

LOCAL LEADERSHIP THROUGH CHALLENGING TIMES

Throughout what has undoubtedly been a challenging year, I have been struck by how the first tier of local government – England's 10,000 local (parish and town) councils – has provided stability and support to our communities.

Over this period and indeed before then, you have helped keep our communities and the country running. This is why I want to use my open letter to thank you all for everything you have done and will continue to do.

Ensuring what you do is better understood and recognised is at the heart of my role as your chair. As I set in my first open letter in January 2022, my priorities have been to ensure local councils are recognised and respected as the first tier of local government, champion good governance in local councils and highlight their role and potential to the media, public and other national bodies. You can read more on how we've been doing that in NALC's latest Annual Report.

A week is a long time in politics, as the saying goes. So much has happened in the last twelve months since being elected as NALC's chair.

No one could have predicted the events that have unfolded, creating so much uncertainty and instability for us all. Learning to live with COVID-19. The war in Ukraine. Turmoil in our national politics. The sad death of Queen Elizabeth II. Rising costs of living. And the ever-present climate emergency.

Your leadership – whether in our neighbourhoods, villages, and towns in rural or urban areas – is helping us deal with these events.

Since stepping up as part of the COVID-19 response, I know many local councils have continued working with local partners to help those who need it. I have been pleased to see your essential role rightly recognised and praised by the government and others.

Your outpouring of support and solidarity for Ukraine reminded me how we must cherish and champion, and never take for granted, our freedom and democracy. At our special meeting about Ukraine earlier this year, some of you shared what you are doing to help, such as organising donations and supplies.

It was deeply saddening to hear the news of the late Queen's death, and we conveyed our sincere condolences to the Royal Family. I am grateful to you all for your important role in Operation London Bridge and subsequent local events, once more stepping up and a reminder of the part you play in our national story.

The King's coronation will provide a much happier occasion on which we can bring people together.

Providing warm spaces, supporting the lonely or vulnerable, sharing information on available assistance and targeting your grant funding are just some ways local councils are helping our communities deal with the cost-of-living crisis.

Lastly, tackling the climate crisis is another big challenge that local councils are increasingly addressing. A growing number of councils have declared a climate emergency and are taking forward an action plan of projects and activities.

As I look ahead to what I sincerely hope will be a more stable, prosperous year, I will need your help to champion and drive change in our crucial part of local government.

I'm confident that more local councils will step up and be inspired by the examples of others to work together, not in isolation, and to use the resources available from NALC and county associations.

Doing so will ensure our sector remains current and relevant, especially to our residents. Of course, it remains vital that we all act as advocates for parish power and the good we can do, especially to Members of Parliament, principal authorities, and other agencies.

I am also clear that changing the culture and getting more people involved has never been more critical to improving civility and respect in our sector. I want to urge every council in the country – every councillor, every council officer – to be part of that change. To get involved in the Civility and Respect Project, sign the pledge, adopt the policies, attend training courses, and encourage your peers to follow.

Such support will send out a strong message and help evidence to the government that the standards regime must be strengthened, including sanctions for poor behaviour. Of course, you can also demonstrate your commitment to good governance through the Local Council Award Scheme.

If you have elections in May 2023, my plea to you is to redouble your efforts to get people to stand and promote the change local councils can make. Please ensure local elections are on the agenda for your council meetings, that you are budgeting for election costs, and that you plan to encourage people to stand. To help you, NALC has a wealth of resources on the Make A Change webpage, and county associations are also there to help.

Remember, you can stay up-to-date on many topics I have covered and more on our website and social media channels (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) and by subscribing to our mailing list to receive our newsletters and weekly bulletins. You can also connect with other councils and councillors through our national networks.

One final word of thanks. It never ceases to amaze me what our councils and sector can achieve when we work together. All of us – councils, councillors, clerks and council staff, NALC, county associations, the Society of Local Council Clerks. And our partners BHIB Councils Insurance, Blachere Illumination, Breakthrough Communications, CCLA, Utility Aid, WorkNest and many others.

Over the year ahead, let's keep doing just that and coming together to help build stronger communities.

I wish you a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

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