a closer relationship with life in the town.

As indicated above, localising the management of provision had allowed the councils to reorganise services and increase local recognition for the work they were doing. In St Ives, this had been supported by leasing the Guildhall and the Island Centre, as well as taking on the freehold of the library, and opening them up for more public use. The spaces had been refurbished and council staff were working hard to ensure that they were being used for local markets, community activities, concerts, and weddings. The clerk was also trying to find a way to engage residents in the new library service via what she called a Library Management Partnership Board. As she explained, "the town council will run the library building and manage the staff, with a commitment to community engagement and so we're setting up the partnership group that we can consult with on ideas for improvements, projects, funding options, etc." This would allow the council to engage with greater numbers of residents while also supporting a wider range of social and economic activities in St Ives.

In order to widen and deepen their capacity, some of these councils were looking for additional ways to tap into local support and capacity. Falmouth had established Friends Groups to lead community engagement and activities in the local parks, and Falmouth and other councils (Hayle, Penzance, St Agnes, St Ives, and Truro) had also developed groups around neighbourhood planning that further widened the number of people with a stake in the development, heritage, and economic strategy of the town.

5 | THE CHALLENGES OF BUDGETS AND BOUNDARIES

While all the councils included in the research had majority support for devolution and localism, a minority reported serious, and in some cases growing, divisions of opinion among elected representatives. A councillor on St Ives Town Council, for example, was concerned about the scale and speed of devolution, saying that: "I think we've done too much, too quickly." He also objected to the increase in costs when the services were largely the same, arguing that residents "are still getting the same toilets, the same library, the same service provided … and that wouldn't be too bad if there was a corresponding reduction in the Cornwall Council tax but there isn't."

This councillor had stood for election in 2017 because he wanted the town council to go back to being a voice for local people, helping them to hold higher-level bodies to account, rather than spending so much time and resources actually running services. These concerns were accentuated due to the fact that he lived in and represented residents in Lelant (an outlying village in the area) where there were few visible signs of any council services. As he explained, "We don't get any services anyway in our villages and we were paying for all these extra services that we couldn't access easily. That really spurred me on. I wanted my patch to get a fair deal." Being on the council allowed him to articulate his concerns rather than "defend the council to the local people." He argued that St Ives council had taken on a different role without really thinking about it and he sought to move the council away from being a service provider.

In Camborne, a small group of councillors, also elected in 2017, had similarly tried to shift opinion away from the devolution agenda. As the clerk explained, she was then faced with weak continuity and less support for the work they were already committed to doing. Even in other councils where there was stronger support for devolution, people reported feeling that it was time to slow down and take stock. As a St Austell councillor put it, "I think we need to just sort of stabilise ourselves and make the most of what we've got. If something else comes forward that's really involving the local community, I guess we'll probably bite on the bullet, you know, but finance is going to be the thing, it really is."

In this regard, the research highlighted the extent to which devolution is vulnerable to changes in council representation and the outcomes of local elections. While the clerks and associated staff were critical to ensure continuity in vision, the increased importance of council operations made it more important to support any newly elected councillors. As part of his work in Falmouth, for example, the clerk had started to do a lot more work to induct new councillors when they got elected, saying:

> I spend two weeks doing induction sessions with councillors and bring our partners in … It's about getting councillors to understand what they can do … You know the life span of a councillor is four years. They spend one year learning the role. They spend two years doing stuff, and then they spend a year trying to get themselves re-elected. So, if you look at that lifespan you've only ever got two years of a councillor when they're particularly active. So, I put a lot of work in with new councillors. And you know I get my managers to put a lot of work in as well, which is a chore, but it does work.

Now that Falmouth Town Council had started forward planning, they needed to ensure that there was continuity in vision and delivery despite any potential changes in elected representation.

The research also exposed a number of concerns about perceived injustices in relation to paying for devolved services. Whereas all Cornwall's residents had previously paid for services like libraries, parks, and community centres, devolution meant that the burden for those facilities was falling on a smaller number of residents – within the boundaries of the town or parish – even if they were used by people from a much wider hinterland. As the Mayor of Penzance explained:

> The main difficulty we have is that our tax base is only our parish, but the people that use our services is [much larger] … So you've got 21,000 people paying for services used by, say, 55,000 people. And you get this situation where now for a Band D property, tax has gone … up to about £195. In Madron, which is literally a mile and a quarter … up the road it's £60. And in Marazion it would be under £100.

This issue cropped up in every other location. Having inherited an ancient parish geography, it was then difficult to revisit the issue of boundaries and/or payments for services. Moreover, while Cornwall Council was conducting a community governance review to consider such issues during 2019, there was little confidence that this could resolve these concerns. No elected representative was willing to give up territory or to advocate that their residents should pay more, and in that context, it was difficult to see how the burden of taxation could be better resolved.

In contrast to the wider story of scalar dumping whereby cuts are relocated from national government to sub-national bodies (Kim, 2019; Peck, 2012), institutional switching involves the costs of services being relocated from a larger institution to a series of smaller bodies, with local people bearing the cost of retaining the service. The research in Cornwall found that local councils had risen to the challenge of taking on services and paying for them, demonstrating that they could improve provision and find efficiencies in the process. However, this had to be carefully managed. There were dissenters within every council, and concerns about the injustice of taxation and access to services could have easily derailed the process. While councils had established a new social contract with their taxpayers, this was vulnerable to dissent, and hinged on satisfaction with the new management regime and service provision.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

As outlined, the particular combination of institutions, willingness to innovate, and successful asset transfer has mitigated the impact of austerity on local government in Cornwall. In less than a decade, local councils have taken on significant increases in their responsibilities, size, and budgets, and despite concerns about the risks of taking on a new role and raising precepts, this has proved a success. The institutional switching prompted by a prior commitment to devolution and localism, in combination with austerity, has produced a new geography of local government with a greater role for local town and parish councils in managing the public realm, including important social infrastructure, across the diversity of communities involved. The case highlights the legacy of the geo-constitution and there is scope for similar activity to be developed in other parts of the country where town and parish councils exist (Welsh Assembly, 2019). It is also resonant of international experience in relation to the growing role of sub-regional and differentiated governance arrangements that have developed over the last 60 years (Hooghe & Marks, 2016).

However, in many areas of the country, particularly in urban areas where service needs can be most acute, these local institutions have disappeared and there are no similar bodies to which assets and services can be transferred. In these areas, new councils or community organisations can be set up to take over services but this takes time and has to be led from below (Aitken et al., 2011; Wills, 2016, 2019a). As such, the case takes us back to the insights developed by economic geographers who have long recognised the importance of our institutional architecture in facilitating adaptation to change and fostering resilience (Martin & Sunley, 2015). Storper's (1997) argument about the importance of having regional "supply architecture" applies to political as much as economic responses to change. Although it is too late for many parts of the country, where important social infrastructure has already been lost, there is a case to be made for rolling out new community councils in urban areas, as was first suggested almost 50 years ago (Baker & Young, 1971). Moreover, in contrast to Hooghe and Marks' (2016) suggestion that community-oriented jurisdictions tend to be less about their functionality compared with larger scale bodies, the parish scale has been rejuvenated because of its practical value. It provides the means to preserve important social infrastructure because of its history of service provision and tax-raising powers.

Overall, this case has a number of important lessons for understanding the geography of austerity as well as wider debates about constitutional reform. First, it is clear that the impact of austerity and the emergence of what has been called "the austerity state" (Pike et al., 2018) is highly uneven. As Pike and his co-authors suggest:

While much of the locus of authority and power to construct and enact austerity may reside amongst actors in the governing party and state apparatus at the national level, explaining the ways in which actors articulate, mediate and work through the national together with other territorial levels and relational circuits of the state are critically important. (Pike et al., 2018, p. 122)

The Cornish case reinforces the argument that the uneven outcomes of austerity are at least partly shaped by differentiated multi-scalar institutions and relations between them, as well as leadership, capacity, and the strength of local social contracts with voters.

Second, the Cornish case demonstrates the ways in which austerity is prompting a reconfiguration of the geography of governance as much as any simple shrinking of the state (Lobao et al., 2018). While the unitary council has lost a lot of its budget, the towns and parishes have increased local taxation rates to cover the costs associated with the devolution of assets and services. Austerity has prompted institutional switching and a rescaling of responsibility for social infrastructure that has required a new social contract with the citizens who pay for the service.

Third, it is clear that there can be no certainty about the future architecture of the state. Local councils had been in decline for 200 years before austerity gave them a new lease of life, in Cornwall, but elsewhere as well (NALC, 2017; Sellick, 2014). Few could have predicted that this would have happened in the way that it has, and it demonstrates that our geo-constitutional inheritance has emergent effects which will shape further reform. While the creation of combined authorities has been the preferred vehicle for devolution at the city–regional scale, the re-emergence of town and parish councils may become more important in providing social infrastructure and place-based service delivery to local communities.

Finally, the case points to the importance of the role of research in helping to shape the process of constitutional reform. There was no certainty that the Cornish experiment would work and embedding research into the process helped to share learning and further development. As such, the case reinforces Buchanan's argument that "the task for the constitutional and political economist is to assist individuals … in their continuing search for those rules of the political game that will best serve their purposes, whatever they might be" (1987, p. 1,436). This will remain the role for publicly oriented research as the UK lives through the aftershocks of the financial crisis, Brexit, and a new wave of constitutional reform.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data produced are not available due to restrictions agreed with interviewees.

ORCID

Jane Wills https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5123-0207

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