

13 January 2017

To all parish and town councillors in England

As the new chairman of NALC, I hope you have a really great 2017 and wish you all the very best for the New Year!

Local councils, their clerks and 80,000 councillors do a brilliant job on behalf of their communities and I would like to thank you all for the work you do. I look forward to working with you over the coming year to make the sector even more respected, effective and clearly recognised as the first tier of local government in England.

I would like to particularly congratulate the following people for receiving New Year Honours: Barnaby Osborne (MBE), former chair of the Lee Parish Council, Buckinghamshire; Cllr Eric Carter (BEM), New Frankley Parish Council, Birmingham; Cllr Jane Coston, chair of Milton Parish Council, Cambridgeshire; Cllr Derek Old, Ibberton Parish Council, North Devon; Cllr Gordon Routledge, Arthuret Parish Council, Cumbria; Cllr John Clowes, Holmes Chapel Parish Council, Cheshire; Cllr Peter Bromell, Tedburn St Mary Parish Council, North Devon; Cllr Sheila Bruce, Kinnerley Parish Council, Shropshire; and Doug Haynes, clerk to Beeston Parish Council, Cheshire

I feel very proud to have been elected as chairman of NALC especially as there probably has never been a more exciting time to hold this important office:

- Local councils are well placed to address the sense of disengagement felt by communities from traditional politics and governance; such a feature of 2016.
- We are the only growing sector of local government. 2016 saw the creation of Kidderminster and Sutton Coldfield town councils and we currently have 150 communities working towards creating parish councils including in, Swindon, Ashford, Lowestoft, London and Birmingham. The growth of garden villages will add an increased force to this movement. NALC's ambition of seeing the whole of England parished has never been more realistic.
- Local councils are doing incredible things. Recent research for NALC identified extensive involvement in "big ticket" items – 15% of councils said they were delivering health and wellbeing services and 12% active in economic development. Encouragingly 70% of councils said they wanted to add such services to their remit.
- We are at the forefront of neighbourhood planning leading 90% of them and using them to shape communities and boost housing provision. These areas have 10% extra housing compared to those without neighbourhood plans.
- Local councils are also working with principal councils helping with the austerity and devolution agenda, and running discretionary services, which would otherwise cease.

A big part of NALC's work is to lobby government, national bodies and the media on your behalf and we will continue to do this in 2017:

- We will push for fair funding. Before Christmas with your help we persuaded Government not to extend referenda principles to the sector and this will continue to be a priority for this year. We will press for access to business rates, an effective Community Infrastructure Levy regime and a share of other income streams.
- We will press for more effective powers for the sector and in particular to see neighbourhood plans strengthened, their influence enhanced and their recognition as a key building block of local communities.
- We will push for strengthened local democracy, making it easier to create new councils, to reduce the number of vexatious parish polls by increasing the number of electors required to trigger them and seek widespread support for encouraging people to get involved in councils and stand for elections.
- We will work with the Local Government Association to make sure principal authorities see us as part of the solution to their financial problems. Principal authorities need to work more closely with local councils giving them time to prepare to take over discretionary services, to engage them in meaningful dialogue particularly around planning and development and to support the creation of local councils across the country.

I want to see NALC continue to improve its influence with government and its services to you. Good progress has been made (see attached) and our overall membership stands at the highest ever. I will work with the 42 other councillor representatives from county associations which manage NALC to ensure it is well run, works smartly, and provides the value for money services you want. NALC only exists to help councils help their communities. Our strategic plan set by councillors at each year's AGM will continue to set our priorities and over 2017. We intend progressing the following issues on your behalf:

- Embedding the new external audit service through the sector led body we set up in 2016 – SAAA (Smaller Authorities Audits Appointments) Ltd.
- Raising the sector's profile in parliament through our third lobby day on 28th March 2017
- Package of support on devolved services
- Addressing issues related to the code of conduct and standards regime

I will also continue to foster the "team" approach with county associations setting NALC's agenda, providing key local services and supporting lobbying work with MPs, Government and others. Further I encourage county associations to invite me to speak at their events or visit their local areas.

I will need your help with all this and in particular:

- To ensure your councils are well run, adequately resourced to do the job, with trained staff and councillors working on priorities your residents want.

- To make sure your councils are financially prudent and transparent and engage fully with residents when any large precept increases are being considered – this is vital if we are to continue to successfully resist the application of referenda principles. And please if you are a small council access the £5m transparency grants available through NALC.
- To consider joining the other hundreds of councils accredited through the local council award scheme. This will demonstrate compliance with new transparency arrangements, provide an independent verification of your effectiveness to residents and enable us to demonstrate to Government and others that the sector is well run
- Get involved in the work of your county and national association. Identify issues you would like to see addressed or raised nationally. Propose policy motions for potential legislative change. Persuade non-member councils to become part of the movement. Stand for election to county associations and national council
- Communicate effectively with your residents, use the new media available, engage with your local MPs and opinion formers and let NALC know the amazing work you are doing through Council Spotlight (<http://www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/council-spotlight-new>) and Star Councils (<http://www.nalc.gov.uk/our-work/star-councils-awards>) so we can showcase your efforts to the wider world.
- Put the dates of NALC's Annual Conference in your diary and register for a place. It is going to take place on 1/2 November. This is already the largest event in the sector and I want it to be at the centre of policy making and the networking event to share good practice, celebrate the sector and understand current challenges such as devolution and Brexit.

I believe local people understand the needs of their area best. There must be the transfer of more powers, so people can make more decisions locally, solve their own problems and create strong, attractive and thriving neighbourhoods.

If 2016 taught us anything it was that some communities feel left behind by our national economy and politics. Local councils and the work they do to support these.

Best regards

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'S S Baxter'.

Cllr Sue Baxter
Chairman
National Association of Local Councils