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EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES | LEE ROWLEY MP TRANSCRIPT

Thank you to everybody who's joined today.

I'm very grateful for you taking time out of your busy schedules to listen to me.

I hope the conference has been very useful and interesting, I'm sorry that I wasn't able to join.

This is the first speech that I am making as local government minister, so it's an absolute pleasure to be able to make that to colleagues in the parish council sphere.

Thank you to all of you for everything you do and whilst we're here, virtually, it's great to be with you today and have a chance to say thank you for all of the work you've done during a very important year.

These kinds of conferences, these kinds of discussions, these kinds of opportunities, are brilliant ways for councils and councillors to come together.

To exchange ideas, to share some inspiration about how to confront and how to mitigate the shared challenges that I know you will see up and down the land on a daily basis.

The last year has been a challenging one for us all and particularly within local government.

From the happy events marking the Jubilee which were often so brilliantly led by local parish councils back in the summer, to supporting people with the cost of living as things have got more challenging and rising energy prices.

I know it's been another year where you and your colleagues have been on the front line, and you've done so many other things that matter to people in this country.

Thankfully, of course, the other challenge of recent years, the pandemic, is hopefully in the rear-view mirror largely.

But I know how important your role was in helping local communities through that generational event and I hope today is a chance to pause and reflect on everything that has been done and everything that you have achieved, but also

the great opportunity that local councils have to continue to build those stronger communities which we all want.

Now I'll be honest with you, I was councillor before I became a Member of Parliament, I came from a unitary council when I was a councillor, and so for eight years - or for at least seven of those eight years - I didn't have the privilege of working with colleagues on local parish councils.

There wasn't one in the place where I was a councillor, although they were seeking to set up a community council towards the end of my tenure there.

I hadn't experienced the opportunity and the great breadth of knowledge and talent and expertise and commitment that parish councils bring to the local government sphere whilst I was a councillor.

But ever since I've been an MP, and I've been an MP now for five and a half years, I've had the privilege to work with over a dozen local parish councils in my area.

All but only a tiny part of my constituency is or almost entirely parished and it's given me a brilliant insight into the fantastic work that local councils do in very different circumstances.

I have parish councils covering almost suburbs of Sheffield all the way to being in the most rural parts of the Peak District where I'm a constituency member in Derbyshire.

I can just see in the meetings I go to and the work I do alongside them, the commitment which local councillors in my patch put forward and I know that is replicated across the country as a whole.

I am so much in awe of local parish councils that I encouraged at least one member of my family to get involved and become a parish councillor over the course of the pandemic.

She is now well ensconced in her local parish council in West Sussex and making a brilliant contribution to her village life and she gets an incredible amount out of that work.

So, it's a pleasure to join as local minister as a result of that.

And my boss, the secretary of state, Michael Gove, is a great believer in not just paying lip service to the value of local leadership but actually trying to empower - the theme of your conference - those leaders to really deliver for communities.

It's a commitment which I also share and in which the whole ministerial team here in DLUHC also share.

And as many of you know, my colleague Baroness Scott who leads for us is the House of Lords on the DLUHC team, is also a former president of NALC and has championed local councils at every opportunity since joining the department.

Now, it's obviously a period of turbulence both economically and politically and we're facing quite a challenging economic background.

The prime minister and the chancellor have both been clear in the last few weeks that there will be some very difficult decisions on spending coming down the tracks.

But even when there are difficult decisions, it's important that those kinds of global headwinds should make our ambition to level up the country more, not less, important.

And when we talk about levelling up, I know that often in the media, levelling up is associated with particular parts of the country or particular things that we need to do.

But the department sees levelling up as absolutely a cross country, cross nations, endeavour to make sure that those who need help and support, those who need the support that government can give, and those that we want to ensure can aspire and have the ambition to be able to do more for themselves and their communities, have the opportunity to do that.

It's our job, whether it's jobs - whether in local or national government to try and reverse long term trends, where we've seen a handful of places in the country have some of the better jobs, some of the best talent and some of the biggest investments - and to try and make sure that that happens across the country as a whole and also across the country in particular areas of deprivation or where it's needed.

And those areas where it's needed do not necessarily come from certain regions or from some certain postcodes, but they come from everywhere.

Because the whole point is to rise all the boats all across the country, and to make it work.

Now part of the way in which we do that is through some of the legislative changes, which we're proposing.

Many of you will be aware of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill which was introduced in the House of Commons a few months ago.

Within that there is a plan, a plan for how local councils can help us deliver on the promise of levelling up.

The bill includes policies like reviewing neighbourhood governance, freeing up brownfield sites for development and seeking to help and ensure we can kickstart more regeneration projects.

It should obviously go without saying that our community spaces, networks, and relationships are the bedrock on what thriving communities are built.

One of the ways in which we want to support that is for example, trying to start making it easier to set up parish councils, with the right resources, powers, and information that those councils can reflect the interests of their communities and drive forward locally tailored solutions to local problems, as you all do every single day.

I want to touch very briefly on housing and planning because I know it's an absolutely vital part of the work that you all do on a daily basis in parish and town councils.

Ensuring that we have the right kind of development, whether it's green, sustainable, and where it works for local communities - that's fundamental to the success of the levelling up mission.

Parish councils have an absolutely leading role to play in that, particularly in neighbourhood planning, which I'm personally a very big advocate of.

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill will bring forward reforms of processes to produce local plans, that will mean the production of those local plans is simpler and quicker and easier for communities to engage with.

It also brings about further opportunities for parish councils to get involved in key stages in the process, with longer minimum periods for engagement than we have presently.

We want more communities making their voices known on development.

We know development is not always popular, but we want more communities making their voices known on development, so that we can ensure that their voices are heard and that we can try and move forward development in a way which works for more people and more communities in more places at more times.

And we want to see more residents as a result preparing neighbourhood plans, more neighbourhood development orders and design codes too, all of which parish councils and parish councillors can help facilitate and encourage.

To do this, of course, we know that this takes time and effort and so many of you, all of you, provide that time and effort for free and in order to provide a service to your communities, and we're all incredibly grateful for that.

But we also want to make sure you have the right capability and resourcing to succeed and to be supported.

And part of that is trying to make small changes to make your lives easier, for example.

I'm very grateful for those who responded to our remote meetings call for evidence and I hope we will have some further things to say on that in the not-too-distant future.

I know that many council members are keen for that to occur. We know there's a range of views on holding council meetings remotely and we're continuing to talk across government on this matter.

But we also know that there is a desire to see an output to that call for evidence.

And we're also trying to make some bigger changes that support the sector over the long term and support communities over long term things like the energy price guarantee, which has come in which we hope has helped over the course of this difficult winter.

We want to work with you and with wider local government sector to understand the increased cost and demand pressures you're facing at the moment and how we can help with regards to that.

We don't have a magic wand, there are some really challenging times economically at the moment and we have to face up to those economic challenges and to the challenges with the national finances which have been the conversation for last couple of weeks, at least.

But where we can help, we want to do so and you will always have somebody who is very keen to find out more, very keen to listen and very keen to work with you where it's possible and where we're able to do that.

So, thank you so much again for everything you have done over the course of a difficult few years.

For everything you are doing now in order to support your communities on the usual daily basis particularly facing the challenges which we are.

And for everything that you are going to do in the coming years ahead.

Parish councils are incredibly important for the success and the health and happiness of our local communities.

It has been a pleasure to work with a small number of parish councils in my constituency over the last five and a half years.

I now look forward, on day eight, on moving forward to working with a much larger cohort of parish councils and see all the good you do to communities across the country.

Thank you very much for your time today and I look forward to answering your questions.