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# URBAN DISTRICT COUNCILS:

Their Constitution, Powers and Duties.

BY

C. M. LLOYD, M.A.

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# URBAN DISTRICT COUNCILS:

## Their Constitution, Powers and Duties.

THE URBAN DISTRICT, as a unit of local administration, was established by the Local Government Act, 1894, superseding the old Urban Sanitary District. There are now about 800 of these Urban Districts in England and Wales, varying widely in population, area and wealth. Thus, at one end of the scale, we have Willesden and Rhondda, with populations of over 150,000; at the other end Grasmere or South Darley with less than 900, and the remarkable atom of Kirklington-cum-Upsland with 244. Willesden has a rateable value of something like £900,000, Grasmere of less than £8,000. On the other hand, Grasmere has an area of 7,332 acres, Willesden of only 4,383. The huge District of Rhondda covers 23,885 acres, or more than 37 square miles. The census of 1911 showed no less than 203 Urban Districts with populations of less than 3,000, and 203 others with less than 5,000, and it is clear that a very large proportion of the whole are really more rural in character than urban. It may be observed, however, that these small Urban Districts came into being for historical reasons; new small districts are not now constituted.

An Urban District may apply to the Privy Council for a "charter of incorporation"—that is to say, to become a Municipal Borough.\*

\* The question often arises, in an Urban District with a population of 30,000 or 40,000, whether it should not seek to become a Municipal Borough. This involves an application to the Privy Council for a Royal Charter, which is only granted after considerable enquiry and delay, and is quite likely to be refused if the opposition from other authorities (especially the County Council) is strong. A Municipal Borough has practically the same powers as an Urban District; but (if over 20,000 in population) it may be permitted to establish a police force of its own, instead of contributing to the County Force. A larger Borough may also be allowed its own Bench of Justices, its own Quarter Sessions, and its own Coroner. Its power of making bye-laws also is somewhat enlarged. Otherwise the only difference is that (a) the Chairman becomes a Mayor; (b) the Clerk is styled Town Clerk; (c) the Council appoints Aldermen, either from its own body or from outside; (d) the Borough may escape from the audit of the Ministry of Health's District Auditor, and have its own Auditors, elective or appointed by the Mayor. A Borough exceeding 50,000 in population may apply to be made a County Borough, and thus become free of control by, or of contribution to, the County Council, and able to exercise within its area (and pay for) all the powers of a County Council as well as those of a Municipal Borough. Short of becoming a County Borough, the chief tangible advantage of an Urban District getting a charter of incorporation is said to be that of being able to raise loans on the Stock Exchange at a slightly lower rate of interest than is usually paid by an Urban District. But it may, of course, be argued that there will be a rise in status and dignity which may be of importance from a civic point of view.

A number of districts have obtained their charters during the last twenty-five years, among the most recent being Nuneaton, Fowey, Stourbridge, Buxton and Aylesbury. An Urban District with a population over 25,000 may petition the Home Secretary for a Stipendiary Magistrate.

Parishes or Rural Districts may be made into Urban Districts and the boundaries of Urban Districts may be altered by the County Council, under sec. 57 of the Local Government Act, 1888.

### Constitution of Urban District Council.

The Urban District Council is in every case a corporate body with perpetual succession (*i.e.*, its life continues unbroken, irrespective of the individual members who compose it) and a common seal. Councillors must be residents in the District who are either (1) Local Government electors on the register, or (2) if not entitled to be registered as electors, owners of land or house property in the District, or have been residents in the Council's area for twelve months prior to nomination. There is no property qualification required. Voting is by ballot under rules made by the Ministry of Health. The franchise is wide; for the persons entitled to be placed on the roll of Local Government electors comprise (1) every British subject, man or woman, over the age of 21, who is an occupier, as owner or tenant, of any land or premises (or as a lodger, provided he or she has taken rooms unfurnished) in the District on January 15th next before the election, and who has been such an occupier of any land or premises, either in the District, or in the County of which the District is a part, for the six months prior to that date, and (2) every woman over 30, who is the wife of a man entitled to be registered in respect of premises in which they both reside.

A Councillor sits for three years, and is re-eligible at the end of his term. As a rule, the whole Council does not come in and go out together; one-third of the members retires each year, early in April, so that one-third are always "first year," one-third "second year" and one-third "third year" men (or women). It may, however, be arranged by Special Order of the County Council (in response to a resolution of the Urban District Council, passed by two-thirds of those voting) that the whole body retire *en bloc* every third year, and this is done in some Districts. The Chairman of the Council is elected by the Councillors, and he becomes, by virtue of his office, a Justice of the Peace. He need not be a Councillor himself, but may be chosen from outside. And the Councillors have power, if they wish, to choose a woman as Chairman, and in that case she will become a J.P., now that the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, 1919, has been passed. The Council may also appoint, and it generally does appoint, a Vice-Chairman, who must be a member of the Council. A District Council has no Aldermen and no *ex-officio* or nominated members. Councillors are unpaid.

## Powers of Urban District Councils.

The powers and duties of the Urban District Council are very wide. They may be most conveniently grouped under the following heads :

(1) *Health*, including drainage and sewerage, scavenging and removal of refuse, treatment of infectious diseases, provision of hospitals, clinics, nursing, mortuaries, cemeteries, the inspection of slaughter-houses, bakeries, etc., and of articles of food exposed or prepared for sale, and the prevention of various nuisances.

(2) *Housing*.—Subject to certain powers exercised by the Ministry of Health, the Urban District Council is the authority for carrying out the provisions of the Housing and Town Planning Acts, which include not only the provision of new houses, but the clearing of slums and the ensuring that all dwellings in its area are fit for habitation, and the preparation of Town Planning schemes.

(3) *Education*.—Urban District Councils are, as mentioned below, the Authorities under the Public Libraries Acts, and they may spend what they please on libraries. They also have power to make provision for Higher Education. But they may not spend more than a penny rate for the purpose, and all but the largest Districts, therefore, are practically bound to work in co-operation with the County Council in this matter. As regards elementary education, the smaller Urban Districts (*i.e.*, those with a population less than 20,000 at the 1901 Census) have no real power at all ; their functions are practically confined to the appointment of two Managers to each "provided" and one to each "non-provided" school.

But in the case of the larger Districts (where, to be exact, the population of the District was over 20,000 in 1901), the Council has much greater powers. It then becomes the Local Education Authority for carrying out Part III. of the Education Act, 1902 (*i.e.*, all elementary education) and the additional duties imposed by the Education Act of 1918, while under Part II. it has power to expend up to a penny rate on education other than elementary. It is, however, permissible for an Urban District Council to relinquish these powers to the County Council, and one Urban District Council, that of Watford, has done so. There are now in England and Wales forty-eight Urban District Councils which are Local Education Authorities.

These three departments of Health, Housing and Education are, of course, of first-rate importance, but they will not be referred to in any further detail here. A full treatment of them will be found in three separate tracts. (See Fabian Tracts, "What a Health Committee can do" ; "What an Education Committee can Do" ; and "Housing.")

(4) *Highways*.—The Urban District Council is charged with the management of all streets and highways within the District. It repairs, paves, cleanses and lights the roads, and may name, re-name,

or re-number streets, or make new ones, and may put up clocks or statues in public places. Certain roads, however, known as "main roads" are in an anomalous position. Normally they are repairable and maintainable by the County Council. But the Urban Authorities were allowed in 1888, when the County Councils were created, to elect whether they would retain the control of any "main roads" hitherto under their jurisdiction. Furthermore, the County Council may require the Urban District Council to carry out the County's duty of maintaining and repairing any main road. In either case the Urban District receives an annual contribution from the County towards the cost, the amount being fixed by agreement between the two bodies, or, if they cannot agree, by the Central Authority, the Ministry of Transport. Many main roads, therefore, belong to the Urban District Councils, though the expense of maintaining them is only borne in part by the District ratepayers. Finally, the Ministry of Transport Act, 1919, allows the Ministry of Transport to make grants to an Urban District for the construction, improvement or maintenance of roads.

(5) *Parks, Recreation Grounds, Commons, etc.*—Under sec. 164 of the Public Health Act, 1875, any Urban Authority may make or lease or buy "public walks or pleasure grounds" and may make by-laws for their regulation. It has a practically free hand in the provision of parks, recreation grounds, playing fields, and the like, and it is worth noting that the County Councils usually contribute about one-third of the cost in the case of large parks. Under the Commons Acts of 1876 and 1899, it may regulate and manage commons. Apart from its concern with the common from the point of view of recreation or amenity, the Urban District Council may also, with the consent of the County Council, aid persons in maintaining rights of common, even to the extent of taking legal proceedings, when the Council consider that the extinction of such rights would be prejudicial to the inhabitants of the District. It is the duty of the Urban District Council, too, under sec. 26 of the Local Government Act, 1894, to protect rights of way and to prevent encroachment on roadside wastes.

(6) *Allotments.*—Every Urban District Council has the duty of providing a sufficient supply of allotments for the inhabitants of any class (not now, as formerly, only for the working class), and for this purpose it may purchase or hire land. If the demand cannot be satisfied otherwise, the Council may, with the sanction of the Board of Agriculture, acquire the land compulsorily, and it may adapt, fence or drain it and equip it with suitable buildings for the allotment-holders. An allotment is a plot of land not exceeding five acres; but, in practice, of course, allotments are seldom, if ever, anything like that size, and it is not the duty of a Council to provide any allotment of more than one acre. A house may be built on any allotment of not less than one acre. The provision of small holdings, which may be larger (sometimes they may, in fact, be any-

thing exceeding one acre up to a limit of fifty acres)—is the business of the County Council, not of the U.D.C. But an Urban District Council may make representations to the Small Holdings Commissioners as to demand for, or desirability of, small holdings in the District. And a County Council may come to an agreement for delegating to an Urban District Council any of its powers in respect of acquiring, adapting or managing small holdings.

(7) *Public Utility Services.*—The Urban District Council may have its own gas or electricity undertaking, its own water supply, its own trams, though of these gas alone is ordinarily within the reach of the smaller districts. For services such as these Parliamentary or departmental sanction must be obtained. There are, however, two important matters in which the Urban District Council can act at its own will. These are the institution of (a) Libraries and Museums, and (b) of Baths and Washhouses. Any Urban District Council may, by a special resolution, adopt the Public Libraries Acts, and over 200 have done so. The Council may also adopt the Museums and Gymnasiums Act, 1891, for the provision of gymnasiums. It is worth noting that Authorities (*e.g.*, neighbouring Councils) may combine for the purpose of providing Libraries.

The Public Libraries Act, 1919, has made several very important changes in the law. It has abolished the restriction which formerly compelled a Local Authority to keep its expenditure on Libraries within the proceeds of a penny rate. It gives the County Council power to adopt the Public Libraries Acts for the whole or any part of a county, exclusive of any part which is an existing Library area. (In that case, a U.D.C., which has not already adopted the Acts will no longer have power to do so: the County Council will become the Library Authority.) It provides, furthermore, that a U.D.C. may relinquish its powers to the County Council, and if the U.D.C. is the Local Education Authority under Part II. of the Education Act, 1902, it may delegate its Library powers to the Local Education Authority (except the raising of a rate or borrowing of money).

The Baths and Washhouses Acts are also adoptive—*i.e.*, any Urban District Council may resolve to provide public baths and washhouses. There is no restriction laid down by the law as to the amount that may be spent on this service out of the rates. A great many Urban Districts have their own public baths, and there is no reason why all but the smallest should not have them.

Public markets and slaughterhouses may also be established by the Council, and, where the District is a waterside one, public quays and wharves. In seaside Districts the Council may, and in some cases does, construct and own sea-walls, esplanades, piers, harbours, and sea-water supply works. And some Councils have "dust destructors," or installations for the disposal of refuse of various sorts, which enable them to convert waste into new raw material, often at a considerable financial profit.

(8) *Miscellaneous.*—The Urban District Council has besides a number of different powers or duties, which cannot be classified conveniently under any of the foregoing heads. These are as follows :

(i) *Advertisements.*—In Urban Districts with a population of 10,000 or upwards the Council may make by-laws for the regulation of advertisements in public places, on hoardings, etc.

(ii) *Diseases of Animals.*—The County Council may, if it chooses, delegate its powers under the Diseases of Animals Acts to the Urban District Council. The Urban District Council will then become the authority for dealing with swine fever, foot and mouth disease, cattle plague, anthrax, rabies, and various other diseases, with large powers of inspection, regulation, seizure and slaughtering.

(iii) *Employment of Children.*—The combined effect of the Employment of Children Act, 1903, and the Education Act, 1918, is that (a) no child under 12 years of age may be employed at all; (b) no child under 14 may be employed in street trading, or in any factory, workshop, mine or quarry; (c) no child between 12 and 14 may be employed on school days before the close of school hours, or on Sundays for more than two hours, or on any day before 6 a.m. or after 8 p.m. But Urban District Councils which are Local Education Authorities (under Part III.) may make by-laws modifying provision (c) and extending (b). They may permit under certain conditions the employment of children over 12 before school hours, and the employment of children by their parents, but such employment before 9 a.m. must be limited to one hour, and no child so employed before 9 a.m. must be employed for more than one hour in the afternoon. The Local Education Authority has the general power to prohibit or restrict any employment of a child which they are satisfied is prejudicial to his health. And by-laws may be made declaring street-trading illegal by any young person under the age of 16.

(iv) *Factories and Workshops.*—In workshops, including retail bakehouses, the law in regard to cleanliness, limewashing, ventilation, prevention of nuisances and overcrowding, etc., is enforced by the Council of the Urban District. A register of workshops in the District is kept by the Council. Factories are inspected by the Home Office; but the Home Office may, if it considers it necessary, demand the assistance of the Urban District Council.

(v) *Fire.*—The Urban District Council has, under the Town Police Clauses Act, 1847, and the Public Health Act, 1875, full powers of protection against fire, including the provision of engines, apparatus, stations, and the payment of firemen.

(vi) *Food Control.*—The Urban District Council appoints the local Food Control Committee, first set up by the Food Controller's Order in 1917. The members of the Committee are limited to sixteen (or twelve where the population is less than 20,000), of

whom at least one must be a woman, and one a representative of Labour. None of them need be Councillors, unless the Council desires.

(vii) *Health Insurance.*—In Urban Districts with a population over 20,000, the Council is entitled to representation on the District Insurance Committee, which functions under the County Insurance Committee. The Urban District Council, as such, has, of course, no substantial power on the Committee, which is an entirely independent body. And the Council's representatives will be in a minority as against the representatives of insured persons, deposit contributors and doctors.

(viii) *Licensing, Registration, etc.*—The Urban District Council is the authority for licensing knackers' yards, game dealers, pawn-brokers, hackney carriages, horses or donkeys let out for hire, and pleasure boats. It registers and inspects canal boats, and old metal and marine stores. It licenses and regulates the keeping and selling of petroleum within the District. It makes by-laws for the regulation of the sanitary condition of tents, vans, and other "temporary dwellings." It may be licensed by the Postmaster-General to provide a system of public telephone communication, though with a national system in existence, it would, of course, not be likely to get such a licence. And finally it may, if it thinks fit, apply to the Home Office to abolish any fair in the District, or to alter the day for holding it.

(ix) *Old Age Pensions.*—In Urban Districts with a population of 20,000 or more, the Council appoints the Local Pensions Committee. The members of the Local Pensions Committee hold office for three years (or less, if so decided by the Urban District Council). They need not necessarily be members of the Council.

(x) *Profiteering.*—Under the Profiteering Act, 1919, an Urban District Council may, if it chooses, establish a Local Profiteering Committee (or Tribunal, as it is commonly called) of not less than seven and not more than twenty-five members. The members need not be Councillors. They must include two women, and at least three members of the Local Food Committee. And there must be "adequate representation of Labour" on the Tribunal. The business of the Tribunal is to investigate and hear complaints of alleged profiteering by local retailers, and either to dismiss the complaint, or to declare what is a reasonable price and order repayment of anything paid in excess of that price. Sec. 4 of the Profiteering Act allows Local Authorities to be authorised by the Board of Trade to buy and sell articles, but they are required to "proceed on a commercial basis, and not by way of subsidy at the expense of the ratepayers." But the ordinary expenses of the Tribunal may be met out of the rates.

(xi) *Shops.*—In Urban Districts with a population of 20,000 or more, the Council is the authority for enforcing the Shops Act, 1912. It appoints inspectors to see that hours of work are not exceeded for young persons, and that seats are provided for the assistants. The

Council may also make and enforce orders fixing the "Early Closing Day," and, subject to the sanction of the Home Office, fix times of closing for any class of shops in its District.

(xii) *Small Dwellings Acquisition Act*, 1899.—This Act, which, except in name, has nothing to do with the "housing question," was meant to facilitate the acquisition of ownership of small dwellings (formerly not exceeding £400 in value, but now, as amended by the Housing Act of 1919, £800) by the persons occupying them. For this purpose the Urban District Council is empowered to lend money to the occupier. In Districts with a population of less than 10,000, the sanction of the County Council is required, or of the Ministry of Health if the County Council refuses. The money lent must in any case be repaid within 60 years at most. A few Districts have made considerable use of this Act. Ilford especially claims to have helped a large number of residents to buy their houses.

(xiii) *Unemployment*.—The Unemployed Workmen Act, 1905, empowered the setting up of Distress Committees for the relief of unemployment in Urban Districts with a population of 50,000. The Distress Committee consists partly of Urban District Councillors, partly of Poor Law Guardians, and partly of "persons experienced in the relief of distress." About a dozen Urban Districts have Distress Committees—which enjoy a nominal existence, but are at present of no practical importance. When they did function some years ago, they depended almost entirely for the provision of their relief works on grants from the Exchequer, since the rates could not be used for the payment of wages on these works.

### Urban District Finance.

The Urban District raises its revenue in two main ways. First, it has the General District Fund, which is derived from (1) rent or profits of property owned by the Council—*e.g.*, land, houses, markets, water and gas undertakings, cemeteries, baths and wash-houses—or the proceeds from the sale of waste from the scavenging department, or from the letting of public halls; (2) penalties, such as fines for breaches of the Public Health Acts; (3) grants from the County Council, or from the Central Exchequer paid through the County Council, for certain services. Such are the contributions towards the maintenance of roads, for salaries of officials, or for education. Secondly, there are the rates. (*See Fabian Tract: "What About the Rates?"*) The General District Rate is made, levied and collected by the Urban District Council. The Council must prepare an estimate showing the total sum required, the value of the property on which it is assessable and the amount of the rate per pound. It is assessed on the basis of the Poor Law Valuation, and is normally levied upon the occupiers of property. Where, however, the rateable value of the property assessed is less than £10, and the premises are let to

weekly or monthly tenants, or in separate apartments, the Council may, if it chooses, rate the owner and not the occupier. If the owner and the Council agree to "compound" in respect of the property, whether it is occupied or unoccupied, the assessment must be reduced to one-half of the full rateable value. An Urban District Council, which is an Education Authority, gets its rate portion of the education expenses from the Overseers by precept.

Apart from the General District Fund and the District Rate, the Council has other financial powers. It may contract loans for various public functions (*e.g.*, the building of houses), with the approval of the Central Authority, the Ministry of Health (or the Board of Education, if the loans are for educational purposes or under the Libraries Acts, or the Ministry of Transport, if they are for roads, ferries, piers, tramways, etc.). These loans are repayable by instalments, and are a charge upon the rates. Further, it may incur expenditure for the benefit of particular inhabitants. For example, it may put Mr. Smith's house drains in order, or pave a *private* street, for which Messrs. Smith, Brown, Jones and Robinson, are responsible. In these cases the Council will send the bills in to Messrs. Smith, Brown, Jones and Robinson, and recover its expenses in the same way as if it were an ordinary contractor. But if the outlay has been heavy and only a few inhabitants have been benefited, the Council may declare the expenditure to be "Private Improvement Expenses." The repayment may then be spread over a number of years, not exceeding thirty, and the money will be collected by a "Private Improvement Rate," levied on the particular persons benefited. The accounts of the Urban District Councils must be made up to March 31st in each year, to be audited by a District Auditor appointed by the Ministry of Health.

### Joint Services with other Local Authorities.

The Public Health Act, 1875, and the Local Government Act, 1894, allow certain services to be carried out by combinations of Local Authorities, and a number of Urban Districts are members of Joint Burial Boards, Joint Sewerage Boards, Joint Water Boards, Joint Hospital Boards or Committees. Thus, the Penistone U.D.C. unites with the Thurlstone U.D.C. and three Parish Councils to form a Burial Board. The Eastern Valleys (Moinmouth) Joint Sewerage Board comprises six, and the Abertillery and District Water Board four, separate Urban District Councils. A Joint Hospital Board is formed in Kent by Beckenham U.D.C., Chislehurst U.D.C., Fooks Cray U.D.C., Bromley Town Council and Bromley Rural District Council. And Kettering U.D.C. combines with two other U.D.C.s and one Rural District Council to form a Joint Committee for the administration of the Dairies, Cowsheds and Milkshops Orders (under sec. 57 of the Local Government Act, 1894).

### Officers.

A great part of the functions of a Local Authority is, of course, exercised through various officers. The principal officers in the employ of an Urban District Council are (1) Clerk, (2) Treasurer, (3) Medical Officer of Health, (4) Inspector of Nuisances, (5) Surveyor, (6) Collector. There may also, in a large District, be a School Medical Officer, Nurses, Midwives, Health Visitors, Superintendents of Baths, Gas and Electricity, Tramways, even a Veterinary Surgeon, and various others. All Urban District officials, except the Medical Officer of Health and the Inspector of Nuisances, are removable by the Council at its pleasure, which means that, in practice, they are generally subject to one month's notice of termination of their employment. As a rule, the Medical Officer of Health and the Inspector of Nuisances have their appointments sanctioned by the Central Authority, the Ministry of Health. Half of their salaries are then paid by the County Council, and their dismissal requires the approval of the Ministry. And the Surveyor will now be in a similar position, since the Ministry of Transport Act, 1919, provides that the Ministry may defray half the salary and establishment charges of the engineer or surveyor to a Local Authority responsible for the maintenance of roads (provided that his appointment and dismissal, and the amount of the establishment charges, are subject to the Minister's approval).

The duties of the principal officers are briefly as follows :

(1) The Clerk is the chief permanent official and secretary of the Council. He generally attends all meetings of the Council and Committees. He is responsible for the taking and circulation of the Minutes, and for the checking of the accounts before they go before the Committees. He has charge of the records and books and documents of the Council. He deals with correspondence, either as instructed by the Council, or in the course of his routine. His advice on all matters concerning the District, the powers of the Council and so on, is available at Council or Committee meetings. He is generally, and should always be when possible, a solicitor, and, if he has also had some financial training and commercial experience, it will be a great advantage.

(2) A Treasurer must be appointed by every Urban District Council, however small its finances may be. He is responsible for all monies paid out, and is usually, in practice, the Manager of the local Bank which keeps the Council's account. But it is only the Treasurer personally and not the Bank that the law recognises.

(3) Every Urban Authority must appoint a qualified medical man, or woman, as Medical Officer of Health, under sec. 189 of the Public Health Act, 1875, or must arrange that the County Council shall appoint one, the Urban District then paying a portion of the salary. The M.O.H. may be a "part-timer," and in the smaller Districts he generally is. But in the large Districts the work requires his whole

time, and in some cases that of assistants as well. If any middling sized District is hesitating between a whole-time and a part-time Medical Officer, it is pretty safe to say that they should decide in favour of whole-time. For the Medical Officer is, from the point of view of the public health—public health in the widest possible sense of the term—the most important person in the District. His functions do not fall within the province of this tract; they are fully explained in "What a Health Committee can do." It is a pretty general practice to combine the posts of Medical Officer of Health and School Medical Officer. Such an arrangement is strongly favoured by the Central Authorities, and it is obviously the right one.

(4) The Public Health Act, 1875, sec. 189, also requires that every Urban Authority shall appoint an Inspector of Nuisances. He has large powers as a sanitary officer, including the supervision of slaughter houses, cowsheds, dairies, workshops and factories; the disposal of refuse, the procuring of samples of food for public analysis, the serving of notices for the abatement of nuisances when the Council has decided to take action. He reports to the M.O.H., and in many matters he will work under him. And in all cases the Council should see that there is the utmost possible co-operation between these two officials.

(5) The Surveyor is the head of an important department, and keeps, or should keep, all plans, maps and records of public work and repairs. He advises the Council on plans for buildings and streets, inspects and passes drains and sewers, supervises the various operations undertaken by the Council, as well as the maintenance of the highways. In a large District the Surveyor will be a man with high professional qualifications; in the smaller ones his office may be combined with that of the Inspector of Nuisances.

(6) The Collector's task is the straightforward one of demanding and collecting the rates. Some Urban Districts have had conferred on them the power, under sec. 33 of the Local Government Act, 1894, to appoint an Assistant Overseer, and then the Collector of the General District Rate is also commonly appointed Assistant Overseer and Collector of Poor Rates. In some small Urban Districts the offices of Clerk and Collector are combined. But disapproval of this practice has been expressed by the Central Authority, on the ground that it is undesirable for the Clerk or other officer, employed upon or having access to the accounts, to be engaged also as Collector in receiving money on behalf of the Council. The larger Districts often have two or more Collectors; Willesden has as many as seven.

### Committees.

The Urban District Council is required by law to meet at least once a month. It does not, of course, carry out all its work as one body. It divides itself into several Committees, each of which is responsible for a certain department, and only comes finally to the

full Council for the approval and ratification of its decisions. The number of these Committees will naturally vary according to the amount and importance of the work and the services provided in the District. The most important Councils may have a dozen or more separate Committees. In the smallest the whole Council will sit as a Committee, and even in quite large ones the whole of the Councillors commonly form the General Purposes Committee. Certain statutory Committees (*i.e.*, Committees which the Council is bound by law to appoint) function, as has been mentioned above, quite independently of the Council—*e.g.*, the Local Pensions Committee. It should be noted also that the Libraries Committee may, if the Council chooses, consist of persons who are not members of the Council, and that Councils will find occasion to strengthen their Libraries Committee by the appointment of some outsiders whose assistance will be valuable to it. A point, which is often overlooked, is the importance of having the fullest possible co-operation between different Committees, so that the work of their departments may be properly correlated. It is obvious, for instance, that the Education Committee ought to be in touch with both the Parks Committee and the Libraries Committee. A second point, which is overlooked by all too many individual Councillors, is the importance of close attention to, and training themselves for, Committee work. Bernard Shaw once said very truly that "it is possible for a Councillor to be stupendously ignorant and shamefully lazy, and yet to be not only popular with his fellow Councillors, but—provided he is a tolerably entertaining speaker—with the ratepayers also. He passes for a very busy public man, when he is really only a sociable one, by attending all his Committees and doing nothing on them." Much of the work appears to be of a dull routine kind or a mass of tiresome details. But the dull routine and the tiresome details are the basis of an efficient public service. A member of a Highways Committee who thinks that a kind heart, or an acquaintance with Karl Marx, or a determination to "save the rates," are a good substitute for a knowledge of paving stones or the habits of contractors, had very much better not be there at all. The Committeeman who will "make good" on the Committee and in the Council is he who will aim at knowing as much as the Clerk or the officials themselves of the procedure, the details of the work, and the functioning and possibilities of the department.

### The Duty of a good Councillor.

The efficiency of an Urban District Council, then, will depend largely on the character of its members. If the Councillors are keen and competent (which in a great many cases they are not) they will see, in the first place, that their officials are keen and competent. They will, in the second place, be constantly looking for improvements in all the work of the Council. This seems a trite thing to say, but it is important, because it opens up the whole question of finance. A large number of keen Councillors are merely keen to

economise the rates. If they were competent as well as keen, they would know that spending rather than stinting may often be the truest economy. Thousands of municipal ships up and down the country are spoiled for a ha'porth of tar. A long list of examples could be given, not only from Public Health or Housing or Education Committee's reports, but from those of Highways and Parks and others. And one of the most fruitful causes of bad work is bad labour conditions—faulty organisation or underpayment of the employees of the Council or contractors. The larger Districts have now pretty generally accepted "Fair Contracts" clauses; some, but not all, have a decent minimum wage for their own workmen. But many of the smaller Councils are bad employers, many even of the larger ones are by no means as good as they ought to be. And this criticism refers, it should be remembered, to the underpaying not only of manual workers, but of clerks and even of higher officials, such as Medical Officers, Nurses, Librarians. Every Councillor ought to regard it as among the first of his duties to know the pay and the conditions of work of any servant of the Council, and to get them improved if they are not satisfactory.

But the keen and competent Councillor will not be satisfied merely with the efficient working of the existing services provided by the Council. He will ask whether there are not any new services that it might, or ought to, undertake. Reference has already been made to a number of communal enterprises of various sorts carried out by Urban District Councils.

It is possible that before long there may be added the supply of milk (not that limited supply, which, even now, the Council, as Health Authority, may provide in special cases, but the general supply of all consumers in the District), and the supply of coal. Socialists have long advocated municipal milk and municipal coal; the universal experience of profiteering during and since the War has at last begun to make a convert of the general public. It may even come to pass that we shall presently see the advantage of municipal pawnshops, such as exist in France and Italy and other continental countries. They would be a considerable advantage, at any rate, to large numbers of the "local government electors" by whom the pawnshop, under the present arrangement of society, is as regularly patronised as the Picture-palace. At present, however, there is no statutory power given to public authorities to embark on these enterprises.

But, as regards the larger public utility services, it is clear that the majority of Urban Districts are too limited in size or resources to undertake them. Nevertheless, there are few Districts in which there are not certain things, valuable, even if small, to be done for the public welfare. Outside the spheres of public health, housing and education, with which we are not concerned here, we may instance two matters, in which the majority of District Councils are content to do little or nothing. These are the

provision of Libraries, and the provision of recreation or amusement. There are, no doubt, many Districts where it is alleged that there is no demand for a Library. But that will generally be found to mean that the Council grudges the expenditure, and few intelligent people will believe this ingenuous excuse for parsimony. If, however, there are places where the difficulty of raising funds, either by voluntary means or by a rate, is really a serious one, the County Council ought to be pressed, should pressure be necessary, to take up its powers newly conferred by the Public Libraries Act, 1919. As for recreation, much is waiting to be done in the little towns and large villages. There are hundreds of District Councils which could, for instance, make swimming baths in the open air or otherwise, improve their parks or playing fields, provide bands or concerts. Some of these things will not produce a revenue; some of them may even be a trifling "burden on the rates." But the wise Councillor will not be afraid of them on that account, since he knows that municipal enterprise and commercial enterprise are not and ought not to be the same thing.

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 Local Government and Local Taxation. By Wright and Hobhouse. 1914. King. 8/6.  
 Local Development Law. By H. C. Dowdall. 1919. Unwin. 10/6.

#### (2) Facts and Statistics.

- The Municipal Year Book. (Published annually.)  
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