

JANUARY 2019

OPEN LETTER TO COUNCILLORS

I want to wish you all a healthy, happy and prosperous 2019 and to thank you for all the work you do on behalf of your communities.

The year ahead will be an interesting one and I believe that our sector is demonstrating locally and nationally that we have a key role to play helping our residents and communities negotiate the challenges ahead.

I wanted to update you on a number of key achievements and set out some challenges and opportunities for the year ahead where I will need your continued help and support.

A strong national voice and a sector delivering results

I am immensely proud of our lobbying successes over the last year, which we have worked closely with you and county associations to achieve, delivering many key policy objectives set out in our ***A prospectus for ultra-localism***, including changes that will save the sector millions of pounds:

- Budget commitment to exempt public toilets from business rates, saving the sector over £2 million per year from 2020
- exempting local (parish and town) councils from the Data Protection Act 2018 requirement to appoint an external data protection officer, saving the sector around £3.5 million per year
- plans to exempt local councillors from paying charges to the Information Commissioners Office, saving the sector around £4 million per year
- completion of our three-year Transparency Fund programme in which we secured government investment of £4.7 million pounds to help thousands of small local councils comply with new transparency rules

You can read more about these and other achievements in the ***Annual Report 2017/18*** and our updated **benefits of membership summary**.

We have achieved these things together because of the brilliant things you are doing locally which are persuading government, politicians, public policy experts and the wider public of the value of local councils.

Many of these examples have been showcased in NALC's Star Councils awards as well as our latest ***Points of Light 2019*** report which highlights the growing contribution local councils are making, including stepping up on important issues such as health and well-being, community transport, economic development, housing and community facilities.

I hope you would agree with me that it is vital we maintain momentum on these brilliant achievements and this important work, engaging residents to understand what they want for their communities, and directly, or in concert with others, delivering them.

This is enshrined in our new vision for the sector, which has been widely supported and is driving the development of our new strategic plan:

- Local councils across the whole country will be the centre of community effort, the natural focus of a range of public activity and service delivery; giving a democratic voice to those communities in the deliberations of other agencies.
- Vibrant, dynamic and effective local councils will help communities to help themselves building strength and resilience and improving the quality of life of residents.

Strengthening and promoting local democracy

Our strongest suit is our democratic mandate as the first tier of government. One of my personal priorities is to see more people from all backgrounds getting involved in the work of local councils and is why I set up our **Diversity Commission**. The findings of its first ever councillor census survey make for challenging reading:

- the average age of a local councillor is 61
- 25% have served for more than 10 years
- 60% are men
- just 11% are aged under 45

This is why this year's local elections in many parts of the country provide a timely, in fact crucial, opportunity to address this.

One statistic I was particularly struck by in our survey was 80% of local councillors would recommend becoming a councillor. So let's ask more people, be they

friends, family, work colleagues or anyone you know who cares about where they live, to step forward and make a change in our communities.

I really want to see the sector redouble its efforts over the coming weeks and months to encourage more people to stand for election. To help you, we've developed a range of new resources on our **elections webpage**, so please check them out and share with us what you are doing.

But when people do become councillors our work isn't done, it's actually just the start. The sector will fulfil its potential if we invest in training and development for councillors, clerks and other staff. Our Annual General Meeting last year urged us to identify ways in which levels of training can be increased including through the introduction of a national member development scheme. Working with county associations we will develop ways and materials to support this, but I would urge you to set aside resources for training and development.

The other key pre-requisite of a strong sector is that we exercise our role as the first tier of government responsibly – that we engage and consult residents on our work, operate openly and transparently, communicate effectively and uphold the highest standards of public life.

In some ways these are divided and angry times, and we need to model behaviours at the community level that engender respect and tolerance. We have been lobbying the Committee on Standards in Public Life to recommend to the government strengthened sanctions to help tackle poor behaviour and we are expecting some movement on this when they publish the report of their inquiry at the end of January.

But just as important is pro-actively developing a culture of respect, investing in training and having sound governance arrangements in place. We aim to publish, with the Society of Local Council Clerks, proposals on this later in the year.

Our local communities will need even more help and support from local councils this year, and we have a vital role to play in helping rebuild and renew public confidence in our democracy. I look forward to continuing to work with you and champion your brilliant work, thank you again for everything that you do.

Cllr Sue Baxter,
Chairman of NALC