



All Party Parliamentary Local Democracy Group

House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA
Tel: 0207 219 5798

Meeting on devolution

15.00 – 16.00, 18 November 2015

Andrea Jenkyns: Welcome to the Local Democracy APPG session. I'm very pleased to be chairing it, and we have two great vice-chairman as well. I'd like to thank NALC for providing great secretariat to this group. Why I got involved in this APPG, having been a councillor myself, and this whole devolution deal we wanted to make sure that town and parish councils also have a voice really at the table in the devolution deals. For those who haven't seen it – Devo Local – NALC's provided a fantastic booklet about what their 8,000 members would like to see happening in the devolution deals and I'm not going to talk for too long.

It's a great honour to introduce our first speaker, James Wharton Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, who's responsible for the Northern Powerhouse which is close to my heart being a Yorkshire MP as well. So I'm going to hand you over to James first, who's going to speak for 10 minutes and I understand you will do Q&A session as well?

James Wharton: I am, but I have to go by about twenty past. The longer the responses to the questions, the fewer you will get to ask.

Andrea Jenkyns: Right. If we can have no statements, just questions if that's ok. Fantastic! So I'll hand you over to Under Secretary of State, James.

James Wharton: Thank you, thank you. I'll stay sitting if it's alright, since you have a reasonably intimate gathering. I wanted to take the opportunity to come and address you because I think the importance of local democracy is at the forefront of national political debate in a way that, perhaps, wrongly hasn't been for quite a long time.

The debate around devolution, the debate around structures that we want in place, the range of powers that we're talking about devolving and the roles that different pre-existing organisations, including democratically elected representative bodies have in that process. So I am, as Andrea said, the Minister for Northern Powerhouse., I'm also Minister for local growth, I'm taking the Devolution Bill through the House of Commons, through the House of Commons stages, now having gone through its first sort of run through the House of Lords.

One of the first things I would like to say is that I've been struck that somebody who has been an MP for almost 5 years, feels like a lot longer, and in the last parliament the only piece of legislation I took through was the EU referendum bill. And that was very contentious, there was a lot of ill-feeling surrounding that and quite a heated debate.



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The Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill has been quite the opposite in the House of Commons, there's a great deal of consensus and unanimity. There is a desire across traditional party-political lines to deliver it to a piece of legislation because of the recognition of what it can offer and the direction of travel in which it takes us. That doesn't mean there aren't those who want to push to get further. Many respected members of the House of Commons, people like Graham Allen, who has a long track record of talking about devolution and is passionate about it, has taken the opportunity to, through to Committee stages, to table a number of amendments to explore where it might go, where the devolution agenda might generally go in the future.

But, the Bill as it stands, even though there are those who go further, there are those who want to make changes to it, has actually commanded more cross-party support from the Commons than I've seen for many pieces of legislation, certainly for the time that I've been in the House. I think that speaks to what is becoming an accepted and demonstrable political truth and that the direction of travel is the devolutionary one. We had generations where governments of different colours have taken powers up to the centre they have felt that local authorities at whatever guise, whatever level have not been able to deliver in the way that they ought to for the communities that they represent and the reaction to that has been to take powers away, to take responsibility away.

I think there is a valid argument that this is being self-defeating on a number of levels. If you want the right people to come forward, you want them to be part of the local democracy, you have to ensure that they are empowered to then make a difference to the communities that they choose to serve. All too often and I have experienced in my constituency and I'm sure many of us have experienced this in interaction with local government, you get very good people who wanted to be a part of it, they get there and find it isn't for them and you lose them, you are unable to retain them. There are of course those who do soldier on, who do remain committed to working through that forum for their community but there is an undeniable truth that too many of the people have either decided it wasn't for them or tried, tested it, realised that it didn't quite work for what they wanted to do and then moved on, nonetheless often having made a valuable contribution and I recognise that local government can and does make a hugely valuable contribution already.

I want to see local government in all its guises do more. I am a believer in devolution. I recognise the voices that call on us to go further than we are currently going, including Graham Allen and his contribution to the debate, well my job is to deliver the Bill in line with the government's agenda at this time. I'm committed to it and believe in it and we're going to do that. But I also recognise that the story of devolution is unlikely to end at that point. So, the majority of our discussions are currently focused around existing authorities above the town and parish level, they are either unitary authorities or districts and counties. From that then we can pull them together in combined authorities structures in most places, not all, Cornwall being a notable exception, in order to then transfer powers that will enable that local leadership to take more control of what happens in its local area.



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I think this is a significant shift in the way that government looks at how services should be delivered and commissioned. I think it is a significant transfer of power which will be on a scale, hopefully if we make all of the deals we hoped we'll be able to make with various who want them, will be on a scale that is actually unprecedented certainly in England in recent years. And it's to a more granular local level that we've seen in the devolved assemblies in Wales and devolved parliament in Scotland, which again I think will strengthen it as something that can stand the test of time and ensure this delivers real change for the communities that all of us are interested in being best served by the processes put in place.

Through that I am confident that it will strengthen local democracy, because we all, I think, would recognise that engagement in politics at that local level is not always at the level we'd hoped it would be, given the importance of the decision-making that actually takes place, the amount already under a centralised system of things, the things that local authorities actually influence and do. By strengthening that, I think you can shape through who you chose as your local councillors, who you chose as your local representatives, as your local mayor, in those areas that are going to have the new metro-mayors will make a genuine and lasting difference to the community in which you live, the economy in which you work, the area that you call home, and if we can re-establish and strengthen that connection more so than it is the case today, I think we can strengthen democracy at its most local level, which fundamentally is the level at which decisions should be brought and be taken on a wide range of areas, where that that has not been the case in recent years.

So I'm enthusiastic about what we're doing. I recognise that a number of interested parties call us to go further and that debate I am sure will follow from the steps that are being taken at this time. But I think that we should all recognise, regardless of the party politics that's surrounding these issues inevitably, that there is a step change in the approach to devolution and there is a significant shift in the debates surrounding how government should do the work that government must do. There is a real recognition that the local level is often the best level at which decisions can be taken. If we're going to do that it is incredibly important that with it comes the strengthening of local democracy and engagement. It is sometimes a bit chicken and egg, we give people more powers, people will be more interested in engaging with the people who then make the decisions and the electing the people who represent them.

But we do need to be ever-conscious that as we transfer power down we must secure the democratic accountability and engagement that rightly should go with those powers. I see that as an important adjunct to the devolution agenda as a whole, it's something I hope that devolution will strengthen at every level including the town and parish councils, districts, counties and unitaries, as well as the other, sometimes non-elected structures that nonetheless are accountable to elected bodies like Local Enterprise Partnerships with a local authority representation.



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I think we are at a point in time at which we can start to re-balance the process that has been moving in the wrong direction for too long and therefore I was delighted, Andrea, to be invited to come speak to you today because it's through groups like this that we can gather new ideas, talk about where the agenda has got and understand why people might want it to go further and, indeed, where we can hear any concerns that people might have about what we're doing or might try to do in the future. So thank you for inviting me and I very much look forward to the discussion.

Andrea Jenkyns: Thank you very much Minister. It's very refreshing to hear how you are open to looking at the input of town and parish councils and taking it further. I'd like to start off asking a question myself, I know NALC spoke to the members and they'd like to see with devolution of business rates to local councils, can they get a share. My own personal view in this is we've got some fantastic councils out there but we've also got some not so good ones too. So I personally wouldn't like to see a blanket where it goes out to everybody, because I've seen some parish councils struggle to spend the £800 in their bank account so why should they get more really. I'd personally like to see some kind of deal where if there's a really good business case, if they can put a good business case forward, town and parish councils, where they can get some of the pots of money of the devolved business rates from the district, city and county councils. Do you think that this is an option that could be on the table or explored at least?

James Wharton: That's very interesting. I don't want to be drawn into commenting in too much detail on what might happen to business rates because of the nature of the process that they have to go through and I'm not in the position to tell you what will happen to business rates at this time.

However I know that a lot of town and parish councils do great work. I've got some very strong town and parish councils in my constituency, I've got some that could do with being a little stronger as well, which sometimes personalities come to the forerun in the debates that they have in their chamber. But my instinct is to say, we're looking at devolving, we are not currently, as far as I understand, looking to devolving to parish level, it would be a level up there or two levels up there. They would of course, they will be able to make their case to their local authority and in the spirit of devolution that local authority could then decide whether it wanted to share the proceeds or not.

But if the parish councils had a proposal that would generate that growth and support that growth, whether they can demonstrate the deal to the local authority to drive that through. Now, I'm at the same time realistic and I know the relationships between local authorities and parish and town councils are not always constructive and straight forward. But one of the things that I think business rate devolution and retention and will allow for, is more creative thinking. The truth is that we are trying to create a system where you have an incentive to grow your economy, where if you get any business to invest in where it would have not otherwise invested there is something that is going to flow back to you as a local body, whether that's the local council or whoever it might be.



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And therefore there will be scope within that, if a parish council has an idea that will generate that sort of growth to do effectively a deal with the local authority to say if we use our powers and our positions to promote this particular type of scheme in our parish and town and to support it and generate additional revenue as a result, can we talk about some sort of sharing arrangements. As one politician once said before 2010 on sharing the proceeds of growth, well I think there's potential for those with organic, sort of semi-full devolutionary deal, finance sharing deals to be arranged between councils within what we're doing already. On the question of whether we should go further, I'm hesitant to say that somewhere by the government there should be legislation to go further or enforcing further steps to be taken...

Andrea Jenkyns: Can you offer guidance?

James Wharton: ... but we are always open to suggestions that might be made.

Andrea Jenkyns: Do you think that we could offer guidance then, Minister, that possibly this could be an opportunity that councils could explore?

James Wharton: You could. But the best guidance you could offer, the best possible thing would be to get one example where it works well.

Andrea Jenkyns: Yes.

James Wharton: And others will look and say, well look what they've done, you should be doing the same. I have a greatly inflated opinion of the influence I have and the attention people pay to what I say, but actually these sort of things are best done by example and best done bottom up and if we can get some examples where this could be done, and there are lots of examples of good relationships between these different layers of local government, they could then prove some exemplars for the others and it's through organisations like NALC that you can then promote these opportunities.

Andrea Jenkyns: We can certainly do some case studies through this group as well. Going to open to questions now. If people like to say who they are and where they're from, then ask the question.

Sir Oliver Heald: Sir Oliver Heald, MP for North East Hertfordshire. I'm very pleased to see that Hertfordshire has the most outstanding project with NALC and won its award in the booklet for training up the clerks in the county and the Hertfordshire Association of Parish and Town Councils does do some really good work. What I was going to ask James if I may is about health and social care integration and whether there's a role for local councils in helping with that, because, if you look at the sort of devolution package you're doing in Manchester, for example, a lot of that is focused around this idea of integrating social services with health and, of course, one of the new models that the health service is looking at is this idea of involving volunteers far more.



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And in somewhere like Royston in Hertfordshire the community transport is run really by the town council having a community transport sub-committee and doing a lot of work in that. So do you think there's a role for local councils in finding volunteers who can assist and also is there a training need for local councils and, of course, higher councils in terms of health, because if you are going to integrate them they need to know quite a bit more about it.

James Wharton: I think the devolution of health and social care is one of the most exciting aspects of the devolution agenda. I talk a lot about the economy, I'm Minister for Local Growth and Northern Powerhouse, so I focus on the economic opportunities that devolution presents. But I know from my experience as a constituency MP that the silos that exist in the way that pots of public money are spent often drive great inefficiencies. And we know, we all know the pressures, particularly adult social care is coming under, with our changing demographics, the needs of the population, people are living longer, we have larger elderly proportion of the population that has quite understandably a right in the expectation in the quality and support of life they should be able to receive.

What we're tending to do and what Manchester is doing effectively, is getting a more formal role in the commissioning and having skin in the game as it were when it comes to one of these other parts of different budgets, health budgets, so they can better integrate them and work together and draw together different things that different arms of government are doing in order to actually drive efficiency and there are a number of examples, I won't go into detail because of the shortness of time, where relatively straight forward things can save significant sums of money and actually deliver a better service just by bringing these budgets together and thinking of them as one rather than two separate blocks.

The role then, following from that, your next level of local government can have is less easily explained, I think, through devolution as a model, in terms of bringing those silo budgets together, but rather it would be realised by the innovative thinking it has the potential to unlock. Because, you're quite right, there are areas in which people can be volunteers and make various contributions, there are areas where in order to do that perhaps more training will be needed or a different way of thinking or flexibility in terms of the way operations are managed. But I'm not in the business of telling areas what that must be. What devolution should do and will do in those areas that are asking for health as part of that devolution package is get local people thinking more about it.

And when they're thinking more about it that means they'll start looking at 'why can't we do it like that?', 'why is it that this is done by a very expensive agency when it could be done by volunteers, if people were willing to volunteer', 'if people were willing to volunteer, where would we find them?'. Well, a natural space then for the even more local tier of local government to field is to say 'well, we can come and find them; this is what we need to do it'. And so, again, similar to my answer to the



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previous discussion, I think this will create space for innovation and creativity. I think it will give the flexibility to do some of the things perhaps envisaged in your question.

I don't think it is for government to dictate that they should happen. I think if it wanted to happen at last it has to happen organically, that will come from the bottom up, it will come from the very organisations we're here to discuss and where best practice is found I would look to organisations like NALC to be facilitating the spreading that best practice and showing that best practice and the difference that it can make so that others might then learn from it, adopt it and perhaps, improve it.

Andrea Jenkyns: Thank you very much, James. Any more questions? We've got another five minutes.

Roger Hornblow: I have a concern...

Andrea Jenkyns: Can you say where you're from?

Roger Hornblow: Sorry, I'm the councillor and the chair of policy and finance from Newport Pagnell Parish Council. I hear you views on the point which you consider the level should be cut off, that parish and town councils really are outside of the scope. Would you not reconsider this in that you have some district councils within the area of populations 10,000 around that figure, we are a parish council with a population of 17,000, we're forward thinking and we do far more, we've taken over quite a lot of assets and done quite a lot within the town. I think to say that a parish council is a cut off is quite a broad sweeping statement. My feelings are that perhaps...

Andrea Jenkyns: Please get to the question as well.

Roger Hornblow:There are some district councils... would it not make sense to look at it more overall?

James Wharton: It's a very valid point, that I used that particular reasoning that I would like to retract and clarify. I think the reality is that in legislative terms we have to have blocks with which we can build for devolution deals and parish councils, at the moment, would be an administrative step too far to use as blocks for building devolution in combined authorities. The idea of combined authorities is, yes, of course, firstly they will receive powers coming down from central government and certainly no local council authority, district, or unitary or county will have powers forcefully taken away from them by the legislation.

But they will also be empowered to pool things that they do in areas of broader interest. We've already seen that happening quite widely in Greater Manchester, where they've recognised that some of the powers and activities that their individual boroughs might carry out could be better carried out in a cohesive way taking account of the whole, and the best way to do that is to pool them upwards to the combined authorities, although that's a process by choice. Whilst parish councils, I take the opportunity to say, I said it on record in the debate in the House yesterday with a



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rather specific example, parish and town councils actually have a very wide range of powers and general competencies which often they don't appreciate.

They have a pretty broad scope, sounds like you're using that quite effectively, to do interesting, creative and innovative things within the communities they serve and I've lost count already in my 6 months as a minister in Communities and Local Government how often people come to me saying 'my parish council wants to do this but they can't; you should change the law so that they can'. I say 'well actually, they can already do it; they have General Power of Competence, there are a wide range of things they have the freedom to do'. They don't though have to the same extent the legislatively prescribed powers that they could choose to pool upwards that district, counties and unitaries have. They are a different structure and play a different role on the whole in our democratic system.

So, I want to see parishes being a part of the devolutionary agenda. I want to see them engaging with it and taking benefit from it. I think it will open up a huge range of different innovations across the country, some of which will potentially be highly successful, some of which will need to be revisited because they won't quite deliver what people locally have thought and hope that they might. But the potential for engagement is there, you know it already from what you do and the truth is it will be parish councils like yours that get up and say 'well, we want to do this, have you thought about that? We've got this new ability, we should use it in this way to drive improvement' that will be part of it. It's the parish councils who sit there and wait to be told what their role is supposed to be that take the longest to come to the party.

So I encourage you to continue in the work that you're doing locally. And I encourage you to engage wholeheartedly with every tier of government. I encourage you to look at devolution as something that will impact on all levels of local government and which will provide for those that are innovative enough significant opportunities within that as well.

Andrea Jenkyns: One more question?

Jonathan Owen: Yes, just quickly. I was very encouraged by what you said actually ...Jonathan Owen from the National Association of Local Councils; that this is the start of a process, you have to get a piece of legislation through parliament but it's not something that it's going to be achieved overnight and there's time to learn from best practice and change. My question, I guess, is that there are about 28 devo deals at the moment and about half of those I think are actively engaging with the sort of lowest tier that's closest to the people and it would be good I guess to see whether the government considers sharing some of that good practice across the various devo deals. Not at the moment whilst you are going through the negotiations, but in terms of learning about what works and examples of best practice?

James Wharton: Certainly afterwards. I'm reluctant to talk about specifics of individual deals. We are coming across this the whole time, people are desperate for us to tell them what they're



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supposed to do and we genuinely want this to be a bottom up process and it's not a situation in which people sort of take what matches and then apply it like a copy cutter to different areas.

And different areas need different things and we'll work with them to identify them, but there will be opportunities to identify best practice once we've gone further through the process and to recognise that. I would say one thing to parish councils: don't wait for me to turn up at your parish council and ask you if you feel you're being involved or not. If you feel that the devolution deal is not listening to your parish council, if you feel that your view is not being heard then get involved – write to us, ask to come and see us, go and see your local chief executive of your district or county and say 'you are negotiating this, you're not talking to us, why aren't you? We have this view that might be different to what you're doing, we want to feed it in'.

If you do that and then find that you're not being paid attention to by all means, complain to me, but don't wait for me to turn up in your town hall or village hall or whatever it might be and say, 'I know there's a few parish councils, but tonight we're doing this one, would you mind like letting us know what you think of this?' – because there are too many for it to be possible. So again, be proactive, be engaged, seize the opportunity, find the opportunities that exist and drive them forward to the interest of the communities that you represent. That's what devolution is about, it's a bottom up process.

That is the challenge and the good ones will do it and the bad ones will sit there and wait for it to be done to them. Well, devolution won't be done to anyone. The worst that will happen is that it will be done without you. And so the chance and the opportunity is there. My message to local government at every level is please seize it and be part of this process.

Andrea Jenkyns: Thank you very much, James. Great to have you here. We're very encouraged about what you said. Thank you on behalf of everybody here.

We have some more great guest speakers as well now. I'm going to hand you over to Lord Bob Kerslake, who's president of the Local Government Association and I'm one of about 15 Vice-presidents so this is a presence. Thank you very much.

Lord Bob Kerslake: Well, thank you very much for inviting me this afternoon. What I'm here to talk about today is the inquiry into devolution that has been set up under the auspices of another All Party Parliamentary Group on devolution and the inquiry has really been set up to build on a report produced by the All Party Parliamentary Group just at the back end of the last parliament and to look really at how we could achieve a coherent and holistic approach to devolution.

We started with devolved nations but working right to the very local level as well. So we're looking, if you like, to devolution in all its aspects, from Scotland to Ireland, Wales through to parish councils. And our contention is that there is some very good work going on, on devolution, we heard that from the minister today. But there is a sense in which it is rather fragmented, that it's happening in



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individual components and there isn't a sense in which we've looked at the ambition on devolution as a whole and asked ourselves the question where would we like to take it.

Our inquiry is taking evidence from a wide range of sources - business communities, and so on - and indeed today, I would see as one part of gathering evidence for the inquiry. We have a series of public meetings though that we're having and the inquiry panel, which again is all party and a wide range of different interests on it, and some of them are not from party backgrounds as well, like myself, cross benchers, and the aim of the inquiry is to both gather written and evidence from sessions like this and also to have the individual sessions which will be open to the public to attend.

So the first one we had was with a number of devolution experts and indeed the former prime minister spoke at the event as well, Gordon Brown, giving his perspective on why the devolution in particular the devolved nations. And the next one we'll have will be predominantly with local government and the final one will be with community and voluntary and business organisations, with a round up session in the new year, from we hope the minister and the shadow minister to get their perspective, and we aim to report really ahead of the next local elections. So that's roughly our timetable and our purpose.

What sort of things we're interested in? Well I think we're interested in, what would be the coherent model of devolution in the devolved nations. We have different models in different countries, actually at the moment between Scotland and Wales for example. I think we're very much interested in devolution in England and we're interested in both the devolution that the minister talked about, which is to effectively collections of authorities, economic and major service issues to a collection of authorities. We're also very interested in local devolution, the sort of thing that you'd be involved in and, in particular, I think, we're interested in answering the question of how can we close the gap between governing and the governed in this country.

So there's a lot of excitement in local government rightly about devo deals but to what extent does it touch the sides of the public and where are they and to what extent do they see it impacting on their lives. So we're very interested in how we can reconnect the public with democracy in many ways I think, with local democracy. The final thing I think I'd say we're interested in is some of the wider constitutional issues, including the House of Lords and indeed, the voting system, but they will be very much for completing the full story rather than the central focus of our work which will be about how we can achieve and what coherent, comprehensive level of devolution at all levels from devolved nations through to the very grassroots community organisations. That's what we're doing and I'd be very interested to get your thoughts and contributions on that.

Andrea Jenkyns: Thank you very much, Bob. I'm really looking forward to seeing the report that you'll produce. I'm sure that's something we could hopefully feed into as well. Just going to move on to Dr Jonathan Owen next, who is chief executive at the National Association of Local Councils.



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Jonathan Owen: Thank you very much and I personally thank you, Andrea, for chairing the All Party Parliamentary Group on local democracy.

I think local democracy's time has come. I think you've heard a little bit about that today and I'm really pleased with the programme we've got for today and also I know you've got some really exciting plans to make this group work even more effectively over the next year or so. So thank you for your help on that.

I just want to get across a very simple message really, that parish and town councils are changing and they're changing fast. The localism agenda from the previous coalition government has seen them take the lead in supporting the development of their local communities. So 90% of them, sorry, 90% of neighbourhood plans have been prepared by parishes. So they're really in the driving seat for producing community-based planning. A third of the community assets that have been listed under the community rights agenda have been done by parishes. So they're right at the forefront of localism. The sector's also growing, becoming more urban, with councils being set up in many big cities, including Queens Park in London, Sutton Coldfield in Birmingham and Kidderminster in Worcestershire. There's something like a million people around England campaigning to set up new parish councils, so there's a real movement trying to reconnect, as Bob Kerslake said, communities with governance, which I think it's a really strong message.

I think councils are also becoming more efficient and professional, addressing some of the points that a number of people have mentioned in this room about how some are excellent and some are, you know, could do with some further improvement, to put it politely. But they are becoming more efficient and professional, they're embracing the new transparency arrangements, they're participating in accreditation schemes to ensure quality, and increasing numbers of clerks are becoming qualified to a standard set by the sector itself. So there's a real movement in that area.

And they're also seizing the opportunity to take over more services, increasingly taking over discretionary services from principal authorities, but also moving into areas where they've not been active previously such as adult social care. And I've just got three examples from our booklet, Forest Row in East Sussex where they've set up a community café providing support to older people, things like free car servicing, food delivered to their homes and hearing aid test, you know some really simple, local level things but actually that make a huge difference to people's lives. And in Rutland, in Uppingham a business-led partnership is improving broadband and 4G communication, so again, making a difference to the local economy. And in Milton Keynes, Campbell Park, they're working to build social capital and helping young people access training and work. And those aren't the kind of things that you'd have thought parishes were involved in a few years ago. It is a changing sector, a modernising sector.



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But it's NALC's contention that parishes can do even more, that's we published this white paper, devo local, which sets out an agenda to empower and strengthen local communities. I think we've heard from the minister that the devolution genie is well and truly out of the bottle, the devo deals, the Northern Powerhouse and city regions are great news for the country, but we believe it mustn't stop there, that we need to put the local into devolution.

And we believe parishes can become local powerhouses, complementing the work of the larger councils and ensuring that individuals can see the benefit of devolution in their local communities and not just at the strategic level. I think there's a risk sometimes with Northern Powerhouses that the devolution is at that strategic level remote from people and parishes can help reconnect it with individual communities.

But to deliver this we need your help. And we're looking for your help around three areas. To strengthen local democracy, make it easier for the hundreds and thousands of people trying to set up parish councils to do so and work with us to promote the work of parishes, how they're changing and encourage more people to get involved. We'd like to see some more powers, give residents and parishes and communities greater involvement in the planning and licensing systems and help us improve relationships between the tiers of government. And finally, probably most importantly, to secure fair and sustainable funding, you mentioned, Andrea, about business rates, I think we should pilot giving parishes a share of devolved business rates and see if they work. And if they don't work, then fine, it doesn't necessarily happen across the board forever. But we also need to make sure that parishes get a share of things like the community infrastructure levy, new homes bonus and underground exploration funding. So those things could really make a difference to our funding going forward.

We're really pleased that the new government has made a great start. It's been said clearly again today that parishes should be involved in devolution, we want to work with government, with you as parliamentarians and principal authorities to seize this once in a generation opportunity, I believe, to really strengthen the sector that is genuinely closest to the people. So I think devolutions' time has come and parishes have a key role to play. Thank you.

Andrea Jenkyns: Absolutely. I totally agree there. I'm sure through the group that we can pilot some ideas. We just need to move on to Professor Colin Copus first and then we'll open up to questions. Colin is professor at DeMontfort University.

Colin Copus: Thank you very much. I was just going to pick up on a couple of things that Jonathan was saying and refer also to the white paper. I think one of the key issues for me is that parish councils play a role that often gets lost in local government and that is that they represent for the local communities real places, real geographical places that people have a loyalty to. Much about local government when it's restructured into bigger and bigger units even starts to lose names that are related to real places. So we have councils that 'south east this' and 'south east that', 'south west this'. Parish councils reflect real localities and I think as the journey towards bigger and bigger



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local government seems to continue unabated in this country, we need a unit of local government to relate to real places rather than sort of continually artificially constructed entities.

And one of the things that worries me about the combined authorities agenda is that we are being softened up for somebody at some point in some government department to say well, we've merged these 10 authorities into a combined authority and they're all working very well, why do we need these 10 constituent pieces. That worries me greatly because local government will then simply become some regional government and will lose any idea of locality at all. Parish councils I think are an antidote or one of the many antidotes to that journey.

Looking at the White paper that NALC has produced, it's a really worthy, radical document. I would actually go somewhat further in some areas. I find it odd that the existence of a democratically elected unit of local government can rest with another level and maybe in our country we are used to this, we've partly been able to abolish layers of local government on particular councils. I think the role of principal councils in making any decisions about the continued life of parishes is something we need to look at very, very carefully. I think only local people should have the right to decide whether a parish stays in existence, is created or is expunged.

I think also, picking up on some of the debate earlier, certainly around the devolution agenda, there has to be a requirement on those principal authorities that are looking at creating combined authorities or constructing deals with central government, to be required to consult with town and parish councils within that process and the minister was saying, you know, push your way to the table, in some cases that might well not be possible. The requirement to consult with parishes is something I think would strengthen that entire process, particularly as some principal councils are not, it might come as a shock for some, are not that keen on parish councils, which is also why I think they shouldn't have that final say over whether a parish council should stay in existence or not.

I think the document is absolutely right on the suggestions for directly elected mayors at parish council level, at town council level. I think that would be an innovation and would greatly strengthen the link between that as a layer of local government and their communities at large, it will enable them to see directly who is in control of the area. The other thing I would add is also the, again being sort of radical, I think we need to consider, maybe there's a need now to parish the entire country by which I mean England. One of the issues about council size and I mentioned earlier, is often solved in other countries such as France for example, with the creation of communes, with the existence of 36,000 communes across the whole of France, which locate both politics, service provision and local decision making very, very closely to local communities. It seems odd that we live in a country with huge units of local government and they are by comparison to the rest of the continent and indeed



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the globe, and yet we allow great chunks of the country to remain unparished. I think there's something that needs to be explored there.

Just one other final sort of issue, the report on page 11 identifies actually some quite stark figures that something like 93% of town councils now I'm assuming, I haven't read this whole document, but I'm assuming that that's some town councils as opposed to the whole of the town and parish council population, 93% of town councils have members that admit to a party-political affiliation.

That actually beats principal local government in England, where 90.5% of councillors as a result of the May 2015 Elections, 90.5% of the councillors came from one of the three main political parties. That's quite a stunning figure. I have to look at the sort of document to see whether that is right across parish councils, I suspect not, I suspect once you take all parish councils into account that figure declines considerably, but I'd like to see considered the possibility for non-partisan parish elections. I see no reason why national political parties are involved at parish level at all. That's not to say that members of political parties wouldn't be able to stand, and indeed, would be able to get elected, it means to say that they would have to campaign in very, very different ways. And I think if we are being serious about strengthening the role of parish councils within the overall governing and devolution agenda, then consideration of some of those points might be useful.

Andrea Jenkyns: Thank you very much Colin, some interesting points. Now we've got five minutes for questions.

Sir Oliver Heald : I just wanted to raise this sort of legal issue really. Which is that, obviously with the combined authority that's something that's being created by statute it's a new legal entity, but then at the lower level you start to get devolution happening in various ways involving companies and some of them are CICs, Community Interest Companies, some are companies limited by guarantee, some are just straight forward companies, some are industrial and provident societies, and then you have the other councils and community cohorts. And I just wondered if when you are looking at devolution, Bob, you are going to actually look at this question of the sort of different bodies that are getting involved in this and how the accountability works, because clearly, say for a health vanguard you might be doing something which is a mixture of local government responsibility being done through the health side, delivered by a limited company as it's happening in Cambridgeshire, or you might have it done by a council, but it's a bit of an interesting legal situation that's developing and I just wanted to raise that.

Lord Bob Kerlake: I think it is a fair question that we ought to explore. But I think what we need in a sense is some clarity of thinking where we distinguish between, if you like, organisations that are delivering services or being commissioned through democratically elected bodies, and democratically elected bodies. They are not the same thing. I really do need to be clear about this point actually. So, I think one of my key concerns is to ensure that what we're avoiding here is a sense of which unelected bodies can be given the equivalent authority of elected bodies. There's a hugely valuable role of voluntary run organisations, but inevitably, the nature of voluntary



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organisations is that it works for a particular group in the community. That's how they get created and you have to constantly work to ensure that they are open to every part of the community and they don't naturally always go for that.

Sir Oliver Heald: Say you've got a community interest company that owns a hospital and lets out spaces to the NHS, the local council, community, transport people and so on. Now the CIC itself doesn't really have any democratic accountability, does it, if they decide to close it, then they can.

Lord Bob Kerslake: Well, yes, except if they've been given an asset and that asset's been given, if you like, free or another basis, there has to be some basis on which that is covered and being failed to deliver the expectation of the original gift, if you like, or original asset then there's a possibility of it being taken back.

Sir Oliver Heald: I was just really wondering whether it would be better done by a local council?

Lord Bob Kerslake: Well, I don't think personally all delivery has to be done through a local council. I'm not one of those saying it's always better and siding with local councils, I actually think that's wrong, I think local councils run a lot of things extremely unwell and we should recognise that. Equally, I have seen situations, when I was particularly in Sheffield, where we transferred the delivery of services under clear contracts of expectations to voluntary organisations who did a different and better job than we do in local councils, there is no question about that.

So I don't have a view that one is right and one is wrong, but what I am clear about though is if you devolve assets to whatever organisation it is, there has to be some level of public assets whether give them away or loan them out, there has to be proper accountability in control of that asset and an ability to put it back if the service you are expecting to be delivered from it is not being delivered or the community is not able to access it completely. That seems to me a fundamental principle. And maybe if our report we can make some of these things much clearer than they are, I think that would be helpful.

Andrea Jenkyns: Thank you very much. Have we got another....we're quite short on time...have we got a question for one of our speakers? Or should we put your question about accountability? Have you got any views on it?

Jonathan Owen: Well, on that, I think I agree with the sort of thesis underlining the question, really, that we need services to be devolved to bodies that have some sustainability going forward and some sound corporate governance and that doesn't preclude the voluntary or community or business sector, but I think there are advantages in certain areas for those things to go to local councils rather than those other institutions.

Colin Copus: No, I think I'd go along with that, I think there does need to be a mechanism of accountability that's clear and direct to local people. It doesn't necessarily mean to say however that body has to deliver, it still remains the body of accountability.



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Lord Bob Kersalke: I think this point about should be more ambitious about the creation of local town councils, it's a good question to ask really. It is the case that there are very mixed views about the higher level, but done well they can be very powerful local connectors really in a way it is very hard for bigger councils to do. I used to, when I was in Sheffield as chief exec, I used to rail against the distance and the lack of connection and awareness of the central government, I did it less when I joined CLG, but, I was acutely aware that in local neighbourhoods in Sheffield they felt exactly the same way about the council. And this is the point, sometimes we miss really.

Andrea Jenkyns: I'm sorry. Back to your point regarding running parish councils right throughout the country, I think in an ideal world that would be fantastic, but one thing that we're looking at with the local democracy group is how can we attract talent into local government and I think without that is a chicken and egg situation, it's not going to be effective, we can open these branches, but it can grow so big and no accountability, no guidance and without the right local leaders, it's not going to be successful, so I think we need to address that issue first. Well, thank you all for coming. I very much appreciate it.

And, move on to our final session, which is councillor Jeremy Rowe, cabinet member for localism and Robin Andrew, assistant head of communities and devolution for Cornwall Council, Professor Jane Wills, Queen Mary University of London and councillor Roger Hornblow and Shar Roselman from Newport Pagnell Council. Now, I think because we're running short on time, I think we should have this as an open questions where... I don't think we have enough time to give you five minutes each really. Has anybody got any questions first for the group or as speakers, are there any key points you want to discuss?

Jeremy Rowe: I had a few...

Andrea Jenkyns: Please introduce yourself.

Jeremy Rowe: Yes, sorry, I'm Jeremy Rowe, from Cornwall Council, I'm grateful that the agenda has been corrected, actually, I'm not the leader of Cornwall Council, the leader himself would probably not have been happy if he'd seen that. I just want to put a few points, which I'll try and make as briefly as I can with the time being of the essence. The key behind the devolution programme in Cornwall to be honest is the need to find £45 million in savings, identified out of £196 million in total over 4 years. We would very much like to tell people it's because we want to engage with the other tier and that we think it's a much better idea, but actually it's because we've got a financial gun to our heads, and I think...

Andrea Jenkyns: So how are you doing this, is through a lot of shared services?

Jeremy Rowe: Yes, we're doing it because we're ...through place based devolution deals, but my point I'm raising is about that is that what that prompted in me was the realisation that we need to have honest conversations with town and parish councils and not go out and say to them 'actually,



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we don't have the luxury of fighting amongst ourselves anymore, we're all in a lot of trouble here, we need to help each other', because ultimately we're all in the same business, we all maintain the public purse and try to maintain the public services the best you possibly can. So, with that backdrop, we were then able to have, I think, a ... I would go into rooms two years ago and it would be full of parish councillors sitting there with arms folded because they felt that we don't have that honest conversation before.

Now I think things are opening up a bit and in a slightly different way and we've actually discovered that there really is a large appetite there the minister touched on this and used the phrase 'chicken and egg' earlier on and I think it's really important that sometimes we have to take a gamble to a certain extent with some town and parish councils. Maybe there is apathy, we've got a lot of rural parishes that don't have elections from one end of the cycle to the other. Maybe that's because there's a lot of people in those communities who don't see the point in being a parish councillor. But if we're actually saying to them 'well, you know, have some responsibility, have some power' then there will be people who step up. So maybe it is that 'chicken and egg' thing. Maybe we just need to ask the question to start getting some answers.

Andrea Jenkyns: I think...it's a shame we haven't got longer really. We could do with a whole session just for this discussion really. I'd be great to, I think we need to produce our own paper as a group, on this, and it would be great to pick your brains on how you brought, you know, ho groups of parish councils on board, going from the arms folded to more engagement really. So, if you don't mind, we'd like to see you again really.

Jeremy Rowe: Absolutely. I wouldn't pretend that we've finished the job, but we're certain that we're operating in some direction

Andrea Jenkyns: Thank you very much Jeremy.

Robin Andrew: I would like to add a couple of points to that. I'm Rob Andrew from Cornwall Council. I'm the officer who's trying to lead on this. I'm also a parish councillor and chairman at Feock Parish Council, a parish council which are in Devo Local. The two things we found, as James mentioned earlier, around the power of competency, this is quite limited to which parishes can actually apply for it. So you've got to have a qualified clerk and have elections or two thirds of members were elected and particular smaller rural parishes to get someone to stand is a challenge, let alone getting to the point of having an elections, okay it's there's an opportunity, but it's also a limiting factor for a number of parish councils who've got ambitious ideas, outside of the norm, but can't necessary deliver.

And the other issue I wanted to mention is a huge change in the role of clerks moving forward. The traditional clerk has gone in, minuted the meeting, put notices on the board once a month; they are



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now running contracts, they're probably employing staff, they've got to know about personnel, procurement rules, all these sort of things and to move that group along, we're trying to support them. There's a repercussion in that, they need more money. So you've got to increase the precept to get the quality of clerk to enable you to deliver the project you want to and that's quite a step change and I think it needs a message for everybody to try and push that whole agenda forward.

Andrea Jenkyns: Yes, definitely a valid point. So regarding developing these parish clerks then...do you have much guidance with this or ..?

Rob Andrew: We worked closely with NALC who also work very closely with the Cornwall Society of Local Council Clerks, who also works closely with the national society, so we've established a training partnership that includes CALC, clerks, but also the voluntary community sector, because they actually provide training on these certain issues and they can get some of the funding back then to sustain the VCS so we are trying partly in partnership, it's quite early days but we'll get there.

Andrea Jenkyns: Yes. No, but it's a really valid point though, that the roles aren't really changing and some of the existing ones are not equipped or event capable of those roles... so you've got to look at how you move those who're ready. Finally over to, well a couple more, Professor Jane Wills from Queen Mary University. So, what you're interests then?

Jane Wills: I've been looking at localism across the piece, but I'm particularly interested in this notion of mediating institutions, because Bob Kerslake mentioned this about the government and the people and the gap between the two and obviously populism is kind of filling that space at the moment, the SNP, Jeremy Corbyn, they're both kind of manifesting this and in many ways part of this...

Andrea Jenkyns: Possibly Farage before that as well

Jane Wills: Yes, exactly, UKIP is exactly the same and in a sense there is this kind of institutional space at the local level because as Colin was saying, this a massive gap between the average citizen and even the first tier of local government, particularly in cities.

So what I wanted to focus on today is the whole issue of neighbourhood planning, which is prompting the establishment of neighbourhood forums. For, in urban areas, it is not parishes, rural parishes, but urban areas, it's been a very interesting phenomenon, because people are often quite cynical about whether people want to get engaged in politics. But because the law gave people statutory powers unlike new Labour had lots of talk about localism but this coalition agreement was actually giving them powers, a new layer of people have got engaged. And there's thousands of these forums set up and they've got passion, they want to put time in, often they're new-retired, so they've got skills and they've got real vision for their place and if local government can more successfully tap that there's tremendous potential.



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So I'm interested in the kind of next stage a bit. Because what I've seen is that the forums get established, they do things, activity itself generates new things happening, new blood coming in, young people getting involved, so activity's really critical to the sort of momentum, even if people don't want to stand for an official role, they've engaged through a festival or an event or looking after a green space, but then once you've got your plan and you've got your referendum, which takes a long time, it's very onerous, then the forum no longer exists. And then all these forums are having discussions on whether they should become a parish council. And I've looked at Queens Park, where, which has been mentioned, they're doing amazing work, but it was such an onerous process to get from being a group of active people to becoming a parish and so much depended on Westminster City Council, who have to go through their own reviews and they stalled it for well over two years between the request and anything happening. They were very tenacious keeping going and maintaining the momentum to get through this. So I think there's something to look at here. As Colin was saying, maybe have compulsory parishing and if you don't have compulsory parishing, you have bottom up parishing, which is this kind of local people, but then you need to make it easier for them, more supportive for them to then engage. Because otherwise, once the plan is passed they have no continuation in the role as a neighbourhood forum and that's a weakness in the localism legislation because the plan becomes the principal authority's plan, not their plan and some of them are fighting to kind of keep their role.

Andrea Jenkyns: I think you made a very valid point. I wouldn't like to see your way first until we've got the recruitment sorted out, you know, for compulsory parishes. But I do think we do need stronger guidance really on what happens next. They were on the issue from the beginning and you want them on board to take it forward, don't you, really? So, that is something we can feed back. Would you mind getting involved when we do our...how we can recruit people in ...sort of local democracy. I'd love you to sort of get involved really, with your research? Thank you. And finally Councillor Roger Hornblow and Shar Roselman from Newport Pagnell.

Shar Roselman: As a parish council to tell you some of the work that we've done. We've engaged with community asset transfer with £11 million pounds principally being a swimming pool. At the time that we took over the swimming pool, it was making a loss of £200,000 per annum. It was refurbished with £175,000 required, which our principal authority considered not engage in. The net result of it was that we were going to mothball the facility because of the roof going to fall down. 102,000 visits by May by children to the pool every year learning to swim and it was much loved by residents because it was previously been gifted by a benefactor to the previous borough council. We took it over, we entered into an agreement with a charitable trust, who built a £1.1 million pounds gymnasium next to it. The net result of that is that it's now a profit making operation, it generates income for the parish council, we didn't have to increase precept to pay for it at all, we have more facilities available for the parish, on-going facilities that won't close, and we also see a neighbourhood plan that has put into operation a requirement for three and a half times the amount of new homes than were called for in the core strategy of our principal authority. With parishes able to do those sort of things, we would very much like to ask for actual parliamentary



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changes to the Localism Act to allow parishes to take on minor planning decisions, which we believe will free up principal councils to take those much needed larger planning decisions, which in our neck of the woods, currently have a seventeen month delay on them and this in turn will see new homes getting built and an awful lot more quickly than they are at the moment. Councillor Hornblow has been involved in all the work that we've done so far and is here to answer any questions.

Roger Hornblow: Can I add just three short points. Well-qualified clerk. Non-political council. And no double taxation allowed at all on any of the projects. I'll take any questions.

Andrea Jenkyns: Has anyone got any questions for any of our final panel speakers?

Jane Wills: There is that point about non-partisan councils, I think it's also really important ...

Roger Hornblow: Political parties, when the council formed some 15/16 years ago, with Milton Keynes as the ... the parties then got together and decided that it will be non-political.

Andrea Jenkyns: That's the same in ... I was a county councillor in Lincolnshire and Boston North West was my ward and the three parishes there they were non-partisan, they were all completely independent and they all just used to seem to pull together, so I do agree...I think at that level as well maybe, I personally work in a way anyway during the rest of the year when it's not an election, I'm very much non-partisan anyway, working together on different things locally to push things through. Have you got any more...

Sir Oliver Heald: What I was going to say, I've got one of each, a town council in Royston which is organised by a political party and I've got one in Buntingford which it isn't. And they both work really well. I mean the advantage with the one that has the parties behind it is that you get more of an election campaign because they've got the legs to go round the streets and do all that stuff. So you do get some leaflets about what's been happening and why not vote for me and this sort of thing which you don't get so much in the other one. But it's a smaller town Buntingford and so they tend to know the people more. So you know, I don't know, I'd personally allow both options.

Roger Hornblow: But we share, I mean there are political factions in it, we tend to share our brochures out and we're sliding them through the doors for re-election, irrespective of which party we are, we shove one another posters through the door. That way you can cover 17,000 people otherwise you wouldn't be able to do it.

Jeremy Rowe: Where we've had a completely Conservative council in Royston we decided next time round that we wouldn't put up a whole slate of candidates because we were arguing amongst ourselves so much so actually works better with a small....

Andrea Jenkyns: What about the question?



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Jeremy Rowe: Yeah, I mean, I wouldn't, I was intrigued by what's been said about that this earlier on. And I personally have a not suspicion but a worry about independence. Because my question for the independent candidate in any tier, if they came to my door and knocked on the door, would be 'how did you vote in the last election?'. Because I want to know when it comes to different decisions what your instincts actually are.

Andrea Jenkyns: Yes, that's interesting.

Jeremy Rowe: And at least if I have UKIP, SNP, Labour, Tory, Lib Dem whatever then I know what they're going to do, when the heat's on and when you're looking in the whites of their eyes. I think it's important to have the flexibility to have both and you know....

Roger Hornblow: But it's easy to answer the question. I have a political persuasion at a higher level of election, but not at local election where you are representing the people.

Andrea Jenkyns: Even, as a Conservative MP, we're representing the people anyway, it doesn't matter whether your constituents only vote....

Jane Wills: I think that's what puts people with talent off local government, often, is the party system, because they don't want to be constrained. They think people are not talking about the real people's interests, they're talking about the party's interest. It does make people suspicious. Whereas these forums, because they're more organic, that's the biggest worry, they say why do you want to be a parish council, then all the parties are going to come and tell us what to say or tell us what to think or control everything. And you want a more organic sense of representation.

Andrea Jenkyns: I think we've got to put a hold on the debate. I think that one final thing here...

Jeremy Rowe: I'm not suggesting that it should be one thing or the other, but I'm saying that neither should thing should be excluded. If people then have the option to elect an independent, because they don't want to be whipped in a political sense, then that's good of course.

Andrea Jenkyns: Yeah, I agree. Thank you very much everybody for coming and thank you to NALC for organising such a great rosta of speakers and this is going to be the first of many sessions that we're going to have. So I'd definitely like to have some of you back in other sessions as well. We'll probably not have as many speakers next time, I think we'll stick to three, so we can really get to know those, but thank you very much.