

NALC ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2026 | SESSION SUMMARIES AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

Devolution Delivered: What the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 means for parish and town councils

Speaker: Baroness Sharon Taylor of Stevenage

In her keynote address to NALC's Annual Conference 2026, Baroness Taylor of Stevenage reaffirmed the government's commitment to devolving power from Westminster to local communities and highlighted the central role parish and town councils will play in delivering that agenda.

The speech focused on community empowerment, neighbourhood governance, public service reform, and local government reorganisation. Baroness Taylor argued that decisions are most effective when made closest to the people they affect and positioned parish and town councils as essential partners in strengthening local democracy, improving services, and delivering visible change in communities.

She outlined several major government initiatives, including the new neighbourhood governance duty established through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act, community power pilots, the Pride in Place programme, and the new community right to buy. Throughout the speech, she emphasised that local voices must remain strong as local government structures evolve and pledged continued engagement with NALC and the parish sector.

Key takeaways:

- Parish and town councils are central to devolution — The government sees the sector as a key partner in delivering community empowerment.
- New neighbourhood governance duty — Local authorities will be required to involve parish and town councils in neighbourhood governance arrangements.
- More guidance is coming — A neighbourhood governance framework and updated community governance review guidance will be published later this year.
- £15m for community power pilots — 25 pilot areas will test new ways of involving communities in local decision-making and service delivery.

- Focus on visible local improvements — The forthcoming Neighbourhood Guarantee will target issues residents notice most, such as cleaner streets and safer public spaces.
- Long-term investment through Pride in Place — Nearly 300 places will receive up to £20m over 10 years to deliver community-led improvements.
- New community right to buy — Communities will get the first opportunity to purchase assets of community value, backed by a dedicated support fund.
- Local government reorganisation — The government want parish and town councils to have a stronger, not weaker, role as councils become larger.
- NALC will help shape implementation — The government committed to continued engagement with NALC on neighbourhood governance and sector guidance.

Power, Assets and Influence: Have parish and town councils gained from reorganisation?

Speakers: Stuart Carter, clerk of Northampton Town Council and Cllr Brian Smedley, leader of Bridgwater Town Council

This session explored the opportunities and challenges of local government reorganisation (LGR) through two contrasting case studies from Bridgwater Town Council and Northampton Town Council.

Cllr Brian Smedley shared how Bridgwater Town Council used Somerset's move to a unitary authority as an opportunity to take greater control of local services, assets and decision-making. The council expanded significantly, growing from three staff members in 2016 to around 70 today, taking on services, facilities and community assets to protect them from potential cuts and ensure they remained locally managed.

In contrast, Stuart Carter described Northampton Town Council's more difficult experience following reorganisation in Northamptonshire. While the new town council inherited civic responsibilities and a large population, many promised assets and services were never transferred. He highlighted ongoing challenges securing asset transfers, limited engagement from the unitary authority and the difficulties of trying to negotiate powers and responsibilities after reorganisation has already taken place.

The discussion that followed focused heavily on asset transfers, precept increases, community engagement and the importance of parish and town councils securing

commitments early in the reorganisation process. Despite their different experiences, both speakers agreed that strong local leadership, local knowledge and proactive engagement are critical to achieving positive outcomes from LGR.

Key takeaways:

- LGR creates opportunities, but only if councils act early — Speakers stressed the importance of securing assets, services and agreements before reorganisation takes effect.
- Asset transfers remain a major challenge — Many parish and town councils are struggling to acquire community assets, with larger authorities often reluctant to transfer them.
- Strong leadership is essential — Speakers highlighted the value of experienced councillors, supportive members and capable clerks.
- Local control can protect services — Bridgwater Town Council took on services and assets to prevent closures and maintain local standards.
- Community engagement matters — Transparent communication helped secure support for difficult decisions, including significant precept increases.
- Staffing and local knowledge are critical — Retaining experienced staff helped ensure a smooth transition and service continuity.
- Relationships with unitary authorities can determine success — Supportive principal authorities can accelerate progress, while resistance can delay it for years.
- Parish and town councils should have a clear plan — Knowing which assets and services to pursue, and why, is vital before negotiations begin.
- The sector wants stronger localism in practice — Attendees raised concerns that some reorganisation processes risk centralising decisions rather than empowering communities.

From Declaration to Delivery: How a parish and town council turned climate ambition into action

Speaker: Lisa Bowman, clerk of Exmouth Town Council

This session showcased how Exmouth Town Council has turned its 2019 climate emergency declaration into practical action across the community. The session highlighted how the council embedded climate and sustainability objectives throughout its work, from measuring its carbon footprint and appointing a climate officer to developing partnerships with community groups, schools, businesses and residents.

Rather than focusing on large-scale projects alone, Exmouth Town Council demonstrated how councils can deliver change through achievable local initiatives, including reusable cup schemes, waste reduction projects, community engagement campaigns and climate education programmes. A key theme was that councils do not need to start from scratch; they can build on existing community activity, work collaboratively and integrate sustainability into everyday decision-making.

Key takeaways:

- Start with what you have — Map existing local initiatives and build partnerships around shared goals.
- Embed sustainability across the council — Make climate considerations part of every area of work, not a standalone project.
- Measure before you act — Understanding your carbon footprint helps identify priorities and opportunities.
- Focus on practical action — Small, visible projects can build momentum and community support.
- Bring the community with you — Engagement, education and local partnerships are critical to long-term success.
- Dedicated resource makes a difference — Exmouth Town Council's climate officer has helped drive projects, partnerships and behaviour change.
- Share learning across the sector — Networks such as NALC's Climate Emergency Network help parish and town councils learn from one another.

Planning After Reform: What are the impacts of the Planning and Infrastructure Act on parish and town councils

Speakers: Roger Mortlock, chief executive of CPRE and Andrew Towlerton, planning advisor at the Society of Local Council Clerks

The session focused on the growing pressures facing parish and town councils as planning reforms, local government reorganisation and housing delivery targets reshape the planning system. Speakers highlighted concerns about large-scale housing developments, the increasing use of private management companies to maintain estates, weak enforcement of Section 106 agreements, and the risk that local voices could be marginalised under new unitary authorities.

A recurring theme was the tension between the government's drive to accelerate housing delivery and the ability of local authorities and communities to ensure

developments are properly planned, supported by infrastructure and held accountable for promised community benefits. Speakers also stressed the importance of planning training for councillors and the need to create stronger mechanisms for parish and town councils to influence decision-making within larger strategic authorities.

Key takeaways:

- Planning reform brings opportunities and risks —, Strategic planning could improve coordination, but important delivery details remain unclear.
- Local voices must not be weakened — National delegation and larger unitary authorities risk distancing decisions from communities.
- Housing targets are driving development — Pressure to meet numbers can encourage speculative growth without the infrastructure communities need.
- Planning is about places, not just houses — New development must include affordable homes, good design, services and community facilities.
- Section 106 needs stronger enforcement — Promised infrastructure and community benefits are too often delayed or never delivered.
- Private estate management is a growing problem — Residents can face multiple charges while parish councils have little power to intervene.
- Neighbourhood planning needs proper support — Smaller parish and town councils may struggle to prepare or update plans without restored funding.
- Planning training is essential — Councillors need the knowledge to submit strong, effective representations.
- Parish and town councils remain crucial — Their local knowledge will become even more important as planning decisions move to larger authorities.

Local Government Finance: Challenges, resilience, and good governance

Speakers: Annie Child, chief executive of the Smaller Authorities' Audit Appointments, Alan Mellor, chair of the Smaller Authorities Proper Practices Panel and James Hood, director of Local Councils' Network

This session explored the financial challenges facing local government and what they mean for parish and town councils. Speakers examined the strengths and limitations of the current audit and assurance regime, outlined proposed changes to the proper practices framework and Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR), and considered the wider impact of local government finance reform, devolution and local government reorganisation.

Annie Child explained that the current limited assurance review is designed to be proportionate, affordable and practical for nearly 10,000 smaller authorities. While it provides an important level of external assurance, she stressed that it is not a full audit and should be viewed as one part of a wider governance framework. Strong governance, effective internal controls, councillor oversight, training and transparency remain essential. Annie also highlighted opportunities to strengthen the system through the new Local Audit Office, a digital AGAR submission portal and the ongoing review of proper practices.

Alan Mellor outlined plans to modernise the Proper Practices Guide and improve the AGAR. Proposed changes include clearer reporting of reserves, additional balance sheet information for larger parish and town councils using income and expenditure accounting, and improved financial transparency while maintaining a proportionate approach. He encouraged councils to support clerks through the transition and place greater emphasis on internal audit and financial reporting throughout the year, rather than focusing solely on year-end compliance.

James Hood examined the broader financial pressures affecting principal authorities. Despite recent funding reforms, many parish and town councils continue to face real-terms budget reductions and increasing demand for statutory services, leading to difficult decisions about discretionary community services. He argued this presents an opportunity for councils to play a greater role in delivering local services, managing community assets and shaping place-based solutions. He also highlighted the importance of demonstrating strong governance, building partnerships and influencing the evolving devolution and local government reorganisation agenda.

Key takeaways:

- Good governance starts long before audit — External assurance complements, but never replaces, strong internal controls and effective leadership.
- Limited assurance has clear limits — It is proportionate and affordable but is not designed to uncover every governance issue.
- Financial reporting is evolving — Proposed AGAR and proper practices changes aim to improve transparency without creating unnecessary burdens.
- Support clerks through change — Training and continuous development will be essential as new financial requirements are introduced.
- Internal audit matters — Robust internal scrutiny provides the strongest defence against governance failures.

- Funding pressures are reshaping local government — Principal authorities are making difficult choices about community services and assets.
- Parish and town councils have an opportunity to step up — Financial pressures and reorganisation create new opportunities to lead local services and partnerships.
- Credibility builds influence — Strong governance, sound financial management and clear vision will strengthen councils' role in devolution and local government reform.