AWICS Independence.....Integrity.....Value
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Public Services News October 2015

Manchester Town Hall: The City is considered to have led the way on devolution

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Foreword

Dear Reader,

In this edition of the Public Services News, we review the progress of the Cities and Local Government Bill through the House of Lords. The bill has now arrived in the House of Commons to receive further scrutiny. Related to the content of the bill, the second article looks at a number of devolution deals in the North of England, such as Manchester, Sheffield, and Leeds. Out of those, Manchester remains the most comprehensive deal. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority has committed to establishing a mayoral office, the Department for Communities & Local Government's preferred means for accountability over devolved services. We point to Cornwall, as the first example of a rural county administration to strike a deal without the establishment of an elected mayor.

In the third article, we point to the upcoming government spending review. Results of the review will be published in November and George Osborne has already announced his intention to save a further £20billion in government departments until 2019/20. The last two articles are on a critique of the government's green record by England's ten leading environmental charities; and exciting news of large redevelopment projects by Oldham Council as well as the creation of an investment vehicle that other Greater Manchester councils were invited to participate in.

For feedback, please contact Adrian Waite at Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk . We hope you find this newsletter informative.

Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill — review

A centre piece of the government's effort to reform the balance of power between local government and the central government is the Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill (further referred to as 'the bill'). The summary for the new bill reads as follows:

> *"A Bill to make provision for the election of mayors for the areas of, and for conferring additional functions on, combined authorities established under Part 6 of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009; to make other provision in relation to bodies established under that Part; to make provision about local authority governance; and for connected purposes."*

After scrutiny in the House of Lords, the bill has now been passed on to the House of Commons, where it had its first reading on 21st July 2015.

Early drafts of this bill were criticised for their wording and content. For example, representatives in local government, particularly from rural areas, complained that the bill was biased towards the needs and requirements of predominantly urban areas of city regions. David Hodge, County Councils Network chair, and Neil Clark, District's Council Network chair, warned of a 'two-speed approach to devolution which was too narrowly focused on city regions'. This criticism has now been addressed by changes in the language and content. The revised bill's title refers to 'local authorities' and in its content the bill states that the preferred way for devolving powers is by the accountability of a mayoral office, but the revised bill accounts for localities where establishing a mayoral office is contested or inappropriate.

David Sparks, Chair of the Local Government Association, welcomed the changes, saying:

> *"[The Bill] was very much trailed as a cities devolution bill but it's actually a Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill and from our perspective that is very important. To us devolution has always been within the context of devolution throughout the UK, following the Scottish referendum, but it is not just about combined authorities. The LGA has been making the case for a long time that any devolution must reach all parts of England because the opportunities around jobs, economic growth, public service transformation are relevant and important to everywhere in England. It's good that Greater Manchester and others have been leading the agenda but there's so much more possibility out there. So it's a really positive, if not perfect, step to acknowledging that in the legislation."*

In broad strokes what does the revised bill do?

The provisions included in the new bill regulate how the Secretary of State of the Department for Communities and Local Government would devolve authority over government services. It extends the provisions included in the Local Democracy, Economic Development, and Construction Act (2009) that established Combined Authorities with increased responsibility over transport and economic development. The mayor would be chair and member of a combined authority. A proposal for the establishment of a combined authority including a mayoral office may be made by a single local authority or several adjacent administrations.

In some cases, the Secretary of State also has the power to *order* the formation of a combined authority, a right that may be used in cases where the local authorities in an area fail to agree to institutional reform.

As the Chair of the combined authority, the Mayor may confer functional responsibilities to a number of deputies who would be accountable to them. In Manchester's case this includes 'general functions' such as a consolidated transport budget, strategic planning, and a housing investment fund. The mayor may also become the Policy and Crime Commissioner, bringing him or her on par with the Mayor of London's responsibilities for the policy. The bill provides changes that would allow the mayor to be accountable for his or her own budget by making the devolved authority the major precepting organisation for its territory. Devolved authorities would be able to borrow money or to raise levies for functions that are not individually exercised by the mayor.

The bill would also allow for the transfer of any public function currently administered by government agencies or local government to the newly founded combined authority. This may include relevant asset transfers, and transfers of rights and liabilities.

The latest amendments to the bill introduced further flexibilities to account for regions where establishment of a mayoral office may be problematic. Amendments include the introduction of a flexible use of the requirement for a mayor. Under the new model, the *location* of a local authority may be used as a factor to decide whether the mayoral model is suitable or not. This change is particularly relevant for counties and district administration away from cities. The 'physiology' of local administration here may be more concerned with a number of cities and towns set within an otherwise rural hinterland. Clause 10 of the bill includes regulation for cases in which a local government does not perceive the mayoral combined authority to be the best way of reorganising for a devolution deal. This may be the case, for example, for two-tier county councils that consist of a number of district administrations that currently enjoy some autonomy on aspects such as planning.

However, this part of the legislation remains somewhat opaque, largely also due to the ambiguity for alternative forms of local government reorganisation in such complex contexts.

What were the responses to the revised bill?

A number of councils have indicated that they are considering changing their constitutional set up. For example, Birmingham, Walsall, Dudley and Sandwell councils as well as Solihull and Coventry Councils indicated that they will discuss forming combined authorities. Alongside other closed agreements with, for example, Manchester, Leeds and West Yorkshire, and the Sheffield Region, the effect of the bill on the *physiology* of government in the United Kingdom, is the formation of larger units of local government compared to today's setup. This drives a consolidation in administrative functions that will have a significant impact on the political organisations involved but also for the 'user experience' of the citizen as the delivery of public services is reshaped.

Interesting discussions happened in the House of Lords. Given the separate devolution bills for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, in addition to the Cities and Local Government Devolution bill for England, some members of the House of Lords called for a wider debate of the future structural form of United Kingdom government.

Lord Norton said:

> *"Let us take the measures in the Queen's Speech that affect different parts of the United Kingdom. It is not just that we have a Scotland Bill, a Wales Bill and a Northern Ireland Bill. We also have a Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill. I am not suggesting that we have a grand, all-encompassing devolution Bill [...] but I think that these measures make the case for standing back and making sense of how the different parts of the United Kingdom fit together. Otherwise, we are in danger of creating a rather haphazard and potentially unstable patchwork."*

In essence, this is a permissive bill that gives the Secretary of State authority to conclude 'devolution deals'. However, it is part of a broader pattern in which the level of devolution to different parts of the United Kingdom, and even to different parts of England, could be markedly different.

As individual local authorities in England begin to prepare to consider institutional reform for greater local autonomy, the devolution agenda in the United Kingdom will remain an interesting challenge for both members of local government and central government for years to come.

City devolution deals for Manchester, Sheffield, and Leeds and the county administrations

Here we compare the devolution deals that the government has reached so far. The most prominently known case is the deal between the central government and Manchester.

As we mentioned in our July 2015 newsletter, in the most recent budget speech, the chancellor announced a number of devolutionary measures that aim at strengthening the "Northern Powerhouse" by handing out further power starting with Manchester and West Yorkshire.

For this matter, further deals focus on the city regions of Sheffield and Leeds that we compare in the table below.

	Greater Manchester Agreement	**Sheffield City Region Agreement on Devolution, 2015**	**Leeds City Region and West Yorkshire Agreement on Devolution, 2015**
Local context	£17.4billion business rates. First mayoral election in 2017. Territory is predominantly urban.	£7.5billion business rates. Sheffield would expand the functions of the mayoral office already in place.	£6billion business rates. Local councils are still working through devolution deal to potentially form "West Yorkshire Combined Authority"
Business rates retention	Yes. Since April, Manchester keeps 100% of the growth in business rates beyond baseline.	—	—
Skills	"Responsibility for the Apprenticeship Grant for Employers"	Local Enterprise Partnership and local authority will form a joint venture with the Skills Funding Agency. Budgets over adult skill provision are devolved.	Set-up of Apprenticeship Training Agencies, 'Apprenticeship Hubs', 14-24 Apprenticeship Academy

	Greater Manchester Agreement	Sheffield City Region Agreement on Devolution, 2015	Leeds City Region and West Yorkshire Agreement on Devolution, 2015
Business support	Access to “devolved business support budgets, including the Growth Accelerator, Manufacturing Advice Service and United Kingdom Trade and Investment Export Advice”	Intent for developing a “devolved approach to the delivery of business support from 2017”. The Local Enterprise Partnership’s Growth Hub takes on greater prominence for business support delivery.	3,000 businesses to benefit from £31million investment in sectors with long term growth prospects
Transport	Consolidated transport budget, with a multi-year settlement. Responsibility for franchised bus services	Intent for stronger collaboration of Sheffield with the Highways Agency and Network Rail on key infrastructure projects.	£1bn local fund to invest in transport over the next decade.
Housing	£300million Housing Investment Fund	£200million Sheffield City Region Investment Fund	£400million city region Investment Fund
Health care	Intention to develop a business case for the integration of the social care and health care budgets for Manchester.	—	—

The deals that the government closed so far were closed with local authorities of larger urban areas, including the city regions of Manchester, Sheffield, and Leeds. This matches the government’s agenda for a “Northern Powerhouse”. Here, Greater Manchester presents the leading model, including retention of business rates, as well as authority over a combined health and social care budget. Early on, Manchester made a clear commitment to the creation of a mayoral office. Potentially in return, the central government has made clearer commitments to devolve business, policing and crime commissioning responsibilities, as well as the authority over health and social care expenditure.

Each of the closed deals is heavily focused on the participation of the Local Enterprise Partnerships and prominently feature new agency collaborations centred on skills delivery and business support. Leeds’ plans are particularly strong on getting young people into work by emphasising apprenticeship models both by forming local academies, but also schemes that make apprenticeships enticing to local businesses.

Cornwall — a trailblazer for devolution deals with county administrations

County administrations and local government in rural parts of England have been sceptical about the government’s apparent focus on the larger city regions. Now a new group of councils, including Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, and Cornwall emerge to test the limits of the emerging devolutionary framework. At present, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire are considering converting to combined authorities in advance of full negotiations for a devolution deal. Nottinghamshire has seven district / borough councils, while there are eight in Derbyshire. It is likely that in the case of a merger to form a combined authority, a significant share of the role and responsibility of these former district councils will transfer into the combined unitary authority, which will likely be based in Nottingham or Derby.

A special case that the government is currently working on is a devolution deal for Cornwall that lacks a significant major urban centre. The deal between Cornwall and the government was published on 22nd July 2015. It is the first deal closed with a county administration and does not include the requirement for an elected mayor. This deal is comprised of the local government, the local National Health Service clinical commissioning group, as well as the Local Enterprise Partnership. At present the deal excludes the devolution of local business rates or housing. However, similar to Manchester, Cornwall will be able to prepare a business plan for the devolution and integration of health and social care budgets. Local and central government will work towards integrating local business support services. Cornwall would gain a greater say over the franchising of local bus services and be able to introduce an Oyster-card-style smart ticketing system.

John Pollard, leader of Cornwall Council, describes the deal as ‘the first stage of a longer journey towards delivering the full case for Cornwall’.

In an article for Public Finance, Jack Hunter of IPPR North points out that Cornwall’s case was supported by suitable local factors. He said,

> *“Cornwall was arguably chosen as the first county to gain wider powers because it is a self-contained area, with coterminous borders for healthcare, policing and economic development. It is also a unitary council and has a strong regional identity. Many other areas do not have it so easy.”*

For local authorities that consider to convert to combined authorities, he adds that

> *“There is still a distinct lack of due process for new and emerging combined authorities to follow. The government should set out in greater clarity the procedure for new and emerging combined authorities to follow to bid for greater powers, in order to encourage other areas to come forward with their own plans and to ensure that the devolution of powers from Whitehall proceeds smoothly.”*

<u>Reactions to devolution deals</u>

Some representatives from the Leeds City Region had hoped for more ambitious outcomes. The agreement trails the scope of the agreement reached with the Manchester Greater Authority. A public statement on West Yorkshire government’s website includes a quote by Councillor Peter Box, Chair of the West Yorkshire Combined Authority. He said:

> *“The deal is disappointing and doesn’t match the scale of our ambition. It undermines the Government’s claim to want a strong Northern powerhouse. If we are to turn that into a reality we need real devolution, including fiscal devolution, to enable us to bring about a step change in the City Region’s economy."*

The leader of Cornwall Council, John Pollard, on the other hand was more satisfied with his agreement with the government. He said:

> *“We were early in recognising the growing momentum of the national agenda for devolving powers from Westminster and, by creating a ‘Case for Cornwall’ which was strong and realistic. We have had a positive response from the government. This is the first stage of a longer journey towards delivering the full case for Cornwall. We will now be working with partners to develop an integrated health and social care system, and deliver significant economic growth, with enhanced business support, greater access to employment and training opportunities, together with a much improved public transport network and more efficient use of public sector buildings.”*

Commenting on the deal, Mark Hawthorne, acting chair of the County Councils Network, said to the Public Finance magazine:

> *"Given the potential benefits of devolution to county areas we expect to see the deal grow and develop over time, as the Greater Manchester deal has. Today's agreement also sets a precedent for bringing more decisions and services closer to county communities across England, and could see the potential of county economies maximised to help meet government growth ambitions and plans to boost productivity."*

Commentary

In this article we pointed to emerging 'city' deals between the central government and Manchester, Sheffield, and Leeds. Based on these deals, the approach taken for Leeds and Sheffield is driven by the Local Enterprise Partnership and so far the clearest outcomes may be the devolution of business-related support (including skills training and employment support). The devolution of other areas, such as the retaining of business rates or greater say over social and health care, as is the case for Manchester, have not yet been reached.

For rural county administrations, Cornwall is the first of its kind to agree a devolution deal. Due to the special local context that may make Cornwall already fairly 'bounded' in its administration, the deal also includes devolution of health and social care as well as greater say over investment that flows in from central government and European grants. While Cornwall already is a combined authority, the deal does not require it to implement a mayoral office.

In the previous article we pointed to commentators, such as Lord Norton, who called for a systematic approach to devolution. The review of the deals here exemplifies that all parties involved have yet to learn and understand the process of devolution and what it involves under which conditions. For the sake of manageability, the government is likely to be well aware of the need for consolidating the offers it makes to local authorities. Too many disparate deals may result in a bureaucratic administrative 'nightmare' in future years.

At present, learning by doing may be an acceptable approach, but as more local authorities sign up to devolution deals, it should become more transparent which sets of requirements are expected in return for which powers. Unfortunately, deals shied away from distribution of taxation and significant fiscal responsibilities, which is what some see as the real gold standard of the devolutionary agenda. While this is what more local authorities will demand, it remains questionable whether they will get there.

Preview of the spending review due in November this year

In July 2015, George Osborne initiated the 2015 spending review. The final results of this review are due to be announced on 25th November 2015. As part of the review, Osborne asked government departments to identify a further £20billion in budget savings that can be made until 2019/20. Unprotected departments (departments except the National Health Service, schools, defence, and international development) will have to draw up two scenarios, one projecting budget cuts of 25% and one with 40%. Osborne also asked departments to identify relevant public sector land that can contribute to the goal of 150,000 homes by 2020 if sold off. The government spending review will also deal with the effects of the devolution agreements already reached as well as the ongoing austerity pressure on local government across England.

Commenting on the aims of the review, Osborne saw it very much as the completion of the 'job' of consolidating public sector finance. He said:

> *"This Spending Review is the next step in our plan to eliminate the deficit, run a surplus and ensure Britain lives within its means. We'll invest in our priorities like the National Health Service and national security. Elsewhere in government, departments will have to find significant savings through efficiencies and by devolving power, so people have a greater say over the issues that affect them and their communities. We'll deliver more with less."*

In a government report on the review, the government's priorities are detailed as promoting innovation in public services, supporting the devolution agenda and associated growth and productivity, supporting the National Health Service, 'promoting choice and competition', and continuing the search for efficiency savings across the public sector. Given the recent dismal productivity statistics showing that the United Kikngdom lagged other G7 nations in productivity per hour by 20%, the spending review will have to address enhancing efficiency in the economy combined with devolution of budgets and decision making to local government. One approach recently taken is in the devolution of skills and training budgets under devolution agreements with local authorities. Here, the government plans to devolve £12 billion in central government expenditure to "Local Growth Funds" from 2015/16 to 2020/21.

A report by the Local Government Association entitled 'A shared commitment — local government and the spending review' highlighted that given current projections, local government will face a £9.5billion funding gap by 2020. The Local Government Association sees strong local government as the key to a resolution for this funding gap. Councillor Gary Porter (Conservative), Chair of the Local Government Association advocated:

"Developing a more trusted partnership between central and local government, one that allows councils to be all they can be, we can unleash the full potential of local communities, and consequently also relieve pressure on the Exchequer".

The Local Government Association called on the government to consider the following measures as part of the review:

- Enabling opportunities from (1) joining up resources that national and local government authorities own locally; (2) continued reform of public services for more local delivery; and (3) better business support locally.
- Address delivery of adult social care delivery. Since 2013/14, the funding gap has increased to £700million a year. The spending review should result in this gap being fully covered. A related issue is the funding of public health expenditure. In 2014/15, 'public health services will have to absorb an unexpected in-year reduction of £200million, more than seven per cent of the total'. The Local Government Association calls for a relaxation of spending rules for public health grants as well as a full review of the spending patterns of £600million in centrally held health funding.
- Fix council taxes. For assessment of council tax, the Local Government Association called for councils to have the ability to review property values on which taxes are raised. These property values have not been re-assessed in over 24 years. Local authorities should be able to introduce new bands if needed.
- Retaining business rates locally. 'Business rates raise £23billion and are an important source of income for local government, on a par with council tax'. The Local Government Association called for a gradual increase in business rate retention to 100%. Subsequently the government has announced that it intends to devolve 100% of business rates to local authorities. However, the mechanism for continued equalisation of resources, currently achieved through 'top ups' has not been identified, giving rise to fears that localisation of business rates will lead to a significant loss of resources by authorities that have a low business rate base per capita.

- Increasing income for local government. The Local Government Association called on the review to consider how the £7.4billion income from fees and charges can be further maximised. One area is planning where residents still subsidise 32% of planning applications services. The government should allow local authorities to change the charges for planning applications to be cost-neutral.
- Greater say of local councils over housing and Right to Buy. For housing and development, the Local Government Association called on the government to put local authorities at the heart of reaping returns from public land rationalisation. It also suggested that local authorities should be able to set and vary 'Right to Buy' discounts as appropriate for the local housing market.

Gary Porter of the Local Government Association said,

> *"A 25% real terms reduction to the local government finance settlement would mean a decrease of £4billion by 2020 while a 40% reduction would mean this rises to £7billion.*
>
> *"For many councils, there are few efficiencies left to be made and these alone will not be enough to cope with further funding reductions. Vital services, such as caring for the elderly, protecting children, collecting bins and filling potholes, will struggle to continue at current levels.*
>
> *"For services to survive, there was a need for radical devolution of how public money is raised and spent."*

Economics editor Robert Peston of the BBC said that asking departments to:

"Model the impact on the services they provide of finding savings of either 25% or 40% by 2019-20 - or £20billion per annum of cuts in aggregate […] is the stuff of public-service reinvention, not efficiency."

Steward Hosie, Deputy leader at the Scottish National Party, commented

> *"Perhaps he's setting the bar high and he'll appear to be the good guy if it's less when push comes to shove… I think the key thing is we look at the last parliament. He failed on all these major targets.*
>
> *"He seems to be wanting to push the boundaries time after time after time. There's no longer fat to be cut. It's into the bone and the impact on services could be catastrophic."*

Based on the government's comments and the announcements from the summer budget, it is clear that austerity is to be continued. The rhetoric has changed to one that aims at efficiency savings in local government by integration and to some extent digitalisation of public service delivery to reduce duplication. From a national perspective, Osborne continues to demand quite extensive departmental cuts and reviews. Local government land may be sold off as incentive for house building and private economy activities.

Localisation of Business Rates

In October 2015 it was announced at the Conservative Party conference that councils in England will be able to keep the proceeds from business rates raised in their area. At present councils keep 50% of business rates but also receive a revenue support grant. When business rates are fully localised the revenue support grant will be abolished. In making the announcement George Osborne said councils would hold on to £26billion, calling it the 'biggest transfer of power' in recent history. Central government currently takes in about £11.5billion in business rates and redistributes £9.4billion in grants. However, it is planned to make significant reductions in the level of grants.

George Osborne said the change, due to be in place by 2020, would mean cities and communities no longer had to go to the government 'with a begging bowl'. The Local Government Association said the move was 'good news'; but other commentators warned that it could start a 'race to the bottom' with councils competing to cut their rates the most.

Councils will also be able to cut the rate to attract investment and employment and some will be able to raise it, subject to the approval of local businesses and limitations on the services that may be funded by any increase. Elected mayors in big cities such as London, Manchester and Sheffield will be allowed to add a premium - expected to be capped at 2p - to pay for major infrastructure projects. George Osborne said:

"Attract a business, and you attract more money; regenerate a high street, and you'll reap the benefits; grow your area, and you'll grow your revenue too."

Robert Peston, the BBC economics editor said:

"This is not comprehensive decentralisation of tax-raising and spending powers. That said, it does put local authorities in competition with each other to attract businesses - by easing planning restrictions for example - and thereby increase their revenues. But although local authorities will be able to cut business rates, they won't be able to put them up, unless that is they are cities like London and Manchester with directly elected mayors - and even then they'll only be able to put the rates up by 2p in the pound, to finance infrastructure, and only if businesses vote in favour in local polls. Or to put it another way, George Osborne does not believe that citizens - who for the sake of brevity I will call 'us' - should be able to vote for a party that feels businesses pay too little."

Councillor Gary Porter (Conservative), Chair of the Local Government Association said:

"While this is good news for councils and businesses, local authorities will face almost £10billion of cost pressures by 2020 so we will now seek to work with government about how this proposal can be introduced more quickly. We would expect measures to ensure local areas with less ability to generate business rates income do not suffer as a result of these changes and all councils are also given leeway to vary business rates up as well as down."

Director-General of the Confederation of British Industry, John Cridland said:

"It will spur councils to take a pro-growth approach, and has the CBI's support… But this must not be a way to increase rates without the consent of the local business community."

The system of tariffs and top-ups designed to support areas with lower levels of business activity will be maintained in its present state. The government also plans to introduce a 'safety net' for any area where business rate receipts fall by 7.5%.

However, there are fears that despite the tariffs, top-ups and safety net, the localisation of business rates will lead to a redistribution of resources from areas with a low rateable value per capital to areas with a high rateable value per capita. This could happen if the poorer areas lose more in revenue support grant (that is distributed partly on the basis of deprivation) than they gain in business rates. However, a Treasury spokesman told the BBC that it did not accept that the changes would mean a boom for London and the South East of England. He said that the latest figures showed the biggest growth in revenue from business rates was in the East Midlands and Yorkshire.

Green Alliance challenges the Government's green record

In July 2015, the Green Alliance, charity and independent think tank for the environmental sector, published an analysis of the new government's green record. In a brief comparison table, the organisation highlighted ten environmental policies that were either scrapped or significantly reduced as shown below:

Cancelled	• Zero Carbon Homes 2016: Cancelled • Zero Carbon Buildings 2019: Cancelled • Green Deal: Cancelled in July 2015 • Climate Change Levy exemption for zero carbon energy: Cancelled in July 2015 • Solar support via Renewables Obligation • Onshore wind support via the Renewable Obligation and contracts for difference (CfDs)
Privatised	• Green Investment Bank
Reversed or weakened	• Differential Vehicle Excise duty • Preventing shale gas exploration in protected areas • Neonicotinoid ban

Ten leading environmental charities of the United Kingdom, including Friends of the Earth, the National Trust, World Wildlife Fund, and Greenpeace, have sent an open letter to the Prime Minister calling for further clarification. In reference to Cameron's Climate Pledge and the ambition set out in the Conservative's manifesto to 'being the first generation to leave the natural environment of England in a better state than that in which we found it', the environmental charities stated:

> *"Ten green policies which could have helped you to achieve these goals have been cancelled or weakened over the past three months. These policies were developed over many years, often with cross party backing, and with the support and involvement of many businesses and charities. Only one of these decisions, to end subsidies for onshore wind, was a commitment from your manifesto. We have, as yet, seen no positive new measures that would restore the health of the environment or grow the low carbon economy.*
>
> *"With respect to the natural world, we are dismayed that drilling for shale gas and oil is to be allowed in areas used for drinking water, and that a proposed ban from government on shale gas and oil exploration and extraction in the most nature rich parts of the country has been dropped."*

Commenting on the letter and analysis, Shaun Spiers, the chief executive of the Campaign to Protect Rural England said:

> *"The Government's commitment to neighbourhood planning and making better use of brownfield land is very welcome, but its overall record on the environment has been woeful. The Prime Minister clearly cares about the countryside and the wider environment, and recognises that strong environmental policies support a strong economy. He must now assert himself and ensure that his government lives up to its promises rather than taking decisions that we all regret in the long run."*

Helen Ghosh, director-general of the National Trust, added:

> *"We are keen to play our part in meeting the big environmental challenges of today – climate change and the catastrophic decline in wildlife and habitats. We see their impact day by day in our places. But Government has to play its role in setting the right regulatory and fiscal framework – and the recent shift in policy positions is worrying."*

So far we have not heard of an official response to the Green Alliance's letter being issued by the government.

Client news: Oldham seeks partner for regeneration project

On 24th August 2015, Oldham Borough Council agreed to progress the redevelopment scheme at Prince's Gate at Oldham Mumps. As reported on the online platform Inside Media, the scheme is intended to deliver 800 homes as well as a number of retail units, with Marks & Spencer agreed as the anchor tenant. The 130-year-old retailer would take up 50,000 square feet out of the total of 150,000 square feet. For developers, the Old Mump's site offers the benefit of access to established transport links such as MetroLink. The scheme would benefit the local area, bringing in investment for regeneration of existing historic buildings, such as the grade-II-listed Old Bank building.

Furthermore, Oldham Borough Council's move is significant for councils in the Greater Manchester area since Oldham invited other Greater Manchester councils to join the selection process for a developer and investor and to potentially contribute further sites under the same scheme. As Councillor Jim McMahon (Labour), leader of Oldham Borough Council, explains:

> *"Prince's Gate at Oldham Mumps is a fantastic opportunity to deliver our most ambitious scheme for the town centre since the 1980s and we're delighted to start the process of finding our delivery partner.*
>
> *"The process of selecting suitable development and investor partners can be time-consuming and costly involving Europe-wide advertising and professional advice. Given the spirit of working as a City Region we thought that we shouldn't go through this process without allowing for other Greater Manchester councils to join at a later stage, potentially saving time and public money.*
>
> *"It starts with a foundation 'bank' of projects worth in excess of £100million (and including around 1,000 residential units) in Oldham but will soon be rolled out as an opportunity to our neighbouring authorities. There are many benefits to getting involved – not least being the ability for councils to retain an interest and a say in the development of strategic sites."*

Oldham Borough Council is one of AWICS' principal clients. The Council often sends delegates to AWICS seminars and we recently assisted them with the introduction of service charges in sheltered housing schemes.

AWICS Webinars — a convenient way to access training

For a long time, AWICS has provided dedicated seminar series and in-house training to customers all over the United Kingdom. Since 2006, over 3,000 individuals across England, Scotland, and Wales attended our courses to carry out their roles more effectively.

Traditionally, AWICS has arranged training seminars in good quality conference venues around the country. For example, we have held seminars in London, Oldham, Wrexham and Falkirk. Our training venues are ideal for the small groups and we traditionally restrict our training seminars to a small number of attendees.

However, we have now broadened our training offer. The Internet has become a medium we have all become used to and therefore we invite you to join us in webinars in the autumn and winter of this year.

These webinars will look at a range of subjects of interest to clients in local government and housing and will be held between October and January. They will last between 1½ and two hours and will offer participants plenty of opportunities for questions and discussion as well as a presentation on the topic. The cost will be £50 a session plus value added tax.

The webinars will confirm to the same standards that clients have come to expect at our seminars and workshops but will offer a different format in which to learn and exchange information and points of view. Participants in each webinar will also receive a digital copy of the presentation used and a digital copy of a briefing paper on the subject.

Housing Associations

AWICS has revised and updated its service offering for housing associations. It now includes a series of timely and relevant webinars as well as new topics in light of the emerging Welfare Reform and Work bill amongst other topics. Our new brochure for services to housing associations can be downloaded from here: Flyer of AWICS services for late 2015.

Upcoming Seminars

The seminars and workshops for 2015 will retain the same high standards for which 'AWICS' is well known and will include some new and topical subjects. The 2015 series of seminars and workshops are as follows:

Seminar subject	*Upcoming seminars*	*Bookings*
Local Authority Housing Finance	London — 10th Nov 2015	**Book**
Extension of the Right to Buy — Implications for housing associations and local government	London — 30th Nov 2015	**Book**
Welfare Reform — the implications for housing and local government	Oldham — 4th Nov 2015	
Local authority new build — the financial implications	London — 1st Dec 2015 Oldham — 8th Dec 2015	

Upcoming Webinars

Social Rent Reforms	19th October 2015.
Introduction to the Housing Revenue Account	5th November 2015.
Self-Financing in the Housing Revenue Account	12th November 2015.
Welfare Reform and Work Bill	16th November 2015.
Sale of High Value Council Homes	24th November 2015.
Business Planning in the Housing Revenue Account	3rd December 2015.
Right to Buy for Housing Association tenants	10th December 2015.
Welsh Social Housing Finance	14th December 2015
Service Charges in Social Housing	8th January 2016
Scottish Social Housing Finance	13th January 2016
New Build Council Housing	19th January 2016
Housing Association Finance	29th January 2016

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Client and reader survey (please give us feedback)

Please consider to give us feedback on how we are doing through our client survey: link.

Editorial notes

This edition of the Public Services News was edited by Sebastian Weise. Sebastian is a freelancer and PhD student at the Centre for Digital Innovation at Lancaster University. He is knowledgeable about participatory urban planning and local government devolution.

The Public Services News is published by 'AWICS' Limited. Articles are written by Adrian Waite unless otherwise stated. However, the views expressed in articles are not necessarily those of 'AWICS' or Adrian Waite unless expressly stated.

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