

10 JANUARY 2024

– OPEN LETTER TO ALL COUNCILLORS –

PROMOTING AND SUPPORTING THE FIRST TIER OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

I want to start my latest open letter by wishing everyone a happy, healthy, and prosperous New Year. And to thank everyone who works in and with the local (parish and town) council sector for everything you did through last year to make a change in communities right across the country.

I never cease to be amazed by the positive difference we can all make to the places we proudly serve, and in turn to the nation as a whole. Because stepping up to play our part in helping tackle some of the biggest challenges of our time is now quite rightly becoming firmly embedded in the everyday work of local councils.

Taking action on climate change, cost of living, health and well-being, housing, community safety, younger and older people – these are among the profound issues we face which you are increasingly stepping up to address. Going well above and beyond your traditional role of providing community facilities and delivering projects which improve quality of life for all our residents.

This is why I was incredibly proud in November 2023 to be re-elected unopposed as the chair of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) for the next two years. It remains an honour and a privilege to have the chance to continue to lead and transform both the organisation and sector and be at the forefront of championing your fantastic work and successes.

I am exceptionally proud of our work and achievements over the last year, where we have worked closely with our network of brilliant county associations and growing range of partners and other organisations to provide the support and services you need. I would encourage you to read our [*Annual Report 2022/23*](#) which sets this out in more detail including how we are improving and extending our services to you and changing how we work in order to deliver our strategic direction.

And as I reflect on the year just gone, I want to extend my congratulations to those new and returning councillors in the many parts of the country which had local elections last May. In particular, I want to welcome councillors on the new councils established in previously unparished areas such as Barrow in Cumbria and Taunton in Somerset.

All councillors are part of a successful, effective, and growing national movement and join over 100,000 other community champions who invest over 14 million hours a year and around £2 billion to improving our communities.

I wish all councillors the very best of luck for the years ahead. As someone who is a staunch advocate of learning and networking, I urge all of you to take up training and development opportunities provided by your county association as well as NALC's own resources such as our growing suite of Good Councillor Guides and e-learning courses.

Those who serve their communities across the country in so many ways and with such distinction were rightly praised and recognised by His Majesty The King in his recent Christmas message. Yet we must never lose sight of the important fact that while through our service as councillors we volunteer our time, we hold public office which comes with it statutory responsibilities and obligations to this important role in public life.

One such obligation is promoting civility and respect in local councils, which was among my priorities over the last two years and remains high on my agenda for the next two.

Because good governance is fundamental to ensuring an effective and well-functioning democracy at every level. This includes upholding high standards of behaviour and conduct, all too often lacking in a minority of local councils where bullying, harassment and intimidation has a detrimental effect on councils' effectiveness and reputation.

I am pleased we are making progress to confront this challenge head on through our Civility and Respect Project which, alongside other initiatives such as the Local Council Award Scheme, is providing tools to support better governance, training for clerks and councillors, and support for those councils facing significant challenges. And NALC will continue to lobby and make the case for the standards regime to be strengthened with new sanctions for poor behaviour. I was also delighted last year that NALC became a White Ribbon accredited organisation to combat gender inequality and violence against women and girls.

Yet there is still much more to do which is why I ask for your help to place civility and respect at the top of your agenda. To make full use of the support available to you through the project. And to sign the [Civility and Respect Pledge](#) and join the 1400 councils who have already shown their commitment to our shared mission to improve standards at the most local level of public life.

Another continuing priority for me is to ensure we have a strong national and local voice so that local councils are recognised and respected as the first tier of local government. Throughout the last year NALC and county associations have been championing the sector far and wide; to Parliament, MPs, Peers, and the government, to the media and opinion formers, and to the political parties, think tanks and wider local government.

Just some of our successes have been ensuring council tax referendums are not extended to local councils, securing direct access to the government's £150 million Community Ownership Fund, clarifying powers on providing financial assistance to the church, significantly raising the profile and understanding of the sector through briefings and debates during the passage of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act, continuation of funding to support neighbourhood planning, and securing action by the government to reform parish polls and update guidance on the creation of new local councils.

With a general election now looking likely to take place in the Autumn this year, it is more important than ever we all engage with current and potential Members of Parliament, political parties, and opinion formers to promote local councils by banging the drum about the difference we make and our future potential.

Which is why a key activity over the year ahead will be to promote our *Manifesto for building stronger communities across England*. This sets out our offer to a new or returning government on the part local councils can play to support our communities and how they can help us do more and increase our effectiveness. Again, I will need your help to do this and would ask you to engage locally with your current and prospective MPs to underpin and complement our own engagement in Westminster. We will be providing further support through the year to help you do this.

Just as local councils are changing and doing more, the same applies to NALC. Our move to new offices last year was an opportunity for us to rethink our work and develop our strategic direction. The ongoing transformation of NALC to better support the present and future needs of the sector remains another priority for me.

Our work with county associations and growing range of partnerships will be fundamental to delivering this, as will new ways of working in the organisation through more commissioned external support and a new website in the Spring which will be at the heart of how we will deliver our services and support in the future.

Extending our relationships and work with other representative bodies is another area I want to develop over the years ahead. NALC and the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) – the professional body for clerks – have a long track record of working together to promote, support and improve the sector. I was delighted to renew our partnership just over twelve months ago which reaffirmed our support for councils to be members of NALC and their county association, and for clerks to be members of SLCC. Given the role of councils is changing, so too is the role of clerks, which is why SLCC have a vital part to play in driving up professional standards such as knowledge, training, skills, and conduct.

The Local Government Association (LGA) are another key body we have been working ever more closely with during my term of office. Supporting council improvement through our joint Peer Challenge programme for larger councils, involvement in each other's conferences and events, the Associate Membership Scheme, engaging with LGA's political groups and working together on shared campaigns such as remote meetings or encouraging more people to become councillors – these are just some of our current initiatives which I am keen for us to build upon. Joining forces more as the collective voice for all local government must also be a common goal for us to strive towards.

I am immensely proud to be NALC's chair and by continuing to work closely together – councils, county associations, NALC, and our partners – I am in no doubt we can provide the high-quality services, advice, and tools that councils need to get on with the job of improving communities and to realise the potential of our sector.

To find out more about our work, including our events, initiatives we support and the help and advice we can provide, please visit our website at www.nalc.gov.uk.

I look forward to working with you and advocating for you over the next two years, and I want to thank you once again for everything you do for your communities.

Cllr Keith Stevens
NALC chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Keith Stevens', with a long horizontal line drawn underneath it.