

— open letter to all councillors —

DECEMBER 2019

## **RE: WORKING TOGETHER TO BUILD STRONGER COMMUNITIES**

Building stronger communities was the theme of October's NALC Annual Conference where Her Royal Highness, The Princess Royal, paid tribute to England's 100,000 councillors for all the work they do for their places. And I want to add my own thanks and appreciation, and wish you all the very best for the new decade ahead.

Right across the country, our local (parish and town) councils have been building stronger communities for the last 125 years. Delivering many things that help make places good to live in, work, and visit. From community events to play areas, allotments to defibrillators, firework displays to markets, public toilets to giving grants – and much more.

Increasingly though, as our existing 10,000 local councils continue to grow in size, resource and ambition, they will be at the centre of community power as service deliverers, culture creators, place shapers and leaders.

In fact, as the most local level of democracy and community action, their role has never been more important, with increasing ambitions to tackle national issues: building community resilience, tackling loneliness, promoting community safety, and creating healthier communities. And recently many hundreds of local councils have declared climate emergencies, and are playing their part in addressing this most pressing of global challenges.

Over the next few years NALC is planning to focus on the three themes of health and wellbeing, the climate emergency, and engaging young people, and to

highlight the current and future potential of the local council sector in helping other agencies and our communities.

Now we have a new government in place, I will be personally prioritising making contact with key ministers across government to ensure the role of our local councils and their future development, including on the themes outlined above, is firmly on their agenda.

Whatever our own political views, on your behalf NALC will work with the government (and parliament) to ensure that they make your job of building stronger communities easier, not more difficult, that your ambitions for your places are supported, not thwarted.

We will continue to press government on measures contained in our *A prospectus for ultra-localism* that help communities to help themselves, so local people can build strong, thriving and resilient communities.

Firstly, empower people and communities. Level up the whole country and establish new local councils in unparished areas including cities such as London, so no community is left behind in having democratic local leadership that is accountable, open and transparent. And allow communities to take back control of their area and have more of a say over planning, housing and development by strengthening neighbourhood planning and ensuring neighbourhood plans have greater weight and protection.

Secondly, help build capacity and support local leadership. Free up communities to respond to the changing needs of their area by making it easier to access the general power of competence, supported by a new national democracy fund to encourage more people to become councillors and support for training and development. And by strengthening the standards regime to improve conduct and behaviour and increase public trust and confidence, and tackling intimidation of elected representatives.

Thirdly, provide flexible and diverse funding. Empower local leaders at all levels to plan for the future and invest in their areas by scrapping council tax referendums. And by reforming business rates, including re-introducing legislation to exempt public conveniences which are an important and valued community facility and asset which provides both a public health and economic benefit.

I believe that with this national support we can be at the centre of a movement of community change, and never has it been more important for local councils to play their full part in this, including realizing our potential to help bring the country and communities back together after the last few challenging years.

In order to do this, I would like to issue two challenges for the decade ahead.

Firstly, to the sector: be up for this challenge, be ambitious for your communities and take your place as the first tier of government. Working with colleagues in the 43 county associations across England, NALC will encourage and support councils of all sizes to do just that. We must work collectively together to fulfil the sector's potential to transform communities, encouraging more people from all backgrounds to get involved. Crucially, we must continue to ensure we are well run and open and transparent to residents.

Secondly, to the government and other agencies (including principal authorities and the health sector), work with us to use what we can offer. Engage with us and listen to us – we are a movement of 10,000 well-run organisations and over 100,000 councillors plus thousands more volunteers, all working to improve their communities. My clarion call to you is to help NALC bring the benefit of local councils to all communities in England.

In the decade ahead, working together, I want to see more local councils set up across the country, ambitiously fulfilling their potential to boost community power. Using their local democratic mandate to influence the work of other institutions and build strong, thriving and resilient communities.

Local councils are of the community, and for the community. They absolutely have a key role to play in the 2020s. Now, more so than ever before, their time has come.

Yours sincerely,

S I Baxter.

Cllr Sue Baxter  
Chairman  
National Association of Local Councils