AUSTERITY POLICIES: TOWARDS LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL EMPOWERMENT OR NEOLIBERAL CONSERVATION?

A LOOK INTO ITS RESULTANT GEOGRAPHIES OF POWER IN THE SOUTH EAST OF ENGLAND, UK

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ABSTRACT

The United Kingdom's government has been sharply reducing its size by exercising austerity on its departments since 2010, with the narrative that this will create opportunity for more localized scales to deliver services and be more empowered. Drawing on the Politics of Scale and Networks with an emphasis on conservation, this research uses semi-structured interviews with principal local authority conservation officers and local conservation charities to map the geographies of power that have resulted from central government's measures, thus testing to what extent their localism narrative has come to pass. We find that some power was indeed transferred to the local scale, but only partially, specifically to established charities, while emerging charities were weakened. We also find evidence that suggests neoliberal motives for effecting the austerity. This research contributes to the scarce literature that delves into the effect of austerity on conservation capacity at localized scales and the debate against austerity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my late father, and my mother,

my tag team of eternal supporters.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On 20 October 2010, the history of 1981 repeated itself. The 2010 Chancellor of the Exchequer in the United Kingdom's Coalition government George Osborne delivered an announcement that marked the beginning of a significant transformation of the country's socio-political and economic climate. He conveyed that from that year, his government was going to commence steep, progressive budget cuts over the majority of its departments (MacKinnon, 2015). The severity of these cuts mirrored those that had been put in place during Margaret Thatcher's 1979-1983 leadership of the UK on the first ever conservative government ticket (Keegan, 2010). While the measures such as the 2010 UK one, which had been occurring leading to that time in the European Union, were a matter of compulsion by the European troika (the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank) in countries such as Ireland, Portugal and Greece, they were a voluntary political decision in the UK (Parnell, Spracklen and Millward, 2017), which makes it a case of interest.

Budget cuts such as those mentioned above are termed austerity, which by definition is "a form of voluntary deflation in which the economy adjusts, through the reduction of wages, prices and public spending, to restore competitiveness which is (supposedly) best achieved by cutting the state's budget, debts and deficits" (Blyth, 2013, p. 2; Evans, 2012). The 2010 UK budget cuts were implemented unevenly on and within the UK government departments, with a few of the departments such as health being basically untouched, while some of the hardest hit were those that are responsible for natural environment management (NEM), such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MacKinnon, 2015; Lockhart, 2016). This targeting of these departments stands ironic as David Cameron, Prime Minister of the time, had not long before the cuts proclaimed the aim of establishing "the greenest government ever" while at the Department of Energy and Climate Change during an official call (Randerson, 2010).

Along with the economic reasons for effecting austerity, the UK government (central government) presented austerity measures as a tools of achieving the 'localism agenda', which promotes the 'big society', a term that became synonymous with Conservative Party and Coalition government leader David Cameron, through being was the flagship of both his election campaign and government's policy. Both of the afore-mentioned terms refer to concepts of devolution of power, which hold that the reduction of the government's budget, and consequently its size and public management responsibilities, creates space and opportunities for local communities, through local bodies and as individuals, to be involved in, take charge of and execute some of them. This is said to be a shift of

power from central government to more localized levels, a move that is claimed to achieve better outcomes through the realization of the specific outcomes that they desire, ultimately resulting in a higher level of their satisfaction (Bach, 2012). Within the same discourse of localism, central government also passed the Localism Act in 2011 which was said to seek to empower the more localized levels spanning from local government to the general public. An example were new rights to allow voluntary organisations to apply to take over and provide services that were initially delivered by local government (Bentley and Pugalis, 2013).

In this dissertation, I define and will refer to power as being influence (Balmaceda, 2018) and responsibility (Wright, 2016). However, apart from what the use of power in the paragraph before this one has inferred, I will also refer to power as capacity and ability (Schneider *et al.*, 2018).

It has been widely argued that i) austerity does not result in local empowerment and ii) it is used by governments as a technology of propelling neoliberalism, as opposed to being a sincere ceding of power to local scales (MacKinnon, 2015; Bramall, Gilbert and Meadway, 2016; Brown, 2016; Lowndes and Gardner, 2016; Méndez and Malfeito-gaviro, 2016). As such, the antagonism of this critique with the UK central government's narrative of localism through austerity, create two sides of one coin, that is, uncertainty, of the outcomes as well as the motives of the measures. This uncertainly can be cleared by firstly empirically tracking how austerity shaped power configurations (which impact on local engagement [(Reed *et al.*, 2018)]) between and among scales (see my classification of scales in section 2.2), and secondly, critically examining the possible motives using that empirical information. This research seeks fill this gap, with a special focus on conservation governance and management.

Research that has been currently done on the effects of austerity has mainly been targeted at national policies of conservation in the UK (Apostolopoulou and Adams, 2015; Lockhart, 2016) as well as at the European Union-level (e.g. Burns and Tobin, 2016), but very little (with Pagès *et al.* (2018) and Cepiku, Mussari and Giordano (2016) being one of the only examples) has been researched on the impact of austerity impact on conservation capacity at scales that are more localised from the national scale (authorities, local community-oriented organisations and individual locals). Please note that in this research, I will call these "more localised scales". Of the limited research that looked at more localised scales, it concentrated on only one aspect (either local authorities, local charities or local individual volunteer) but very little has taken a "process look", that is, tracking effects from central government – local authorities – local voluntary sector, and even impact within the latter. This research thus seeks to fill this gap.

Local government forms an eye-opening research entry point into exploring the above as they are the lowest level of the government scale that is mandated towards working with local scale, and yet they bore some of the highest levels of the brunt of budget (see Fig. 1 below). They suffered a 27% slash to the budget they received from central government between 2010 and 2015 under the Coalition government (Lowndes *et al.*, 2012; Hastings *et al.*, 2018) and a further 56% (nominal percentage) was announced as the cut that would be made between 2015 and 2020 under the new Conservative government (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016). While other sources of finance such as taxes and service charges for local authorities exist (Innes and Tetlow, 2015), the cuts remain heavy and seriously impact council service provision and activities, which include natural environmental ones.
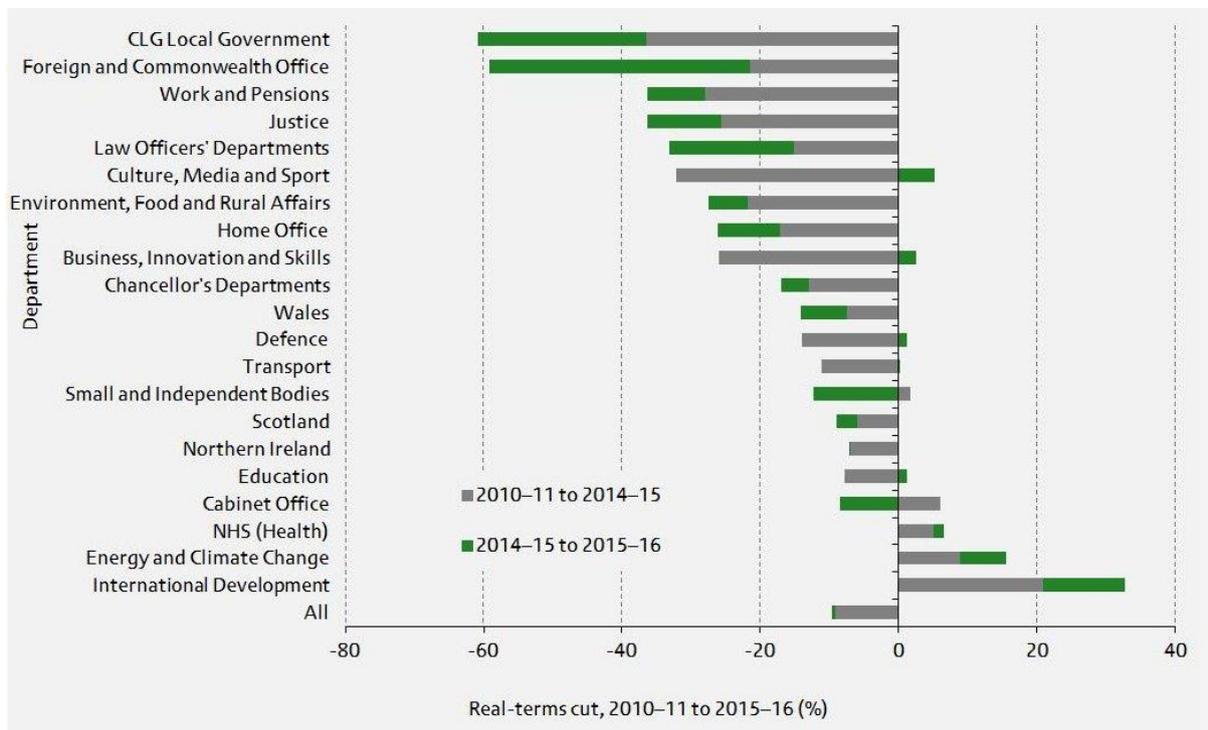
Figure 1: Cuts effected by the UK government on each of its departments, with the department for local government in the lead. These are real-terms cuts (nominal figures adjusted for inflation and other financial factors. Source: Crawford et al., (2015)

In addition, local authorities have been given less attention than DEFRA in conservation, yet they serve an important role. The interplay between DEFRA agencies (e.g. Natural England, Environment Agency etc.) and local authorities in UK conservation is that DEFRA agencies have legal authority over statutorily protected natural landscapes such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and are the ones that provide these local authorities with the permission to work on these sites. DEFRA have the power to take legal action against any polluters and damagers of these sites. As a specialist service solely focused on the natural environment, DEFRA also have an advisory role over the local authorities who also have a plethora of other mandates in areas such as social care, transport and housing etc.

The **broad research question is**: What new geographies of power among the national, sub-national and local scales have emerged from the UK central government's localism agenda, which was effected through austerity measures?

These will be answered through addressing the following three **specific research questions**:

a) How has austerity impacted the power of the sub-national scale?
b) How has austerity impacted relations between the sub-national scale (principal local authorities) and the local scale (the third sector)
c) How has austerity impacted configurations of power within the local scale (third sector)

With the deployment of the conceptual framework of the Politics of Scale and Networks, this research utilizes key informant interviews with natural environment officers representing all county, district and city councils in the two counties of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, which are situated in the high development South-East Region of England, United Kingdom.

I question the degree to which the assertive dismissals of local empowerment through austerity that I highlighted in this section are warranted, proposing that empowerment of the local scale. From the results of my study, I find that local empowerment did play out. However, it was only to a certain extent, and partial (to established charities) as it did not reach the very grassroots level (such as emerging charities and individual publics. However, although the empowerment did happen, I also point out from some indications in my findings that the motives of austerity could have been neoliberalist rather than for local empowerment.

I will begin the following chapter (2) by tracking the origins of neoliberalism and its manifestation in environmentalism, after which I will discuss conservation service delivery at the local scale. After having concluded this Chapter with the introduction of my theoretical framework of the Politics of Scale, I will detail my research methods and go on to provide detailed results and discussion in line with my research questions. I will conclude with a re-cap of my main findings and point out unexplored areas of research that are in the line of enquiry of this research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 From Neoliberal Environmentalism to Austerity Conservation

2.1.1 Neoliberalism

What is Neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism is an intricate and versatile system by which affairs are run with the intent of re-establishing and strengthening the power of the capitalist class. It is a developed, higher level version of capitalism which has been said to be more damaging to the well-being of human-kind that capitalism itself (Heynen and Robbins, 2005; Harvey, 2011). It is a political ideology that seeks to fuse matters of social, political and ecological natures into dynamics of industrialist commerce (Buscher *et al.*, 2012).

Its theory is that of the freedom and spread of commercialization and marketization, along with the allowance of unrestricted competition. In its bid for this freedom, which is often impeded by governments, neoliberalisation has been seen, at a wide variety of scales, to bring about re-orientations and re-sizing of those very governments, sometimes using austerity measures. This is often with the aim of "weaning" the public of government services and promoting their self-dependency and participation while fostering the free-market. This is often framed as decentralization of power and local empowerment. In its action to bring about the afore-mentioned, neoliberalism occupies multiple and constantly metamorphosing forms in adaptation to variable contexts, and continuously exists as a process, changing many dynamics at different levels (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Peck, 2001; Peck and Tickell, 2002).

The History and Development of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism was conceived and has developed through two stages, each of which has sub-stages:

1) Theoretical Stage

Proto-neoliberalism / Ideological Phase (1970s)

At initial stage, the movement existed as an idea, that of Austrian economist and political philosopher Friedrich Hayek and American economist Milton Friedman, to bring into economics the free-market thinking and establish it high up on the rankings of intellectual concepts. It took flight in Chicago,

and became promoted through the economic hubs of New York, Washington DC and London. (Peck, Theodore and Brenner, 2012).

2) Applied stage, in which there were two phases:

a) Roll-back Neoliberalism / Destructive Phase (1980s)

Led by Margaret Thatcher (the UK's proposing figure of neoliberalism) and Ronald Reagan, then President of the United States (Apostolopoulou and Adams, 2015), this phase was characterized by the government doing away with its own rules and the structures that supported those rules (Peck and Tickell, 2002) in order that national control stands at a minimum and players of the economy can be self-controlling (Castree, 2008). This narrative was a means of establishing public conviction for it whilst actually deploying governmental power to back market-orientation of systems (Peck and Tickell, 2002).

b) i) Roll-out Neoliberalism / Creative Phase (1990s onwards)

This phase was no longer only targeted expansion of commercially-oriented ways by reducing legislation, but went further to proactively create and propel new economic and social structures that controlled institutions and individuals to bring about marketization and privatization (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Castree, 2008). These new structures often came along discourses such as those of local government-local community partnership in service delivery, community building, among others (Peck and Tickell, 2002).

As austerity progressed in the UK post-2010, a shift was noted in its stated objectives, with the 2010-2015 Coalition led government, although having mentioned the Red Tape Challenge, presenting it as more towards giving local communities agency to provide services and influence decisions to a higher degree while the post—2015 Conservative led government focused their reasoning more on commercial development (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016), resulting it being labelled a neoliberal discourse and tool of offloading responsibility by central government (MacKinnon, 2015; Brown, 2016; Méndez and Malfeito-gaviro, 2016) This has resulted in it being said to amount to nothing much more than "a recycling of public management diktats" (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016: 357).

2.1.2 The Application of Neoliberalism to the Environment: Market-friendly / Neoliberal Conservation
The Impact of Neoliberalism and its Associated Austerity on General Environmental Policy and Work

"Nature remains the main source of wealth along with labour power (Marx 2002 [1867]:523), and plays a key role in capital accumulation" (Apostolopoulou and Adams, 2015, p. 16)

As a result, widespread prominent feature of the post-2007 / 8 economic crisis has been that of increased neoliberal measures, which has not spared non-human natures. There has been a drive for all actors to adopt commercialized means to combat the dangers that biodiversity is in, but whether this is right, is a question that is much debated upon (Harvey, 2011; Peck, Theodore and Brenner, 2012; Grey and Sedgwick, 2013; MacKinnon, 2015; Alphandery and Fortier, 2015). More specifically, this commercialized means is neoliberal conservation.

Neoliberal conservation is a combination of a philosophy and practice that seek to submerge natural environmental elements within economic systems, with the narrative that this alignment is the only way in which the natural environment can be redeemed from its current trend of degradation, dismissing non-neoliberal ways of conservation (Igoe, Neves and Brockington, 2010; Buscher *et al.*, 2012; Apostolopoulou and Adams, 2015). Neoliberal conservation lies at the nexus of capitalism, neoliberalism and non-human natures (Buscher *et al.*, 2012). Among different labels that have been given to this wave of thinking have been "selling nature to save it" (Dempsey and Suarez, 2016, p. 667) and "trademarked nature incorporated, Nature™ Inc." (Arsel and Büscher, 2012: 62).

The aims of the neoliberal conservation movement are to remove old and put in place new nature conservation methods that do not hinder but continue to support and even increase the harnessing of wealth economically, while at the same time protecting nature on which it is reliant on exploiting for its activities (Arsel and Büscher, 2012; Apostolopoulou and Adams, 2015). In this way, neoliberalism thus creates an atmosphere that is optimal for its own expansion (Buscher *et al.*, 2012).

Neoliberal conservation often works equivocally, forcing a separation between human nature and non-human nature while also claiming that it is a means of bring the two together. Through the former, it dislodges important knowledge and established practices of actors in certain scenarios when it wants to establish itself, with the claim of sustainable conservation as the intent. Through the latter, it wins over much of society, creating within them an anticipation for improved biodiversity (Buscher *et al.*, 2012). It uses eco-friendly accounts as a rationalization and a shield for its self-interest.

Neoliberal ideology of conservation is becoming strongly rooted as a discourse (Roth and Dressler, 2012), and is spreading across the world (Alphandery and Fortier, 2015). Riding on the wave of the concept of ecosystem services, which seeks to quantify environmental benefits in economic terms, a number of examples of neoliberal conservation exist widely, one of which is biodiversity offsetting, which the UK government took interest in at the time of the crisis and unsuccessfully tried to launch

alongside austerity policies in order that it would cover the resultant financial gaps and bring about economic growth (Lockhart, 2016). Another is Payments for Ecosystem Services where a price is allocated to the economic value of an ecological area and the owner is paid that sum to maintain the area as is (Fletcher and Buscher, 2017). The latter falls under what are called Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs), which are intended to help people who live in or near areas of high natural value sustainable, additional means of living based on the resources in their area (Fletcher, 2012).

Much of critique that exists in literature on neoliberal conservation proclaims that environmental conservation and commerce, by their very natures, are incompatible, opposites and cannot mutually thrive (McShane, 2011; Miller, Minteer and Malan, 2011; Minteer and Miller, 2011; Salafsky, 2011; Russel and Benson, 2014). Unending fiscal growth on the earth, which has a limited amount of natural resources, is impossible, as it eventually results in exhaustion of those resources (Daly, 2007; Bina and La Camera, 2011; Russel and Benson, 2014).

Another point that demonstrates that capitalism and conservation are not compatible, is the amount of finance that has thus far been injected into and is circulating in market-oriented land-based conservation. Since the full-blown emergence of neoliberalism 20 years ago, and despite its sustained fanfare thereafter, this finance has been found to be small and geographically inhibited, failing to reach international finance flows. This suggests that, contrary to how it is positively depicted as a logical relief for austerity-induced conditions, this initiative is floundering as a conservation financier and is, in reality, only promissory. It has even produced less that the conventional routes of conservation financing which have been a combination of governmental and philanthropic (Dempsey and Suarez, 2016).

By pointing these facts out, the literature does not as such dispel neoliberal conservation, but acknowledges that perhaps the possibility that the initiative will gain momentum exists, and that it is in needed preparation. That (finance) which is flowing through biodiversity conservation relates to green commodities rather than land based conservation, which is essential. The literature puts forward the suggestion that conservation is not, even by design, a sound venture to seed money into, producing low financial yields in return for high risk. (Dempsey and Suarez, 2016). Further weakening the success of neoliberal conservation were the very austerity policies which sought to propel it, as cuts to local authority budgets and consequently staff reduced capacity of the authorities to effectively run the neoliberal schemes, such as biodiversity offsetting and even the development planning process, which need planning and ecological expertise, manpower and data (Lockhart, 2016). However, through austerity, these governmental streams have been drastically cut down.

Neoliberalists, however, through their efforts to gain conservationists' conviction of the need, the high mutual success between conservation and commerce (Russel and Benson, 2014) and inevitability of neoliberal conservation, have led many people to agree to accept this status quo, and led some people to even contribute in some ways. But questions arise as to why, even with its dismal performance, these conservationists cling on to these ideologies without finding alternative methods (Dempsey and Suarez, 2016).

Krinsky and Simonet (2017) reflect on how localism by austerity this encourages organisations to take advantage of free labour and how the value that is generated by this work a certain class, making the application of these budget cuts a way of increasing profits, promoting commercially oriented activities.

Lacking in literature on conservation and austerity, which I have presented above, is looking at impact on capacity on scales that are more localised than the national scale to deliver conservation. Little attention has been afforded to this. In the next section, I review the little literature that exists on this aspect, then proceed to my contribution to it.

2.2 Delivering Conservation at Scales More Localised than the National

In order to place the scales that I will refer to in context, I begin this section by providing a schematic below (Fig. 2) which illustrates the different scales that are involved in UK conservation. This is the structure on which I will base my study, in which I argue that there was a re-scaling. Note that principal authorities (county and district councils), although classified as local authorities, are at the sub-national scale, with parish councils and the voluntary sector being at the level that is local to them.
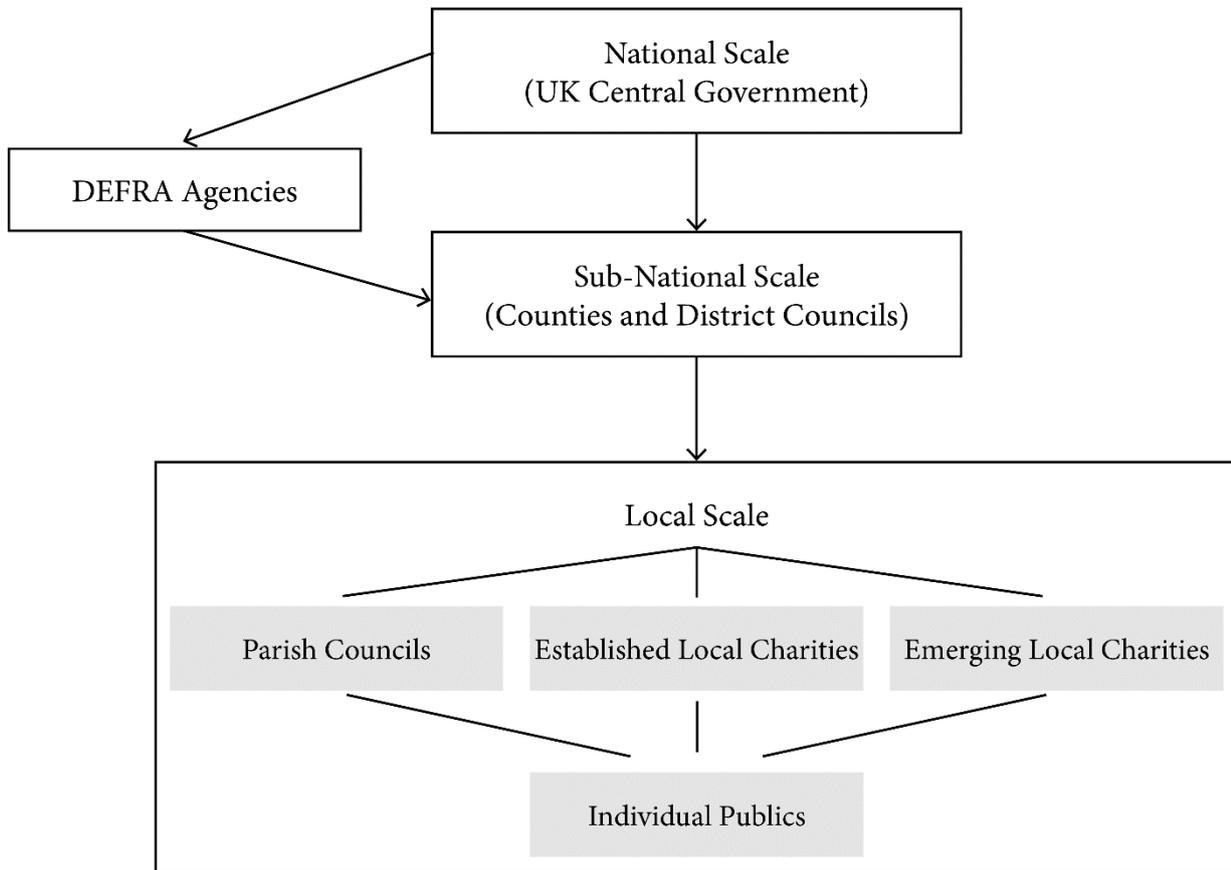
Figure 2: The different scales involved in UK conservation (in their normative heirarchy), which this study is exploring. Source: Author (Candidate's Own Production)

2.2.1 Local Government Service Delivery under Austerity

The delivery of services locally by authorities adopts various shapes in response to austerity, mainly shifting from the Ensuring Model to other models, which models have descriptions below and can further be articulated using the operational model describer (Fig. 3) that is presented thereafter.

1) Ensuring Model

This is where the local authority maintains the sole duty to administratively and practically provide for the environmental needs of a community, and where it retains accountability. Custodianship of place is one of the ethos that drive this. Often, this model assumes that the local authority, rather than third sector or private sector players, possesses the requisite capability and surety to undoubtedly deliver (King, 2014).

2) Commissioning Model

This model is more commercially inclined, defining the local authority no longer as the deliverer of services but the purchaser of those services externally, where it stipulates service needs to service providers (who may be private or voluntary) based on its perception of the needs of the public. This model manifests in the form of arrangements such as contracts and public-private partnerships. It is often driven by cost efficiency (King, 2014).

3) Cooperative Model

This is where more localized levels are afforded a higher influence over the way in which the local authority delivers services to them (King, 2014).

4) Catalyst Model

The catalyst council has moved away from the Ensuring Model in all respects, by giving out both the direct provision and decision-making powers to local communities. This is the category under which the big society and voluntarism falls (King, 2014).

Figure 3: A descriptive tool to characterize operational models for local government services. Source: (King, 2014); (Institute of Local Government Studies 2012, p. 14); (APSE, 2012)
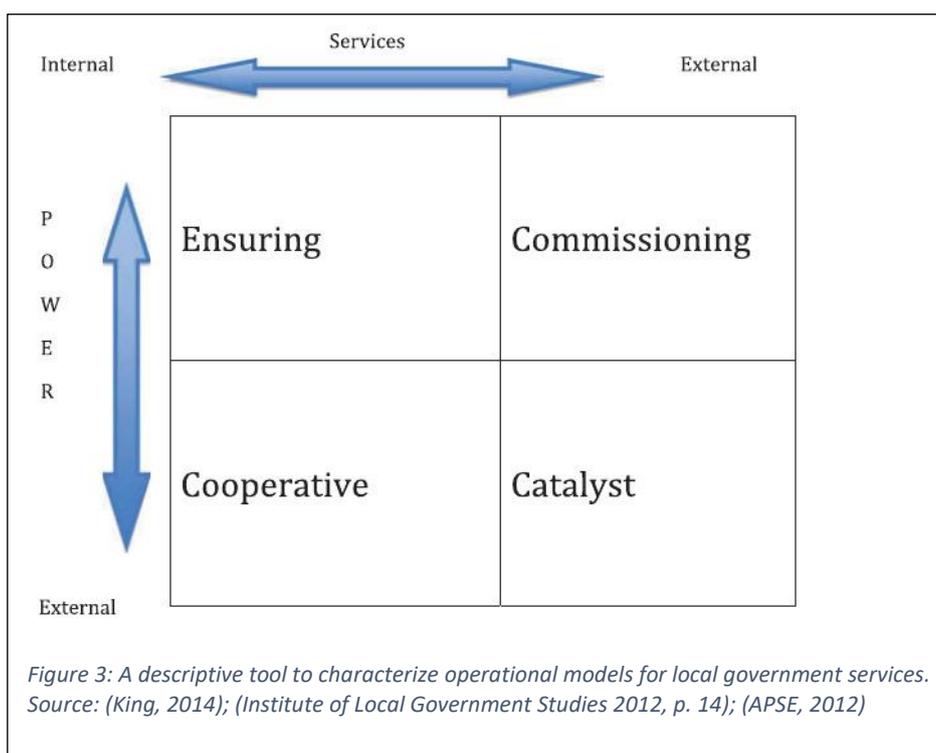
2.2.2 Current state of knowledge on local scale capacities for conservation under austerity

Neoliberalism, particularly applied through austerity measures, impacts in a number of ways on the capacities of the sub-national scale to deliver conservation to the local scale. Though limited, these have been researched by Pagès et al. (2018) in the UK, Alphandery and Fortier (2015) in France and some Krinsky and Simonet (2017) (quoted in section 2.1.2) in the United States. Although there will

be widespread similarities in how the local scales of the three countries will react to austerity in terms of conservation capacity, I do acknowledge some small contextual differences.

The public sector, including local government, have customarily been unaffected by the dynamics of their surrounding economic climates. The UK central government however peeled this protective shell by drastically reducing local authorities' budgets. This crippled their service provision capacity to the public, which include environmental services. (Bach, 2012; Bach and Bordogna, 2013).

The situation also left them with no option but to adopt commercially oriented methods of operating in order to survive. Austerity caused moves away from the "ensuring" model of local authority service provision (where they solely provide all services and hold all decision-making power) to ones with more players, and with these.

Non-governmental service providers bring financial efficiency, and have been known to deliver tasks very well, because they are specialist (Bach, 2012; King, 2014; Ramchandani *et al.*, 2018). The problem with outsourcing, however, is the resultant fragmentation i.e. having many bodies delivering services renders the tracking of quality and ethics difficult (King, 2014).

Austerity has sometimes led local authorities to transform their relationship with the local associations from being one of building them up, for example traditionally by subsidy, to being exchange-based and strictly financial outcome driven, forcing them to have to align in a commercial manner in order to continue receiving funds from the local authorities (Alphandery and Fortier, 2015). By creating an challenging environment of resource scarcity as stated above, austerity crafts a competitive terrain among the local voluntary organisations, inciting unease and the application of increased effort for each organisation's self-survival (Grey and Sedgwick, 2013). This threatens smaller voluntary organisations, for example, which is a challenge because the people who the smaller bodies engage are often very important due to the specialized knowledge that they possess of their grassroots nature in given areas, which becomes a significant loss for the capacity for conservation at the most local scales (Alphanery and Fortier, 2015). The above also indicates the selective transfer of power to the local voluntary scale (Peck, Theodore and Brenner, 2012; Grey and Sedgwick, 2013).

The contractualisation and professionalisaton of the relationship between the local authorities and the local voluntary organisations negatively affects the technical and even, also quite importantly, the personal relationship between the two, yet evidence exists that the pooling of diverse skills from numerous stakeholders, along with the morale boosting enjoyment of this collaborative working, tends to improve outcomes. It also takes away the morale boosts that come from their attachment to certain lands or biodiversity (Büscher and de Beer, 2011; Gray *et al.*, 2012; Pagès *et al.*, 2018). As

such, the ending of these relationships reduces local conservation delivery capacity through contractualisation. Austerity also limits the local scales from acting upon their own initiatives (Alphandery and Fortier, 2015).

This research focuses on local authorities' role in conservation in two counties of South-East England, UK (Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire) and impact of austerity-induced shifting geographies of power on their capacities as well as their relations with the non-profit sector.

2.3 Shifting Geographies of Power: The Politics of Scale and Networks

The outcomes of this research will be analysed within the conceptual framework of the Bulkeley's (2005) Politics of Scale and Networks, a fortified version of Smith's (1990) Politics of Scale. This framework will be used to conceptualize the dynamics of power and relations related to biodiversity conservation among and between the geographical scales in the UK.

Politics of scale is defined as "the production, reconfiguration or contestation of particular differentiations, orderings and hierarchies" both "within a relatively bounded geographical arena - usually labeled the local, urban, regional, national and so forth" and "among geographical scales" which are not necessarily based on physical geography (Brenner, 2001: 599-600).

Further to the definition that I have given, Bulkeley (2005) proposes that governance of natural resources not only involves the configuration and re-configuration of scales, but the creation and re-orientation of networks and connections as these have a bearing on the governance and outcomes. There is thus a close, mutually affecting relationship between geographies of scales and networks, which is extremely important to recognize and delve into because it will help us to comprehend new modes and situations of governance that are erupting, as well as the their outcomes.

Normatively, scale, as set according to geographical area, has corresponded to power (in the sense that I define power in my introduction, as influence, responsibility, capacity and ability). In other words, the higher scale, for example, the sub-national scale, would be expected to hold more power than the local scale. In this research however, I take power alone to be my determinant of scale, and thus using those lens, I look into what re-scaling has occurred and the resultant scale structure that has emerged in the UK, from the application of austerity measures.

My adoption of this stance is in line with observations that the physical geographical "larger" scale is not always above "smaller" ones within a pyramid, as this may be determined by other factors of operation on the ground other than size (Ernwein, 2014). Furthermore, the literature states that "scale configurations are altered as shifts in power occur" (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003, p. 913), which

power corresponds with the competences of persons and assemblies to contribute to the production of the environment (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003).

The politics of scale is a worthwhile framework to apply as a contribution to filling a gap in the literature as many papers have put forward that (i) literature of the politics of scale has not been utilized as much in mainstream literature and (ii) the theorization of scale is lacking in attention towards issues such as non-human elements, biophysical processes and politics of natural resources (Brown and Purcell, 2005; Manson, 2008; Neumann, 2009).

As this research also looks at the networks (by interaction and relationships) between the sub-national and local scale, as well as relationships within the local scale, the politics of scales and networks framework forms a hand-in-glove fit for it.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Area

The study focused on two adjacent, side-by-side counties of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire which are located in the South East region of England in the United Kingdom. The areas are geographically divided into districts, with Oxfordshire having four districts (South Oxfordshire, West Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, Cherwell) and a city (Oxford) while Buckinghamshire is also divided into four districts (South Bucks, Chiltern, Aylesbury Vale and Wycombe). Administratively, each of these two counties are covered by a county council whilst each district also has a district council. It must however be noted that Buckinghamshire County Council in the past covered the area of Milton Keynes, which it no longer does. It must also be noted that as a result of financial challenges and in order to bring about cost efficiency, some of the districts within the study area were merged, particularly South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council (to make South and Vale District Council) in Oxfordshire as well as Chiltern District Council and South Bucks District Councils (to make Chiltern and South Bucks District Council) in Buckinghamshire. In one case, Cherwell District Council, which is in the study area, merged with South Northants District Council which is outside of the study area, in the county of Northamptonshire. Where these mergers have occurred, the two councils in question join up some or all of their departments in order to carry out shared working, but the two councils remain legally and politically sovereign organisations. As such, some of the participants in my interviewees represented two councils.

In order to make a light brush of cross-checking what the council officers had said, I interviewed three local arms of established conservation charities, Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust BBOWT) Oxfordshire division and BBOWT Buckinghamshire and Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre. I must make it clear that BBOWT operates at the local scale and is not a branch of The Wildlife Trusts, which is national. Although it is a member of the "movement" of the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts (Wildlife Trusts) in the UK, it is one of several "independent charities who all share a mission to create living landscapes and living seas and a society where nature matters" and "Each of the Wildlife Trusts is a registered charity" in its own right. As such the role of the Wildlife Trusts is "to ensure a strong voice for wildlife at a UK and England level and to lead the development of the movement." (www.wildlifetrusts.org/about-us/how-we-are-run/wildlife-trusts-questions-answers). These charities are involved in natural land management, and are made up of a mix of employed professionals, volunteers and subscription-paying members.

Because the research sought, in some way, to test the motives of the UK government's localism agenda, whether it was truly for transferring power or for liberalistic reasons, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire in the South East region of the UK were chosen for their status of being among the

most bustling, high development areas in the country, with developments such as Heathrow Airport expansion, High Speed 2, East-West Rail and Oxford to Cambridge Expressway, as well as the UK Growth Agenda among others. In addition, the affluence of this region cause it to receive little attention when it comes to resource scarcity, and even with aid (this was confirmed by Council Officer D and Charity Officer B confirmed this) yet the work of their local councils, voluntary sector and even local community are being affected to a significant degree by the country's austere conditions.
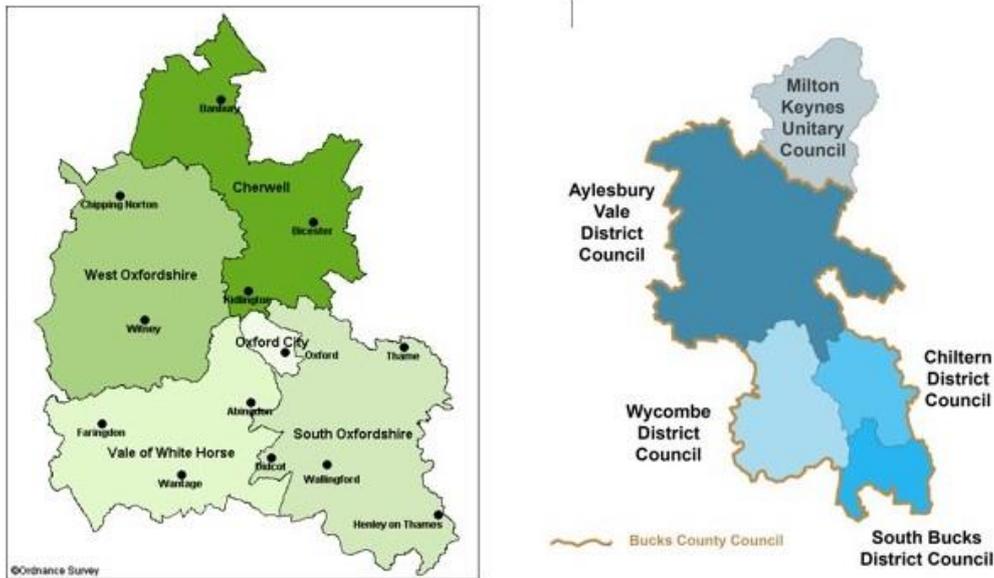
Figure 4: Neighbouring counties Oxfordshire (left) and Buckinghamshire (right) and their districts and (one) city, each of which has a council. Sources: oxonlibdems.uk and modernisingbucks.org respectively.

3.2 Sampling Design and Participant Selection

The councils that were selected to be represented were chosen based on that they were located in and had a jurisdiction over the study area. The choice of which particular council officer within each council to interview was done by a combination of snowball sampling (Marshall, 1998) and homogenous, purposive sampling. The latter sampling is based on the possession particular relevant expertise (Fetterman, 2008). With the specification of seeking council staff who were responsible for council land management and community conservation, I contacted an alumni of the MSc Biodiversity, Conservation and Management course at the University of Oxford who worked in the past in one of the target county councils and now works in a council in the other target county, as she was likely to know job descriptions very well, requesting nominations of persons who held the responsibilities. They referred me to eight interviewees representing seven organisations, of which six agreed to be interviewed. One of the nominees referred me to a more suitable staff members, who accepted the request to interview. For the remainder of the interviewees, I sent emails requesting interviews to email addresses retrieved from council websites based on job titles. In some instances,

I received replies from people to whom the emails had been forwarded as either being more suitable or being available while still being in the department. In other instances, I had to follow up with the councils telephonically after not having received a response, at which I secured a person to interview.

Nine out of twelve of the interviewed council and charity officers initially assumed duty with their respective councils prior to the 2010 budget cuts. However, of the three that joined them after, they had worked with councils in the UK prior and thus were knowledgeable on how the councils work.

In all except one council, I interviewed a natural environment officer, a person whose role was particularly dedicated to the environment. In the exception, the council did not have a person team dedicated to the natural environment, hence the closest person was one dedicated to planning.

3.3 Data Collection: Key Informant Interviews

I conducted a total of twelve interviews semi-structured key informant interviews (Gray, 2004) between mid-June and mid-July 2018, each of which lasted approximately one hour. Nine of these were county council officers whilst three were charity officers. All interviews, except one, were held at council or charity offices in the respective counties in person. I chose to conduct the interviews face-to-face as I wanted to gain visual context of the descriptions that my participants provided, as well as the aura that came with those descriptions. In the exception, the interview was conducted as a voice-only conversation on FaceTime, a video-telephony application. This council officer stated that they were not keen on meeting with me in person as they did not feel it was worth my effort to travel to see them.

The introductory questions were general, easy and personal, in order to build a comfortable atmosphere given that it was my first meeting with all of them, covering their history and current role. Ensuing questions generally, overally covered aspects such as how austerity had affected council biodiversity work, their biodiversity-themed relations with the voluntary sector and community, the perceptions of the council staff and their councils on austerity, as well as if, and how austerity had altered their personal experience of their work. The questions were not asked directly or in any order, but followed leads based on the flow of direction of the interviewees' answers (Gray, 2004). In addition, questions altered slightly as the interviews progressed, such that the later interviews brought out more sharply and quickly what the study queried.

3.4 Data Processing and Analysis

The interviews were recorded using an audio recorder, and the files were "cut and paste" onto a personal computer, on which they were encrypted. They were then auto-transcribed using the Oxford Libguides recommended YouTube function based on captions, which I firmly ensured each time was

done in private mode. The transcribed material was then edited while listening to the recording, as it does not punctuate and fails to detect some words correctly. The files of the recordings were deleted from the function soon after download of the edited transcripts.

The transcripts were then imported into the computer software NVivo, in which they were analysed by coding through allocating the various parts of the conversations to themes (Holton, 2007). I created these themes as I proceeded, adding each idea or fact from interviewees, as I encountered it, to its corresponding existent theme. Where a theme did not exist because it was the first encounter of that kind of idea, I created the theme. As coding proceeded, even coded themes were constantly being reviewed as new perspectives constantly emerged as to which ideas were of the same theme, which were separate, and which themes were sub-sets of other themes (Dey, 1993). Following this, relevant themes were then extracted and fitted to the framework of the research questions. Description of the data began thereafter.

3.5 Positionality and Limitations

My positioning as a foreign student in the UK, from a developing country, researching on a politically-charged and polarized issue, in which much was at stake, worked to the advantage that I was able to be objective to a greater extent. Not having had personal experiences or ties that would have influenced my judgement, or ties to any of the political camps that were either for or against the ways of governing of the present government, enabled me to be objective. It may have also encouraged the interviewees to be open, sensing that I probably have no affiliations to any of the political camps. However, this, at the same time, may have worked against me, as I may have failed to pick up some of the sensitivities or underlying feelings behind some of the things that my interviewees said.

I identify a few other limitations. Firstly, in some instances, the council personnel that I interviewed were the sole person responsible for the area of work of my interest in two councils that had been merged. As the mergers happened as from 2010, while these staff had joined their initial councils many years before, this meant that they had worked within the council of their initial entry more than the other i.e. the one that their council had now been joined with. This may possibly have skewed my results, causing them to provide me with information that leaned more towards their initial councils, which they had more knowledge of and had more experience in. Additionally, that experience of shared working for some of the council workers may have made them different from other study participants. There were some instances where interviewees, when answering some of my questions, clarified that they were unsure of the situation in regard to that question in the council that they had just begun to work for.

A second limitation was a lack of liberty, which I detected, to present full information and views as the interviewees personally saw it. This may have been because of the sensitive, political nature of my area of inquiry. Asking staff to provide me with information of real situation that has resulted on the ground as a result of their employers' decision, which they support with what I realise from literature, the media and study, is commonly considered propaganda, may understandably be unsettling, especially given that they are, in some ways, mandated to support their employers. Similarly, asking them to give their personal views on the outcomes of their employers' decisions may also be a challenge. Two council officers expressed concern that although they had understood that they would be pseudonymized, their respective counties were so small that it would not be difficult to link what they had said back to them, with one officer saying that they were concerned that this would expose that perhaps their council is not doing as much as it used to, while the other said they feared being mis-quoted. One of the officers thus said that he would provide his personal opinion on some questions, he would provide the official, council position on others, also citing a fear of being misquoted, which he said easily happens. It was interesting, however, that despite airing these concerns, these officers grew more expressive as the interviews progressed.

Thirdly, errors of fact may have occurred, but I overcame these using triangulation (Reeves, Kuper and Hodges, 2008) by cross-checking with grey literature that the council staff referred me to, and internet searches.

3.6 Ethics

This research was granted ethics clearance from the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Council (CUREC) under the reference code SOGE 18A-112. With the invitation to email, prospective interviewees were informed of this ethics clearance, given the code and provided a website link to the relevant part of the CUREC website so that they could read and understand what the clearance meant for their participation. On agreement to be interviewed, they were sent the Participant Information Sheet which detailed the focus of the study, their rights and the channels they could use to lodge complaints and concerns. On arrival at each site, each interviewee was provided given a chance to ask questions that arose from going through the provided information, after which they were asked to sign their consent before the interview began. They were made aware that at any time, they retained the right to withdraw from the study completely, or from answering any question. As in my CUREC application I undertook to pseudonymize participants, I have attempted, as much as possible, to eliminate possibilities of identifying the participants in this research report.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research seeks to track and map the change, more specifically, the re-scaling of configurations of biodiversity power within the normative hierarchies that run through the national scale (i.e national [central government], sub-national [principal authorities] and local scale [parish and local charities]) that have emerged as a result of austerity, which was applied by the UK central government as a part of the localism agenda. The stated objective of this localism agenda was a devolution of power (including biodiversity power) to the most local levels. The research goes on to explore the underlying motives of bringing about this re-configuration and articulates the re-configuration's implications concerning biodiversity power for the most localized scale.

4.1 Impacted of austerity on the configurations of power (capacity, ability, responsibility and influence) in biodiversity management between the national, sub-national and local scale

4.1.1 Overview of Changes

All of the interviewed council officers reported steeper, more significant cuts in their budget allocations from central government to their councils in general as from 2010. It must be noted that budgets for environmental work were already on a trend of decline since the late 1980s, but the cut of 2010 made the decline much more significant and steeper. Councils then had to make decisions as to which areas of their operations to cut or change form in order to make savings. Where savings to the council budgets were made through changes to natural environment functions, these were made in three forms, namely i) staff reduction by redundancies, non-replacement of retired or resigned staff, conversion of full-time staff to part-time status or transferring staff to private companies with whom the councils have service-level agreements. An example was Council H, which experienced high cuts to their envirional department:

"*Within a very short period of time, the senior officer had gone, the junior officer had gone and then the officers on the ground ..... so we've gone from being able to have two and a half officers provide stuff on the ground ..... to having one person*"

ii) cutting internal council budget allocations for natural land management iii) partial or total cut of non-contractual grants to community bodies for conservation work All councils reported having experienced at least one aspect of i) and iii) in its entirety. The majority of councils reported having experienced ii), but some of the councils, such as A and C, reported that because the budgets were not a large proportion of total council budgets, they had not attracted enough attention to be targeted

"the core funding for biodiversity has been protected, it's a relatively small area of the work we do within the scheme of the authority ... I think as a result of that and I've kept it kind of under the radar because it's not a huge area of expenditure, it's not the one that they initially look at when they're looking to make cuts." Council Officer A

The above-mentioned situations were rebutted by all the charity officers who were interviewed, who expressed their awareness of these trends within local authorities. I report on i) and it's consequences in the following two sections. I then report on iii) in the section "Impact of Austerity on Subnational - Local Scale Relations"

4.1.2 Manpower and Expertise

This reduction in manpower shown by i) above signals a reduction in the natural environmental management and conservation expertise available in the council. Respondents informed the study that adding further this dwindle of natural environmental expertise were cuts to DEFRA agencies' staff such as Natural England, Environment Agency and Historic England (confirmed in literature by Jowitt, 2010) who were providing planning and practical land management advice. One council officer said:

"Ten years ago, if I needed to seek advice from either those statutory agencies, it was very straightforward for me to get on the phone, call the local conservation officer, they would meet me on-site, have those discussions, if there is an issue ..... but because of the budget cuts that they've had, it's incredibly hard actually getting site meetings with Natural England staff." (Council Officer E)

They also encountered a reduction in opportunity to share expertise and work together between councils, except where there were mergers.

4.1.3 Prioritization of Tasks

The impossibly disproportionate council officer to natural environment task ratio that resulted from the staff cuts forced councils ensure prioritization of certain tasks over others by their workers. As dictated by central government's rules for local authorities, of the natural environment tasks, the planning function, as a statutory function, was given precedence over all others. As Council Officer I put it sharply:

"the council, because of funding, had to retract to a point that if it wasn't statutory, we weren't doing it"

This meant staff letting go of their work time allocations that were related to natural environment-themed community and capacity building, for example where Council Officer I reported that they

"*used to do more than half our work in any week ... as community work ... with landowners ... educational laison works taking school kids out, youth groups ... we just had to stop doing all of that.*"

I do not find the concerted effect of the austerity, to limit the capacity of council staff such that they have to prioritize certain tasks over others, and the statutorization of the commercial, economic activity of planning, which compels council staff to prioritize it, as being coincidence. I find these to be deliberate ploys by central government to streamline local councils towards economic growth activities. In line with with Alphandery and Fortier (2015), Boussard, Demaziere and Milburn (2010) and , I propose that this is what has been called professionalism, of the work of councils, which seeks to angle their deeds and those of their workers in commercial ways and can be considered a new form of administration.

Interviews with the council staff suggested that the extent of cuts to council manpower was so severe that even with streamlining of priorities to focus largely on just planning (with less focus on peripheral natural environment tasks), the staff struggled to cope. Staff were unable to give detailed attention to planning applications or even consider seemingly smaller ones. Speaking on this change, Council Officer A said:

"*I could receive an application, I'd normally try and do a site visit to ... form an opinion before I start reading what somebody sent me which then tends to influence how you feel about it. I don't always do site visits now, I can't because of the time and obviously inevitably I now give it a light touch ...* "

4.2 Impact of Austerity on Subnational - Local Scale Relations

One of my personal critiques of the rhetoric of localism, as it was presented, is that it failed either to possibly detect, or if it had detected, to acknowledge that the voluntary sector is categorical, with established and emerging charities as the two categories, that had different strengths and abilities which dictated how they were able to respond and how they would be affected by the methods of the devolution of power movement.

4.2.1 Established Charities Pick It Up Tasks, as Councils Lose Agency

Established local charities, of their own initiative and proactivity, have requested to and picked up some, but not all, of those planning functions, stating in their interview that they have even become relied upon:

"*they (council officers) even rely on us to do it, sometimes. They haven't said that but that's the truth, they sort of rely on us checking*" Charity Officer C

The prioritization of planning applications, combined with the increasing number of planning applications in the councils of study, due to their location in the high development South East England region where several large transport and housing projects are running[1], left little to no allowance for other natural environment tasks.

Some projects were closed, while others were continued by the councils at a drastically down-scaled level whilst in others, responsibility was transferred to the private sector (under contract) or to more localized government or voluntary scales (with or without contract). Where responsibility was transferred, "*the council provide some funding ... for taking care of some sites that they would have had to in the past ... which is enough for the charity but it saves them (the council) costs*" (Charity Officer A) because local charities have volunteers from whom they garner help. If the management responsibility transfer was to a local charity, the council retains ownership, but if the transfer was within government, for example, to a parish council, it went with the ownership.

4.2.2 From Grant-aid to Contract

Condensed budgets for the councils, and consequently for their environmental arms, compelled the councils to prioritize budget allocations in a hierarchy that not only went from statutory to non-statutory, but also from internal task (such as management of the council's natural land holdings) to external tasks (such as supporting local charities in their own nature conservation ventures, such as bird monitoring and habitat restoration). The squeezed finance was thus allocated to internal tasks, as a first priority, leaving little to no finance for the external tasks.

"*provided grant funding towards biodiversity projects within our area ..... that was all cut back on, in fact, no longer exists, it wasn't just cut back on ... so it's no longer 'here's some money you go and do something good', it's now, 'okay, here's some money this is what we want from you'* " Council Officer A

At the time of the interviews, where any finance was still being given to a charity, it was on an exchange-based arrangement (funding for biological data and land management) and was seldom on a grant-aid basis.

This move from providing services internally to outsourcing is documented in literature (Bach, 2012; King, 2014; Ramchandani *et al.*, 2018) and can be discussed using the schematic below.

A descriptive tool to characterize operational models for local government services. Source: (King, 2014); (Institute of Local Government Studies 2012, p. 14); (APSE, 2012)
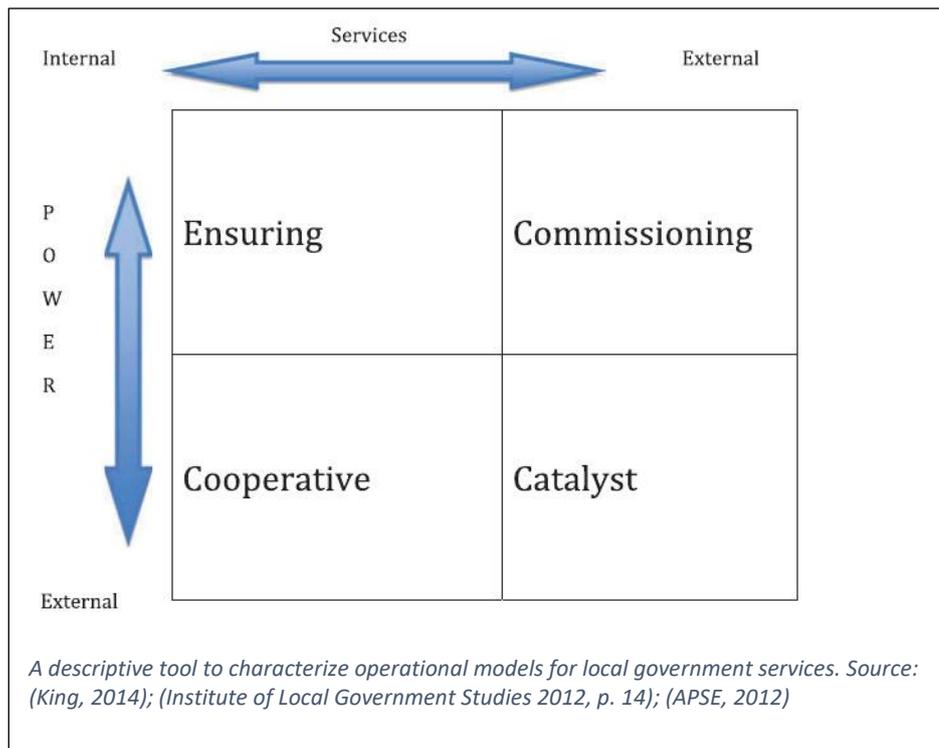
The relationships by which the councils begun to operate with, which are described and discussed in the sections prior to this one, can be described using the operational model illustrated above (see section 2.2.1 for full explanation of model.) The explanation is that the principal authorities have moved from an ensuring model, of solely providing biodiversity conservation service from internally, to largely a catalyst role, where they have given out both the service whilst the decision-making has also largely left them, being taken up by the third sector. Although they are providing some amount of matched funding towards the established charities' land management, it is evident from Charity Officer A's words in the section below that they lost much of the power.

Only the established charities whose structures at the time were robust enough to be able to continue onto a relationship with such heavy commitment. This resulted In a competitive atmosphere in the charity sector, which I discuss further on.

Similarly to the point that I put forward in 4.1.3, that was backed by Alphandery and Fortier (2015) and Boussard, Demaziere and Milburn (2010), I maintain that the above application of budget cuts to councils, compelling them to convert the arrangements for all funds that leave the council to becoming transactional (where some had been building community capacity to conserve biodiversity) is a tactic by central government to commercialize the councils in nature, focusing them on maximizing economic gain rather than serving the community as they are normatively meant to be.

Alphandery and Fortier (2015) also confirm that contracting is directly responsible for the disruption of schemes of financial aid.

Another point is that council officers mentioned that the charities do tasks very well, sometimes better than the councils, because they are specialist. This is highlighted in literature by (Bach, 2012; King, 2014; Ramchandani *et al.*, 2018).

The charity officers informed the study that although through the contracts they "*increased the amount of land that we're influencing for nature*" (Charity Officer A), they found that getting involved in more "*work which the councils used to do ... then locks in more resource in that area, so we don't have as much freedom, where we're not as light on our feet as we'd like to be so it's not it's not as good as it used to be*" (Charity Officer C). In agreement with Alphandery and Fortier (2015), I synthesize this the be the fact that contractualisation reduces the discretion of the local charities to do projects of their own initiative, which they also see as best needed for a particular local area, forcing them to be guided to do work on conservation projects in areas that councils have conservation contracts for, as a way of pursuing funding in a bid to survive, especially after non-contractual funding will have been reduced.

4.2.3 Established Charities Proclaim a Gain of Influence in Relation to Principal Authorities

All of the interviewed charities, which were established, revealed their gain of power from the government agencies in the arena of local natural environment management and conservation,

"*the local authorities are relatively less important and the charities ... we have more influence, more power, we're doing more of the work so we have more say ... we certainly relatively have more resource and influence than we used to, with the DEFRA family as well ... we are bigger players now than we used to be*" (Charity Officer C)

with Council Officer H saying confirming this by saying that "*for those groups that had the level of support and effort and energy ..... 3-4 years ..... prior to the squeeze, it enabled them to feel really empowered ..... and I do genuinely think they do ..... I think they have gone off.*"

In actual fact, the established local charities informed the study that they even grew in size through the period of austerity, leaping up 85% in full time staff in the 6 years leading to this study.

4.2.4 Loss of Contact

Responses from the interviewees brought to light that with austerity and the situation that it brought, financial and technical interaction between the councils and the emerging local charities was lost, with Council Officer A saying: "*we no longer have a reason to communicate with them because I*

haven't got any money to give them, I don't have the capacity to give them any advice so it's kind of gone now" Council Officer A.

In agreement with Büscher and de Beer (2011), Gray *et al.* (2012), Pagès *et al.* (2018) and (Reed *et al.*, 2018), I think that outside of finance and technical assistance, this loss of collaborative working further contributes to a loss of conservation capacity of the local communities, charities and even the council workers, as it has been proven that collective working, through morale, increases capacity. The loss of being able to put diverse ideas to solve complex challenges also saps capacity out of conservation actors.

In actual fact, the interaction between the councils and local communities, and thus collaborative relationship, has not ended simply with a decline, but has gone further to become resentment from the communities, with Council Officer D in their interview remarking, *"when I first came into planning x odd years ago ... we were seen as something quite positive ... we were there to enhance and omprove people's lives ... now we're seen as the enemy and unprofessional and we don't listen to people so as a professional, I think we've deteriorated in people's perception.*"

4.3 How has austerity impacted configurations of power within the local scale (third sector)

With reduced funds being available, combined with contract conditions, competition for funding increased within the voluntary sector. Grey and Sedgwick (2013) and Peck and Tickell (2002) confirm this dynamic, discovering within their own survey the contract's ability to breed a mentality of racing, which is fueled by dread of demise. Emerging charities found it challenging to hold their fort against the established charities. Even among the established charities, competition is fierce and even their increased efforts keep them at the same level as the terrain gets more challenging.

"from austerity, I think grant funding is becoming more competitive ..... the big pots out there used to be and still are things like the Heritage Lottery Fund and various landfill taxes and we found that those are becoming more competitive basically because there's less public money around so most of those grant funders are facing increasing competition which means your projects have to be very good and we do have a good track record but we have noticed that grant funds and charitable trusts have had far more competition than they did before ..... there are plenty of charities out there competing for people's support and we're no different so I think we have had to work a lot harder and a lot smarter ..... we put an awful lot of effort ..... and I'd say we probably just about managed to stand still" Charity Officer A

The councils highlighted their awareness of this:

"with the market crash that came, that affected all the trust funds, so all of a sudden they had less money so you know there is less local authority funding coming and actually there's less trust money around because the share prices have all dropped. That is starting to rebuild itself now so there is money starting to be available in those however if one thinks of these private benefactors, we are all familiar that significant wealth is accumulating in what appears to be an ever reducing number of people. One consequence of that is that you end up having to go to a smaller pool of people out there who you can approach that have the spare resources to be able to fund projects" (Council Officer B).

With less funds available, established charities like Charity B developed a commercial arm that dealt which sold biological data to the private sector in order to be able to supplement their income.

I believe that the field within the charity sector was never level, and the smaller charities never had a fair chance to compete and thrive or survive in austere conditions. In agreement with Alphandery and Fortier (2015), I have noted that the more a charity has had the opportunity and thus the experience to handle finance, which often correlate with its age and size, the higher the chances it has to harness finance. This is because it will then have had a chance to build secure structures for it, the know-how of handling the finance, the know-how of where to find finance and how to convince donors and investors, as well as a track-record which place them in a favourable position to be given more finance. This fuels a trend of their rise in being able to access resources, and thus rising in power, while smaller charities face challenges in those respects.

4.3.1 Emerging Charities are Weakened, While Established Local Charities Strengthen Up

The challenging terrain of competitiveness for funding that was created within the voluntary sector, was one in which emerging organisations seldom survive. In consistency with Council Officer H's specification above of the history of voluntary organisations that survived the squeeze, interviews with the council officers informed the study that some of voluntary organisations which were still young and budding, at the time of the 2010 austerity measures, collapsed, while those that continue to run do so feebly. Said Council Officer D:

"*we used to help fund ..... along with other authorities ..... the Oxfordshire Woodland Project and the Oxfordshire Wood Fuel Project ..... for example ..... and I think we've all cut the funding therefore those two groups are no longer in existence*" (Council Officer D) whereas, in mentioning the Wychwood Project, the same Council Officer said "*the Project Officer spends much more time now just trying to find funding than actually doing work*", signaling struggle.

Examples of initiatives that are challenged are two certain projects targeted at swifts and the great crested newts.

In agreement with (Reed *et al.*, 2018), I find that the lack of vigilant administration of the forces at work of power are among the reasons why programmes of empowerment become unsuccessful in producing the aimed situations.

4.4 The Overall Big Picture: Re-scaling Occurs through New Geographies of Power
Following the definition of power that I chose to adopt (specified in the introduction) and taking into consideration the above shifts in dynamics of the conservation environment presented in this section, as a result of austerity, I propose that there was a re-scaling as determined according to power, and more specifically, the sub-national scale lost power, while the established charity gained power simultaneously with the loss of power of the emerging sector.

The sub-national scale (principal authorities who were interviewed for this study), who previously, before the 2010 austerity cuts, had more power in issues of biodiversity management and conservation, lost this power as shown by their loss of capacity and consequent loss of agency. This power became then "floated", becoming available for any of the two parts of the voluntary sector (established and emerging) ta take up. Because of their capacity, the established local charities picked up some of this power, along with parish councils, by taking up some of the responsibilities, while simultaneously, because of the withdrawal council financial and technical support on which they relied, they became disempowered in the process.

As I have already demonstated, the change in the power status of the local charity as a result of austerity that was applied as part of the localism agenda, was not homogenous, as the sector itself is not homogenous. This is line with the observations of Council Officer C and Reed (2008), who both described that for every instance of a locally empowering initiative that achieved success through measurable benefits, a case of failure exists, which may either have just been unable to realize its intended outcomes, for example, leaving service delivery gaps, or may even bring about unanticipated outcomes, resulting in challenges. Below is a testament to this.

Within this research, I clearly defined what I am taking to be power. I however do acknowledge that there are other factors which can be taken to be determinants of power. For example, within this research, in almost all cases, council officers reported that where principal authorities handed over land for management to a charity, this ceding did not come with ownership of the land, with the

principal authority maintaining this. In some respects, being the owner of the land could be deemed power.

The implication that I construe from the above, which is in agreement with Brenner (2001) and Swyngedouw and Heynen (2003), is that order of scales can be intricate and even contradictory, with more than one scalar configuration existing at the same time seen depending on what factors the scales are being considered by. In this case, scale can be constructed by considering who possesses the resource and applies them (established charity sector) whilst another can be by who possesses proprietary authority (the principal authorities). In agreement with Ernwein (2014), I find that what could be deemed the "larger" scale, based on, for example, political level, may not necessarily be higher when a hierarchy that is based on real, practical terms of a situation on the ground is constructed. As such, scale is a construct and is not set, as its shape and state are subject to socio-ecological situations. It can be navigated and is often discursively used.

4.5 Queries into the Nature of Charities in the Conservation Sector

The dynamic of the survival and empowerment, through neoliberalistic measures (austerity), of only the established charities, which Morison (2000) characterizes as being well-endowed, highly organized and made professional, in contrast with the weakening and sometimes demise of the emerging charities, which Fyfe and Milligan (2003) call grassroots because of their higher composition of interested locals rather than professionals, warrants scholarly inquiry into the nature and motives of organisations within the local voluntary sector and the political implications of this. In agreement with Alphandery and Fortier (2015) and Tsai and Tseng (2003), I believe that this dynamic is important because of the extreme value of the emerging charities given the local nature of the knowledge and information that higher proportion of its members have, as compared to the established charities. I will begin with questioning their nature.

Along with Alphandery and Fortier (2015), I ask important questions about what the missions and role of charities should be, whether they should be performing a role of monitoring and challenging the government and private sectors where they lack, places of vigilance, debate and action, and contributing to filling the gaps which they genuinely fail to fill, or if they should be taking on full parts of roles of government such as natural land management. In line with the opinions of Tsai and Tseng (2003), who present that local charities are vessels of reform creating and occupying an intermediary level between government-level regulations and local publics, I think that charities should be crusaders. However, their delivery of such a role becomes difficult for them to maintain that role when they are expected by government to take over service provision. I also personally think

that government also deliberately create the service provision gap and ask charities to fill it in order to keep them distracted from their "watchdog" function, which relieves government from challenge and provides them with some leeway to implement more neoliberalistic measures. I also think that the government also create these gaps knowing fully well that charities, by virtue of their stated objectives to improve society and the environment, charities are unlikely not to act in attempting to fill this gap.

I move on to exploring the possible motivations of conservation charities to take on responsibility, especially that they give them power and influence. Although Pagès *et al.* (2018) proposes that recognition, status, the gain of political standing, and influence as being among the principal drivers for some leaders to occupy and work in their positions in voluntary groups, I disagree with these notions, based on my data.

In Section 4.2.3, the established charities stated that they had gained power and influence in biodiversity, and explained how and why. The Council Officer (C) was however quick to re-assure an ethic of still wanting to work collaboratively, even in the position of more power::

"*it's not something that we've wanted to happen, that's just an inevitable consequence of what's happened ..... I mean I'm not interested in who has the power, I'm interested in the right decisions being made ..... who's to say that we're right, we shouldn't think that we always have the right approach to things ..... whether that's a good thing (having more influence, power and say), as I say, is a matter of opinion, really*" Charity Officer C

In fact, the charity officer expressed displeasure from being given these tasks, which are the source of their power, and this is evidence that it is not their primary concern:

"*... which is ridiculous, it's not our job, we're a charity, we don't have any statutory responsibility, we don't have to do anything, you know, there's nothing that says we have to do this, we do it because we think it's the right thing to do*" (Charity Officer C)

However, a lack of unity comes to light within the voluntary sector. The established charity, while growing in power and influence, are not seen to assist the emerging charities,

4.6 Neoliberal / Market-Friendly Conservation

Council Officers G and A informed the study that theirs were one of the minority of councils that had replaced Section 106 Agreements (negotiated and agreed developer contributions) with Community Infrastructure Levies, a new framework that that made them compulsory. Through this, Council

Officer G said their council had harnessed sizeable sums of money, some of which it used to fund biodiversity projects, among many others.

This unique situation defies predictions that had been made by (Brown, 2016) that austerity measures would affect the planning system by plummeting developer contributions.

Even where they have not yet brought in high income into the councils, this study's interviewees expressed a regard of developer contributions, and biodiversity offsets, as not only the only lifeline left for the environment and biodiversity, but also a glimmer of hope for its protection and enhancement, which some of them said encouraged them personally to continue attending work.

Said Council Officer A referring to biodiversity offsetting "*over the next 20 years there is going to be far more spent on biodiversity conservation ..... which are better for people and you are getting more biodiversity gain ..... which is what's kept me here*"

Council Officer D expressed excitement about the proposal for a garden village in Cotswold, and it's what keeps her going to work, but some critics say is simply development just with a label of sustainability

From the above, I was able to deduce that the council workers have accepted the neoliberalistic status quo of market-friendly conservation that had befallen them.

The enthusiasm expressed by the majority of council officers for the promise of neoliberal conservation outcomes surprised me, as in the same conversations, they had all expressed feelings such as those below:

"*... this constant drive and that for economic growth which drive me mad, I'm a conservationist I'm about biodiversity at heart, that's my thing, I always have been that's why I haven't changed job in the last number of years...* " Council Officer A

In my personal view, I see this as an indication that central government have successfully forced, and possibly in some regards, psychologically conditioned the council workers into accepting these neoliberalistic ways of conservation. I think they have done this by providing them with a problem (of budget cuts and possible), and simultaneously a solution, which comes as a relief, but is of a kind that furthers the commercial interests. I back my thoughts literature, which in providing the very definition of neoliberalism, states that it aims at painting the picture that alignment with it is the only way in which natural resources can be saved from their decline (Igoe, Neves and Brockington, 2010; Buscher *et al.*, 2012; Apostolopoulou and Adams, 2015; Dempsey and Suarez, 2016). In agreement with observations by Apostolopoulou and Adams (2015), I suggest that neoliberalism causes harm to

the environment in a cyclical and constantly downward spiraling way, an example which can even be seen in the data of this study. In the first step of this cycle, money-seeking ways plunge the environment into a degraded state, in this case through the withdrawal of funds for natural environment conservation in order that investment is concentrated in directly money-making exercises. In the second step, capitalistic methods are then used to reverse the degradation that it would have caused, in this case by generating funds for conservation through developer contributions, which are increased by increasing development and paving its way. However, this very development is also a major contributor to environmental degradation through clearing of natural land, for example, build houses, as well as pollution from industrial activities. While all this happens, non-commercial methods of conservation tend to be disqualified and omitted from possible solutions to the conundrum.

Taking into consideration the above "successes" of neoliberalism, and in agreement with (Peck and Tickell, 2002), I feel that its foundational pillars are strong, and although we have seen reforms in actions of players as a result of campaigns against it, these have only been on the surface, with some of the reforms simply being the neoliberalism's change in form, while its foundation still remains firm (Peck and Tickell, 2002).

There is something, however, to be said about whether the optimism for neoliberal conservation is worth it. In the opinion of Dempsey and Suarez (2016), the chances of neoliberal conservation thriving as a conservation financier are slim, as it already has a poor record of financial return in its years of operation thus far, despite the extent to which it has been hyped up and generated excitement as Council Officer A shows above. Some authors say this failure is because conservation and neoliberalism simply cannot co-thrive because neoliberalism uses resources (natural) that are exhaustible (McShane, 2011; Miller, Minteer and Malan, 2011; Minteer and Miller, 2011; Salafsky, 2011; Russel and Benson, 2014).In agreement with Lockhart (2016), I add that another of the reasons for this failure of neoliberal conservation is that it tends to self-destruct through austerity, for example, in the case of councils, reducing the manpower and expertise that would otherwise develop neoliberal schemes such as biodiversity offsetting and development planning.

My own thoughts on this issue, however, are that the problem with neoliberal conservation is an underlying premise that comes with it, which says "if you can pay for it (to be replaced), you can destroy it" which is condoning destruction. Given the difficulty of setting a comprehensive price-tag on the environment, this amount that is paid to replace what has been destroyed has a very high possibility of being inadequate.

4.7 Perceptions of Council and Charity Conservationists on the Localism Agenda

The interviewed officers did not appear to believe the reason of localism, and that of fiscal efficiency, for applying the austerity measures. Charity Officer said "*I'm naturally a bit cynical about the motivations for it, I think it was a fluffy way of central government offloading some expensive responsibilities*" Charity Officer A while Charity Officer B said "*often I think it comes down to political whim rather than actually, efficiency*" Charity Officer B.

In agreement with the above officers and with Milbourne and Cushman (2013), I also do think that what was portrayed as egalitarianism by central government and trust to the local scales to allow them to deliver services was only a smokescreen of power by central government, where they were rather intent on establishing neoliberalism. (Buscher *et al.*, 2012) notes that the equivocacy of separating people from non-human nature, by reducing their resources of interacting with it, in this case, whilst at the same time promising that this brings them together, is a common feature of neoliberalism. Interestingly, this often wins over societies, yet this is disruptive to local participation.

Council officers expressed a lack of confidence in that there was ever a need for the localism agenda stating that rather than being a block, the councils were actually supporting the communities and were still needed to continue that support. They also expressed that communities do not fill up roles of service delivery because they have been created or exist. They need to be spurred by interest:

For example, Council Officer G said "

"I'm not aware of any evidence, directly and certainly anecdotally whereby people have felt, 'oh my goodness this is great, now the council's taking less of a role, it frees us to do something', frankly that's a little bit far-fetched … councils have only ever provided support anyway … we could never do all the things that could be done anyway … if they … had an idea then we could … build their capacity … act as a conduit for funding … in stepping back, I think it's more likely I see that people struggle to know 'well, what do I do, I want to do something but where do I start'

Indications abound from the study participants' words that they observed councils begin to be commercial in aim and orientation. A number of the Council Officers gave indication that they were being compelled to work neoliberally against their will:

"*at the end of the day you don't go into the role to find money, you go into the role to make more butterflies and better land*" Council Officer B

Milbourne and Cushman (2013) confirm the above feature of contracting, stating that it does change the voluntary sector against its will.

However, one Council Officer, F, said that they experienced an improvement in their working conditions since the onset of austerity as a their enthusiasm for their work grew They explained that prior to austerity, they were being assigned to do tasks for which they had no training or interest in, and did not enjoy the independent work culture. As austerity brought about some mergers, they now enjoy team working and it has increased their flexibility.

"there's more of us perhaps to share around the projects because there's more than one of us who's got a particular knowledge or skill, we can help each other out" Council Officer F
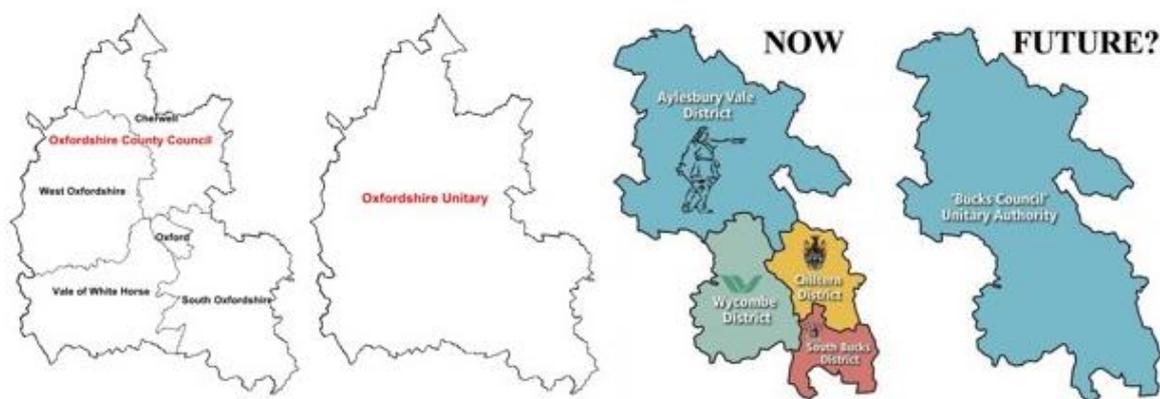
4.8 The Future: Unitising

Figure 5: Diagramatic illustration of plans in consideration to merge county and district councils in Oxfordshire (left) and Buckinghamshire (right) into respective unitary authorities. Sources: oxfordmail.co.uk and bucksfreepress.co.uk respectively.

There is a move towards merging the county and district councils in a council into one authority in the UK. This has already begun to happen in some areas, and has actually disrupted the structures in my study area. Cherwell District Council, which is in a merger with South Northants District Council, will soon be breaking up in the merger as a result of instruction from central government for Douth Northants District Council to join the unitary in its respective county, Northamptonshire. Unitising also caused the loss of Milton Keynes area to Buckinghamshire County Council.

Proposals are in place for unitising to take place in my two counties of focus:

"*in Buckinghamshire we're probably gonna have, instead of a county and four districts, it looks like we might have at County as one unitary*" Charity Officer C

In agreement with Council Officer G, I see this unitising as a situation that may make more dire the situation, as it will be easier to reduce the funding allocation to a unitary authority as it will be one unit.

"*I think that the decisions may become even more sharply in focus with some of the funding streams ... and will mean that there's less scope to do local projects that add distinctiveness and bring out the best in an area*" Council Officer G

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research makes a number of key contributions.

There is much outright dismissal in literature of the UK central government's narrative that austerity can transfer power from government to more localized levels, where it has been called nothing much more than simply public management diktats (MacKinnon, 2015; Bramall, Gilbert and Meadway, 2016; Brown, 2016; Lowndes and Gardner, 2016; Méndez and Malfeito-gaviro, 2016). However, this study, has demonstrated that there is some substance in that claim and ideology, based on that the established local voluntary sector gained power, as shown in my results. However, this empowerement is only partial, not reaching the more grassroots level. However, by the same result, it contributes to a strong case against steep austerity, as the power does not reach the most localized the most localized levels of society, and thus this study calls for its alleviation. This evaluation important, serves to set alight a debate that will invoke action towards the desires of the majority (Colley, 2012; Clayton and Merchant, 2016).

Secondly, the study unravels how the nature and role of charities are being changed by central government through austerity and how they are being disempowered. Normatively, they arem"watchdogs" which call out the government where it fails to deliver services to the public, thus being a defender of the public, seeking to empower the local grassroots person. However, this study articulates how they are being disempowered from this crusade role, by occupying them with filling its central government's role at the local scale. This works to the advantage of central government as they reduce the extent to which they are being challenged and help accountable.

Third, by highlighting a simultaneous rise of the established charities with the struggle and sometimes demise of the emerging charities, this study brings to focus a lack unity or collaborative working within the third sector, where the stronger (established) category of the sector assists the weaker (emerging) one. The established third sector organisations have appeared to be pre-occupied in their competition against other large third sector organisations without thought to assist the shriveling sister category within their sector. In line with their normative role of being a defender of the grassroots, I encourage them to assist.

Fourth, because in many councils, comparatively larger portions of their budgets go to their activities such as social care or transport etc., many of the studies that look at local councils focus on those with the consequence of less attention on the environment. This limited attention is partly driven by a

perception of comparatively low importance of council environmental work evidenced by its target as one of the first areas of cut during times of austerity. In addition, environmental work does not rank among one of the first thing that appears in people's minds when council work is mentioned. This little explored but crucial element of councils' work is what this work seeks to explore and promote, also contributing to increasing its visibility.

Fifth, the study also contributes to literature. As far as my search in literature reveals, this study will be the first to adapt the University of Birmingham's Institute for Local Government (2012) framework for the typology of operational models for local government services, to illustrate the changes in biodiversity management and conservation activities, yet it is a highly useful descriptive tool. The model has been used to illustrate changes in sport provision by King (2014). This study will also utilize the politics of scale whose use in literature both generally and in relation to non-human elements has been found to be lacking (Brown and Purcell, 2005; Manson, 2008; Neumann, 2009). Furthermore, evidence for theory of the connection between the decisions that are made and effected in times of austerity and the consequence of those decisions is weak (Cepiku, Mussari and Giordano, 2016) thus this work aims at strengthening this link.

While most studies have only looked at the effects of austerity on one scale, this study is unique in that it takes a process look at the effects of austerity on biodiversity power distribution.

More generally in terms of contributions, this research takes a political ecology stance while looking into the outcomes of the UK central government's austerity measures, and since political ecology seeks stands to understand socioecological situations in order to formulate how power can be distributed and used in an all-inclusive way that is characterized by equity (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003), the research is of immense benefit. Theory in the area of engagement is scanty, so this research works towards filling this gap.

Basing on the results of my literature search, no study has looked at the effect of austerity measures by UK central government on conservation at scales that are more localized relative to, specifically in the counties of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, let alone elsewhere. This is partly where this study draws its originality.

This study, in the opinion of the interviewed conservationists, was important to them and timely, with them saying:

"*I'm really interested in your research because we actually need some evidence to show to the politicians, the government to say 'look, I know you look like you're saving money here, but actually, there's a big cost to that decision' and it is meaning that organizations like charities are starting to struggle to cope*" Charity Officer C

" *we have an executive report going to the July meeting which has senior Councillors ... and one of the things that we are asking for them to approve is this (referring to a report) and then we are also asking them to approve or endorse some wildlife trust ... so your interview is very timely in a way*" Council Officer C

In addition, the positioning of this research, in the last half of the latest term of budget allows is strategic in contributing for a review.

This research also falls within the scope of the MSc Biodiversity, Conservation and Management course, relating strongly to courses such as Conservation Governance and Conservation and Society through examining how government policy have re-shaped the terrain of power, responsibility and action among biodiversity management actors within government, the third sector and wider society.

As a recommendation, I agree with Reed *et al.* (2018) that the strategy of participatory processes should be made in such a way that there is good control of the power dynamics so that all targeted participators have a equal chance and are able to do so.

In line with their normative role of being a defender of the grassroots, I encourage established charities to assist emerging charities, and encourage central government to invest in communities in order to make successful the process of giving them power and enabling them to stand alone.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: List of Study Organisations and Key Informants

Table 1: List of Study Organisations and Key Informants

Council / Charity	County	Interview Venue
Aylesbury Vale District Council	Buckinghamshire	Aylesbury (Face-to-face)
Buckinghamshire County Council	Buckinghamshire	Aylesbury (Face-to-face)
Chiltern and South Bucks District Council	Buckinghamshire	Amersham (Face-to-face)
Wycombe District Council	Buckinghamshire	Facetime (Videotelephone)
Cherwell District Council	Oxfordshire	Banbury (Face-to-face)
Oxfordshire County Council	Oxfordshire	Oxford (Face-to-face)
South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Council	Oxfordshire	Abingdon (Face-to-face)
West Oxfordshire District Council	Oxfordshire	Witney (Face-to-face)

Oxford City Council	Oxfordshire	Oxford (Face-to-face)
BBOWT Buckinghamshire	Buckinghamshire	Oxford (Face-to-face)
BBOWT Oxfordshire	Oxfordshire	Oxford (Face-to-face)
Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre	Oxfordshire	Oxford (Face-to-face)

Appendix B: Key Informant Interview Guide

Introductory questions

1) What is your position within this council and where is it placed within the council's organogram?

2) What biodiversity management activities are this council involved in and what is your role within these?

3) What has been your past career and professional trajectory?

4) Did the budget cuts that were effected by central government on most of its departments including local councils in 2010 and in 2015 result in a cut to the budget allocated to biodiversity related work in this council? If yes, what proportion was cut?

How austerity has affected biodiversity project prioritizations

5) How have austerity measures changed the national funding structure of the stream that reaches local councils, the funding structure in the council to biodiversity and the one in biodiversity departments or for those activities?

6) How were biodiversity-related activities or departments within this council affected by the budget cuts?

7) What were the reasons or what influenced the choice of which projects to prioritize, which to share in responsibility and which to let go? (as will have been described in the above question)

8) Would you have done these prioritizations differently? If so, how and why?

9) Where the third sector has taken up management, how have they fared in this responsibility, from

Impact of austerity on personnel's experience of work

10) How have tight budgets changed your experience of conducting your work?

11) Are there any changes in where you see yourself placed and in your importance within the county or district's biodiversity work as a result of austerity? If yes, what changes are these?

Impact of austerity on relations of councils with third sector including community groups

12) How have the austerity measures changed the way in which your council relates with the third sector (i.e. community groups and third sector organisations) in issues relating to biodiversity?

13) What is your perception on whether local communities feel more empowered as a result of the localism agenda? (which was aimed to be delivered through decentralization of power to local communities from public sector through budget cuts and consequent crowding out of service provision, providing space for them)

Perception of local council on austerity

14) What is your understanding of the reasons why the government applied austerity measures?
15) If you were in central government, would you have applied the austerity framework differently, and if so, how and why?