



EDITORIAL

This issue concentrates on regional government. The Government have announced proposals for elected regional assemblies coupled with two-tier local government which anticipates the transfer of county powers either up to an Assembly or down to district and unitary authorities.

The *Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill* had its second reading in November and makes provision for referendums to be held about elected regional assemblies, and for the Boundary Commission for England to review local government structure before any such referendum is held. The recent *Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill* was not so much fast-tracked through parliament as actively rail-roaded, probably causing many amendments in future years. Meantime the environment will suffer from the lack of simple and accessible reforms promised in the Planning Green Paper last year. MPs criticised the increasing centralisation of power because planning may become less local, less accountable and less democratic. Many expressed significant concern for the future of county councils if they lose their statutory role, as 'spatial strategies' will be driven by large urban authorities at the expense of smaller or rural authorities. The Government have stated that after their proposals have been launched in the North-West, the West Midlands will be the next.

THE FUTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AS IT AFFECTS CIVIC SOCIETIES AND SIMILAR LOCAL BODIES DEPENDS UPON AN UNDERSTANDING BY THE VOTERS OF THE ISSUES AT STAKE.

To prepare for more fast-tracking through parliament, this issue of CSM attempts to give a balanced and dis-interested view of the Government's proposals for the regions, and the possible consequences of the changes.

STOP PRESS: 27 Feb. The West Midlands Regional Assembly have asked the Government that their Region should NOT be included in the "first tranche", as all the regional Focus Groups have objected to the proposed changes. However, John Prescott is known to want to press on.

Graham Reddie: Editor

REGIONAL GOVERNMENT

I write with some background knowledge having worked for a District Council and Surrey and London County Councils, and collaborated with Redditch DC, and Warwickshire and Worcestershire County Councils.

To remind ourselves of the present position, Regional Assemblies are in place in each of the ten Regions, comprising **appointed** members. The Government say that in due course members should be elected, which would be far preferable. The Regional Assembly for the West Midlands currently comprises 80 appointed members of which 68 are from local government. The Government have stated that elected chambers would have 25 to 35 members for the whole Region with responsibility for three kinds of functions:

- a) preparing regional strategies,
- b) executive functions e.g. economic development, planning, housing and certain functions to do with culture and sport; and
- c) influencing functions relating to issues which have a regional dimension but need local input e.g. business support, employment and skills, planning of major projects, transport, cultural strategies and public health.¹

Below the Assembly are the Borough, District and Unitary authorities, which in turn consult Parish Councils.

At the 1994 local government reorganisation Hereford was separated from Worcestershire and became a Unitary body. Other Unitary bodies in the West Midlands are Telford and Wrekin, and all the authorities within the old County covering the three major cities and the Black Country.

The Government's proposals for modernising local government, and a pre-condition for the creation of a regional assembly, include the creation of a single tier of local government below the Assembly in order to simplify the system, speed-up response to demand, and bring government closer to the people. How will this affect civic societies?

Before a referendum can take place, the deputy PM will have to consider whether there is sufficient level of interest in a region to justify holding a referendum on establishing a regional assembly.²

Once the Government consider there is sufficient interest to justify holding a referendum in a region, the Boundary Commission will be instructed to conduct a review in order to implement all-purpose Unitary Authorities in the region. The expected result of this review will be the abolition of the County Councils in any region that elects to have a Regional Assembly, counties being left with Minerals and Waste management. Districts will become unitary

Sources: 1 House of Commons Research Paper 02/62 of 21.11.03

2 LGA Guide to the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill

authorities They may be merged with others to form larger units. Like counties?

Worcestershire has already been divided by police and health authorities with Kidderminster, Bromsgrove & Redditch forming a northern half. If the County is abolished the southern part, without the economic punch of the northern half, may have to be linked with Gloucestershire.

Thus there would be far fewer councillors within a region and they will represent much larger areas than at present. The urban system of local government will effectively be imposed upon the rural areas. It is said that far from the stated aim in the White Paper of "bringing government closer to the people", this will in fact do the opposite. Considerable cost savings and time savings could be achieved with fewer authorities, councillors and officers, but whether this will achieve better local government and better local environments must be carefully considered.

WEST MIDLANDS

In the West Midlands what would be the effect on local representation a Referendum result in favour of a Regional Assembly and consequential abolition of the County Councils ?

At present five shire Counties together with a Unitary total of 224 councillors as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1.

Authority	Population	No. of Members
Shropshire (less Telford and Wrekin)	283,000	44
Staffordshire	1,005,000	61
Warwickshire	505,880	62
Worcestershire	542,000	57
Herefordshire	174,800	-
Totals	2,510,680	224

The unitary authorities within the old West Midlands County have a population of 2,556,000; in 39 wards with 117 Members.

In the proposed regional assembly, restricted to 25-35 members as envisaged by the Government, two-thirds will be elected and the remaining one-third will be appointed.

At present, in the West Midlands each shire county councillor represents about 11,200 persons. In the proposed regional assembly each would represent around 150,000 persons. This statement gives a strong indication of the likely problems for councillors and those they represent.

EAST MIDLANDS

In the East Midlands the general situation will be similar but without the pressures from the Second City. The cities of Derby, Leicester and Nottingham are each a unitary authority, as is Rutland. In Table 2 population data on each city is included within each relevant County.

Table 2

Authority	Population	No. of Members
Derbyshire	957,000	64
Leicestershire	925,000	54
Lincolnshire	648,000	77
Northamptonshire	630,000	73
Nottinghamshire	1,016,000	63
Totals	4,176,000	331

The Unitary Authorities together have a population of 804,000. (Rutland County has a population of 35,000).

Thus, in the shire counties each county councillor represents an average of 10,293 persons, whereas if a regional assembly is created with 35 members they will each speak for over 120,000 persons.

CONCLUSIONS

In both regions, with populations of 4 to 5 million people, Assembly councillors will probably have difficulty finding the time for and details of

- a) matter brought to them by their constituents for advice or action;
- b) grasping important and relevant points for many submissions by their officers concerning areas with which they are unfamiliar,
- c) finding the time to visit their constituencies often enough to become known and valued as regional representatives; and
- d) keeping track of mailers affecting them, from the welter of data supplied by the Assembly's officers for the whole region.

Other regions probably have similar statistics, but in the South-East and South-West both are far larger in area, and the former more populous.

The voters similarly would find it far harder to be in touch with their assembly representatives; harder to explain the relevance of geography e.g. on matters concerning the potential ruining of a local environment on which objections should be pursued; and far more expense and extra time spent attending the assembly and meeting councillors and officers

Compare the Assembly's members with other elected members:
M.P.s traditionally represent constituencies of 70-80,000 persons.

Source: 3 Data obtained direct from each County Council

The West Midlands sends 8 regional representatives to the European Parliament. Each represents over 700,000 people and we rarely see them.

County Councils are responsible for a range of services including education, highways and transportation; police; social services; economic development; libraries and recreation; the fire service; and waste management. County Councils support a number of joint bodies such as the public analysts' laboratory and countryside parks, and offer grants to environmental bodies. The education departments offer training to people throughout their lives. Counties assist local communities by providing supporting finance for rail and bus services crossing District boundaries.

District and Unitary authorities are unlikely to be able to match the scale and diversity of education and transport provision, and not just for financial reasons. Most District Councils are currently affected by lack of money hence shortages of staff and adequately trained and experienced officers. Closing the County Councils will not automatically provide a source of staff for Districts. Planners' interests and salaries in the private sector for instance may well prove much more enticing to them.

Historical, geographical, industrial, geological, micro-climatic and other factors together created the counties over the centuries. Enforced uniona though neat solutions on paper rarely succeed on the ground e.g. the short-lived counties of Avon, and Hereford & Worcestershire.

Have the counties outlived their usefulness ?

Will regional assemblies achieve the Government aim to "bring local government closer to the people"?

Will the formation of new administrative bodies provide 'Best Value'?

Will the changes be worth the heavy cost and considerable upheaval?

Will "modernised" local government help to create better education and health services and, dare I say it, better neighbours?

In the Welsh Referendum only 20% of eligible voters bothered to vote. In Scotland the Referendum turn-out was little better at 34%.

IT IS VITAL WHEN REFERENDUMS ARE HEW THAT EACH VOTER CASTS A VOTE, LEST WRONG DECISIONS ARE MADE DUE TO IGNORANCE OR APATHY, OR BOTH. THIS CONCERNS US ALL.

To conclude on a lighter note: W.H.Auden said "*We are here on earth to do good to others. What the others are here for, I do not know*".

QUALITY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) has recently undertaken an extensive survey of how local authorities (LA) manage design issues. The results of their survey showed that ONLY:

- * 38% of LA have a registered architect in their planning depts;
- * 23% of LA planning depts. make use of a design panel in assessing the design quality of planning applications (not including CAAC);
- * 20% of LA have a 'design champion' to promote good design; and
- * 22% of LA have refused planning permission principally on design grounds in more than 20 instances in the past year (2002).

CIVIC SOCIETIES COULD USE THESE STATISTICS TO ENCOURAGE THEIR LOCAL PLANNING AUTHORITIES TO RAISE THEIR STANDARDS, AND REJECT ALL POOR PLANNING APPLICATIONS.

Sir Stuart Lipton, Chairman of CABE, writing in *The Daily Telegraph* on March 3rd headlined "**Good design is a cornerstone of profitable housebuilding**" commented on the numerous TV programmes about housing.

"Yet" he said, *"of the myriad of houses featured in these series, one type is conspicuously absent – mainstream houses produced by the big-name volume housebuilders. Strange, given that they are the Home Front for so many of us... Housebuilders have constructed businesses based on speculative land gains followed by provision of a cheap product fuelled by low-cost, low-skilled labour"*.

"In the car industry if a product is badly designed and doesn't sell the best designers are head-hunted to redesign it. Where is the equivalent process for new houses? Many housebuilders seem to believe that good design is costly and time-consuming. After 40 years in the property industry I know this is a fallacy. Invest in good design at the outset and you will produce houses with character and vitality with social and environmental benefits for occupier and visitor alike. The current situation is not the fault of housebuilders alone. Local planners often demand onerous conditions to the point where owners sit on land rather than build on it. The result is rows of ticky-tacky boxes on the outskirts of nearly every UK town."

Well said, Sir Stuart. It is very encouraging when battling against badly designed low-cost housing, to have such high-powered support.

WASTE WATER TREATMENT PLANT

(From the Scarborough & District Civic Society Newsletter December 2002)

Sewage works rarely feature in civic society newsletters or in Heritage Open Days but Scarborough's new state-of-the-art plant is a far cry from the usual. The new plant appears to be a handsome farmstead being

well camouflaged, uses very little space and is run by far fewer people. A computer room controls and monitors no less than 255 litres per second of effluent flowing in/out of the plant, and is only staffed during office hours. Problems outside office hours are dealt with by computer elsewhere in the county but stand-by staff are within 30 minutes notice.

The technology is right at the edge of what is currently available e.g. ultra violet light at a certain wavelength is known to kill off most of the noxious things which arrive at the plant. Thus four banks of such lights, about 100 in all with each tube costing about £250, are in continuous use deeply submerged in the flow". By law they are required to be working 95% of the time in any given year, and they are. Imagine the problems of maintenance. The waste water and gas reaches and leaves the plant in three huge tubes passing through a tunnel built at enormous expense with machinery of the sort used to build the Channel tunnel. Once the process is complete and the water is 99.9% pure, it is carried out to sea.

The £30million the plant cost is a small part of the total being spent up and own the coast, but the new plant is a place Scarborough should be proud of, well worth an interesting and surprisingly enjoyable visit.

STREET NUMBERING IN OXFORD

(An extract from the Oxford Civic Society Newsletter for Nov. 2002)

Before 1840, English city houses generally had no numbering system and people would find their way by directions such as "Two doors to the right of the Angel". This would have worked well since Oxford's streets were punctuated at regular intervals by interesting landmark buildings. But when the Penny Post was introduced in 1840 postmen doing city delivery rounds needed superhuman power to sort the mail away from such visual aids. This precipitated the almost universal numbering of UK city streets.

When the numbering was carried out it was not done by today's method, but by commencing from the major junction with 1,2,3 etc on one side to the end of the road and then continuing back down the other side. Examples of this can be seen today in High Street, Magdalen Street and Queen Street. *Hunt's Oxford Directory 1846* shows streets numbered in this deceptive way, which continued until the 1920s.

New roads built from the 1920s onwards were numbered from the start with the 'odds and evens' method. Some old streets use the modern method because the houses there originally had enormous gardens, but with so much in-filling renumbering became essential between the 1930s and 1950s. Because so much of the old centre of Oxford remains, the numbering is more idiosyncratic than in towns which have seen more development. Maybe this information will apply to other ancient towns.

EFFECTIVE OPPOSITION**No.3**

Leamington Spa is a mecca for bowls enthusiasts as Budleigh Salterton is for tennis players. Victoria Park in Leamington is a fine open space beside the River Leam, with high quality bowling greens, a cricket pitch etc located some 7 mins. comfortable walk from the town centre shopping area, and much used by the local inhabitants, young and old.

Warwick District Council decided that the Park “was not historic, only old” and made a planning application for a £1million 8-rink bowls arena to “improve facilities for sports users. The Leamington Society with other local bodies decided that they preferred the Park as it is, and objected, supported by the residents around the park who foresaw traffic, parking and noise problems where there were none. Residents then created a monster banner, illustrated above, bearing the words “THIS IS THE LENGTH OF THE PROPOSED INDOOR ARENA IN VICTORIA PARK” 66 metres long (216ft 6ins) across the frontages to five houses and facing into the park.

Outside the Town Hall where the Public Inquiry was held in 1992 Society members stood shoulder-to-shoulder with another 66 meter banner saying “NO BOWLS ARENA IN VICTORIA PARK”. The Press and TV attended. A local planning consultant and member of the Leamington Society led the case for the objectors, who clearly influenced the Inspector, decisively. The District Council lost their appeal; the people kept their park; and the residents are spared traffic and noise nuisances day and night.

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