

6 JANUARY 2025

OPEN LETTER: COMMUNITY TIER OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

I wish you all a very happy and prosperous New Year.

My sincere thanks go to everyone working in and with parish and town councils for your hard work, dedication and commitment to continuing to rise to the challenge of improving communities.

As I enter the final year of my term of office as chair of the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), it is my privilege to reflect on a year of many significant outcomes and set out some priorities and challenges for the year ahead.

The past 12 months have been extraordinary. It was the biggest global election year in history, as over half the world's population went to the polls. Closer to home, earlier than expected, the UK general election has highlighted the critical role of community democracy and action in addressing the challenges we face.

Ahead of the general election I called attention to this potential in my open letter to political party leaders, presenting [NALC's manifesto for building stronger communities](#). This sets out our priorities for the incoming government, including strengthening local leadership by empowering local councils and building their capacity and capability. We also urged the adoption of higher standards in public life in support of our campaign to promote civility and respect.

Our engagement with the previous and now new parliament and government has already yielded success. During the passage of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act, we secured cross-party support for allowing parish and town councils to meet remotely, clarified funding for places of worship, and significantly raised the sector's profile. Another notable success was extending the Community Ownership Fund to allow direct applications from parish and town councils who secured £7.6 million. We have also continued to ensure council tax referendum principles are not extended to parish and town councils.

We currently face a pivotal moment as we work with the new government. The challenges confronting us—economic uncertainty, environmental imperatives, and societal inequalities—demand that we seek to strengthen this relationship and partnership.

That is why I have welcomed the recent English Devolution White Paper, which recognises our call for devolution to go beyond mayors and strategic authorities to communities and neighbourhoods. This is where I believe parish and town councils can play a key and bigger role. This devolution revolution, coupled with local government reorganisation in some areas, presents a huge opportunity to nurture neighbourhood governance to ensure its success.

Crucially, the white paper contains a range of proposals which NALC and our network of county associations have lobbied for. These include resetting relations between central and local government and rewiring relationships with principal authorities. Financial reforms such as multi-year settlements and more straightforward, less competitive grant funding. And strengthening the standards regime with sanctions to suspend or disqualify councillors, remote attendance at council meetings, uplifting audit thresholds, and improving support and development for councillors.

I firmly believe this is a real opportunity for us to stake our claim as the community tier of local government, but we must be ready to rise to the challenge.

Parish and town councils and county associations should be on the front foot and engage with principal authorities to ensure your voice and ambitions are heard, particularly in any local proposals for local government reorganisation.

We are already actively engaging with ministers, civil servants, parliamentarians, and others to advocate for greater recognition, respect and support for our sector, particularly to help parish and town councils deliver for their communities.

Ministers have written to me and spoken in parliament about their commitment to working together on the devolution white paper, an offer I am already taking up.

We are also continuing to engage heavily with parliament and the government on the planned National Insurance Contributions (NICs) increase, which will take effect in April. We are working hard to voice your concerns in Westminster and ensure that parish and town councils are fairly compensated for the planned increase, bringing you into line with larger councils and other public sector organisations such as the NHS.

I remain immensely proud of our wider activity and achievements over the last year. We have continued to work in partnership with our network of fantastic county associations and a growing range of partners and other organisations to support parish and town councils. Please read our [Annual Report 2023/24](#), which

sets this out in more detail, including how we are improving and extending our services as well as modernising how we work to support parish and town councils and county associations.

In particular, I wanted to highlight the launch of our new website which is at the heart of our ongoing transformation and reflects our commitment to supporting parish and town councils and county associations with the tools and information they need. Our new website offers a platform that is not only visually modern but also highly functional, making it easier for councillors, clerks and council staff to access resources and stay informed. I strongly encourage all councillors, clerks and council staff members of a parish or town council in membership to [create their account](#), unlocking access to a range of exclusive member benefits such as advice notes, publications, support information, and campaign resources. To learn more about our work, including events such as June's in-person [Power Shift 2025 conference](#)), initiatives we support, and the help and advice we can provide, please visit our new website at www.nalc.gov.uk.

As we embrace these opportunities, we will continue our transformation and modernisation journey over the coming year. We will streamline our operations, enhance our digital services, publish an updated edition of Local Councils Explained, gather and use more data, and improve our engagement with parish and town councils, county associations, and partners.

But these changes are not just about keeping pace with the times. They are about future-proofing NALC to ensure we can provide the best possible support for years to come.

Central to our efforts are the partnerships we continue to forge and strengthen. Our collaboration with the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) remains vital in driving professional development for clerks and council staff and embodying high standards of conduct. We are working with organisations across the public, private, and voluntary sectors to bring innovative solutions to local challenges. Bodies such as the Local Government Association, Association of Democratic Services and Lawyers in Local Government will be increasingly important to our work over the coming years. These partnerships amplify our impact and reinforce the idea that we are a sector stronger together and more effective by working together.

However, none of this is possible without people – dedicated councillors who serve their communities. I cannot stress enough the importance of encouraging more people to stand for election. Parish and town councils need representatives from all walks of life to ensure diversity of thought, experience, and perspective. I

urge you to reach out to neighbours, colleagues, and friends who might not yet have considered becoming a councillor. This role is an opportunity to make a real difference, to shape the future of your community, and leave a lasting legacy.

But NALC and county associations also need councillors to get involved in our work. We want the best and most talented people possible to step up and provide the necessary leadership to run successful, effective county and national associations. NALC's will hold its elections for leadership roles and committees this December, with the process starting in the summer. I hope councillors from county associations will grasp the opportunity to drive forward the next phase of NALC and our fantastic sector.

As we move forward, I am filled with optimism. The strength of our councils lies in their connection to the communities they serve.

With your continued dedication, the unwavering support of NALC and county associations, and a renewed spirit of collaboration with the new government and the rest of local government, I am confident we can rise to the challenges we face and achieve great things together for our communities and the country.

Thank you once again for everything you do.

Cllr Keith Stevens
Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Keith Stevens". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a long, horizontal, slightly curved line that serves as a decorative underline.