

Local councils in England selling off over 4,000 public spaces and buildings per year

Alice Summers
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More than 4,000 council-owned public spaces and facilities are being sold off by local authorities each year, with the majority purchased by private developers, according to the UK local communities charity Locality.

Freedom of Information requests were submitted by the charity to all 353 councils in England in January 2018. Based on the data supplied by the 233 councils that responded, Locality's report, titled *The Great British Sell Off*, revealed that 20,651 public buildings or spaces were sold off between 2012/2013 and 2016/2017—an average of 4,131 per year. The council assets sold off include sites such as public parks, libraries, swimming pools and youth centres.

The southeast of England sold the highest number of public facilities, offloading an average of 872 every year to the private sector to be used for private profit and short-term speculation.

The study also reported the number of buildings identified as surplus by local authorities over the next five years. Some 1,602 buildings in the Yorkshire and Humber region of England were identified by councils as surplus and therefore likely to be sold off—the highest figure in England—out of a total of 7,280 across the country. The report noted that this figure is almost certainly a significant underestimation of the number of sales that will actually take place.

While councils do not publish official data on the number of sell-offs or on the proportion that are purchased by private developers, the report noted that many of these public buildings and spaces are sold on the open market to the highest bidder.

Sites sold off in the last five years include the council-owned Temple Cowley swimming pool in Oxford, which was disposed of for just £3.5 million in 2014 to a property developer who plans to bulldoze the building

and replace it with 48 new homes.

Other sites, such as the Hastings pier in Sussex, have been sold off to private developers for a fraction of the cost of building or rebuilding them. Luxury hotel developer Sheikh Abid Gulzar reportedly paid £50,000 for the pier after it went into administration last November, even though it had been rebuilt in 2013 with £12.4 million of lottery money. This is despite efforts from local community groups, who raised £433,000 to purchase the pier and keep it in the hands of the community.

In fact, the report notes that only around two-fifths (41 percent) of local authorities have policies in place for the community ownership of formerly council-owned assets, with the default option for most local authorities being to sell to the private sector.

Nonetheless, over the last decade, hundreds of previously council-run facilities have been passed to community groups to operate at their own expense. More than 500 of the UK's 3,800 libraries are now run by community volunteers. Volunteers are forced to step in to keep open valued library services that would otherwise be threatened with closure due to central government and local council cuts. Almost 600 public libraries have been closed since 2010, according to the chartered institute of public finance and accountancy.

Despite the report's focus on the benefits of community ownership as a solution to cost-cutting and closures by local councils, community-run spaces and buildings are a difficult financial and labour burden on the often unpaid and untrained community volunteers who endeavour to maintain facilities with little or no funding.

This mass sell-off comes in the context of relentless cuts to local authority budgets from central government over the last years. Central government council funding

has been slashed by £11.3 billion and by 2020, according to the Local Government Association, local authorities will have lost 75 percent of the central government funding they received in 2015.

Almost half of all councils, 168, will receive no central government funding by 2019/20 and will be forced to rely exclusively on local taxes—the Business Rate and Council Tax—and local charges, which are expected to rise sharply and cover a wider range of services. According to the Local Government Association, councils face a funding gap of £5.8 billion by 2020.

However, in addition to central government cuts, both Labour- and Conservative-run local authorities are complicit in the selling-off of council assets. In Haringey, north London, the Labour-run council planned the largest transfer of local authority assets to a private developer, Lendlease, through a 50:50 partnership: the Haringey Development Vehicle (HDV). The proposal would see the transfer of council housing, schools, clinics and commercial buildings worth £2 billion to the private developer.

Since April 2016, councils have been permitted to spend the proceeds from the sale of their assets on their day-to-day operations, further incentivising the local authorities to sell.

The research noted the terrible impact that the selling-off of public spaces and buildings has on working-class communities, who often rely on them as places to meet, socialise and relax. “Importantly it is often the poorest places that are most reliant on these types of spaces,” the Locality report stated. “Losing them can have a devastating impact on local people and communities. Years of austerity and lack of investment have decimated local services and left many of the places people rely on shuttered up, under threat or falling into disrepair.”

The selling of public spaces poses significant problems for freedom of assembly. While half of councils surveyed (48.7 percent) for a report by the Heritage Lottery Fund acknowledged that they had disposed of or transferred the management or ownership of urban green spaces in the three years leading up to 2016, the problem of private ownership of previously public spaces in cities goes further than just public parks.

According to a *Guardian* investigation published last

year, many apparently public squares and parks in major cities across the UK, particularly in the capital, are owned by private individuals or companies. Over 50 “pseudo-public spaces” in London are owned and managed by giant corporations such as JP Morgan, including large swathes of Camden, Islington and the City of London.

Although the public generally have free access to these areas, these squares and parks are not subject to local authority bylaws, with their private landowners often hiring their own private security services to police them.

This private ownership and policing of squares and parks in towns and cities can have enormous repercussions. According to the *Guardian*’s report, private security guards working outside the London mayoral headquarters, City Hall, prevented *Guardian* reporters from carrying out interviews near the premises. The security officers stated that journalistic activity is not permitted on the site as it is privately owned, before escorting the journalists to the security office and forbidding further attempts to conduct interviews with members of the public.

Not only are vital and valuable public facilities lost through council cuts and sell-offs, but the offloading of these public spaces to private entities, which are free to restrict access and police them as they see fit, is an attack on fundamental democratic rights of freedom of assembly and speech.



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