

## **To all parish and town councillors in England**

Dear Councillor,

I have the great honour of being NALC's chairman for another year following my re-election by colleagues from county associations a few weeks ago; I am grateful for their support.

As I embark on my final year as chairman I intend to approach the job in the same way as the last three years: working tirelessly to lead the sector to the best of my ability and working hard to strengthen and improve our organisation.

Therefore at the beginning of this New Year I wanted to reflect on some of the achievements we have made together over the last year and set out some of the challenges we will all face in 2016 and beyond.

### **Ensuring local councils are at the forefront of the devolution debate**

In the run up to last May's general election we developed and issued a discussion paper to outline our views on devolution and I am really pleased the new government has listened and published guidance on the role of local councils in devolution deals.

We developed our ideas further in our Devo Local white paper – launched at the Conservative Party autumn conference – which we have been promoting and discussing widely, including a session of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Local Democracy.

Many of you are now actively involved in devolution proposals and we will be sharing good practice on our website and working closely with the LGA throughout the year. I would urge you all to seize the once in a lifetime opportunity that devolution offers the sector.

### **Improving relations with principal councils and the Local Government Association**

In many areas relations between local councils and principal councils are not as good as they should be. Over the last twelve months we continued to influence LGA and promote the sector: in March we welcomed LGA vice chair Councillor Marianne Overton to National Council to talk about working between the tiers and their new chairman Lord Gary Porter addressed our July conference.

In 2016 our programme of engagement with LGA and its interest groups will include promoting and sharing good practice, developing the leadership capacity of councillors with significant investment by LGA in a series of events and attending their annual conference.

I would ask you to continue to work hard at demonstrating to your principal councils how parishes are changing, becoming more professional and the role you can play in helping them cope with the significant financial challenges they face.

## **Maintaining our influence with government, civil servants and Parliamentarians**

We have met all of the new Ministerial team and they have been most supportive of the role and importance of local councils. This confidence was reflected in NALC being chosen to lead the establishment of a company to procure auditors for local councils and being awarded £3.7m to set up a Transparency Fund to help smaller councils buy computer equipment and set up websites to make financial and other information more readily available to their residents.

These are important parts of our work in 2016 and I would urge smaller councils to apply to the Fund and for all councils to sign-up to the Smaller Authorities' Audit Appointments Ltd.

We will continue to lobby on your behalf and build on previous successes including winning the argument about council tax referenda principles, slowing the withdrawal of council tax support funding, making it easier to set up new councils and reforms to parish polls.

One of our big ambitions for 2016 is to get public conveniences exempted from non-domestic rates and I am grateful for all your support on this campaign including colleagues from Cornwall and Cranleigh in Surrey.

Involving more of you in our advocacy work is one of our recent changes in direction and has seen us take councillors, clerks and county association officers to meetings with ministers and civil servants. In June last year we held our first ever lobby day to promote parishes in Parliament, which saw NALC and county associations engage with over 50 parliamentarians and lay the foundation to build on over the course of the Parliament, including on our second lobby day in April.

But we still need your help, especially talking to your MPs and telling them what great things you are doing and getting them to support the changes we are calling for on your behalf. National Council has tasked every county association representative with holding at least 6 meetings with MPs in 2016 and I would like to urge all councils to play your part and help build good relations with your MP.

## **Sharing and celebrating good practice**

We need to get the message across about the impressive work local councils do from helping build dementia friendly communities to running local facilities; from supporting local economic development to enhancing broadband capacity.

We are sharing these experiences better than ever before on our web site, through conferences and events, publications and social media. Last year over forty councils featured on our home page as Council of the Week and nearly two hundred applied to our relaunched Star Councils awards, with Frome Town Council being recognised as Council of the Year.

We will continue these initiatives in 2016 and I would encourage all of you to consider participating and sharing what you do with others – NALC's Twitter account is a great way of finding out what's going on around the country.

And don't forget to share what you are doing with local residents and the local media, letting us know about any coverage you receive.

### **Creating new councils and growing membership of county associations and NALC**

I am particularly proud that fourteen new councils have been created over the last few years including England's largest in Sutton Coldfield, with dozens more in the pipeline. This work, of vital importance to us all, will get more difficult as Government funding for the project is under review, so a real challenge for us all will be to ensure communities receive the help and support they need.

We also all need to sell the benefits of membership of county associations and NALC to those fifteen per cent not in membership. Word of mouth is usually very persuasive and I would ask you all to contact colleagues in councils not in membership and tell them of the great work we all do: we will genuinely all be stronger and more influential if we have all councils in membership.

### **Developing an improvement strategy to take forward our ambitions of a sector led approach to improvement**

Finally and most importantly we need to improve as a sector to demonstrate unequivocally that we are up to the challenge and able to perform a key role in the country's local governance.

Last year we launched the Local Council Award Scheme to promote best practice, good governance and sector-led improvement, with take-up encouraging; the new CiLCA qualification is also going well and provides a solid foundation of knowledge for all clerks.

This year I would encourage all of you to consider applying to the Local Council Award Scheme, to encourage all clerks to achieve CiLCA, and to make sure councillors are getting the training and development they need to enable them to make the most of the important public roles they perform.

In conclusion, the key to these achievements and to meeting the challenges ahead is the new culture of working together – local councils, county associations and NALC.

By working even better together we can build on what we've achieved so far, on all of our good work. I want us to step up a gear this year, to shift from good to great – going from doing good things to great things!

I wish you and your families a peaceful, prosperous and successful 2016.

Kind regards,

**Councillor Ken Browse**  
**Chairman, National Association of Local Councils**