

MARCUS JONES MP, Minister, Department of Communities and Local Government

I'd like to thank the National Association of Local Councils for the kind invitation to speak at your annual conference.

I'm sorry that I can't address you all in person, but I have urgent business to attend to in Parliament. Otherwise it would have been my privilege to attend and I hope for the opportunity to do so in the future.

This year's conference is taking place in Birmingham. Your surroundings are inspiring, with a great history of vigorous and independent local government since Joseph Chamberlain. The most recent notable event is that Birmingham will soon be the home of the brand new Sutton Coldfield Town Council. This will give local people a voice and oversee work on delivery of services to their community. Almost 70 per cent of those who voted in the referendum chose to set up a directly elected Town Council. This is bringing local democracy closer to home and greater independence from Birmingham, and giving local people more of a say over the decisions that affect them as well as how their area is governed.

NALC – Today and Looking to the Future

I'd like to take the opportunity today to thank NALC for your immensely positive role as the national membership body for parish and town councils. You represent the interests of some 9,000 local councils and 80,000 local councilors. Your provision of advice and guidance - in partnership with County Associations - is very important – it is a campaigning vision for a better future and quality of life for local people and communities, I know County Associations and NALC are working hard to ensure there

are local councils for communities that want them and that your member councils are representative of their electors and delivering on local priorities. This supports your aim of a strong and vibrant sector where local councils represent and deliver for communities – and is an important link to my Department's agenda in supporting community rights and local service transformation.

This government has ambitious plans for a devolution revolution, which include Devolution Deals, but I want to stress that devolution is not just for principal authorities. Parish Councils have a key role to play and they should be speaking to their principal councils about opportunities for further powers and functions to be devolved. There are some great examples already underway. To name just two - Feock Parish Council in Cornwall have introduced an extensive range of innovative new local services, including co-ordinating the development of a neighbourhood plan, and setting up a local transport scheme with volunteer drivers to enable the elderly to get to medical appointments and shops; Campbell Parish Council in Milton Keynes, has been focussed on developing social capital, and work with their local equality council and college to promote integration and community cohesion and enable young people access to training and work.

So parishes can show their local communities what they are doing and how they are ready to deliver services better.

Last year we supported the revision of the Local Councils Award Scheme. We want to see all parishes taking part in the scheme – I know over 700 have already done so. The scheme gives a framework for good governance, for improving, and the chance to show that you're ready for the devolution and new opportunities that exist.

We've recently produced some information which we shared with you through NALC and SLCC – to let you know how the devolution process is working, and what it means for you. We want you to understand the opportunities it presents - so get involved – and take those opportunities to benefit your residents. Let's put the local in devolution.

I also wanted to say that I welcome and value NALC's work with the County Associations to support, promote and improve parishes. This has helped play a huge part in delivering the community rights agenda. We don't have to remind ourselves that parish and town councils are the tier of local government closest to their communities, and have a key role in Government's vision for localism. I'd like you all to note our strong support for parish councils and full appreciation of the tens of thousands of parish councillors who work in support of their local community.

We believe local people understand the needs of their area best. This is why we have been transferring powers, so people can make more decisions locally and solve their own problems in the creation of strong, attractive and thriving neighborhoods. Like NALC, we too want the creation of town and parish councils to be an easier process for people that don't currently don't live in one; but who know their community would benefit from stronger local democracy in becoming a town or parish council. We are fully supportive of councils that care about their communities and want to get involved in improving them. It's happening already. As I said – here in Birmingham the City Council has agreed to create what will be the largest town council in the country for Sutton Coldfield. There are groups working hard for the creation of new councils in dozens more areas around the country.

In fact the recent success of neighbourhood planning owes a huge amount to the town and parish councils of England. But there are still [around](#) 8,000 parished areas without a neighbourhood plan. So my advice to those of you who are wavering is this: take this opportunity - empower your communities to have their say on where new homes and shops go and what they look like. Put your community in the driving seat. Join the quiet revolution.

The Transparency Fund

Another important area where we are working closely and where I am grateful for your help is the new audit and accountability regime.

You'll all be aware by now that this Government confirmed a £4.7 million Transparency Fund to support small parish councils and other smaller authorities to become web-enabled and compliant with the Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities. The fund is being provided to small local authorities with a turnover of less than £25,000, to enable them to be compliant the new Transparency Regulations. The fund will provide these authorities with support, training and guidance, and will assist authorities that require support to move to on-line publishing of this information, to ensure they are transparent and accountable to their local communities, as well as being up-to-speed in the digital age.

The programme will provide impetus to place more power into citizens' hands to increase democratic accountability. The Code gives local communities the information and ability to hold their authorities to account; and the aim is to ensure that a framework is in place for citizens to get the information they want.

NALC was chosen by Government to deliver the Transparency Fund - with grant funding for councils available from September this year – and is for a 3-year period, delivered on county basis that targets local needs. NALC will be delivering the funding through County Associations targeting local needs, in a flexible and proportionate way.

The Sector Led Body – Supporting Sector –Led Approach

Government is also fully supportive of the sector-led approach to supporting and promoting good governance in the parish sector.

In 2014 the Audit Commission was disbanded and a new local audit framework was introduced. An independent ‘sector-led body’ to procure audit for smaller public sector bodies from 2017 was needed and indeed this way forward was put forward by NALC. Ministers accepted this approach and requested that NALC lead on this work. We are pleased NALC are now in the process of setting this up, working in partnership with the Society of Local Council Clerks and the Association of Drainage Authorities. My Department is funding the set-up – in the future it will be self funding.

TO CLOSE

I want to close by mentioning the challenging financial times in which we now live.

As we become a country which lives within its means, every bit of the public sector needs to do its bit to tackle the deficit. That includes parish councils too. You will need to think very carefully about how to make best use of your resources and how you use your precepting powers now and in the future. I am sure you will do your utmost to achieve this aim.

Many thanks to all the Parish Councilors and members of the County Associations for attending the conference. In government we appreciate all your collective hard work. This is parishes delivering services and representing your communities; NALC and county associations supporting your parishes, with advice, training and support.

Have a successful conference.