

# ELCR

The official magazine of the National Association of Local Councils

AUTUMN  
2018

**SHAPING OUR  
FUTURE**  
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FUTURE OF LOCAL  
COUNCILS LOOK LIKE?

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at this year's event

# RISHI SUNAK

INNOVATIVE LOCAL COUNCILS ARE THE FUTURE



# CALL OF THE ENTREPRENEUR

In an exclusive interview with *LCR* editor Marie Dill, the businessman turned MP Rishi Sunak called on local councils to be more enterprising, ambitious and driven in a bid to help their local communities flourish

Photography: Jason Alden

It occurs to me quite quickly, that my interviewee, Rishi Sunak MP, has done his homework and knows enough about me for me to ask, who's been talking? But of course, it could just be that he's done a deep background check on me because we are meeting in his office at the Home Office (insert winking emoji)! All joking aside, it indicates that the local government minister appointed in January this year, is eager to make me feel relaxed and to get the interview off to a good start.

Our conversation feels very natural and engaging, like that friend you sort of know but are compelled to find out more about. In those first few moments, I learn we have something in common – an interest in watches. I was a watch journalist in another lifetime and he, as a businessman, has invested in watch brands. In fact, he spent all of his professional career in business, and while he may have grown up in Southampton, he spent a long time in California running a successful investment business; and the Golden State was where he studied, met his wife, and his two children were born.

But why the change in career? In 2015 he became the MP for Richmond in Yorkshire – he says, because of his parents. But not in the traditional sense, they were not politicians. His dad is a GP and his mum ran the local chemist where he grew up. They did the same thing in the same place for 30 years and he worked in both the surgery and delivering medicines to people who couldn't get to the chemist themselves. He says he was always struck by what these people told him about his parents – that they had done something nice for them or their parents or grandparents or kids. Other people would come up to them on the street just to say hello. This was the type of impression his parents made on their community. So, it was not too much of a stretch for him to see that being a good MP was the way to have that same impact on a community – to try and shape it in a way that is going to be better for people.

With his new appointment, he's aptly placed to influence communities across England. Read on to see what he thinks of local councils and how he is already introducing initiatives to help them.



**“My vision is that we have more local councils doing more ambitious and innovative activities, and people feeling good about the place they call home”**

**Q: NALC is currently consulting on a vision for local councils for the next ten years. What do you see their role as being by then?**

A: It's an incredibly exciting time to be in what I would call ultra-local government. We're creating more [local councils] and they are doing more things that impact

their communities, and I think people are generally more interested in what's happening at a very local level. So my vision is that all of that continues, that we have more local councils doing ambitious and innovative activities, and people feeling good about the place they call home.

I went to your Lobby Day this year which

showcased your Star Council Awards winners, and what I love is that the awards showcase that kind of entrepreneurship at a local council level. I ran an investment firm so I'm used to dealing with entrepreneurs, understanding how companies innovate, so seeing that at a local council level, it's pretty inspiring.

## QUICK FIRE Questions

**LCR asks Rishi Sunak the little questions...**

### Favourite pub?

I'm a big pub person. I can give you three that we go to most, my wife and I – if you don't put them all in then their landlords will be upset with me. So there's the Golden Lion in Osmotherley, The Wellington Heifer in Ainderby Steeple. And then the one that we drive to, which is our treat place, is the Blue Lion in East Witton in Wensleydale. Those are our three regular haunts. Landlords are Christie, Rob and Paul.

### Do you have a favourite movie?

I do, *Star Wars*. Massive *Star Wars* fan. Episode Three, *Revenge of the Sith*, I think the last 40 minutes of it is up there with the best of any *Star Wars* movie, when Anakin basically turns bad. I mean, the cinematography, the music, the lightsabre and he just kills everyone. That was just brilliant. The rest of it was all awful though. And of the new ones I think my favourite is *Rogue One*.



**Q: What can local councils do now to help shape their own futures?**

A: In recent times, I think the government tried to pass down more opportunity to local councils, so I would urge people to have a look at all these new powers and see what might make sense for them to take advantage of in their area. In general, there's this thing called the My Community Platform, which we funded at the department, which brings together in one place how to get people engaged in their community, so that's a good place to start. To give you a couple of specific examples, one is neighbourhood planning, which is incredibly important. The quality, location and number of houses being built in an area are the things that people care about most. I think what this government's done through the neighbourhood planning process is nothing short of transformative, where it's put power over all those decisions in the hands of local communities. There's a £20m fund to support neighbourhood planning groups, which are more often than not local councils. And in the legal planning process, we've given Neighbourhood Plans weight and ensured that local areas have to respect them. So that's an enormous amount of power that a local area now has.

The second thing is about community assets. We've created the Right to Bid and the Assets of Community Value. What we've done is give communities an ability to protect assets from being sold without the community having a right to bid for them first. That's incredibly powerful. And in my own area, I've seen the community do this on more than one occasion, whether it's tennis courts or indeed a pub. Talking about pubs, we've funded a More Than a Pub programme, which I've seen first-hand in my area. It's where the community buys

control of the local pub. They've raised the money for it and the local council's obviously heavily involved in the process. And the government's supporting this with grants and loans and advice, and again it's local councils taking the lead, making sure their local pubs stay in a particular village or a parish. So that and neighbourhood planning are two incredible examples of things that people can now do that they couldn't do before.

**Q: What is the government doing to encourage creating new local councils?**

A: You know, the last few years have been quite good. There's been 41 new councils created in the last five years. What are we doing? What the government does is fund new burdens for principal authorities that have to carry out a review, so that hopefully is not an excuse for principal authorities not to do it. There's three to date that have applied for funding from us to cover the costs of that.

The second thing is that we've been urging local areas that are considering reorganising to also consider how they do local government. You've got different tiers of government reorganising themselves and as part of that process, parishing is really important because people want to feel that democracy is not remote from them. So if local government is changing and you're just going to have one unitary authority, as part of that process it might be a good idea to create new local councils. That's what we're seeing in areas like Dorset, and mergers in Suffolk, which are undergoing these processes, and indeed what we saw in Wiltshire. Salisbury became a town council, and I think we will see more of that, and we're supportive of that. I would

always urge local areas that are considering how they reorganise local government, to have a strong regard for the importance of the local council sector and whether there's an argument for increased parishing to maintain strong civic links or traditions.

**Q: Do you think all of England should be parished, including urban areas?**

A: Well, you know, it's not really for me to say. I think the beauty of this is, we're talking about what do people in each area want. What we try and do is be as supportive as possible and make sure that for those who think that it's right for them, it's an easy process and one which they feel supported in. We make sure that everyone's aware of it and the benefits thereof. But ultimately it wouldn't be right for me sitting in this office in Westminster to tell someone a few hundred miles away in my constituency what to do in their village. It's for an individual community to decide what they want.

**Q: You recently launched the Digital Declaration – what's your vision for it, and how it will transform public services?**

A: I was quite inspired by my time in California, where I was in the heart of Silicon Valley, spending a lot of time working in and around technology, and was struck by how transformative technology can be and that's what led me to do this.

I announced it at the LGA conference. There's two parts to it. One is the Digital Declaration, which is an outline of principles that not just us, but lots of people in local government have come together to publish, which sets out an

**Favourite football team?**

Southampton.

**Where do you think is the worst place you could get stuck?**

Erm... in a traffic jam on the way to the NALC conference. That would be the worst place in the world. There's one other. My other answer would be probably in a place where there was no Coca Cola – I can't survive without that drink.

**A crazy thing you dream of doing one day?**

Getting my wife to say, "Yes, you were right." That's pretty crazy [laughs]. That would be a genuinely crazy thing.

**Pineapple on pizza, yay or nay?**

Definitely not, definitely not, gross.

**Favourite walk?**

I'm very lucky, I have probably the most

beautiful constituency in the country. So my favourite walk is from Keld to Muker, it's a beautiful walk in Swaledale. One of my elderly constituents lives in Keld and she always bakes a lovely chocolate cake when we (my wife and two children) come, so we always start there.

**How would you like to be remembered?**

As a good dad, good husband.



**“Digital makes it easy to share ideas and products, and if we can do that everyone’s going to save money and be able to serve their residents better”**

ambitious vision for what best in class digital local government looks like, and we’re asking people to sign up to those commitments, and it’s about how you do your IT. The second component is a £7.5m Digital Declaration Fund, which opened for bids last month, where ambitious tiers of government that have a project that meets the ambitions of the declaration can apply for some funding. [More details of the fund are on the Gov.UK website.]

Additionally, as part of this a training programme will be available for the different tiers, and one for people in leadership positions in local government who want to understand this area in more detail. Because lots of people have told me,

“Look, I know that digital’s important. I know that we need to do more. I know it can be transformative for public services and indeed our bottom line, but I didn’t grow up with this. I need someone to walk me through it.” So we’re making sure that those people have access to a very high-quality digital leadership training module as part of all of that.

There’s a lot of excitement around this and as with everything in local government, there’s a huge range of people who are already brilliant and ahead of the curve, people who know that it’s important and want to learn more but want some support. So hopefully we can bring all these people together and work together. That’s the

great thing about digital, it makes it easy to share ideas and to share products, and if we can do that then everyone’s going to save money and will be able to serve their residents that much better, so it seems like a no-brainer.

#### **Q: What role can local councils play in this?**

A: Well, they should be fully involved in it all. We’re not distinguishing between the tiers. Everyone should look at it, and if it’s exciting to them they should sign up and think of something that they might want to do that fits with its ambitions. In terms of local councils, we’ve just completed a £5m fund, which we worked with NALC on, to get over 3,000 local councils online and transparent, and that’s proved to be a real success. It shows that local councils get this agenda.

#### **Q: Artificial intelligence, will it be a good or bad thing for local democracy and public services?**

A: In general, I think technology’s a good thing, and I think one thing people forget, as we figure it out – whether it’s children at risk of online bullying or the downsides of what some of these new technologies are – is that they’re all relatively new. These companies that we’re talking about have been around for less than ten years, so yeah, it’s unsurprising that we’re still figuring out exactly the right way for us to interact with them, what the right regulation is. But there are undoubtedly huge benefits from new technology. I think the nice thing about the UK is not only are we a place full of amazing scientists and entrepreneurs, so we’re on the cutting edge of innovation, we’re also good historically at figuring out regulatory frameworks for things. Around the world, for instance in financial regulation, people look to us as an example of how to get this stuff right. For example, you know, we’re the leading place in the world to do fintech, not Silicon Valley, not Boston, not India, not Israel. We’ve got a huge financial services industry here, but the regulator’s been very creative about figuring out a regulatory environment for new fintech companies to innovate and try new things.

On the other side, we may want to make sure that the burdens of regulation

are not excessive. For example, when the GDPR was introduced to improve data protection for people, we decided that it wasn't proportionate for local councils to have to appoint a data protection officer. Plus there were other ways to get to the same outcome, so we were able to amend the Digital Bill going through parliament to exempt local councils from that requirement. That strikes a sensible balance between protecting people's privacy but not at the cost of an undue burden on local councils. So that's a good win for local councils and a good example of our balanced approach.

**Q: The discretionary rate relief on public toilets – is there an update?**

A: There's no major update. It was part of the previous Finance Bill which fell as a result of the election and there hasn't been parliamentary time to reintroduce that

provision. But it's an area that I'm aware of and it's constantly kept under review both by the Treasury and by ourselves.

**Q: How do we get more people from all backgrounds involved in their communities?**

A: There's probably not one magic bullet that will do it. My colleague, Jake Berry, is doing some work with the Fawcett Society, specifically around the idea of increasing the representation of women in local government, and that's really exciting work.

More generally, I was just talking to the Women's Institute (WI) recently and they were talking about the same thing. One thing I was saying to them, that I think is changing [representation] is something called NCS, National Citizenship Service, which was introduced by David Cameron. With NCS 16- and 17-year-olds can attend

a funded community civic programme to attend. I've attended quite a few of them on my own patch, and worked and spent time with the young people. The feedback is that that experience has opened up their eyes to the idea that they should give something back to their community because it's the right thing to do and they've benefited from it themselves. But they've also realised they really enjoyed what they did because they did it as part of this programme. And, they enjoyed transforming that playground in this particular village and they saw the impact it had. As part of that, there's a whole new generation of young people from different backgrounds who have come together and have been turned onto the idea of being more engaged in their communities. I'm hopeful that more of them will think, you know, I'm not just going to do that for this summer, I really enjoyed that, so let me carry on doing something like that. ■



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