

NALC ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2026 | BARONESS TAYLOR OF STEVENAGE KEYNOTE SPEECH

Well, thank you, Ian, and thank you, NALC.

It's lovely when you go up on a stage, and there's just one little step.

The other day I had to do one in the Excel Centre, and there was a great big, long flight of stairs, and I was convinced I was going to fall out.

But good morning, everyone.

It's a real pleasure to join this National Association of Local Councils Annual Conference.

And I want to begin by thanking NALC for the invitation and by thanking all of you for the work you do in your communities every day.

And I think when we have extreme weather like we're having this week, this is when our parish and town councils and councillors come into their own.

I'm sure many of you are thinking about cool spots for vulnerable residents or getting information out there about how people in our communities can keep themselves safe in hot weather.

Parish and town councils are a vital part of local democracy.

You are often the first place people turn to when they want to improve the place they live in, when they want to raise a concern or get something done.

You know your neighbourhoods, you know your residents and the realities of local life in a way that no one in central government ever could do.

That local knowledge, practical commitment and democratic legitimacy matter enormously.

And we've also seen how powerful it can be when parish and town councils bring residents into the conversation about the future of their area.

Now, is there anyone here from Bridgnorth today?

I'm just going to give Bridgnorth...

Oh, hooray, good.

Well, I'm just going to give you a name check because your town council is asking residents, businesses and community organisations to help shape its community strategic plan.

That matters because it gives local people a real voice in setting priorities and helps make sure that the plan reflects what the community needs and wants.

Now, from my time as a minister in the department and I've been in local government for about 30 years now, I know from direct experience that power works best.

When it's exercised closest to the people it serves.

And that's why community empowerment is not just an add-on for us, it's central to how we want public services, local government and local democracy to work.

Not only will it lead to better outcomes, but it will also promote greater trust between those who oversee or run public services and the citizens who use them.

Today I want to set out how we're taking that ambition forward and why parish and town councils are very much part of that future.

At the heart of our approach is a simple principle, and that is that power should sit closer to the people it affects.

That's what devolution means in practice.

And that's why this government is committed to shifting power out of Westminster, that little bit of Whitehall and Westminster where I work at the moment, and into communities.

This is relevant at every level, but especially at neighbourhood level, because people want a meaningful say over the future of their area.

Too often, they feel they can't influence the decisions that shape it.

Our ambition to change that now has a strong legislative foundation through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act.

This is a landmark piece of legislation, transferring power out of Westminster, strengthening local leadership and creating a firmer basis for community voices.

For everyone here today, one part of the Act matters especially: the new neighbourhood governance duty.

This creates a new requirement for local authorities to make effective arrangements for neighbourhood governance.

Our intention for this is to give communities a stronger voice in shaping the priorities, decisions and services that affect the places where they live.

We're clear that parish and town councils have an important place in neighbourhood governance and in the wider community empowerment agenda.

That's why the duty includes a requirement. A requirement for local authorities to engage parish and town councils, where they exist, on how they will be represented on neighbourhood governance arrangements.

I know many in this room made the case for the parish sector during the passage of the legislation, and I spoke often during the course of that, taking that bill through the House of Lords with NALC and representatives of NALC.

I hope you feel your voice was heard.

We will also publish a neighbourhood governance framework later on this year.

That framework will set out the high-level principles for the neighbourhood governance arrangements ahead of laying the statutory regulations.

And we will also update community governance review guidance, drawing on good practice from across the sector.

And it's my intention, if NALC are willing to do it, to convene a roundtable with NALC as part of that process.

As well as devolution, I also want to talk about our wider programme of public service reform, making services more joined up, more place-based and more responsive to the people who use those services every day.

This is something the secretary of state and I are really passionate about.

I've worked with Steve Reed for over 20 years now, and we share our passion in this respect, and I would encourage you to read his recent speeches on community power.

If reform is to mean anything on the ground, it must be felt in neighbourhoods and shaped by citizens.

One practical way we're taking this forward is through our community power pilots.

The pilots will be run in 25 areas across England and will bring decision-making closer to residents.

These pilots will invite local authorities to work with community groups, residents and local service users to co-design the solutions to local problems.

They will explore longer-term models of community involvement in service delivery and help build neighbourhood and community capacity for the future.

We've set aside 15 million pounds for the pilots, and we will publish further information on them shortly, including the places where the pilots will take place.

Parish and town councils must be part of that conversation wherever they play a role in local leadership, service delivery or in community engagement.

Alongside this, we're developing a neighbourhood guarantee.

That's clear expectations about the basics that matter to people's everyday lives, from cleaner streets and visible action on fly-tipping, to safer public spaces and better access to local services.

Because people should be able to see that change is happening where they live.

Community empowerment is not only about structures and about legislation.

I deal with that every day, but when I go back to Stevenage, that's not what people are talking about.

It's also about whether people can see and feel that their neighbourhood is improving and where the public services are responding to the issues that matter most to them.

And we know from years of surveys that how people feel about their local area, they judge as they walk out of their front door and walk to their shops, to their workplace, to the school.

That's how people judge how things are being looked after.

Because ultimately what we're trying to build is not just better systems, but stronger places, places people feel proud of, connected to and invested in.

Pride in Place is about the everyday experience of neighbourhood life.

Whether the high street feels cared for, whether public spaces are welcoming, whether people feel safe and whether communities can see that change is possible where they live.

And that's another reason parish and town councils are so valuable.

You are often the people who help turn national ambition into visible local difference, whether that's improving a park, whether it's supporting a community asset, backing a local event, or simply making sure that the voice of the neighbourhood is heard.

For example, we've seen with Ripon, North Yorkshire, the historic town hall has recently been transferred from North Yorkshire Council to Ripon City Council on a long-term lease, putting a key local asset into local hands.

That's created an opportunity for residents to shape how the building is used in the future, with the local council now leading work to develop a clear plan for its regeneration and long-term sustainability.

It's exactly this kind of approach where communities are given greater control over local assets, backed by support from the wider system, and how we can unlock the full potential of neighbourhood governance in practice.

This commitment to community-led change is also at the heart of our Pride in Place programme.

It's a long-term commitment, with nearly 300 places receiving up to 20 million pounds each over 10 years to back the priorities that local people themselves identify.

Because lasting change doesn't come from short-term gestures, it comes from sustained investment, local leadership and a plan that people can believe in.

I did want to mention briefly the community right to buy because we're committed to giving communities stronger powers to take that ownership of community spaces, which have a significant role to play in developing social networks, encouraging community participation and promoting civic pride.

So, through the English Devolution Act, we've legislated to strengthen the current assets of community value scheme and introduce a new community right to buy.

This will give communities the first opportunity to purchase an asset of community value when it's put up for sale by its owner, and a 12-month period to raise the funding they need to buy the asset, with an independent valuation process to ensure there's a fair price.

And we also put our Pride in Place community right to buy fund, which will help communities buy and run the buildings and spaces they value most, including pubs, shops, community centres, sports facilities and cultural venues.

It will make community right to buy work in practice, tackling the key barrier that communities, especially in deprived areas, are often priced out due to a lack of finance.

We want to ensure communities have practical support to develop plans, purchase assets and sustain them for the long term with a focus on the places that need it most.

And we will set out more details of this in due course.

Crucially, decisions are being shaped through neighbourhood boards, bringing together residents, businesses, community organisations, councils and MPs to agree a long-term plan for change.

Because pride in place can't be imposed from above.

It must be built with and by communities.

Finally, I wanted to say a few words about local government reorganisation.

And after the events of this week, you may justifiably have questions about where we're going with that.

I know many of you are engaged in active conversations with your communities about local government reorganisation.

This is a significant change in some parts of the country.

And understandably, people want to know what it means for local communities and for parish and town councils.

So let me turn to that directly.

The government's aim is to simplify local government by ending the two-tier system and establishing new single-tier unitary councils.

And our vision is clear: stronger local councils are equipped to drive economic growth, improve local public services and empower our communities.

But let me be clear, reform at one level of local government must not come at the expense of a voice at another.

And as local government reorganisation moves forward, I want to be clear that the relationship between principal authorities and parish and town councils will matter more, not less.

As councils become larger, we must make sure that local voice is not lost.

Where parish and town councils exist, they bring local knowledge, democratic legitimacy and that close connection to the communities that you serve.

Later this year we will update the community governance review guidance.

I look forward to working with NALC on this, as I said, and there'll be good practice examples on how local authorities and town and parish councils can work together.

And this will be shared with all of the local authorities in England.

So, this is about partnership, working together in a way that reflects local capacity, local circumstances and the support councils need to play their part.

So, my message to you today is this.

Our government is serious about devolving power, about rebuilding trust and improving lives in every part of the country.

And that means valuing the contribution you make, listening to your experience and working with you as partners.

I look forward to continuing that work with NALC and with parish and town councils across the country.

Thank you for your leadership and for everything that you do for the communities that you represent.

It's really a privilege to be here today, and I look forward to discussions with you.

Thank you.