

SLCC NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2026 | CLLR IAIN HAMILTON KEYNOTE SPEECH

Good afternoon, everyone.

Can I begin by thanking the Society of Local Council Clerks for inviting me to speak today.

This is my first address to an SLCC National Conference as Chair of the National Association of Local Councils, and it is a genuine pleasure to be here.

Before I say anything else, I want to recognise the contribution that clerks make to local democracy.

Somewhere in England tonight, a clerk will still be at a laptop long after the office has closed, meeting ended, or their evening should have started.

Preparing papers.

Checking figures.

Finalising minutes.

Answering a councillor's question.

Making sure a meeting runs properly.

Making sure a decision is lawful.

Making sure residents can have confidence in their council.

And so much more.

But probably also wondering why nobody warned them the job would involve quite so much of everything.

Much of what parish and town councils achieve would simply not be possible without the professionalism, judgement and commitment of clerks.

So, my starting point today is a simple one.

Thank you.

And thank you too for the partnership between NALC and SLCC. Our memorandum of understanding reflects something I feel strongly about:

councillors and officers achieve more when we work together with mutual respect, shared purpose and a clear understanding of our different but complementary roles.

That partnership has never been more important than it is today.

Many of you may know me, but many may not.

So, I thought I would start by briefly introducing myself.

I serve as a councillor on Halewood Town Council in Merseyside and have been active within NALC and the wider local council movement for many years.

Before becoming NALC Chair last December, I served as Chair of the Larger Councils Committee, represented Merseyside councils within county structures, sat on NALC's Policy Committee and have attended National Assembly since 2016.

My professional background is perhaps a little different from what people might expect.

Earlier in my career, I worked for the Royal Navy, where I developed a payroll system that received a Herbert Lott Award. It taught me the importance of reliability, accountability and designing systems people can depend upon.

Nothing teaches you about accountability like getting people's pay wrong.

I later built a career as a software developer and IT consultant, specialising in healthcare, CRM and financial systems.

Alongside local government, I have also spent much of my life working within the voluntary and community sector. As a charity trustee in Halewood, I helped oversee the growth of a local organisation from a small estate-based charity into a major community hub delivering adult education, childcare, family support, day care services and a social supermarket.

I am also a carer for my wife.

All this experience has reinforced something I've always believed.

Strong communities matter.

Accessible local services matter.

People need places they can turn to and organisations they can trust.

Whether in the Navy, technology, community organisations or local government, one lesson has remained constant.

People rely on systems they can trust.

Good systems don't replace people.

They help good people succeed.

That is a lesson I've carried throughout my career and into my role as Chair of NALC.

When I stood for election, I said our sector was an invaluable asset to communities and an essential part of strong local government.

I believed then, and I believe even more strongly today, that the voice of parish and town councils needed to be heard more clearly in national policy discussions.

Too often decisions are made about communities without the people closest to those communities being in the room.

Parish and town councils are not an optional extra.

They are democratic institutions with a unique understanding of place, people and local priorities.

And if government is serious about community empowerment, democratic renewal and local growth, then our sector must be part of the conversation.

That was the motivation that led me to stand for Chair.

When I was elected, I set out three priorities:

Stronger voices. Stronger governance. Stronger partnerships.

But behind all three priorities sits one simple belief.

Community power must reach every community.

Now earlier this year, NALC and SLCC stood side-by-side at the Local Government Association Annual Conference 2026 alongside the University of Birmingham and the Association of Democratic Services Officers to launch research into the changing role of councillors and clerks.

What struck me most about that work was a simple conclusion.

Today's clerks are far more than administrators.

In fact, I sometimes think the phrase "clerk" undersells what many of you do.

Because the modern clerk is often a governance adviser.

A project manager.

A community leader.

A communications professional.

An employer.

A financial steward.

And occasionally, I suspect, part-time counsellor.

But the report showed they are also connectors.

They are communicators.

And they are catalysts.

As connectors, clerks bring people together.

They connect councillors with communities.

They connect local councils with principal authorities.

They connect residents with services, voluntary organisations and local partners.

At a time when governance structures are becoming more complex, that role is more important than ever.

As communicators, clerks help communities understand what is happening around them.

They provide trusted information.

They explain decisions.

They engage residents.

And increasingly they help councils navigate a rapidly changing digital landscape.

Yet for all the discussion about technology, local democracy still depends on trusted human relationships.

And as catalysts, clerks turn ideas into action.

They help secure funding.

Support volunteers.

Deliver projects.

Manage assets.

Establish services.

And turn community ambitions into reality.

If we are serious about the future of local democracy, then we must recognise, value and support those roles.

And ultimately that is what my three priorities are about.

The political environment around us is changing rapidly.

A new Prime Minister.

A new government.

A renewed focus on devolution, local government reorganisation and what ministers describe as rewiring the state.

At the heart of that agenda is a simple question.

Where should power sit?

NALC's answer has been consistent.

If government is serious about devolving power, strengthening communities and renewing democracy, then parish and town councils must be part of the solution.

Not as consultees.

Not as an afterthought.

But as genuine partners in delivery.

That has been the message we have taken into our engagement with ministers, officials, parliamentarians and stakeholders over the past year.

Following the appointment of Prime Minister Andy Burnham, I wrote to congratulate him and to make the case that parish and town councils must be central to the government's ambitions for devolution, democracy and community empowerment.

We have engaged with ministers, officials and Number 10 on the government's Rewiring the State agenda.

We have met with MHCLG officials and ministers to discuss local government reorganisation, neighbourhood governance, standards reform, remote meetings and the future role of parish and town councils.

And we have consistently argued that parish and town councils are not simply part of local government.

They are one of local government's greatest strengths.

Because when I look at the challenges facing the country, whether it is economic growth, public service reform, environmental action, community resilience or democratic renewal, I see parish and town councils already playing a role.

I see councils protecting valued local services when larger organisations step back.

I see councils managing community assets.

I see councils supporting vulnerable residents.

I see councils driving local pride and local identity.

And I see councils finding practical solutions to local problems.

That message is finding an increasingly receptive audience.

Through our Westminster Forum, parliamentarians from across the political spectrum are helping ensure parish and town councils are heard in national debates.

Recent parliamentary debates on rural services, devolution and community resilience have highlighted exactly the contribution our sector makes every day.

There is a growing recognition that parish and town councils are not relics of the past.

They are institutions for the future.

That matters because the government's reforms will shape local government for decades to come.

Local government reorganisation.

Strategic authorities.

Community empowerment.

Neighbourhood governance.

Rural proofing.

The government's emerging ten-year plan.

All these discussions create risks if local voices are overlooked.

But they also create enormous opportunities if local voices are heard.

NALC's role is to ensure parish and town councils are not overlooked when decisions are made.

To make sure community governance doesn't undermine our sector.

To ensure devolution reaches neighbourhood level.

And to secure the powers, recognition, funding and support local councils need to succeed.

Because if government is serious about pushing power out of Westminster, it cannot stop halfway.

It cannot stop at mayoral offices.

It cannot stop at principal councils.

Community power must reach every community.

And when it does, I know parish and town councils will be ready to help deliver it.

The second priority was stronger governance.

Good governance is not bureaucracy.

Good governance creates trust.

It protects public money.

It supports effective decision-making.

It provides the confidence needed for councils to take on greater responsibilities.

And it is the cornerstone of our credibility.

Over the last year NALC has continued to invest heavily in governance support.

We have expanded guidance and resources.

We have strengthened training opportunities.

We continue to campaign for the return of remote and hybrid meetings.

And we have supported thousands of councils in improving their digital security and governance arrangements.

I also want to highlight an area where NALC and SLCC have worked particularly closely together.

Audit.

Now, I suspect few people entered local government because they were excited by annual governance statements, internal controls or accounting regulations.

Yet we all know how important they are.

Over recent years, clerks and councillors have told us that the audit framework can be difficult to navigate.

That is why NALC, SLCC and our partners have been working together to review proper practices and governance guidance.

The goal is straightforward.

To make guidance clearer.

More practical.

More proportionate.

And easier to apply.

Not simply to improve compliance.

But to improve governance.

Because audit should not be something councils fear.

It should be something that gives councils confidence.

Confidence that decisions are being made properly.

Confidence that risks are being managed.

Confidence that public money is being spent well.

Now I also want to say a brief word about standards, because I know it is a subject many of us care deeply about.

When people hear the word "standards", they often think about complaints, investigations and sanctions.

Those things matter.

And let me be clear about something.

NALC continues to believe that where councillors engage in bullying, harassment, intimidation or serious misconduct, there must be meaningful consequences.

For many years we have been the loudest voice calling for a stronger standards framework, a mandatory national code of conduct and stronger sanctions against unacceptable behaviour.

We have continued making that case to government because no one should be driven out of public service by poor behaviour.

And that applies whether the victim is a councillor, a clerk, another member of staff or a member of the public.

One of the lessons from the Civility and Respect Project is that most people enter local government because they want to serve their communities.

Yet too often we hear stories of good people stepping back because of bullying, intimidation or persistent poor behaviour.

That hurts individuals.

But it also hurts local democracy.

Because if good people leave, communities lose experience, expertise and leadership.

And that is why standards reform is not simply about punishing bad behaviour. It is about protecting the people who keep local democracy working.

But standards are about much more than sanctions.

They are about creating councils where good conduct is the norm, not the exception.

Where councillors and officers understand their roles.

Where governance is strong.

Where disagreements are handled professionally.

And where people treat one another with civility and respect.

That is why NALC's work on standards has never simply been about what happens when things go wrong.

It has also been about helping councils get things right in the first place.

Such as through our vital work with SLCC together on Civility and Respect including the Pledge.

Through improvements to governance guidance and employment policies.

Through the Good Governance Checklist.

Through the Local Council Award Scheme.

Through additional HR support.

And through wider efforts to strengthen governance, accountability and transparency.

Because many standards issues do not begin with deliberate misconduct.

They begin with weak governance.

Poor processes.

Unclear expectations.

Or people not getting the support they need.

The best standards framework in the world will never replace good culture.

And culture is built every day by the people in this room.

Now recent discussion about ethical standards has sometimes focused on regulation.

I understand that.

But the more important question for me is this:

How do we create councils where clerks, councillors, staff and residents can work together with professionalism, respect and trust?

That is what the Civility and Respect Project is about.

It is what our wider standards work is about.

And it is why I believe clerks have such an important role to play.

Because if the research we launched earlier this year is right, then clerks are not simply administrators.

They are connectors.

They are communicators.

And they are catalysts.

You connect people and processes.

You communicate expectations and good practice.

And every day you act as catalysts for good governance, ethical leadership and positive council culture.

I think that is something the whole sector should recognise and celebrate.

Strong councils require strong governance, and strong governance requires skilled and supported professionals.

And NALC will keep working closely with SLCC on that.

My third priority is stronger partnerships, which really matters deeply to me.

No organisation has all the answers.

NALC succeeds when county associations succeed.

County associations succeed when councils succeed.

And councils succeed when councillors and officers work together effectively.

That is why our relationship with SLCC is so important.

The best examples of partnership are not meetings or agreements.

They are outcomes.

Martyn's Law is a good example.

NALC and SLCC worked closely together to engage government, ensure policymakers understood the realities facing parish and town councils and advocate for a proportionate approach that reflected the diversity of our sector.

And our work did not stop when the legislation passed.

We have continued working together to help councils understand their responsibilities and prepare for implementation.

That is a partnership that delivers.

The same spirit can be seen in our work on civility and respect.

In audit reform.

In governance improvement.

In our joint presence at the Local Government Association Annual Conference.

And in the research, we launched together earlier this year.

When NALC and SLCC work together, we do more than represent our members.

We help shape the future of the sector.

[sub header - Project Keystone and the future of sector support]

One of the most important pieces of work currently underway is Project Keystone.

This is a strategic review of NALC and our relationship with county associations, designed to inform the future direction, role and strategic priorities of sector support for parish and town councils.

And to ensure that support is fit for the challenges and opportunities of the next decade.

Through our survey, workshops and other engagement what we have heard is clear.

Councils expect increasing responsibilities.

They face growing financial pressures.

They need support with skills, recruitment and retention.

And they want clearer and more consistent support.

Councillors, clerks, county associations and national representatives have all contributed to the conversation.

And that conversation is continuing.

So, my ask today is simple.

Stay involved.

Read the report when it's published next month.

Discuss it with your councillors, in your branches and your county associations.

Help us build a support system that is fit for the next generation of parish and town councils.

Because if the future holds greater responsibilities for local councils, the support available to them must be fit for that future too.

One way we are already responding is through investment in practical support.

Earlier I mentioned a lesson I learned in the Navy and in technology.

Good systems don't replace people. They help good people succeed.

That's exactly how I see NORA - NALC's Online Resource Assistant - which we launched last week.

As someone who spent many years designing systems people could depend upon, I see NORA in exactly that light.

Not as a replacement for professional expertise.

But as a tool that helps professionals find trusted information more quickly.

Just as importantly, it shows members where that information comes from.

Because trust depends on being able to check the source, not simply accepting the answer.

NORA draws on NALC's own guidance, resources and knowledge base.

It helps members find information.

It helps members find original source material.

And it helps members access support when they need it.

Technology should support professional expertise, not replace it.

The judgement, experience and professionalism of clerks remain irreplaceable

Alongside NORA, we have established a National AI Network to help councils learn from one another and navigate the opportunities and challenges that new technologies present.

Whether we're ready or not, technology will continue to shape the environment in which local councils operate.

Our responsibility is to ensure the sector is ready.

If you haven't already tried NORA, I encourage you to have a look during the conference and let us know what you think.

Earlier I spoke about the government's ambition to push power closer to communities.

Community power must reach every community.

Not just mayoral offices.

Not just principal councils.

Every community.

That is why parish and town council's matter.

And that is why clerks matter.

Because every thriving community needs people who can bring others together, make sense of complexity, navigate change and turn good ideas into action.

Because the future of local democracy will not be built solely through policies written in Whitehall.

It will be built through thousands of decisions made in village halls, council offices, community centres and town halls across England.

It will be built by people who connect communities.

People who communicate information people can trust.

People who turn ideas into action.

Connectors.

Communicators.

Catalysts.

And thankfully, this room is full of them.

Thank you.

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