

**JFK AUDIO: *“These are extraordinary times. And we face an extraordinary challenge. There is no single simple policy which meets this challenge. Experience has taught us that no one has the power or the wisdom to solve all the problems of the world.”***

Good Morning and Welcome to Warwickshire and the West Midlands, an area of great diversity ranging from large metropolitan areas to quiet rural villages; from prosperous residential districts to some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country; from localities of great historical significance to expanding new towns. This is the region served by the Warwickshire and West Midlands Alliance of Local Councils.

We’ve just heard the words of John F Kennedy, words that are every bit as true today as they were in 1961.

These are extraordinary times. And we do face an extraordinary challenge. Power is being devolved to a local level and for the first time in many generations, we have the chance to forge something new. To create strong and

resilient towns, villages and neighbourhoods where local people and local councils work together to make dreams become reality.

In an area as diverse as this, one size cannot fit all. No one organisation can fully understand the needs of every person who makes this their home.

But so far the localism agenda is still to have a significant impact on local communities. The focus of devolution has been largely on government and economics, on regional power houses and combined authorities. There is a need for local anchors, holders and protectors of community assets, and a place for town and parish councils at the decision making tables. The challenge is how we seize those opportunities.

Across the country, and indeed here in the area served by WALC, there are beacons of light. For many years residents of Sutton Coldfield have campaigned to have greater control over their community and what happens in the area. It has a rich heritage of local governance dating back over 500 years. But, in 1974 it was absorbed into Birmingham.

What the history of Sutton Coldfield shows us, is that local people are best placed to solve local issues. It owes a great legacy to Bishop Vesey and Henry VIII who did much to set the town on the path to prosperity.

Bishop Vesey decided to rebuild Sutton Coldfield upon a set of principles. Principles that would address the people's needs and bring economic prosperity, with results that have endured for over half a millennium.

He encapsulated his strategy in a Royal Charter granted by Henry VIII. This enabled him to instigate a unique system of local governance where the town's people could determine their own policies rather than having decisions imposed from afar. Or above.

He invested in both people and infrastructure, establishing the right of residents as well as nobleman to hunt and forage in the local forest. He provided new stone built homes for all the families living in the town, and established a school.

He used his own money to create a market place, to pave the streets, to bridge rivers and protect those in need.

Ever since its incorporation into Birmingham, residents of Sutton Coldfield have lobbied for a return to the days when they had say in what happens in their town, the path it takes on the road of development. The Localism Act breathed new hope into their campaign.

WALC provided assistance with legal issues and statutory procedures, advice on negotiating with the principal authority and facilitated grants to raise awareness of the referendum. Such was the success of the campaign that 70% of people voted yes, paving the way for a new Council to breathe new life into Vesey's vision.

Elsewhere in this region Finham is also soon to have its own Parish Council.

What both of these new councils highlight is the need for meaningful relationships between Principal Authorities and town and parish councils. The

WALC area committees have worked to strengthen these bonds, developing charters that establish ways of working that benefit local communities.

Going forward, it's these partnerships and these networks of local councils; through area committees, through local associations, and through NALC that we will ensure that the localism agenda brings power to local people and their representatives, the Parish and Town Councils.

There are some promising signs here in Warwickshire and the West Midlands. Shipston on Stour has formed a steering group to make the village and the surrounding areas dementia friendly communities.

In Rugby, five parishes are trialling lengthsman schemes, whereby their Parish Councils identify local problems and arrange for this work to be carried out quickly and efficiently.

In Castle Bromwich, the Parish Council formed a Youth Council which has worked to ease intergenerational tensions and enhance the environment. The youth council has proved so successful that it has produced a video showing other councils how to form their own.

It is initiatives such as these that we need to be shouting about. We need to raise the profile of local successes and show how by working together, we create a better world for everyone.

As an association, WALC believes in reviving the hopes of those who have lost hope. We believe in providing the knowledge to enable local people and local communities to work with their Parish and Town Councils to make their dreams a reality. We believe that nobody should face difficulties alone. We know that one size doesn't fit all, and we are proud to have an association where our members are united by their similarities and strengthened by their differences.

These are extraordinary times, and we face an extraordinary challenge. No one person has all the answers. Let's explore the opportunities to work together, to share what works, and to ensure that the localism agenda empowers local communities to tailor and provide services in a way that meets their needs.

So I will say again, welcome to Warwickshire and the West Midlands. Thank you for attending, and enjoy your day.