

A new geography of local government:



The changing role of Town and Parish Councils in Cornwall, UK

JUNE 2019 | Jane Wills

Localism and the role of Town and Parish Councils in Cornwall

INTRODUCTION

This report summarises research that has been undertaken as part of a larger project led by Locality, the national network of community organisations. It comprises material that forms part of phase two of the work undertaken for Locality's Commission on the Future of Localism. The Commission has gathered evidence and ideas about efforts to engage local people in decision making and to strengthen community, and the challenges faced in realising these ambitions. Locality published the first round of findings in a report entitled *People Power* in early 2018 (Locality, 2018a). This report highlighted the need for greater thought and more focused action in relation to developing and supporting local institutions, fostering better relationships and building local capacity, in order to unlock the 'power of community'. Building on the ideas developed in that report, phase two of the Commission's work has involved action research with four local authorities (Cornwall, Southwark, Stevenage and Wigan) to explore the importance of geo-institutional inheritance and culture, local experiences, and the outcomes of efforts to foster localism. A report that draws on the learning from all four cases will be published late in 2019.

This report focuses solely on the findings from the research undertaken with Town and Parish Councils (TPCs) in Cornwall. Conducted in late 2018 and early 2019, the author interviewed 27 individuals in 18 separate interviews, including representatives from 11 TPCs as well as the County Officer of Cornwall's Association of Local Councils (CALC). The rationale for the research, the methods and key findings are presented below. In addition, Locality staff conducted interviews with a number of Cornwall Council's localism and community link officers as well as representatives of the voluntary and community sector in Cornwall. This fuller body of work will contribute to ongoing debate about policy and practice in Cornwall as well as contributing to Locality's national research.

BACKGROUND

Submitted in 2007, Cornwall's bid for unitary status included plans for the development of 19 new community network areas as a way to sustain relationships with the local population and its main institutions. The bid also included an increased role for TPCs 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 Council, 2007, 40). The document continued by recognising that: "The capacity and appetite for taking on extra responsibilities varies across the county and careful consideration will be given to the types of service and level of responsibility that is delegated. There is a strong case for delegating responsibility for certain environmental services to local councils, in that they are inherently local and not generally delivered in partnership with other agencies. However, it may also be appropriate to consider how some of the larger town councils, or clusters of smaller councils, could administer community development functions or deliver small affordable housing projects. Consideration will also be given to determining how town and parish councils should be supported to play a more influential role in planning, licensing and highway decisions. We recognise that we must consider how the local councils are supported, both financially and professionally in a new structure. Reorganisation will provide an opportunity to build capacity (through the sharing of the decentralised support for the Community Networks) and encourage collaboration at the parish level. The new authority will examine opportunities to support local councils that aspire to achieve nationally recognised standards" (Cornwall Council, 2007, 41).

These early efforts to recognise the potentially enhanced role of TPC in local government in Cornwall were subsequently boosted by Cornwall's nationally-agreed devolution agreement in 2015. This document made the case for Cornwall to have greater control over key budgets and decision-making such as those concerning housing, transport, property, planning, employment and skills. The document presented included mention of ongoing work to increase the role of TPCs saying that: "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, 8). In asking for more powers from national government, Cornwall Council recognised the parallel contribution to be made by the towns and parishes of Cornwall. Indeed, it would be hard to justify the request for greater powers to come to the unitary authority if they were not then shared with the wider population of Cornwall.

While support for ‘double-devolution’ has been about support for the principle of subsidiarity - officially defined as “the principle that decision should always be taken at the lowest possible level or closest to where they will have their effect” (1) - it has also been a useful way to try and save money (Wills, 2016). In tandem with other local authorities across England, Cornwall Council’s budget has suffered unprecedented cuts since 2010. While the costs of statutory service provision such as social care and cared-for children have risen, the amount of money given to councils has been dramatically reduced, with expectations that local government should be financially self-sufficient (on the basis of council tax income, some business rate retention and by generating income) by 2022. Cornwall Council’s revenue support grant has been reduced by 90% since 2013/14, falling from £105M in 2014 to just £14M in 2019 (Paynter, 2018). These cuts have prompted major staffing reductions, the loss of non-statutory services and the acceleration of efforts to transfer assets and responsibilities to TPCs.

As an example, the library service is now overseen by staff in County Hall but most of the library buildings and the staff, as well as day-to-day service decisions have been devolved to local organisations. In 2015, Cornwall Council provided 31 local libraries for local people and by early 2019, it had almost none of them left. The vast majority of these facilities and the staff had been successfully transferred to the relevant TPC, either via freehold or long-term lease. Cornwall Council still provided the books and associated materials to each local library but with the exceptions of the locations mentioned below, they had successfully shed the costs associated with maintaining the buildings and employing the staff. In just eight cases, this was not possible or desirable. In two of these cases Cornwall Council had agreed to continue providing the service due to recent investment in new or refurbished buildings in Bodmin and Penzance. In Helston, the library was refurbished and then the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) moved their Jobcentre Plus services along with Cornwall Council’s One Stop Shop into the building. In St Austell, they agreed to retain the listed building but the TPC took over the staff and the day-to-day work. In Liskeard and Par local community groups took on the service and moved it to an existing community building. At the time of writing, the libraries in Fowey and Padstow were likely to close as it had not been possible to find local partners to take on the service.

There are financial savings to be made by transferring other forms of physical infrastructure such as public toilets, parks, green spaces, burial grounds, leisure centres, monuments and community centres. These buildings, spaces and services are critically important to the public realm and community life, but they require ongoing investment. Given budget reductions, many local authorities are trying to transfer or sell these assets. In a recent study based on Freedom of Information (FoI) requests to principal local authorities, Locality (2018b) found that on average, authorities in England sold an estimated 4131 properties (including land) per year on the open market between 2012/13 and 2017/18, just over half of which were sold to for-profit organisations (52%). Given that the majority of the population live in areas that no longer have TPCs, this will restrict the capacity of principal authorities to transfer their physical assets to other levels of local government. It also makes Cornwall particularly interesting in relation to these broader developments. Not only does Cornwall have long-established and well-recognised local councils but it has a cadre of local representatives who have stepped up to the combined challenges posed by devolution and austerity.

Indeed, Cornwall's particular economic and social history means that unlike most other English counties, it doesn't have one or more large conurbations where economic growth has been concentrated. The importance of the rural and maritime economies, and Cornwall's early industrialisation focused on mining in the c18th, has meant that economic growth and settlement formation was always dispersed. As Ronald Perry describes it: "Cornwall's distinctive settlement pattern of small, free-standing towns of equal and jealously guarded status and individuality ... [has produced] localised political loyalties, industrial specialisation, self-contained administrative, transport and retail catchments, [and] a fragmented intellectual infrastructure" (Perry, 1993, 23). As he goes on to note, the particular economic geography of Cornwall has had profound consequences for the local political culture with strong feelings of anti-centralism predating the present focus on devolution: "Politically, the industrial culture had long been allied to a tradition of anti-centralism at all levels of disaggregation: a distaste for Truro-rule as well as Whitehall-rule. Loyalties were localised" (Perry, 1993, 26). In this regard, Cornwall seems particularly well-positioned to take advantage of the current support for devolution and localism, albeit that much of the impetus has come from budget cuts rather than political vision. Unlike many other more urban areas, Cornwall has retained its town and parish councils and people have a strong attachment to the towns in which they reside.

Cornwall has 213 parish councils and meetings. They range in size from 19 (St Michael's Mount) to almost 17,000 electors (Newquay) with an average size of just 2000 (see Table 1). There is only one city, Truro, with a population of just over 15,000 electors on the electoral roll (December 2018), and this is smaller than five of the larger towns (see Figure 1). Most of the councils cover very small communities and the focus of devolution activity has understandably been on the larger towns and parishes. As indicated in Figure 1 and Table 2, there are 20 communities that have electoral rolls in excess of 5,500 people, and these are the communities where activity has been focused. These larger councils provided the focus for this research and interviews were conducted with representatives from 11 of the 20 communities indicated in Figure 1 ranging in size from St Agnes to Falmouth.

Number of councils	Minimum	1st quartile	Median	Mean	3rd quartile	Maximum
213	19	391	785	1,989	1,831	16,851

TABLE 1: THE RANGE OF COUNCIL SIZES, INCLUDING THE MEDIAN AND MEAN, USING ELECTORAL ROLL DATA
(DECEMBER 2018)

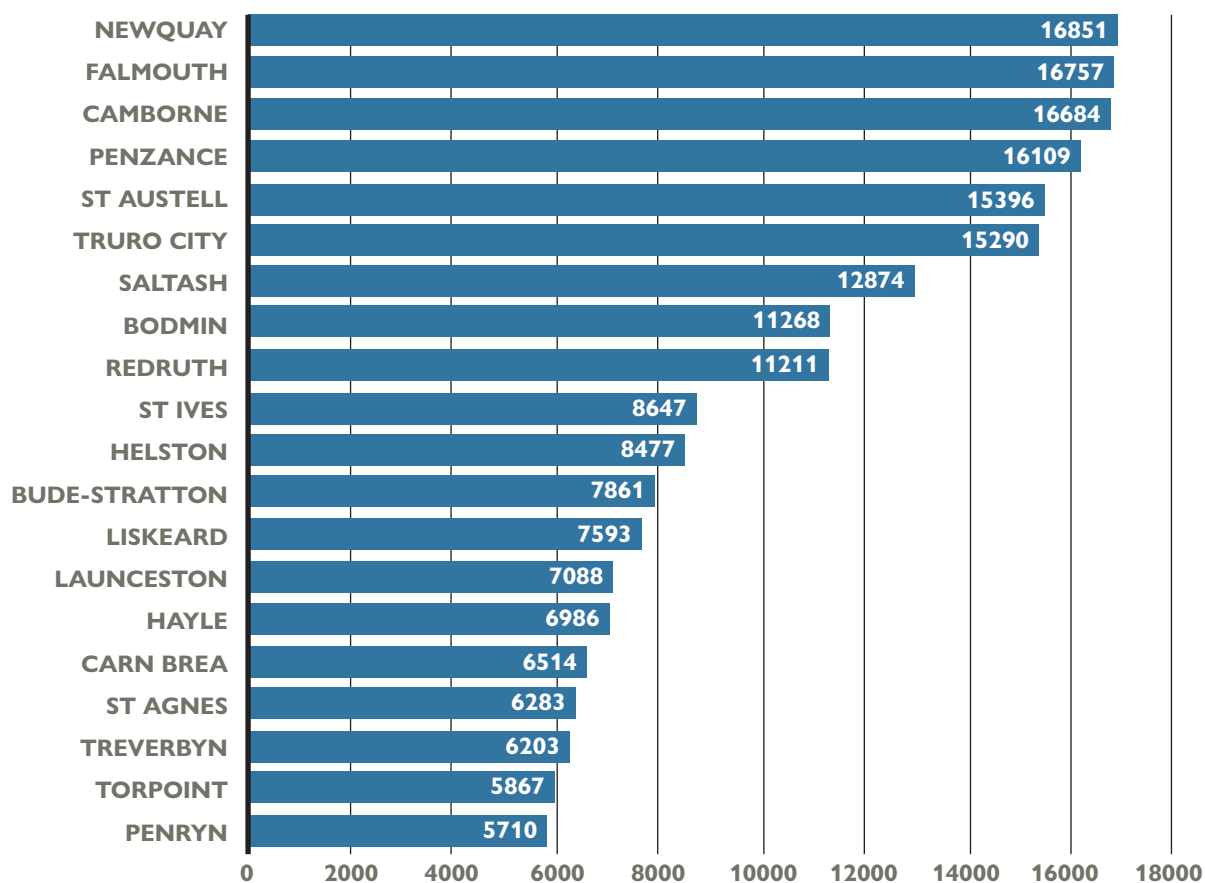


FIGURE 1: CORNWALL'S 20 LARGEST COUNCILS, BY ELECTORAL ROLL NUMBERS
(DECEMBER 2018)

	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

TABLE 2: THE SIZE OF TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS IN CORNWALL, BY GROUP, USING ELECTORAL ROLL DATA
(DECEMBER 2018)

The Research

This research was supported and facilitated by both Cornwall Council and Cornwall's County Association of Local Councils (CALC). A group interview was organised by Locality, involving the Cabinet portfolio-holder and officers overseeing the devolution and localism work at Cornwall Council in July 2018 in order to ensure that the research supported ongoing activities and evaluation. I have had ongoing contact with Sarah Mason, CALC's County Officer, to explore her experiences and in order to ensure that the research was useful for local councils across the county. Sarah suggested a number of councils that it would be useful to include in the research. I was also invited to attend a meeting of CALC's larger local councils committee in January 2019 in order to share emerging findings and invite people to get in touch if they wanted to take part in the research. Attendance at that meeting helped to further illuminate many of the issues being raised in this research and highlighted the importance of the ongoing Community Governance Review. I also benefited from attending two of the Localism Summits organised by Cornwall Council and held in Helston on 13 November 2018 and Truro on 15 November 2018. These provided greater insight into the rationale for devolution from Cornwall Council's point of view while also providing an opportunity to hear from a wider range of representatives from TPCs across Cornwall.

The research has been designed to capture the experiences of both officers and elected representatives in TPCs. As would be expected, this meant focusing on the larger councils and those that had greatest experience of taking over physical assets and services from Cornwall Council. In most cases, I made email contact with the clerk, requesting an interview and if possible, then followed up with an interview with an identified councillor. In a number of cases, however, I was able to make initial contact with the councillor through meeting them at another event, and in two of these instances, the councillor then arranged a larger meeting that included other councillors; in Hayle, the clerk was also involved in this meeting and in Truro, the group also included the community worker employed by the City Council. The meeting with clerk Mark Williams from Falmouth took place some months before the others and provided an important preliminary interview that helped in developing the research ideas.

Table 3 provides a list of those who were interviewed and the dates given indicate instances of separate or group discussions. In each case, I recorded the meeting, had it transcribed and have quoted verbatim from the interviews in order to illuminate the findings from the research. The research protocol was endorsed by the University of Exeter's Research Ethics Committee before it began.

While I had a standard set of questions that were used in each interview, my knowledge increased over the period of doing the work, shaping the nature of the discussions. In addition, the particular interests and experiences of the clerks and councillors, and developments in their town or parish, inevitably shaped the conversations we had and the data collected. The material cannot be read as fully representative of all TPCs in Cornwall but the aim was to do justice to all those interviewed in the 11 communities where the research was conducted.

TABLE 3: INTERVIEW RESPONDENTS AND THE DATES OF ENCOUNTER

Town/Parish Council	Name	Role	Date
Camborne	Amanda Mugford	Clerk	1.11.18
	Val Dalley	Cllr	3.12.18
Carn Brea Parish	Bob Drew	Cllr	11.2.19
Falmouth	Mark Williams	Clerk	9.1.18
Hayle	Ellie Giggall	Clerk	8.2.19
	John Pollard	Cllr	8.2.19
	Clive Polkinghorne	Cllr	8.2.19
Helston	Chris Dawson	Clerk	30.10.18
	Mike Thomas	Cllr	30.11.18
Launceston	Chris Drake	Clerk	18.3.19
Penzance	Hester Hunt	Clerk	2.11.18
	Dick Cliffe	Cllr	20.11.18
St Agnes	Lee Dunkley	Clerk	15.2.19
St Austell	David Pooley	Clerk	29.10.18
	Sara Gwilliams	Clerk	29.10.18
	Brian Palmer	Cllr	3.1.19
St Ives	Louise Dowe	Clerk	16.1.19
	Anthony Harris	Cllr	11.2.19
Truro	Stuart Roden	Cllr	5.2.19
	Lorrie Eathorne-Gibbons	Cllr	5.2.19
	Mrs A J Carlyon	Cllr	5.2.19
	Mary Neale	Cllr	5.2.19
	Lindsay Southcombe	Cllr	5.2.19
	Damien Richards	Youth Worker	5.2.19
	Bert Biscoe	Cllr	3.1.19

Overview of the changes in the towns and parishes included in the research

The research sought to identify the nature of the assets, services and staff that had been transferred from Cornwall Council to each of the local councils. This information is captured in Table 4 and there was a range of practice covered by the research. Almost all TPCs had taken over local public toilets and the library, as well as parks and green spaces. However, this was not universal and every arrangement was different, depending on the nature of the local assets and the goals and negotiations of the council in each case. As examples, Camborne took the decision not to take over the toilet blocks as they were in a very poor state of repair, developing their own community-based provision instead. Helston had only taken over the toilets on long term lease and they had not taken over the library at all. In Penzance, the town council had decided to take full control of 2 toilet blocks but to lease another 3, and as outlined above, they had not taken over the library. As outlined in more detail below, each council had to carefully review each asset, the condition in which they found it, the cost of running it and maintaining it, and then decide what was best for the local community. In some cases, the councils decided to lease rather than own the property, and to continue or start contracting services such as cleaning and grounds work rather than directly employing the staff. In this regard there was no 'one way' in which devolution had taken place. There was a mixture of practice on the ground, reflecting the different ambitions of both parties (Cornwall Council and the TPC concerned), and especially, the willingness of the TPC to take on the costs and risks of doing more than they had in the past. Some of the TPCs had taken a more conservative approach than others.

In this regard, a minority of councils had decided to try and take a more strategic approach to devolution, determining what they wanted in advance and then approaching Cornwall Council with a request for a particular 'package' of assets to be transferred. This was exemplified by St Austell, a new town council created in 2009, that took over a wide range of assets and associated services, increasing its staff complement from 2 to 19 in just 10 years. As the deputy clerk, Sara Gwilliams explained:

“ Cornwall Council were trying to drop services on us sort of piecemeal, 'Would you like to take on toilets?' and then a month later, 'Would you like to take on the library?' and then a month later, 'How about CCTV?' And so we quite sensibly said, 'No, we don't want to do it sort of piecemeal like that, we need sort of a big holistic approach to this.' And we said, 'We'd like to do a package and in that package we would like an income stream as well. We just don't want all your liabilities. ”

As a result St Austell had a longer negotiation that included a number of car parks to bring in some revenue, that were eventually reduced to just one (much to the annoyance of the St Austell team), but they ended up with a much larger package of buildings and services than was transferred in most other towns.

Falmouth also decided to move relatively early to take over a significant number of assets and at the time of interview, they were negotiating over control of a further car park in order to secure revenue for a further round of transfers. The town council had expanded dramatically, increasing its budget and staff numbers from 5 to 40 in just 8 years. Camborne had grown very rapidly too, having decided to establish their own works unit and amenities team to run the newly-transferred parks and open spaces. They had taken on the library building and staff, leading a major regeneration project to provide additional office space and much improved facilities. In the eight years since Amanda Mugford, the town clerk, arrived, the numbers of staff had increased from 4 to 13 and further expansion was likely.

As might be expected, Truro, the one City Council, was the largest body in terms of staffing although its precept income was lower than that for some of the larger towns (see Table 5). By early 2019, Truro City Council had as many as 71 staff. The council already had considerable experience of managing buildings and providing community services prior to the devolution agenda being developed. However, they had recently taken over additional toilet blocks and green spaces as well as the library.

It is significant that the research found no difference in the way in which the two parishes were responding to the devolution agenda. St Agnes had taken one of its toilet blocks back from Cornwall Council as well as leasing another. The council had subsequently also taken over the library building and its staff after negotiating an agreement that Cornwall Council would do important repairs to the building before they took it on. This involved trebling the number of staff employed directly by the council and the parish was employing the same number of people as Hayle and Helston town councils, indicating that there was no clear divide between the capacity and ambition of the larger parishes when compared to the smaller towns.

However, given recent expansion amongst the larger towns and parishes, it is likely that any future growth will be focused on the medium-sized councils in Cornwall, especially those that have yet to embrace devolution in any significant way. As the clerk of St Agnes parish, Lee Dunkley, remarked:

“ The bigger councils like Falmouth and Penzance already have in place a certain level of capacity to deliver services. They already do more than just sit around once a month and discuss planning applications or grant applications.

So, even before the devolution drive really kicked in, which wasn't the same time that it was meant to kick in, they already had say a couple of different departments. They had more than one person in the office, they had people doing grounds-keeping work, maybe maintaining a park.

At Penzance they own a museum and a gallery, so for them to stretch into managing public toilets, this kind of thing, is a natural progression and it's somewhat of a steadier increase in remit than it is for the medium sized councils like Camelford and like St Agnes. So, when I arrived here which was only two years ago there were a total number of staffing hours of 48 hours a week and that's all in the office, all admin, okay? And two years and three months later - if we go to April this year which is when we take on the library - there will be nine members of staff, so a tripling of the number of people, and the total hours will be somewhere in the region of, let's see 155 hours a week. It's a tripling of the number of staff and it's a tripling of hours as well, staffing hours in two years.”

For Dunkley, it was smaller towns and larger parishes like his own, Camelford, Penryn and St Just that were in the process of growing fastest in the current phase of devolution in Cornwall.

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 as indicated)	Changes in staffing (from dates where available)*	Other possible transfers in future?
Camborne	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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	Additional green spaces
Carn Brea Parish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – CCTV services – 7 toilet blocks and 1 other on long term lease – Information service – Library – All parks and green spaces (and 2 car parks are still 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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)	Park around the leisure centre; another car park; traffic management

Penzance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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.	Phase 2 being negotiated: 4 parks; tennis courts, flower beds
St Agnes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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	
St Austell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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 (completed September 2017) – Have set up a new works unit and workshop 	2 in 2009 19 (in amenities, library, office) at end 2018 Contract cleaning for toilets.	Youth Centre building (when roof is fixed);
St Ives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – CCTV services – Long term lease for Guildhall (includes offices and concert hall) – 8 toilet blocks (2 being leased on to local businesses) – Lease of the Island Community Centre – Tourist Information Service – Library – Powers of traffic control and dog enforcement – Already had one park. Took on weed control when service stopped. 	3 in 2008 17 (in tourist info, library, enforcement, facilities and maintenance, finance and office) at end 2018 Some contract cleaning for toilets.	Green spaces Beaches and cafes
Truro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – CCTV – 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	

*The staffing figures used relate to head count. Some of these staff will be working part-time and the hours worked vary a great deal on the ground.

As might be expected, local precepts had been raised to cover the costs of taking on all this additional responsibility and provision, and as indicated in Table 5, these rises were considerable, albeit that they started from a very low base. Three councils (Falmouth, Penzance and Truro) now have precept income of more than £1M a year and they manage a very wide range of activities. Of course, the ability to generate additional revenue has been critical to the rationale of devolution in Cornwall and elsewhere. Respondents argued that they had done this in dialogue with local residents, with expectations of improving the services as well as renewed efforts to reduce costs by bringing contracts in-house, re-contracting and/or greater scrutiny of contracted provision. At present, increases in the precepts paid to TPCs are not capped or restricted by the demand for public referendum, and this has given them greater licence at a time of public sector budget cuts. Indeed, as double-hatted Councillor Mike Thomas from Helston explained from the point of view of the unitary authority: “Devolution was seen as a way of dealing with austerity. So it wasn’t necessarily [about] the concept of localism and all that went with it; it was seen as a way in which a local area could take responsibility for itself and make things good by being willing to pay for more services.”

It is clear that all the assets being transferred require money spending on them, and this financial burden has been shifted almost entirely from the larger unitary council to the smaller TPCs. As Councillor Brian Palmer from St Austell put it:

“ Things like parks and libraries don’t make money, they just cost [laughs], they’re not assets, they’re liabilities. Good liabilities to have, we’re delighted to have the library and there are some great people working at the library too. My wife and I are both big readers so we’re always in and out of the library. Plus it does act incredibly well as a community hub, they’re always doing non-library things in the library and they’re a great team. In terms of the parks and gardens we’ve taken on, very quickly we were getting a lot of complimentary remarks from locals saying everything is looking better, what a lovely team you’ve got, and the guys themselves best of all are getting direct compliments from members of the public, which is brilliant. ”

As he later continued:

“ The only things that actually earn money that come within the grasp of local authorities really are car parks, and people can complain as much as they like about you shouldn’t have to pay to park in a town centre and it would do the business community a huge amount of good if they were all free blah-blah-blah, [but] watch them scream if we put the precept up to cover that entirely. It is a lot of money. ”

Given the scale of the financial risks involved in taking over asset management and service provision over a relatively short space of time, the research respondents were extremely sensitive to public opinion about the council tax going up. A number of them argued that they were taking a very careful approach to additional spending, trying to get better value for money for tax-payers while improving the quality of services. It is also true that smaller councils are less able to bear the risk that would be much more manageable for a larger council like Cornwall. What could be lost in a budget of millions could easily bankrupt a smaller council.

As Councillor Clive Polkinghorne from Hayle put it:

“ If you’re in Cornwall Council and you have a building with a bit of shoddy work and it falls on somebody’s head, you don’t want it to happen, but you know you’ve got £60 million in the bank and a huge insurance policy, so you’re covered. Whereas for us [it’s different]. ”

As a result, TPCs were proceeding with caution.

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)*	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 (£570,00 in 2013)	£130.13 to £390.38
St Agnes	£288,200 (£116,000 in 2016/17)	£95.23*
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

*Some councils have additional income from charges such as car parks. This can increase the budget considerably and as an example, St Austell generates 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. The budgets of all 28 Town Councils in Cornwall range from Falmouth at the top end to Marazion at the other (precept income £56,498 in 2018/19).

An emerging partnership?

The research interviews exposed the way in which the process and experience of devolution has evolved over time. Whereas in the early days of devolution Cornwall Council favoured offering long-term leases to the TPCs, budget cuts had prompted them to move towards freehold later on.

Whereas negotiators tended to be very cautious in the early days, they had become more willing to pass over responsibility as time went on. All the respondents said that in the 'early days' they had felt that Cornwall Council were trying to 'pass the buck' and off-load costly infrastructure on to them without due consideration for their needs. Over time, however, relationships were changing, and one respondent thought there had been a significant improvement since early 2018. In addition, representatives from TPCs had become more experienced in assessing the state of buildings and services, and developing business proposals to manage them, as well as more able to share ideas between themselves. Respondents reported now being better able to stand up for local interests in their negotiations with the larger body. On the other side of the table, Cornwall Council's officers also appear to have slowly recognised the strengths of the sector, albeit that culture change is reported to have been faster at the top than in the middle-layers of the council hierarchy (and more on this below).

However, the research exposed a significant lack of trust in Cornwall Council's motivations and decision making. Respondents found that Cornwall's officers were slow to act, ill-informed about what services cost to run, how staff were managed and what other parts of their own authority were doing. Respondents reported being asked to take over buildings that needed essential works doing, some of which would rectify existing health and safety violations, most of which would cost thousands of pounds. Clerks reported investigating parks and open spaces that had unsafe play equipment that needed urgent attention and emergency works. Indeed, due diligence in Camborne and St Austell revealed the existence of old mine workings under playing fields that raised major concerns for the local councillors taking them on. In scrutinising the conditions and costs associated with the buildings and facilities being transferred, most TPCs were getting more confident about their ability to negotiate over the necessary expenditure required to improve these assets before taking them on or to refuse the offers being made. However, this was harder to do at the start of the process. Similarly, the process of transferring the staff employed to provide services provided an opportunity to scrutinise and update existing contracts and conditions of employment and to update out of date DBS checks.

As the clerk from St Agnes, Lee Dunkley, explained in relation to the two years of negotiations he had endured over the library transfer: "There's a kind of crushing inertia at county hall - of indecision. People are kind of scared to make a decision." While staff in the library service wanted to transfer the building, Dunkley then encountered people in property and legal services who were much less committed to the project; the latter severely restricted by understaffing, and the former seemingly more interested in protecting their own budget lines and interests at the expense of progressing with the devolution project. As a result, the talks went round in circles and went on for years.

In the same vein, Councillor Bob Drew from Carn Brea highlighted what he called as feeling of 'institutional inertia' at county hall: "[It's] not really incompetence, it's just no one really seems to have the energy or the dynamism ... for a variety of reasons. I understand they've been whacked by central government cuts and I understand all that, but it just seems to be a struggle". This was reflected in the time it had taken to progress the hand-over of some small parcels of land in his parish that had been in discussion for years. Four-years after it was first mooted, the council was still in negotiations over the transfer of the land and some local monuments (see case study in Box 1). These kinds of delay were the norm across the cases examined and it obviously cost the TPCs a great deal in time, energy and money to pay for surveyor reports, legal advice and due diligence in a landscape that was constantly subject to change.

BOX 1: THE LONG NEGOTIATIONS OVER TRANSFERRING LAND IN CARN BREA PARISH

Cornwall Council had originally approached the council with a list of 36 parcels of land on it, suggesting that Carn Brea took them all or nothing, in 2015. When a number of councillors went to inspect the sites listed, it was clear that some of them had little benefit for the local community and would incur considerable cost in management, and so needed to be rejected. As Councillor Bob Drew explained:

“ There were two or three of them which were I think by any sensible person’s judgment, pieces of land which you would not take on unless you were completely mad. I mean there was one for instance, not so far away from here, where there is a very, very long and very narrow piece of land which has quite high mature trees growing on it, in actual fact it’s a tree belt. And it was planted deliberately as a sound barrier between an industrial estate, a light industrial estate and a residential area. So this piece of land is probably half a mile long but it’s probably no more than about 20 or 30 feet wide. And when you go and have a look at it all it’s got on it are these trees, which is fabulous. I’m sure it fulfils its function very, very well, but in terms of a liability, you know, I mean it’s just dreadful. ”

The parish council also discovered that part of one of the sites listed was in the process of being sold to Lidl and this gave them ammunition to reject the whole list, in favour of selecting the sites that suited them best. Further negotiations over each site were then subject to slow delay and conflict. And as an example, the parish tried to take over the monument to Richard Trevithick that had been neglected by Cornwall Council only to be confronted by a long, legal agreement and further discussions. As Bob Drew explained:

“ We had a legal document sent to us ... relating to the Trevithick monument. And when you go through it is like War and Peace ... All we want to do is take over responsibility for the maintenance and care of the monument. The monument sits on a little area of land behind which there is rather an ornate wall and ... we’ve said: “No, we don’t want to be responsible for all of that, it’s just the monument”. The important thing here is the monument to Richard Trevithick. All the stuff around it is totally incidental ...

All we want is a sheet of A4 paper which says ‘look, Carn Brea parish council agree to maintain the monument in a reasonable condition’. ”

Another set of problems arose when negotiating over a closed churchyard at St Andrew’s Pencoys in Four Lanes. The parish were prepared to take over the land but were aware of a long-standing dispute between local residents and Cornwall Council over rear access to the graveyard. While staff from Cornwall Council denied there were any problems, the parish had evidence of the dispute and wanted it sorted out before they took on the land as part of what was to become phase 1 of the transfers. As can be imagined, these negotiations over relatively small parcels of land and local assets took years and were still not completed at the time of interview (February 2019). The costs of this work were also considerable for both partners. Indeed, as Bob Drew put it in relation to the experience of Carn Brea Parish:

“ It has cost this council thousands of pounds because we have been persistently and consistently mucked about by the unitary authority and what I would describe as unfortunately, a lack of professionalism their end. ”

A number of respondents had been confronted with the particular issue of demands for overage on the properties being transferred. Councillors in Penzance had agreed to take over the freehold of two toilet blocks before the newly installed clerk, Hester Hunt, realised that overage had been included. As she explained this “means that if we sell the property they get 50 percent of any profit that we make for a period of about 80 years. So it’s ridiculous isn’t it ... if we were to invest in it or sell it ... [and] one of them is like next to the skate park on the front and you could turn most of it into a café.” Given the costs of running the building over the years, the expectation of securing overage was seen as extremely unfair and councils forced Cornwall Council to drop such demands in negotiations that took place later on in the process.

Many respondents had spent years in devolution negotiations and much of the time, they were encountering problems created by confusion and lack of communication between different groups of staff employed by Cornwall Council. Things agreed at one meeting would then be overturned at the next. Decisions made at one meeting would be over-ruled by finance, legal or property services staff at the next. The inclusion of a particular asset in one document could be removed without notice in the next version of the document, meaning that everything needed to be thoroughly checked. In this regard, the clerks from St Austell reported having to use their personal relationships with senior staff at Cornwall Council in order to reinforce the principal of partnership working. As they explained, they felt propelled to call on senior staff to “resource the legal service and also brief them a little bit about devolution - what it’s all about, the spirit of devolution - because quite frankly they’re just trying to stitch town and parish councils up all the time, you know”. Other respondents had similarly had to go to ‘the top’ to get things resolved.

The public and the precept

Despite such problems in negotiating devolution, however, almost all the respondents argued that it 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 Councillor Mike Thomas 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 Christmas lights turn on where the town is really stretched to capacity, and occasional other events. You need to ensure that there is a proper facility for the people to use. ”

This response was common across the TPCs and as Lee Dunkley from St Agnes put it, devolution “was as close to a no-brainer as you can get. The challenge is in doing it, not in deciding to do it. 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, it would be very hard for local councillors to do nothing while their public facilities were shut down. [2]

Research respondents argued that taking on local assets was clearly in the interest of the local community and the economy. They also argued that they could improve the quality of provision and achieve better value for money by taking them on. For TPC representatives, devolution was about local people and their representatives ensuring that “the destiny of the community ... is not dictated from county hall” (Lee Dunkley, St Agnes). As the clerk from Launceston, Chris Drake, put it: “We should be cutting the grass in the town, it’s our town, they’re our verges, it’s 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”. The clerk from St Austell, David Pooley likewise explained: “One of the really good things about having a town council is we can be very parochial, we can fight St Austell’s corner.”

Things like toilets, parks, roundabouts and libraries are critically important to the functioning of a local community with far-reaching implications for social and economic well-being. Indeed, as Councillor Val Dalley 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.” Almost all the clerks and councillors recognised this and they sought to defend the interests of their place and its people.

In so doing, respondents had made a significant effort to communicate with local residents, trying to explain what they were doing and why council precepts were rising so much. All the councils had a website (of varying quality), most had good links with local newspapers and a number distributed some kind of newsletter or magazine, either directly to households or via public places where it could be collected for free. A number of councils had also conducted additional consultation activities prior to confirming their decisions to take on particular buildings and services. As examples, Camborne did a piece of work consulting 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 their devolution agenda. In every case, local people supported the moves, albeit that they raised obvious concerns about having to pay more for the work.

In addition, securing public support for the decisions gave extra confidence to the councillors that they were doing the right thing, and these councillors then felt more able to delegate the daily decisions to council staff. As the clerk in St Austell, David Pooley, explained: “Going back to the beginning of the process we did a major consultation exercise in the town to start it all off ... we did a big consultation exercise.” This “gave us a mandate then to continue with devolution ... It helped the [council] members feel that they could delegate a lot of the decision making and day to day management to us, which made it manageable. Otherwise if I’d had to go to councillors for every decision we would never have got the devolution package through.”

As part of the process of deliberating over green spaces in Camborne, the town council discovered that Camborne Recreation Ground (given to the town by the Basset family for Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897) needed greater protection. A dispute over whether Cornwall Council wanted to retain half the ground for possible future development prompted the town council to launch a local campaign called ‘Keep Rugby at the Rec’. The campaign garnered a lot of attention and more than 4000 signed a petition asking that Cornwall Council lease the ground to Camborne Town Council. Once this had been done, the field could be protected through registration with the National Playing Field Association, ensuring that the town council were able to act as guardians for the community interest. This campaign raised the profile of the local town council. When they subsequently sought to engage people over the future of the green spaces and parks that they have taken over, they were more hopeful about a positive response. As the clerk from Camborne, Amanda Mugford, explained, they were going to do “a lot of consultation and engagement with the local community to say, ‘Actually, what do you need? What do you want? We’ve got this huge space, how can we best use this for everybody, all ages, abilities?’”

In the early days of the devolution experiment, TPCs were concerned about a public backlash against 'double-taxation'. And as the clerk in Falmouth, Mark Williams, explained:

“ The biggest issue to reconcile is double taxation. So 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 that

“ The classic example here is Falmouth Library. 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, we've said to our residents, we can do this, it's going to cost you an extra X pounds per year and we had absolutely no objection to that. What I always find enlightening is for a number of years under a different political regime at this council we set nought percent precepts. What I was regularly getting was residents ringing me up and saying, "Why can't the Town Council do this?" The last three or four years we've engaged in devolution. We've had to increase the precept in those years to do that. We get the odd objection, but predominantly what get now is a lot of positive reaction from residents saying, "Yes I'm pleased you did that. I'm pleased you told me you were going to do that. ”

Devolution has increased the amount of work that Falmouth do to communicate with local people. As Mark Williams explained:

“ We've become very good at telling people what we do well. We've never done that [in the past], you know [traditionally], the only time people engage with their councillors is when they've got something to complain about but now, one of the advantages we've got is we've got a very developed Cultural Services, you know Youth Services, education, library, the stuff that people want to come to. So we can use that to get our messages out there, and we do a regular guide as well [that goes to all households]. ”

When Mark Williams started working for Falmouth in 2003 he had 5 staff, managed a number of contracts and had a precept of “about £300,000”. Nothing significant changed until the onset of devolution in 2013 and the council now has a total budget of getting on for £2M (in 2019). It is significant that Falmouth’s growth has been about taking over new services but it also reflects their efforts to bring out-sourced contracts in-house. As Mark Williams explained:

“ Part of the growth is because we’ve brought contracts back in-house. Now councils like to contract, but actually you make a massive saving by delivering them in-house. It’s almost counter-intuitive because you’re recruiting staff, you’re buying plant and equipment, but actually that’s still more effective for us because we’re a small organisation we can use that workforce to be flexible across the services.”

Given that Falmouth need to manage a number of parks, public toilets, public spaces and a large cemetery, they can use generic grounds staff more efficiently than was possible in past when each was subject to contracting agreements managed by the particular private contractor and agreed with staff in Truro. Such contracting arrangements had a very detrimental impact on the flexibility of staff deployment and managing workloads. Falmouth now has the capacity to move its own staff around as needed to service the key green spaces in the town, regularly winning prizes for the work being done. The town council has also developed a new management structure to support this desired flexibility, combining activities where staff can be effectively deployed across a range of services. The most significant growth has been in ‘grounds and facilities’ as well as ‘cultural services’ that covers the library, art gallery and youth services in Falmouth. By employing people in-house and changing the management structure, it has been possible to provide better services with reduced costs, albeit that local people are paying a higher precept than they did in the past.

A similar practice has been developed in St Ives. The town council had taken over the tourist information and its four staff but when they agreed to take over the library they had an opportunity to merge the two services into one building and increase the opening times. As the town clerk, Louise Dowe, 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, upskilling with a more satisfying job.”

Looking ahead, St Ives also hope to be able to negotiate over some of the car park revenue for spending in the town. Given that the toilets are mainly used by visitors during the holiday season, it seemed to the council at least, only fair that Cornwall Council shared at least some of the revenue gained.

Increasing the profile of town and parish councils

Given the increased role of the TPCs in providing local services, respondents argued that this provided a good opportunity to improve the brand recognition of their council and its work. The larger towns like Camborne, Falmouth and St Austell had bought uniforms for staff, and branded their vans and signage to ensure that local people knew who was doing the work. As David Pooley, 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 to their 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.”

This was reinforced by local Councillor Brian Palmer who told me:

“It helps having those little white vans with the town council crest on floating around as well, you know? People see things happening for the benefit of their town.”

These local staff were also providing TPCs with extra “eyes and ears” (Sara Gwilliams) on the ground, feeding back information to ensure further improvements, ensuring that the council had a closer relationship with life in the town.

As indicated above, TPCs were using their libraries in order to reach out to the community and increase local recognition of the work they were doing. In St Ives, this had also 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 public use. The spaces had been refurbished and council staff were working hard to ensure that they were being used for local markets, activities, concerts and weddings. They were also able to open the library and tourist information centre for longer by combining them in one place, and overlapping the staff. The clerk, Louise Dowe, was 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:

“So 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 range of social and economic activities in St Ives.

In, Truro the transfer of the library and staff similarly provided an opportunity to bring the City's BID team, Citizens Advice Centre and adult education into one building, with the library, managed by the council. Taking over key buildings provided a way to find synergies across the services and increase the profile of the council. As is outlined in more detail below, Truro also has a very strong community development team, which along with the management of public spaces, allows them to engage with a variety of communities in the City. In order to widen its capacity, Falmouth had established Friends Groups to lead community engagement and activities in the major local parks (such as Kimberley Park and the grounds around Princess Pavillion). A number of other councils were doing similar work. Having taken over the treasured green spaces in their towns, they were trying to build a wider community of interested people around them. Many councils (Hayle, Falmouth, Penzance, St Agnes, St Ives, Truro) had similar networks of interested people who had engaged in neighbourhood planning groups that further widened the number of people with a stake in the development, heritage and economic strategy of their town.

An uneven landscape of support for this work

While all of the TPCs included in the research had majority support for devolution and localism, a minority reported divisions. Councillor Anthony Harris from St Ives town council was very concerned about the scale and speed of devolution. As he put it: "I think we've done too much, too quickly" and he objected to the increase in costs when the services were largely the same.

As he explained:

“ They [residents] are still getting the same toilets, the same library, the same service provided ... there's little betterment ... and that wouldn't be too bad if there was a corresponding reduction in the Cornwall Council tax but there isn't.

Councillor Harris had stood for the council 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 running services. These concerns were accentuated due to the fact that he lived in and represented residents in Lelant (an outlying village in the parish) 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 extras 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 Councillor Harris to articulate the concerns of his neighbours 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 just a service provider.

The research also 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 are critical to ensuring continuity in vision, devolution makes it more important to support the new councillors when they are elected, ensuring that they understand what has been happening and the implications of this for their work. As part of his work in Falmouth, for example, the clerk, Mark Williams, has started to do a lot more work to induct new councillors when they get elected. As he explained:

“ 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. Because a lot of them, well, some of them are persuaded to stand, some of them stand because it was a stepping stone onto Cornwall Council or other things ... 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 has started forward planning, they need to ensure that there is some continuity in vision and delivery despite any changes in personnel. This is likely to become increasingly important in other places as well, and it has implications for the work of CALC, as outlined further in the penultimate section below.

Developing a larger brief in the future?

Many respondents had expectations that TPCs will need to do even more local work in the future. This seemed particularly important in areas like Camborne where a lot of new housing development had been agreed by Cornwall Council without sufficient thought for the local social and physical infrastructure needed to underpin this new growth. Moreover, while the negotiations over section 106 money or the Community Infrastructure Levy were handled by the principal authority, these decisions had major implications for the local town council. The clerk, Amanda Mugford, was particularly concerned about: “managing development and the infrastructure that is needed for that development whether it's school places, whether it's transport links ... I think there's a huge challenge around that and providing quality public amenity services such as parks, playing fields, a hall to do your yoga in, whatever it is that people need to add to their quality of life, you know. Places for kids to play, activities for teenagers”. At present, the differentiated – and hierarchical - jurisdictions of local government mean that the TPCs have little, if any, role in these important decisions around planning and development spending. And yet, if devolution is to further develop, local towns need to have a much stronger voice in the negotiations about planning for the future of our communities and the financial support they will need.

Indeed, in Penzance, the need to spend the section 106 money released by Sainsbury's new development in the town, prompted local organisations to come together in 2014 in order to explore new ideas, including support for the new heliport in the town. As Mayor Dick Cliffe explained: “we now have a group called the Penzance Regeneration Partnership, which includes ... the five local Cornwall councillors, it's got two from the town council, it's got four representatives for the business community, from the Chamber of Commerce, and the BID (Penzance Business Improvement District), the lady from the Neighbourhood Plan, and the chair of Penwith College. We now sort out our business, you know, behind closed doors, and we present a united face to the outside world ... it's been very successful.” In Penzance, the town council was increasingly playing a coordinating role, bringing together the key organisations and community groups that have an interest in the town.

Councillors in Truro reported potential opportunities for them to engage in a wider range of activities in future including: “housing, community development and economic regeneration” as well as efforts to mitigate climate change. About 15 years ago, Truro City Council had provided some funding towards a community development worker who had built sufficient local support and raised additional money to build three community centres in the city, with another one under way. A relatively small investment had delivered long-term benefits for the local community. The community development worker, Damien Richards, had done a lot of organising around the estates on the edges of Truro, building up local community capacity. One councillor reported on an example from Rosedale where the local community group had “raised money by various fundraising coffee mornings and things. They made an application to the city grants or small grants, they got a £100 from us and then they bought every elderly resident on the estate got a little package, a gift, with some biscuits and a card to say ... if you need any help ring this number.” This kind of community development work was argued to be invaluable for the well-being of the local community and it is activity that has positive benefits for all the public services at work on the ground. At the time of writing, the city council was working with eight local community associations, many of them using the three community centres in the City. Community development workers were engaged with a social prescribing project that involved the NHS as well as adjoining parishes (and this shared service interest may be pertinent to the future of the debate about parish boundaries, outlined below).

Similarly, the clerks in St Austell reported their enthusiasm for taking on a greater role in providing youth services. As Sara Gwilliams put it: “The House youth project is really exciting ... we should take the lease of that on shortly from Cornwall Council probably before Christmas, and we’ve persuaded Young People Cornwall to relocate from Truro to St Austell and that will bring 30 or 40 jobs to the town. It will bring a youth information and advisory service centre, a one stop shop for young people, so they come in for advice on education, advice on medical issues ... [and] general youth things.” For Sara and the council, this would allow the council to better engage with young people in the town as well as helping to meet local concerns.

It is striking that the other large towns were also developing a wider brief of activities. Falmouth town council had provided strong support to the local Business Improvement District (BID) and was employing a Town Manager to contribute to the important work being done in the town. The BID share offices and back-office services with the town council and the joint ‘Town Team’ has done a lot to try and support local businesses by backing events and festivals to bring visitors into the town. They also brand empty shops with the ‘Town Team’ logo and work hard to try and encourage new businesses to take over the lease. As part of this broader vision, the council has also taken a much greater interest in managing behaviour and social relationships in the town. Reflecting the importance – and tensions – in having significant numbers of students in Falmouth, they have employed an Environment Education and Enforcement Officer who can help to manage important issues like parking, noise and litter, use of the beaches and night-time behaviour, before things get out of control. This assists the local police force and reassures local residents that local government is responding to their concerns.

It is significant that a number of other respondents highlighted concerns around which they wanted their council to act in the future. Lee Dunkley, the clerk in St Agnes, argued that community energy was something that the sector could look at in future. Launceston’s Chris Drake reported particular problems with traffic and parking enforcement in the town. Arguing that Cornwall Council lacked the resources to manage these properly and that it was well-known that they sent an enforcement officer to the town only one day a week, so that parking had become a significant problem. He suggested that the council needed the capacity to deal with it fast. If they took on a role in enforcement, they could act fast and reassure local people that action would be taken to improve the roads, parking and safety.

Clerk Chris Drake was also aware of other concerns in Launceston where the council could potentially add value including providing services for older people who needed transport to attend lunch clubs that would then reduce their social isolation. The council had already invested in improving the sound and light quality of the Town Hall and had hired a community events organiser in order to bring local people into the building but he felt they could also add services of their own in the hall.

As he explained:

“ To this day, of all the successful things we done, our favourite one was the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra ... it was packed. There were age groups from little children to proper sort of Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra watchers ... amongst the younger children, there was a little lad who was sort of standing on his mum’s knees, as you do, and was sort of pretty vocal, you know, “What’s that man doing mum?” The usual. And when there were pauses, kind of, clapping that--, that technically is the wrong time to clap. But the beauty was that when the orchestra took their break, because they were on the floor, they had to walk out through the audience, and on the way back in, the conductor high-fived the little boy. ”

While the research has documented the role of TPCs in taking over assets and services, it also highlighted enthusiasm for TPCs to act as coordinators for a range of activities in their towns and communities, building relationships between all the key public sector bodies (health, social care, schools, police, benefits services) and community groups. In Helston a number of councillors had been working to establish a local Community Interest Company that could tap a wider pool of talent and interest in order to reinvigorate the town centre. In St Austell the council had played a similar role in relation to anti-social behaviour in the town, reporting that: “we’ve been doing a lot of work on antisocial behaviour and been held up as a good example of good work in terms of bringing in all the communities, all the agencies together” (David Pooley). The council in Penzance was doing very similar work. These local networks could also involve the smaller parishes that fringe each of the larger towns, helping to coordinate information exchange and potentially, avoiding some of the concerns about differential precept rates and service usage that are outlined below.

Boundary problems

The larger councils included in this research were all exercised by the sustainability of their tax base and the perceived injustice over council tax payments in relation to service use from outside their borders. As outlined, the larger towns and councils had all put up their precepts in order to pay for the additional services they were now providing, but their wider rural catchments consisted of smaller parishes where people paid very little tax and made no contribution to the work being done in the town. As Dick Cliffe, 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 probably as large as Penwith. 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.”

The same issue cropped up in every other location. As a Truro councillor explained:

“ You know ... I can walk from my ward ... and I can stand in the same street with my back looking at two houses, back to back, their gardens back onto each other and one is paying £250 and the other is paying £40. And they both use the same facilities, so it can’t be morally right.” This councillor later added that: “In my view, we should at least be talking to our adjoining parishes to see if there’s common ground because they may have to pay more but they would probably get a higher level of service. ”

The ongoing community governance review being led by Cornwall Council in 2019 might provide advantages for these larger councils. If the review grasps the opportunities for change, they could develop new geographical boundaries around every town and larger village, incorporating neighbouring parishes without necessarily abolishing them. As clerk David Pooley from St Austell explained:

“ It would help us to have a bigger footprint because there are parts of St Austell that are outside of our parish ... people often telephone say from the north of St Austell and they think they’ve been missed by the weed spraying and the grass cutting and things [when they haven’t]. ”

Even without moving the physical borders around towns and larger villages, there is scope for forging more reciprocal relationships between the towns and their neighbouring parishes.

Recognising that “the little parishes around us become a little bit nervous at times. I think they’re wondering whether they’ll be swallowed up into us as well”, Sara Gwilliams and David Pooley both advocated closer working relationships over service provision and costs. As David Pooley suggested:

“ I think this might be our next step. Rather than take on more functions from Cornwall Council I think we might look at our neighbours and offer our services to some of our neighbouring parishes ... Because we’ve got the expertise now ... the difficulty with the services we have is we have to change in steps, so the next change in terms of our grounds maintenance team will be another truck and two more people perhaps a bit more machinery, possibly a supervisor or something. You know, so you have to move in stages. ”

A number of respondents also raised concerns about the rationale of Cornwall Council’s existing Community Network areas, panels and associated officers. There is widespread confusion about the role of these bodies and officers, and some concern about their boundaries. As Hayle Councillor John Pollard put it: “my personal view which I’m pounding at County Hall, is that those networks need to be redrawn and rejigged. They were a construct ... very much dependent on the districts and we need to review them”. Hayle’s inclusion with St Ives made little sense to respondents who also queried the expectation that these bodies had recently been given the authority and capacity to make limited spending decisions. Indeed, the recent decision to give each panel £50,000 to spend on highways was seen as a way to fuel further problems meaning that councils could end up “fighting with our neighbours to get what we want” (clerk Ellie Giggall, Hayle).

Others went further to suggest that the network areas should be scrapped and that the community governance review could explore more sensible geographical boundaries or networks of towns and parishes, based on the larger towns. There are questions about economies of scale and cultural affinities that support working in this way, bottom-up, seeing what makes sense on the ground. There could be benefits for both large towns and smaller communities if this was carefully handled.

Remembering the circularity of Local Government change (and the danger of going round in circles again)

A Truro councillor with several decades' experience in local government reported that devolution was about the city's assets 'coming home' where they really belonged. She had served long enough to know that: "Truro city council owned them [the local assets] in the beginning, then Carrick confiscated them, then Cornwall Council confiscated them. We're getting back what we had, what Truro people have paid for in the beginning!" The same was true for all the other councils in Cornwall, the vast majority of which had transferred the freehold of their assets to the new District Councils in 1974 and from which they had been passed to the new unitary authority in 2009. As a further example, Helston Borough Council had its own housing stock as well as the toilets, library and parks before the reform in 1974 but these were then lost to the new District before being passed on to Cornwall Council in 2009.

Unusually, Hayle Town Council had retained ownership of five parks and gardens that they then leased to the new district council in 1974. These leases had been passed on to the new unitary council in 2009, and the assets were now being returned. In forty years, the reorganisation of local government had moved the responsibility and management of these assets to two different sets of councillors before they were returned to local control. As long-serving Hayle councillor, John Pollard, explained:

“ In 74 they wanted to take over everything and Penzance gave them everything, St Ives did. We were quite dogged that we weren't going to because we would always be out on a limb even in the rural district council. So, going to a district council we felt it was best that we retain them and eventually, we persuaded the district council to maintain them because they were maintaining the assets they'd taken over from Penzance. So we had a big fight in my day, and we got them to maintain them. That was a bit of Hayle stubbornness initially. ”

When Cornwall Council declared they would no longer provide these services, Hayle had little choice but to take back their assets and contract or hire the staff who were working to maintain them. Since then, they have also been offered additional buildings and services that were owned and provided by Cornwall Council such as the public toilets and the library. Whereas they had decided to contract staff in relation to most of the grounds work and toilet cleaning, they had then taken over the staff who work in the library. This has obvious implications for the council that then needed to develop a stronger role as employers. As the clerk, Ellie Giggall explained in relation to the decisions about staffing:

“ I'm watching other town councils all the time. It's not my decision, it'll be... the Council's decision, but I am looking at it and there are real HR issues. You've got to weigh up managing HR issues, managing lots of staff... and all the equipment that they would need, the storage of these things, It's quite a headache whereas actually, if you contract it out, it is easy to manage. ”

Later she continued on this theme saying:

“ We’ve established very good routine monthly meetings with our contractors ... we’ve got two big contracts, one is for the maintenance of all the open space land, they don’t do the flower-beds, our gardener will do all the flower-beds, but they do the grass-cutting, hedge trimming, leaf clearance ... Tree work and things we still have, but we sometimes might go out to other contractors for things like the more bespoke work in there. And then our other contract is for the cleansing of the toilets. We try and do as much of the maintenance as we can, but of course we have to buy in specialised electricians and so on. ”

Hayle council demonstrates how much things have changed in a relatively short space of time and clerks and councillors have had to work out what is best for their town. As Ellie Giggall put it: “we didn’t realise almost what we were getting ourselves into” and this and all other councils are involved in an ongoing process of change that sometimes takes us almost full-circle, back to where we began.

Building capacity amongst the town and parish councils

It is striking that many of the clerks working in Cornwall’s towns and parishes had considerable experience of local government, having previously been employed by one of old district councils or another town/parish in Cornwall (Chris Dawson in Helston, Louise Dowe in St Ives, Lee Dunkley in St Agnes, Amanda Mugford in Camborne, David Pooley and Sara Gwilliams in St Austell, Mark Williams in Falmouth) or by local government in other parts of the country (Hester Hunt in Penzance, Chris Drake in Launceston). These individuals had a wealth of experience and capacity and were generally in post much longer than many of their negotiating partners in Cornwall Council’s legal, service-oriented and localism teams who were vulnerable to redeployment and redundancy due to ongoing budget cuts in the council.

Councillor Mike Thomas from Helston argued that devolution would not work without a good clerk saying that:

“ Our financial officer, the clerk, is top notch you know, he is certainly somebody who, as are the other ones that I’ve met in Cornwall, is really switched on. You have to have a business plan that show that you’ve got the capacity to take on the extra work. And you also need to have the facilities and the staff, or the capacity to take on staff because you can’t do it without the money and you can’t do it without the people. So you can obviously recruit but you need to have a good leader in terms of the chief financial officer and also a council that fully supports it. ”

The role of the clerk is a particularly challenging one, especially when stretched over the demands of devolution. As clerk Amanda Mugford from Camborne put it: “it is a highly pressurised job both in having to know such a lot and learn such a lot about new subjects all the time... and adapt and change and move and inform your councillors. You’ve got to manage your councillors as well as manage your staff. It is a tough, tough job”. While the range of skills attached to the role has dramatically increased, the status of the post has yet to catch up.

Indeed, as the clerk of St Agnes, Lee Dunkley explained, you need a good clerk and a very good team to manage things well:

“ You need someone that can do the role effectively - looking at things holistically and managing everything that’s going on for the council in the community, within the council’s remit. But in order for me to do that here, I need really good staff to support and to take away the other bits and pieces that I would otherwise be caught up in... That’s the capacity issue... A clerk with a legal background will probably quite enjoy a lot of elements of the devolution work, but might despair at working with people or managing people, or sorting out contractors to cut the public footpaths, whatever it may be. And then a clerk with a financial background will enjoy doing that side of things, the accounts and the budgeting. We hail from so many different... areas and there are some that will not really have any particular professional background and may have entered a relatively small parish council as a clerical worker, a minute taker. They’re going to need so much support to develop into what they need to be if they’re going to be taking on services. ”

For Dunkley, this also meant hiring in expertise when it was needed and all the respondents had bought in legal and surveying services when deciding whether to advance a devolution project or not.

A number of respondents also highlighted the importance of supporting each other as part of the devolution agenda. The formal links established through CALC, as well as less formal personal relationships, had proved invaluable to many respondents when they faced challenges in their negotiations with Cornwall Council. Councillor Bob Drew from Carn Brea highlighted the wisdom embodied in the CALC network in Cornwall as well as amongst Cornwall’s town clerks saying: “When you sit in a room with Mark Williams and Carl Hearn it doesn’t matter how smart you think you are, you rapidly become aware that you’re in the presence of two people who know their business inside out and upside down. When you rub shoulders with these people and you pick up the knowledge and the expertise, even though you don’t automatically get it, you know [it clashes] with this culture at County Hall that suggests everybody from town and parish councils is stupid!”

Councillor Bob Drew further reported that being involved in CALC allowed him to glean intelligence from other councils that he could then apply to his own: “I was able to ask people questions, you know, people from Newquay and Penzance and Liskeard and Bodmin and Falmouth particularly, and find out what they had been doing and if there had been problems, where they occurred and so on and so forth. I was able to come back to here to Carn Brea and say, “Well look, I think this is how it’s supposed to work, this is what’s been happening up to now elsewhere across the county, I think these are the sort of things that we need to be watching and looking for and so on.” As he continued: “the great concern bordering almost on cynicism is, if Cornwall Council is prepared to give you this piece of land for a pound, yeah, it’s like the old saying, isn’t it, if it looks too good to be true it probably is.”

These sentiments were widely shared amongst the respondents and a number of clerks and councillors reported feeling patronised by staff from Cornwall Council who assumed they were less able and more amateur than themselves. As one clerk remarked: “I’m frequently spoken down to as if, you know, what are you worried about? Don’t be so stupid, we know better than you, we’ve got a robust approach, we’re the experts. We’re the big council. You’re just the amateurs!” Likewise, a councillor reported that: “It may be a highly personal view of mine but I think it’s borne out by reality, [there] seems to be a culture within Cornwall Council, it’s not necessarily at the top and it’s not necessarily at the bottom, but there seems to be a kind of middle level there who seem to think that people on town and parish councils are stupid.”

Respondents were not, however, suggesting that all the fault lay with the larger body. A number of clerks and councillors recognised the growing demands of the job and the need for more training. As Councillor Bob Drew suggested: “There is a large void in training giving our people the skills and knowledge that they should have.” And clerk Lee Dunkley from St Agnes made a similar response about training saying that:

“ NALC and the local associations need to absolutely massively ramp up training for councillors. These are people that are now making significant decisions. We’re not just talking about whether the bus shelter gets cleaned once a year or twice a year, as might have been the case ten years ago, or whether we give £500 to the church roof or £250. It’s not like that now. You need councillors that have a good understanding of the whole array of things that the council needs to do and a good understanding of how to think forward, not just fire fight. ”

However, it is also clear that Cornwall Council need to do a better job in planning, managing and delivering the devolution agenda from their side of the table.

National issues

Overall, the research has highlighted important issues for the councils in Cornwall but it also raised a number of issues that can only be tackled by much broader change. Devolution has exposed the fact that TPCs are not given the political weight that they are now due in relation to the increase in their role, budgets and impact. As clerk Chris Drake from Launceston explained: “The big issue we have is, that at central government level, we’re not classed as local government. I know, as an example, there was the recent Community High Street Fund, where the government gave out umpteen... millions of pounds to be put in a pot for high streets, but town councils weren’t allowed to put their name in that, because we’re not classed as local government authorities.” Without access to national government funding like this, TPCs could not realise the more ambitious aspects of the work they were planning to do.

There were also complaints about having to pay Business Rates on all public buildings, even toilets, so tax liabilities had also been transferred with the assets. NALC and a number of local councils were lobbying government for change on this front. Indeed, North Cornwall’s MP, Scott Mann, had played a significant role in securing political reform at the end of 2018. (3) In addition, Chris Drake argued that the law needed to be strengthened in relation to the internal governance of local councils. Given that they had a larger role, and there was more at stake than was the case in the past, there was a greater need to have a more robust code of conduct to ensure that clerks and councillors could enforce good behaviour and the highest standards of practice. This too would require a change in the law of the land which could then influence the emerging role of local councils.

Conclusions and recommendations

Due to the combined impact of greater political support for devolution and localism, alongside the economic realities of cuts in local government funding, TPCs are now playing a greater role in local government in Cornwall. After more than 200 years of centralisation and an erosion of their role, a particular combination of political and economic forces have propelled TPCs back on to the frontline of local government. In Cornwall, the larger towns and parishes have risen to the challenge. In less than a decade, many have taken on significant increases in their responsibilities, size and budgets. Despite concerns about the risks of taking on 'assets' and raising precepts, as well as major challenges in the negotiations that have taken place with Cornwall Council, the process of devolution has been remarkably smooth. In Cornwall's larger towns and parishes, the public realm is now managed by local councillors and council staff. There is evidence of considerable improvements in the quality of service provision. TPCs are able to pay closer attention to the buildings and facilities on their patch, and invest in their maintenance and improvement. They are also better able to police contracts so that services are more responsive, or to bring the staff in-house to improve the flexibility of service provision as well as job quality.

Devolution is enabling a closer relationship between local people and the decision makers who are responsible for their public toilets, parks and libraries. TPCs are also expanding their capacity for local decision making and are widening their brief to consider additional services they could provide as well as the need to play a coordinating role in their area. The research has found that TPCs can play a significant role in building a coalition of interested parties in any town or parish, finding areas of common concern, responding to local needs and taking an interest in the future development of their locality. As such, this fits very much with Cornwall Council's declared aims to support localism as a way to underpin its service delivery and community engagement in future (Cornwall Council, 2016).

However, the research has exposed the extent to which a 'natural' geography is emerging, focused on the larger towns and parishes, as they come to play a coordinating role amongst key organisations in their patch, including their neighbouring parishes. In some areas, this emergent geography does not coincide with the 19 community networks areas that have been created by Cornwall Council. Going forward, there is scope to explore the extent to which local government can be (re)organised around the larger towns and parishes, supporting them to play an even greater role in coordinating relationships across their patch. This would need to involve the local voluntary sector and community groups and this very local layer of activity has yet to feature strongly in the development of localism in Cornwall.

This kind of work is already in evidence in relation to youth services (Falmouth and St Austell), anti-social behaviour (Falmouth, St Austell), community development (Truro), developing ideas about affordable housing and local enforcement intervention (Launceston, St Ives), and economic development (Falmouth, Penzance). The next stage of localism might be to focus on this emergent geography of local government whereby the larger towns and parishes provide a hub for partnership and innovation in their area. These are issues that are being explored by Locality's Commission on the Future of Localism, from which Cornwall's experience is being connected to a national conversation. The hope is to share learning between areas and across the scales of local government institutions today.

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End Notes:

- (1) <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/subsidiarity>
- (2) Of course, this argument is limited by the fact that I only interviewed TPCs that were supporting devolution, albeit to different degrees, but there are only a very small number of places where local assets have been closed because the local parish council was unable to take them on and no other solution could be found. Examples include the libraries in Fowey and Padstow and some public toilets on the Lizard. There will be others about which I am unaware. As the clerk of St Agnes, Lee Dunkley, put it, devolution “falls to the town and parish councils’ decision-making ability and quality. So, if they’re good then that system works, but it’s a patchwork of services... Although I’m immersed in it and I should be a keen advocate come what may, devolve, devolve, devolve, I’m not. Not really. If it works in places then it should be celebrated and where it doesn’t work in places, it should be highlighted. I don’t think it is a case of devolve at all costs... I know that I’m going against the grain”. For Dunkley, weak TPC posed a challenge to successful devolution and no-one had a solution for solving that issue. It is also true that Cornwall has sold off some additional land and buildings rather than put them up for transfer. Due to the established hierarchy of local government organisation, they have not had to discuss these with local councils. More information is available in the database collected by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (2019). If there was a genuine balance of power between the different tiers of government, this ‘quiet asset sale’ would not have been possible.
- (3) Reform has been agreed, partly on the back of calls made in Cornwall: <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/news/entry/1104-nalc-s-call-for-an-end-to-toilet-tax-answered>



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

This research was facilitated by Sarah Mason from Cornwall's Association of Local Councils and I am very grateful to all those who took part in the research. The ongoing engagement in the work of Locality's Commission on the Future of Localism made by Cornwall Council's Localism Team has also been invaluable in ensuring that the research reaches a wider audience and can shape policy and practice in future. Limited research funding has been provided by the University of Exeter, for which I am very grateful.

Produced as a contribution to Locality's Commission on the Future of Localism

ISBN: 978-0-9933713-5-6