

APPG on Local Democracy

10 February 2017

Prime minister confirms parishes' role in future Britain Transcript from the APPG on Local Democracy meeting on 25th January

Voice file name: IC_A_010

Key:

- S1: Speaker 1 - Scott Mann
- S2: Speaker 2 - Jonathan Owen
- S3: Speaker 3 - male
- S4: Speaker 4 - male
- S5: Speaker 5 – John Gili-Ross
- S6: Speaker 6 – Marcus Fysh
- S7: Speaker 7 – Martin
- S8: Speaker 8 – Sajid Javid
- S9: Speaker 9 – Lawrence
- S10: Speaker 10 – Clive
- S11: Speaker 11 – Graham Pycock
- S12: Speaker 12 – Ian Carman
- S13: Speaker 13 – Steven Lugg
- S14: Speaker 14 – male
- S15: Speaker 15 – Wendy Matthews
- S16: Speaker 16 – female
- S17: Speaker 17 - female
- M: Unidentified male speaker
- F: Unidentified female speaker
- s.l. sounds like

S1: Hi, good afternoon everyone. Can we make a start, is that alright? It's just gone three o'clock. Can I first of all start off by wishing everybody a very happy new year. This is our first meeting in 2017 of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Local Democracy and I'm extremely delighted today that we'll be joined by Sajid Javid MP, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. Just a few quick introductory remarks from me and just some points of interest. We do have a prisons debate going on at the moment, we're not expecting any votes during today's session but they might well come, so if any bells go off we might well be running around. We're joined by several of my colleagues here as well; it's nice to see MPs taking an interest in this particular All-Party Parliamentary Group. I know the Secretary of State has to be away today at half past three but once he's made his speech then we're hoping to take some questions from the floor.

I'm Scott Mann, I'm the Member of Parliament for North Cornwall and Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group. We have very high levels of parish councils and town councils in Cornwall and I wanted to do my bit for local democracy. We have members of the All-Party Parliamentary Group who are parliamentarians from both houses, from the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and our purpose is to promote the virtues of existing forms of first tier local authorities – in laymen's terms parish and town councils – to inform policymakers and to stimulate debate on models of community governance. In short, we're champions for local democracy, town and parish councils in parliament and the All-Party Group provides an important forum for people to get together and discuss a wide range of issues affecting their local communities. We remain very grateful for the National Association of Local Councils who continue to provide excellent and invaluable support and secretarial work for the All-Party Parliamentary Group.

There are two notable apologies today that I wanted to mention before I invite the Secretary of State to speak. Unfortunately, my Co-Chair, Andrea Jenkyns MP, is unable to be with us today, although Alex from her office – Alex, can you just put your hand up – Alex is over there, and I know how strongly Andrea feels about the All-Party Group and the parishes that she represents. And also Councillor Sue Baxter, our new Chairman of NALC, is away today and not able to be here and I just want to take the opportunity to congratulate Sue on her historic election in December, becoming the first ever female Chairman of NALC, and to say we look forward to working with her and meeting with her soon. NALC's Chief Executive, Jonathan Owen is with me and I'm grateful if you could convey those sentiments, John, when you meet with her.

S2: I certainly will.

S1: Finally, two things, the Twitter hash tag for today is *#localdemocracyallpartyparliamentarygroup* and this session is being

recorded by video and on audio. Okay, is the Secretary of State outside, do we have him with us yet?

S3: I was given a sign about a minute ago. (Laughs)

S1: What I'm hoping to do after the Secretary of State has made his announcement is to ask a couple of questions myself and then open it up to the floor. MPs first and then everybody else, if everyone's happy with that.

(Pause)

S4: Could I take this opportunity just to advertise another All-Party Parliamentary Group on 31st January looking at neighbourhood planning, an issue, I know, of interest to many people in this room. It's a joint APPG between this one and the Civic Society one and I'm looking forward to an interesting afternoon, especially with the Neighbourhood Planning Bill running through parliament at the moment.

(Pause)

S5: Can I ask a question then?

S1: Of course, absolutely. Would you like to introduce yourself?

S5: Yes, John Gili-Ross, I'm Chair of the Essex Association of Local Councils. The All-Party Parliamentary Group, the members themselves, are there any that are actual parish councillors, town councillors, or have been?

S1: Okay, could I start on that? So I spent two years on Wadebridge Town Council in Cornwall, I spent two years on North Cornwall District Council and then six years on the unitary authority. I don't know if there are any other MPs that would like to say...? Yes, Marcus.

S6: Yes, I'm Marcus Fysh, I'm MP for Yeovil but I spent four years on South Somerset District Council and I am still currently, until May, a county councillor in Somerset. So in that role in particular I've attended many many parish council meetings and I know many of our local parish and town councillors.

S1: Martin.

S7: Martin Vickers, the MP for Cleethorpes. I've spent 26 years as a local councillor... I'm just trying to think, what's that, 12 years as a district councillor and 14 years as a unitary councillor. Or was it the other way round? But anyway it's... And if I can just give a plug for the local government APPG, Chair, which I chair, we're meeting next Wednesday afternoon at three o'clock in Room 20 and the Northern Powerhouse Minister, Andrew Percy, will be answering questions.

S1: And we've got the Secretary of State with us now. Secretary of State, thank you for coming along to see us.

S8: Hello, (overspeaking), thanks. Shall I sit here?

S1: Yeah, pop yourself in.

S8: Thank you.

S1: Secretary of State, it's a real pleasure to have you with us today. Our All-Party Parliamentary Group is being webcast today. We feel very strongly about the importance of town and parish councils, hence we very much welcomed the decision before Christmas not to extend the Council Tax referendum principles to parishes. No doubt finances will be something you touch on in your speech. So if I can pass over to you and if you're happy after you're done you can take some questions.

S8: Of course, yeah.

S1: Fantastic.

S8: Thank you very much. Thanks, Scott, thanks for inviting me. Yeah, I thought I would make a few remarks at the start on some of the priorities and some of the key issues that the team at DCLG is looking at, and of course, as you said, I'm happy to take questions. I think the first thing before I say anything further is just really to state again, and I can't say it enough, how much the central government, myself, my team value all the work of our local councils up and down the country, whether they are town or parish councils or other councils. You play a hugely important role in our democracy and that local decision-making, and some of the things I talk about now will show just how vital that role is. And even if I look back at the Prime Minister's speech just last week when she talked about Global Britain, it's something that ought to be recognised that Global Britain must be made from strong foundations and I think our parish and town councils are a key part of that.

There are a few areas I thought I'd just focus on... I just picked two or three. First, devolution because I do get lots of questions about it and clearly councillors up and down the country as well as, where relevant, the newly elected mayors, have a huge role to play. And what I'd say about that is, just a sort of reminder really why the government is so focused on devolution, and it is not devolution for the sake of it, it is because it can make a big economic difference. We are a country that's still, despite some of the successes of recent years, where we have too much growth; where our growth is concentrated in the south east, we want see that square out throughout the country. You would have seen references to that in the Industrial Strategy that was published on Monday, and devolution is part of that, there's much of that in the Industrial Strategy as well. And that is because it recognises that a lot of the key economic decisions that are currently made in Westminster would be better made if they were done locally, but then when you look at that over-centralisation here in Westminster but then look down at the local level often power is too fragmented for those big decisions. So whilst there's lots of good powers within town and parish councils exercised and should continue

to, I don't think many of us would say they should run the local transport networks alone or run all the local colleges and things like that, so you need the right local structure for that. And that's how we got to the combined authorities, that's how we got to mayoral combined authorities and that then enabled more power to be put down at the local level. And, like many of these changes, when they do take place locally, I think it's always important to try and build up that local consensus, get local people to see the advantages that they could bring about, and where local people accept that, that's great and we go ahead with the deal. And with all the devolution deals that we've done so far - ten were announced in the March budget last year - we made it clear that none of them would happen without all the relevant councils in each deal area approving those deals. So you saw, for example, the Liverpool deal, the Manchester deal, just two examples going ahead, whereas the North East couldn't get local agreement, it's not happening. But devolution is something that's going to be around for a while, I want to try and deepen some of the existing deals, want to do new deals, but it is an important part of local democracy.

Then turning specifically to town and parish councils and, again, just to recognise the huge role they play, over 10,000 of these councils covering some 90% of England, some 40% of England's population. And I've seen for myself, whether it's in my own constituency or other examples, just the hugely important role that they can play, whether that's in the delivery of some local services. I think often at that local level it cannot just be more attuned to local needs but it can also be more efficient in terms of cost, and that's the welcome thing in this day and age, clearly.

But then the next point I want to make about them, which brings me onto my third and final point, is when it comes to housing and planning. Your local parish councils and town councils had a big role to play recently through the Neighbourhood Planning Bill which is currently making its way through the Lords but has had its successful third reading here in the Commons, is trying to enhance that role and try and provide more support. Now, Neighbourhood Planning of course is part of our housing initiatives and that is the third and final point to make because I do think that there's more of a role for local people, whether through their council or otherwise, to do to try and make sure that as a country together in England that we are building more homes so we can deal with this record high unaffordability that we have today; in the London area it's an average of eleven times earnings, in England it's almost eight times average earnings. That is some of the worst affordability in terms of that ratio of any major country, any OECD country, and that is something that's clearly unacceptable. I think it's our biggest social problem, it's also an economic problem. And that's why, as well as some of the measures that you would have seen for the Neighbourhood Planning Bill that I referred to, that the government will very shortly be publishing a white paper that will try to deal with some of the underlying issues here and see if we can really get to a point where we can build enough homes so that everyone in this country that is aspiring to a decent home to buy or to rent really feels that they have the chance to do that. So you'll be hearing a lot more about that.

I think, if it's okay, Scott, I'll leave my opening remarks there and happy to listen but, once again, thank you very much for inviting me.

- S1: Fantastic. Thank you very much for that, Sajid. First question from me really, on Monday we saw legislation passed that allowed local authorities to waive business rates on public lavatories. Now, we happened to write to the Prime Minister on this particular issue. I know it might not be a big issue for a lot of people but as local authorities devolve things down to town and parish council level very often whether a local authority or town or parish council will take over a public convenience would specifically be based on whether they could afford to meet those business rates costs, so I just want to say from this group how fantastic a decision that was to waive those business rates. And on devolution in general, Cornwall, we're seeing, is going to be one of the first local authorities to get full business rate devolution. I'd like to ask you how you envisage seeing devolution happen from central government down to town and parish council level, so rather than going through the unitary or district or county councils how you could kind of devolve things from central government down to town or county.
- S8: Scott, are you talking specifically about business rates devolution or just more generally about devolution of powers?
- S1: Just more generally, devolution of powers in general.
- S8: Yeah, I mean, first of all on your first point, I remember when we had that debate in parliament on Monday, there were a number of jokes about relief around public toilets, public conveniences, and at one point I think one of our colleagues was talking about how he wanted 'extended relief' around his public toilet.
- S1: (Laughs)
- S8: But it does show that that was a measure – just to pick that one as an example – where a number of people, including lots of town and parish councils made representations around this, would really help deliver what is an important service and where we are able to listen or we try to do something in that particular bill. Your wider question about devolution, at the moment it is centred around the powers that are being devolved or centred around those that are the big economic drivers. So I mentioned transport earlier, skills would be another example. And also a lot of the mayoral...well *all* the mayoral combined authorities also get an annual pot of cash, in some cases up to 30 years. In the case of Liverpool, for example, Liverpool City Region, I was there just earlier this week, its £30 million a year for 30 years that the combined authority can then determine to use together for economic growth. So that's about how do you create more jobs and opportunities. However, I think as we look at these deals taken further, another aspect I think they can focus on is are there opportunities to deliver some public services just much more efficiently, so it's not so much economically driven but it's about just being much more efficient and actually giving a better service to local people. I think the best example I can probably pick up is healthcare and adult social

care, you know, having better integration because I think there'd be very few people that would think that's not a good route to go. I've said a number of times, so has the Health Secretary, the challenges in adult social care, for example, are not just about resources, it's also about having the right reforms, the right way to deliver, and having that integration is important. So some of the devolved areas are experimenting with that. Now, more specifically about how does that fit in with town and parish councils, that is something I'm very keen to actively look at to see if that can be part of if not so much of the economic delivery, having... But it is clear when it comes to housing, that is part of the economic challenge in areas and, as I said earlier, for example, the Neighbourhood Plans parish councils have a role to play, but certainly I think they could also play a role with delivery and efficiency of services, and the numbers that I see often show that parish councils can be far more efficient sometimes than the alternatives.

S1: That's great news, Secretary of State. I've got a couple of MPs that would like to speak, Lawrence and then Marcus.

S9: Thank you for the opportunity. Notwithstanding the government's policy with regards to housing there are safeguards in the planning guidance notes with regards to green belt and flood risk areas, and all too often I think these get overlooked by planning inspectors. In my area particularly just this week the planning inspector is looking at the local plan, to insist a sight goes back into the plan which is very clearly in a flood risk area, and the previous Prime Minister actually came to that very area to see it flooded just a couple of years ago. And yet the into the plans but also ignoring the guidance with regards to unmet housing need unlikely to outweigh the importance of protection of the greenbelt. That's actually quoting almost directly from the guidance. And so you'll see in my area thousands of houses, literally thousands of houses built on greenbelt land and this allocation which is clearly in a flooded area that there's a big gap between the planning guidance and what the inspectors are actually doing. So I wonder if that could be looked at.

M: Okay. Do you want me to...?

S1: Yeah. We'll take two, shall we, take one from Marcus as well and –

S1: Okay, sorry, you go now and then we'll come to Marcus and Clive.

F: My area borders on... Three areas actually, the Liverpool city area, I'm in Greater Manchester and I border on Cheshire, all putting in their plan, all wanting to take greenbelt with industrial warehousing, in fact one local authority has asked to release greenbelt in advance of their local plan. And how the two are integrated, because it seems to me there is a race to the bottom and taking greenbelt.

S8: Okay, shall I respond to those two first as they're related?

S1: Do those two first and then we'll go...

S8: First of all, when it's the greenbelt protection or having the right policies towards flood risk those are both really important parts of our planning NPPF, the National Planning Policy Framework. And it wouldn't be appropriate for me to comment on any particular plan or application, just sort of speaking more generally, there are... As you know, any local plan before its adopted needs to get the sign-off from the Planning Inspectorate. It is important I think the local communities, your communities and the others, have confidence in that process and they feel that when things are getting looked at and either given the okay or in some cases it's sort of sent back, that that's all done for the right reasons. From what I've seen, having sometimes having had a look when these applications end up with me, was that many of them don't even go... One thing I learnt in this job is that every day I read that 'The Secretary of State just decided this, just decided that,' law decisions are taken, as you may know, on my behalf by the Planning Inspector but some of them do end up at my desk or Gavin Barwell, the Planning Minister's desk, and some quite... There's a balance that needs to be struck about things that are both important to the community, that might be the protection of certain spaces, making sure that flood risk is taken seriously, as well as the need for housing, and sometimes it can be quite a tricky decision. But we rightly have some very strong protections for those kinds of things but it's always important, I think, that we make sure that... Lawrence used the word there's a... you think there's a bit of a 'gap' between the understanding of maybe some of the Planning Inspectors in what's actually happening on the ground and we've got to make sure that we minimise that, and I hope that (s.l. my) white paper will also show that we are (s.l. alive) to these issues.

And just on your point about integration, making sure the plan-making is done sort of together, one of the things in the devolution deals is that in all the combined authorities actually there is... So they do spatial planning together and so... Now, whilst that might not help that border area, in your case if it's Liverpool and Greater Manchester, I can see the challenge there, but it's trying to deal with the issue of... Let's take Greater Manchester, it's better that Greater Manchester as a combined authority works together on spatial planning, for a variety of reasons, than each of the local authorities just have their own plan. And so that's why these combined authority deals are where those local areas have agreed bottom up that it's best to plan together.

S1: Fantastic. I'll take Marcus and then Clive and then I'll open it up to the floor.

S6: Just to pick up on the neighbourhood planning issue, I know that certainly in Somerset a lot of parish councils are putting a lot of effort into developing their neighbourhood plans and welcome the extra powers for neighbourhood plans that we've put through. It is often quite a time-consuming and heart-wrenching exercise for some of these individuals on the councils to get to grips with what's involved and also to build support within their communities for having a neighbourhood plan and it's a big commitment, and I know that district councils and other planning authorities are under pressure with I guess their bandwidth or being able to help with that process. What help are we able to give the town and parish council level on an ongoing basis to be able

to come up with these neighbourhood plans? And my second question is just going back to what Scott was saying about the degree to which parish councils, particularly in the rural areas which are much sparser, can potentially more efficiently get involved in a wide range of services, whether it's knowing that the ditch needs clearing in this particular area or whether it's, as you say, helping to organise adult social care or networks of friends and mentors for older people. I think it's absolutely right that we should look at that but we have seen historically a gap between the funding that rural councils get versus urban ones, and my concern would be that if all of our focus is on, as you say, giving extra pots of funding to combined authorities within a predominantly urban environment that maybe some of these ideas that we could be bringing forward in rural areas aren't as highly prioritised. I just wonder what extra support you could give to helping areas like Somerset develop their own combined authority plans to be able to think of some these things in a creative way.

S1: Okay. And Clive.

S10: Clive Betts, MP for Sheffield South East, I'm supportive of the principles of devolution with powers eventually fiscal responsibilities down to a more local level. The move to devolution began in Manchester with the creation of the combined authority, now we have a mayoral combined authority working with metropolitan districts, some of which may or may not have parish councils. As we move devolution on to the counties we're going to end up with in some cases mayoral combined authorities, the county and the district and below that the town and/or parish council. Given that very often people have regular difficulty understanding what level of government does what, does four levels of government look a bit like over cumbersome and, if so, which level should be removed?

(Laughing)

M: You can see why he's the Chair of the Select Committee, can't you?

S8: Yeah, it's a good question. Do you want me to...?

S1: Yeah, fire away.

S8: (Overspeaking) respond to Marcus first. In terms of... First of all on the neighbourhood plans, and you're quite right to highlight that, part of what's in the bill that's just finalising its way through parliament now is more resources. So, I mean, before I say that, I also totally recognise when... I mean, I've met a lot of people in my own constituency that have put a lot of time and effort getting together, getting ready to put neighbourhood plans through, and obviously others have already progressed, there's almost 300 that have gone through referendums and... By the way, I was looking at... of the ones that have actually had referendums the average 'yes' vote was about 89% which is very encouraging. But these people that put the plans together, they don't get paid for it, you know, they do it because they care deeply about their community and that's what really motivates them. And I recognise that and I

think the things that we can do is, one, make sure that we can help with the resources, and there's an extra £22 million I think that's been allocated to that, so people putting together a neighbourhood plan, each parish can apply for a grant – I think it's up to £9,000 grant to help them with some of the costs of doing that. Also I think what we can do is make sure that people feel, rightly, that once they've put in the time and effort, they've got it accepted by the inspector and it's gone through the referendum, that it actually means something, it will actually make a difference, and I think that's a really important part of it as well. So, for example, when we had this bill a number of members of the house brought up some issues around... which weren't even... Actually one of them wasn't even covered in the bill so we covered it separately with a written ministerial statement to make a certain clarification which in effect immediately has an impact. And that particular one was around where people had brought to my attention and Gavin's that where you have councils that have a local plan but then they don't a five year land supply, then those people that have put the time and effort in their neighbourhood plan want to make sure it doesn't suddenly become meaningless and we wanted to show that it still carries weight. So that's the most important point, help with resources, and also make sure that it really means something.

On your second point about rural areas and funding and what can be done for them, firstly you specifically asked about combined authorities in rural areas, a great example is Cornwall which Scott and others have seen where... You know, it is a largely rural area but it is also a combined authority as well, has a slightly different set of powers than some of the others but each deal is bespoke, but we can do that. And whether it's Somerset or other areas, if they want to come forward, as Somerset is, with plans for us to look at, each deal is bespoke, we will look at that sort of bottom up and try to come up with something that would work for that area but also something that we feel that would really make a difference in terms of both opportunities and efficiency.

And returning to Clive's question about the layers of local government, I mean, you're right that in some areas there might be four, some areas there might be three, but there are lots of layers, and we all find as MPs, I'm sure, that we will get people in our surgeries all the time not really sure who's responsible for what.

M: M: We are. (Laughs)

S8: Yeah, well they always feel that we're responsible for everything, but we'll see that. And you're quite right to point out, does this add to that? But I think the most important thing is to see if every layer that you talked about - so say it's the mayoral combined authority, the county, the district, the parish – if it genuinely has a separate and distinct function that should be done at that level. So take the highest level there in terms of the geography it will cover, that's the mayoral combined authority, take Manchester that you used in your example, most people would look at that and say it is right that when it comes to transport and skills, for example, that it should be made at that level; I don't think people would say, like referred to at the start, that that should be made

at a parish level. And I think people can see if you've got counties that are levels or unitaries that are coming together and pooling those functions of transport, for example, that it economically can be stronger for that area. Equally, neighbourhood planning wouldn't make sense at that combined authority level or even the county level; it makes sense at the parish level. So I think that's the most important thing to maintain. Having said that, if a local area – itself wants to come forward to us, to central government, and say, "You know what, I'd rather be a unitary because it's more efficient, I think it's a better way to organise, the time has come," then we'll listen. And I am in receipt at the moment of a number of unitary proposals and I'm sure that number this year will go up, from what I'm hearing at the moment. But places like Dorset, for example, the districts have come together, they're putting proposals together, and we're still going through that process, I can't comment on any particular one, how it's working, but that is a locally driven process and we will look at it. And so even if something worked today, if people want to change it for tomorrow we're listening.

S1: Fantastic. I've got the chap in the grey suit and then I'm going to bring Martin in.

S11: Thank you. Good afternoon, Secretary of State. My name is Graham Pycock and I'm the Chairman of the Norwood Planning Assembly which is a neighbourhood planning group in South London. Neighbourhood planning in London has some enduring problems, as you know. A number of originally enthusiastic groups have given up and faded away, there are groups who have actually got designation which have stalled and nothing has happened. In my own neck of the woods Lambeth Council has spent, amazingly, somewhere approaching £200,000 producing everything but a neighbourhood plan, that is to say refreshed master plans, cooperative local investment plans... And when I asked for one of the consultant's reports that was produced, for our evidence base, they wouldn't give it to me, they said, "You'll have to wait 'til the Lambeth Council report comes out," So I got it through a Freedom of Information Request. I don't think that's honouring the duty to support. They're now putting lots of obstructions to us getting designation by giving me two pages of additional hoops we've got to jump through for the Cabinet to agree to... This is wilful obstruction. They are flouted with will of Parliament and the Localism Act (inaudible 00:31:52). Will the Neighbourhood Planning Bill really get Neighbourhood planning moving in London or is there something else you're going to use to actually break through the obstructions that we've got?

S1: Okay. And Martin... I'll quickly bring Martin in as well.

S7: Thanks. Sajid. Two queries about the New Homes Bonus. One is where you've got a local authority that's sort of geographically in a very tightly knit area a lot of the new housing that is needed to serve that town is actually in a neighbouring authority so it's not getting any benefit in effect from the New Homes Bonus, and the Cleethorpes area is typical of that and I'm sure many others. I mean, is it possible to have some sort of an arrangement whereby that authority at least, who have in effect provided us public services for those

new premises, actually get some sort of benefit? And the other one is I know you're going to consult on the proposal not to give the bonus where planning applications were determined by an inspector, which I have to say I'm strongly opposed to because it does seem to be the exact opposite of devolution and local people tend to think that they have not... or shall we say not sufficient say on planning issues anyway, and I think that's a step too far.

S8: Okay. Thank you. So Graham, on your point about London specifically when it comes to the neighbourhood plan, you know, there are some specific issues that have been brought to my attention there. I'm not sure if the answer to that is necessarily more primary legislation or things to do that, but what it really points to are, there are some planning authorities that I've seen that take neighbourhood plans very seriously, whether they're in London or not, and actually promote them in their neighbourhoods and things and work closely with their parish councils, and others would just rather not have them and just think of them as a nuisance, and that's unacceptable because the whole point of having this process is that local people at the parish level can decide. Sometimes it might be just, there might be other ways for us to influence that and intervene, and just make sure a local authority is actually taken its responsibility seriously in there. There are some things in the bill that's going through parliament now in terms of support but if there's something in particular around Lambeth, which is what you mentioned, that you think we should take a closer look at, then I'd be happy to do that if you want to furnish me with some information.

Martin, on the New Homes Bonus, basically your first question about is it possible to sort of share it between two local authorities. There's no existing mechanism that I'm aware of that would allow that. Having said that, I can see reasons, and you've given one, where it might make sense for those two authorities. So if a local authority wanted to... if that's what they wanted to do and it made sense for both of them and they approached us and said, "Look, can you help us find a way to do this?" I'm sure there's a fertile conversation to be had.

And on the appeal point, as you say, we are consulting on it, I'm listening to all the representations we get back and then we'll make a determination.

S1: Fantastic. Well Secretary of State, I appreciate your 30 minutes that you've allocated to has gone. We do have several other questions in the audience, would you, once we've formulated our minutes, be prepared to accept our minutes and peruse them?

S8: Of course, yes.

S1: Thank you very much for coming to see today.

S8: (Overspeaking). Thank you, everyone, thank you very much. Thank you.

(Applause)

S1: That was fine, I think. Great. (Inaudible 00:35:38). Thank you very much.
Can we just get a picture, is that alright?

S8: Yeah.

(Pause)

(Background voices)

Thank you.

S1: Thanks, Sajid. (Pause) You are next sir. (Laughs)

S12: Ian Carman. I represent Newport Pagnell Town Council.

S1: Fantastic.

S12: It's a pity that the Secretary State's gone because the question's really about where he was voting on, about devolution.

S1: Yes.

S12: I'm just wondering, if the people present would actually have theories of the future, on our behalf? A few years ago I was down drinking at my local pub, but one of my drinking buddies was a councillor from a very small town in Finland, about a quarter of the size of our town.

S1: OK.

S12: We were chatting about Town Council budgets. And he said "How much was my budget for education?" I tried to explained that there is no such thing. He explained that his was about £2.5 million....

S1: Wow.

S12: ...for education alone. Can anybody here foresee the day when that sort of responsibility actually does (inaudible 00:50:12) down to the town council level? I don't think the answer to that, can come from the local precept.

S1: Yeah, I mean, my primary question to Sajid was about kind of devolution from central government direct to town and parish councils. I think over the last two or three years as unitary authorities and county councils have had their budgets reduced, they have kind of palmed things off on town and parish councils and there's been an obligation on town and parish councils to either take the service over or lose it completely, and that's not the way I envisaged devolution working. From my point of view and I think from the central government point of view we want devolution to be a two-way conversation and a two-way process. I would like as a democrat to see a day when we do get down to having a democracy at that kind of local level where budgets are set locally. And I think we're seeing the start of that with some of the business

rates devolution, I'm very happy about the fact that we're devolving that and democratically elected councils in those areas will be responsible for how they set their rates and how they spend their money and I think that's... We're on kind of a stepping stone, if you like, and I would like to see us progress to a point where maybe we are at a place where education budgets can be set locally.

- S12: Yes, I agree, your point is well made here. What are the size of their precepts? It must be more... I agree, you make a valid point there about the services being... I think you said palmed off from the sort of primary authority level and I think this is exactly what we're likely to see. (Inaudible 00:51:52) likely to see but those services could be seen to be what disappeared.
- S1: Yeah, well we've made some progress on the... We spoke about public toilets, we made some progress on that, we ran a big lobbying campaign, got the Prime Minister involved, and that was successful. So we hoped that we can kind of analyse stuff that comes up when it does become a problem and have a two-way conversation. I've got the chap with the red and blue tie. Yes, sir.
- S13: Steven Lugg, Chief Executive of the Hampshire Association of Local Councils and also I'm a county, district and town councillor, who'll be voting on local government reorganisation in the morning). Clearly, I wanted to speak to the Secretary of State but didn't get an opportunity, but I've stood with a question. I think we're all democrats in this room and a lot of residents' worries. I've been involved in two by-elections recently and I've literally spoken to hundreds of people. Where different authorities differ in their view of a future model of local government re-organisation, obviously in this case in Dorset, but more widely, would the government or the Secretary of State consider imposing a system of governance on those people where there clearly isn't an agreement? Because many of us are very nervous about having a system of local governance imposed on us.
- S1: Is this... Just so I'm completely clear on this, is this a district council and a county council that want to amalgamate into a unitary?
- S13: So, if you use the Dorset example, it is nine councils, a county and 8 districts potentially amalgamating maybe into unitaries, they are several options obviously. But it's where a lot of residents have different views, and clearly you're never going to get the same view, it's that position that really worries me (inaudible 00:41:19).
- S1: Well I'll be honest with you, we went through local government reorganisation in Cornwall, we went from having six district councils and a county council to having a unitary authority. And people call me a Luddite but I quite liked the district councils, I felt that they were a good way of delivering services locally, and we now have an amalgamated service working out of Truro which is central to some people in Cornwall but it feels a very, very long way if you're on the periphery. So from my point of view I wish they did away with the county council and they devolved to five or six different district councils that

would have been the way that I would have done it, although unfortunately, I wasn't in charge of the council at that time. But I think the question about whether it would be imposed is one for the Secretary of State and we'll make a point of in the minutes asking that question to him when that comes. And the chap just behind, yes, sir?

- S5: John Gili-Ross here from Essex Association. My question really is about the neighbourhood planning side. I think you're great, yeah, and I'm glad to see the message now is starting to show through, plans being accepted (inaudible 00:54:35-00:54:37), that's good stuff and there's quite a lot of this going on around and it shows that even though it's quite a lot of work. However, my concern is at the end of the process it seems logical to me that if you've gone through all of that work and you've demonstrated as a community that you know and accept (inaudible 00:54:55-00:54:57) with a local plan, why that parish or town council can't determine planning applications in their area when there's (inaudible 00:42:56). (Inaudible 00:55:07-00:55:09) somebody who quite often doesn't have a clue what's going on, and of course, I'm not going to go into the planning details because we all know about it, wrong information can go forward, the planning committee at the ward or district level can then decide on something, the parish and council got no (inaudible 00:55:30) and yet got the neighbourhood plan in place and shouldn't be allowed to do that. I'm just wondering whether that's the second stage (inaudible 00:55:56).
- S1: So you'd like to see planning decisions devolved to town and parish councils. That's I think probably more radical than the education budget, if I may say so. (Laughs)
- S5: (Inaudible 00:55:46-00:55:49) I'm suggesting we still use the options that are there but rather than reward councillors (inaudible 00:55:56-00:55:58) on whether the house is right or the building is viable or the business is viable, why don't we give it down to the people determining the planning?
- S1: Well I like the idea, I think it's an exceptionally good idea. I think we've made some progress, I mean, I think some town and parish councils used to be just statutory consultees but the fact that they're now able to pull together a neighbourhood plan and set the agenda for their area is the first positive step. Who knows, in a few years' time maybe that will be the next step, we'll move to a point where instead of unitaries or districts making decisions on planning it will be down to town and parish councils. Sir?
- S14: Yes, (inaudible 00:56:37-00:56:48). The issue is about the land supply (inaudible 00:56:33-00:57:02) are – I don't know how to put this politely – slow in coming forward with planning applications (inaudible 00:57:04). (Inaudible 00:57:05-00:57:12) to encourage developers to (inaudible 00:57:16).
- S1: Well, once again, this is a question for the Secretary of State but I've seen applications... We call it 'land banking' in Cornwall and it's not... as a Conservative, it wouldn't be a particularly Conservative thing to do to charge people, but I think when you're at a stage where land is finite and people are

withholding applications or waiting for the time to be right to deliver those applications then I think maybe we should step in. I know we're making it easier for developers and planning authorities to have a two-way discussion about planning conditions and we think that that might free up some of the backlog but there is definitely, I think, a call to have those discussions. And the lady...?

S15: (Inaudible 00:58:00) come from Iver Parish Council, and I'd like to support my colleague regarding the issue with local services (00:58:08-00:58:11).

S1: Yes.

S15: We are very willing to take these things on but it has to be done in the context of our local situation, what's happening certainly in our area is that it's the one size fits all (inaudible 00:58:24) and if it doesn't fit your particular situation in your parish then you are left high and dry. And, there really needs to be much more of a dialogue between the government parishes and at the unitary or county council as to how it actually works and not (inaudible 00:56:42).

S1: Can I ask what it is specifically, is it libraries, toilets... what are they asking you take on?

S15: (Inaudible 00:58:47) to do with grass-cutting and work on the Highways Agency.

S1: Okay. And if it didn't fit the model that the local authority were looking for there wasn't a two-way conversation?

S15: No, (inaudible 00:59:00).

S1: Okay, well that's interesting to hear. And maybe we should take some notes about which local authority that was and press those buttons. Because, if, from my point of view it needs to be two-way and at the moment there are some local authorities that are being pretty kind of hard-headed with it. And at the end of the day, parish councillors, town councillors are volunteers, you know, and there are a lot of people that sit on district and unitary authorities who receive remuneration for doing the work they do and town and parish councillors do it for the love of it. But to ask them to take on services and be very rigid about how they do that I think is very wrong so we'll make a point of writing to the Secretary of State and letting him know about those issues. And the lady at the back...?

M: And also the lady (overspeaking).

S1: Oh okay, and...

S16: Some feedback for people who were struggling with raising funds for the, during the initial neighbourhood plan, you can apply to (s.l. Viz) Britain and Virgin start up, or just a company as a community groups and faith groups and they will fund up to £25,000 which has to be repaid but it's a very low interest

rate. And a very positive step, especially if your project is being led by community groups rather than just the council on their own. A second point, there is a huge lack of collaboration and you need to teach local communities what the collaboration model is, which is value all stakeholders, that's the homeless, the community groups, the charities, faith-based groups. There's a huge amount of talent and volunteers and skills that are not being harnessed at the local level. We're encountering local councils won't... sorry, town councils won't speak to district councils and everybody who's putting artificial walls up instead of saying, "Okay, these are all our residents, these people need homes, these people need this and these people need this, how do we collaborate at a local level?". We've raised £395 million to invest in 165 (inaudible 01:01:19) and you'll be pleased to know that there's only a two-page form for it (inaudible 01:01:25-01:01:27). We're now at the stage where the funds are available but we need collaboration from the Treasury because we want to ensure that the funds don't go to pay off debt, don't go off on something else but they actually go in right from the very, very top, right the way down at community level. I've got groups, community groups, which their total expenses for one year is £375 million, they are completely starved of cash at the grassroots level. And I've got a group now that's applied for £200,000 to do a fantastic community project, they were given £10,000 by the Lottery Fund. And, yes, that's a step forward but how long can people continue taking these steps to get to nowhere? What we've got to do is to accelerate the funds getting in at the community level, cut the bureaucracy and get the people who have the talent, skills and the energy to get on with transforming local communities to have the resources to do it.

S1: Great. Thank you very much for that. And just for the benefit of the webcast and the *#localdemocracyallpartyparliamentarygroup* could you just tell us again what the name of the organisation was?

S16: Yes, it's Eco Soft Public Bank incorporation. So it's a public private international organisation. It takes the UN Innovation in Financing Policy and the Financial Stability Board shadow banking moving fund into the market where they need to be, and then at a local level it ensures that the funds come right from the very top and are injected at the community level. That's what, why our local towns are starved and the villages and especially the rural areas where we've got a million people who don't even get to speak to anyone (inaudible 01:03:26) in one month. These are the people that we need to serve, we need to turn everything inside out and focus on the citizens and the residents, what are their needs, and then reorganise the local resources to fulfil those needs. It's not a shortage of talent or skills or time or energy or funds, it's the fact that we don't have a collaboration model in place and we're not saying to people, "You need to be a cross-party, all-party, cross-function", so it actually transforms at a local level.

S1: Okay. Thank you very much for that. And the lady just in front...?

S17: I'd like to fully support what the lady (inaudible 01:04:11) a few moments ago (inaudible 01:04:15).

S1: Similar issues.

S17: Very much so. But around, to talk about funding very very quickly and also the devolving power down to district councils, where they have the ability to waive things and have a look (inaudible 01:04:28). But if that gives the district council the ability to waive it or cannot I would like to see that monitored, and I could take that further and talk about funding as well (inaudible 01:04:42) think back a few years ago to when (inaudible 01:04:45) council tax deductions being taken offset the impact of that. That money was not passed down in many cases, down to the parishes, it stayed at district level. The new homes bonus isn't required to be passed on, it doesn't get passed on, it sits at the district level, and I'm very concerned that if (inaudible 01:05:09-01:05:11) possibility of it being waived, I've already taken that up with my district I've asked the question, "If this comes in will you allow the (inaudible 01:05:20) to take place?" and the answer was, "Well we'll have to see if it affects our funding." (Inaudible 01:05:25) and it doesn't help us when we really need it.

S1: Okay. It is being waived, that's exactly the situation. When we wrote to the minister originally the idea was that we'd like to have them completely removed; it seemed a bit nonsensical for us, for local authorities to be charging themselves for a service, for effectively their own building. They did waive them, they said that the local authorities can waive them. And I think we need to apply democratic will to ensure that, and political will to ensure that that does come down through the chain.

S17: I think we monitor it and make sure it's (inaudible 01:06:08).

S1: And as far as the New Homes Bonus, that's a new one on me, I didn't know that that wasn't being passed on. So maybe that's a letter that we can write as an organisation to say, "As you guys are all shaping your neighbourhood plans and the amount of housing that you're receiving in your areas, then, and you're facilitating that growth, then you should see the benefits of that growth through the New Homes Bonus."

S17: (Inaudible 01:06:27).

S1: Yeah. And yes...?

S2: Yeah, Jonathan Owen, Chief Executive of the National Association of Local Councils, really to get the issue in the minutes, I guess. I think it was really good that the Secretary of State quoted the Prime Minister as saying that parish and county councils were the foundation of Global Britain, I think many of us in the room would agree with that. However, I think a slight area which we need to have a little bit of a look at is how widespread parish councils are across the country. This week is the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Milton Keynes, the only urban area in the country which is 100% parished. We're seeing more and more urban areas becoming parished in London, in Birmingham. I live in Suffolk, in Lowestoft, the most easterly large town in the country, which will be parished on 1st April. And I think we need to see some

views from the government on how further parishing of urban areas could be achieved and quickened up. And that might well pick up the point that the gentleman from London made about neighbourhood plans not working that well in unparished areas because the reality of neighbourhood plans is 90% of them will be done by parish councils and when they have been done parish council housing allocations have been something like 10% greater than in the local plan, so they're delivering affording housing and other things. So it would be really interesting to get a view from the government about how we can accelerate parishing of urban areas.

S1: Okay. Fantastic. Well that'll be in the minutes. (Laughs) Can I conclude, we're almost at four o'clock, can I conclude by thanking you all for coming. The session and the transcripts and the video will be available on the NALC website shortly, and do check out the Twitter hash tag, as we mentioned earlier, and see what people have been commenting on and sharing. Do join us again for future sessions - today's been actually quite interesting, I think, with the Secretary of State here - and you can book to attend future sessions through NALC or through Civic Voice websites. Safe journey, everyone. Thank you.

(Applause)

[End of transcript]