

**Teresa Pearce MP, shadow secretary of state for Communities and Local Government**

**Edited transcript of speech**

It's a pleasure to be here today. I thank you Kevin for inviting me, all of you for attending. As it's been mentioned, I took up the Shadow Secretary for Communities and Local Government role quite recently in September. Before that I was actually the Shadow Minister for Housing and Planning, and planning obviously overlaps both, so it is very important and I'm amazed actually at what comes under my brief. I think it just shows how much councillors have to do. It's the breadth of things that councillors do; I believe is not properly understood by the public.

And, conditions are difficult and stressful and it's people like you that deliver for local communities, your own community, your neighbours, your families and I sort of say thank you for what you do. It's often very unsung, it's hard, and everyone's a critic. I was a councillor once for four years, it was tough, so I'd just really like to say thank you for what you do.

I cover Communities and Local Government and I think there's a disconnect between the two, but for local government it seems, communities don't really understand who makes the decisions and how they and why they're made. And it would be nice if the case [inaudible - 00:01:38] it's actually council casework and not the new casework, and the councillors have a lot more say.

And, this year, probably more than any other, as being a huge question thrown up about government, politics, democracy and most importantly communities. And, a question that we need to answer and we need to answer to our communities about how services are delivered and who delivers them, and what the evolution actually means. And, I think the vote to the leave the EU on 23<sup>rd</sup> June shows to all of us that it wasn't just a discontent with the EU, there was a discontent with the politics and the way things are, and there's a real need for people to feel contented to decisions that are made for them and around them.

And, it's a really important timing the debate in England about closing that gap, and local councils are crucial in that conversation, because to be perfectly honest, even in this room, and any rooms like this, that are more

likely to have the right answers for their communities for the people like me. So it's your voices we need to be listening to, because every day parish councils, town councils deliver to millions of people.

Local councils are on the front line of government, delivering the services, which is reaching some of our communities on a day-to-day basis, and that's why we need to work closely with you now. Back in 2014, on the Local and Public Accountability Act, we got the amendment for the form parish polls, who crucially supported the establishment as a sector led body, which was established by NALC. And, we're glad to be working on these reforms, but we're concerned that the reforms don't really seem to have been enacted yet, and they seem to be falling lower and lower in the pecking order in the daily business. And, going forward is incredibly important, both to me and to the entire Shadow Communities for Local Government team to keep an open, productive dialogue to enhance in Parliament and every tier of local government.

And, I believe that my party is the party of evolution, however, it's been a hard road to get there, because there are many in my party that believe in devolution, and there's some, there's ones that who can still do what they're told, and that's not what devolution about.

And, it's very hard, it's a very hard conversation to say to people with power, we want you to deliver that, but I think we're there. I think some of the things that have happened say this year what's happened in America, what's happening now with Europe, has shown the political class if you want to call it that, that things have changed, the ground has shifted and the people are understanding for long time and how it needs to go down the local people and local communities.

And, that evolution does need to be bottom up and not top down, because I believe in the devolution of that agenda that reaches every nook and cranny under it. Not just those areas with directly elected mayors and combined authorities, I believe the evolution needs to focus on every single tier of local government and how are both the communities over elected representatives, and most of all I believe in the devolution of power, which is backed up by the devolution of funds. Only that way, that you can transform the evolution into a reality...

With the devolution agenda that was introduced by the former chancellor and it's very often been, it's been top down scripted and it doesn't listen to the needs or wishes of local communities, and sometimes actually contradicted the principles of the evolution. For instance, with directly elected mayors, and sometimes they're in post even when they're not wanted. And, the

introduction of Metro Mayors, within City regions has been a top down, no negotiable feature of the devolution deals. These are areas that have explicitly rejected having a directly elected mayor yet have them in post anyway. That's not devolution.

I believe that the next mayor should not be a precondition of the devolution of power and the government should listen to the specific needs in local communities and tailor devolution deals accordingly, rather than having this one size fits all.

In Parliament we encounter countless examples of ways in which there is the opposite in England, whatever your view on education, the Government referred to this idea of forced academisation, and the outlook was as though, in some areas grammar schools would be despite teachers and governors and parents in that area not wanting them. It's a matter of huge importance that the Government listens properly to what people say devolution will look like in their area. But really with the tool we had, because it talks localist, but acts centralist, and furthermore when devolution does take place, it's too often used as a smoke screen for actually a devolution in cuts and responsibility and blame.

I'm making sure that my party, and it's not easy, formulates policy to introduce radical devolution generates giving power handed back to communities, giving council residents and local businesses the opportunity to shape how their community looks. What their place looks like, and how their services are provided. But often it seems from my side of the chamber, especially recently, that the Treasury are telling the DCLG to wind down the rhetoric on devolution, but it's my job to make sure that devolution is actually delivered.

Within my team we have Jim McMahon who is the councillor, was the leader of a council, and is very loyal to local government and he's absolutely passionate about this. And, he constantly coming to see me with radical new ideas that he's been around the country talking to different people and it's amazing, that the new ideas are coming forward when you go out and talk to people rather than sit in Westminster and expect to decide public service, and don't have any ideas. And, we're still at an early stage of policy development, which is quite odd really, because for not one minute, we're too early in cycle to make policy because it's too far away from a general election. But on the other hand we could have a possible snap general election.

So, it's going to be a strange place for policy of the year, but what we do need to decide and listen to town and parish councils throughout this

process. I want to see local government fully funded from town/parish level to right up to the principal authorities and we need to make use of the structures within local governments use those structures as building blocks for further devolution.

We want a devolution programme, which will compliment rather than complicate existing local government structures, and partly timed around evolution and more power, more power from Brussels and Whitehall to you.

One of the things that's going through Parliament at the moment is the Neighbourhood Planning Bill, and neighbourhood planning is a big part of engaging with communities and deciding how their areas are developed. Roberto Blackman-Wood who is the Shadow Minister for Planning in our team and she's been leading on this Bill.

As the opposition, I'm looking to try strengthen neighbourhood planning, but the neighbour planning is a bill, as the measures they're a positive start and a path we must go down for the planning system.

Neighbourhood planning for communities are a meaningful voice in growth and development than any other, and this important... because for too long we've said in, planning is about numbers, you must have this number here and this number there. It's not knowing about what we learnt, it's just about a number of what we, and we need to be thinking about this have and not just numbers. Those working on them in our planning departments are terribly underfunded and we really need to see planning, properly funded resource, because as I said in my local borough the planning department don't have the time to think about what we want our areas to look like. Who do we go out to talk to, about this space? They don't have the time to do that, because like I said they're underfunded.

I think there's something like 37% less staff in the planning department than there was five years ago and we did get an answer from the minister in questions on Monday, that we would see something coming forward about the funding of planning departments, and I think it's really important.

One of the things, just finally say is, I'd like to commend town and parish councils in the way you have stepped into save local services that have often been cut, and this year principal local government will have their direct funding cut by 79%.

At some time they're cut across the board and it tends to affect the most deprived, the poorest areas the most, and the 10 most deprived areas are being cut 18 times higher than the rest. Local government has suffered from

these devastating cuts, youth centres closed, parks have been sold off, and then nobody steps forward into public service to close libraries.

Every one of you that steps forward, gives up your time to come forward, to look at your area and think, "Yeah, I make a difference here". You do it because you want to make things better and nobody does it because they want close things or cut things, and it's really integral I think for councils now. But parish councils and town councils have stepped in, in many areas across the country and run libraries and youth centres, even public toilets in some places.

And, libraries are important; they're a hallmark for society, because they play an important role in our communities. Especially, with the housing crisis, with many people overcrowded families and children need a place to develop, which is quiet and they enough space and they can learn, and it's a credit to the parish and town councils that have supported local libraries.

We also need to change the narrative around public services altogether. Local taxes shouldn't be seen as a burden, which we're forced to pay, they should be seen as something we care about. There was a famous American judge who once said, "I like paying my taxes because I buy civilisation" and I think that's true. And, I think people will get that, if it's more explained to them, what the taxes they pay actually go to provide. And, we should be proud about the fact that local taxes have been spent a lot on services that in the wider community and enriched the quality of life overall.