

Andrew Gwynne MP speech to the Local Government Association's Conference 2017

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Andrew Gwynne speaking at Local Government Association Conference 2017, said:

Thank you for inviting me here to speak today.

It is a privilege to be here with you this week, I want to begin by thanking the LGA for all the work you do championing local voices on the national stage – and I want to thank the thousands of councillors and council officers and staff who demonstrate the commitment you have to your communities through all your hard work.

I wish to also echo the comments of the Chair, Lord Gary Porter, who in his speech to conference this week commended councils who speedily undertook new safety checks on their high-rise buildings. This is a difficult and challenging time for local authorities, but one which the sector has responded to with the urgency that it requires.

Although we are not in the same party, I want to say clearly to you Gary, that Labour will work to back you up as you continue to champion the cause of local government here at the LGA.

I hope you will continue to see me as a strong ally, standing up for local government in Westminster.

I'm sure you will agree that ensuring local government has appropriate mechanisms for financing, and that clarity from central government on how this funding will be delivered should not be a party political issue.

My message to government is this: You cannot empower local government if you impoverish it.

We share with you your concerns on cuts to local government.

I also want to pay tribute to the work of Mayor Sir Steve Bullock and Councillor Sharon Taylor, who have both played a leading role in local government and as Deputy Leaders of the LGA Labour Group. I want to thank them for their long service to Labour in local government.

I also want to thank leader of the LGA Labour Group, Nick Forbes – as council leader in Newcastle he has demonstrated the difference a you can makes – investing in projects that are good for the economy of the city, good for the profile of the city, but also help the council's finances in the longer term. Last year he said, and I think it's worth repeating, as central government

appears to not be filling many with confidence:

“If you want to see economic credibility, if you want to see an ability to govern, if you want to see leadership, look at what Labour is doing in power now, look at what we are achieving in local government right now, and look at what Labour Councillors are doing for the communities across the country.”

In Liverpool – they have set up their own not for profit energy company – Liverpool Leccy.

Lewisham have developed new ways of developing housing for the homeless – in place/ladywell with pop up housing and community facilities.

Bristol ‘works’ giving every young person a quality work experience placement.

Thanks Nick, and I look forward to working with you to make sure that the voice of local government continues to be heard on a national scale.

I want to start by expressing my concern at the comments made by the Secretary of State on this stage earlier this week.

He has failed as your ‘champion’ in central government.

I want to be very clear on this –

I have not met a local government officer or councillor who has underplayed the tragedy of Grenfell or not asked searching questions about how this could have been avoided.

However, what I have seen is leadership, competence and empathy that has been sorely lacking in central government, and from the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.

He told you that local government faced a looming crisis in confidence – he’s wrong. It is his government that are facing the looming crisis in confidence.

Councils of all complexions, and their staff, from across London have come together to help.

We all know our local government has seen an overall budget cut of 40% and we all must agree that when authorities are forced to cut back on core services, collecting waste, running children’s centres and libraries in order to plug growing funding gaps – there is something seriously wrong with the management of finances in central government.

And yet the we find ourselves now in an even worse situation –

Even if councils stopped filling in potholes, maintaining parks and open spaces, closed all children’s centres, libraries, museums and leisure centres, turned off every street light and shut all discretionary bus routes, they still would not have saved enough money to plug the funding gap.

The LGA has been warning of the impact of these cuts on councils for the past 7 years of Tory Government – but these warnings have fallen on deaf ears in Whitehall.

Back in 2012, Sir Merrick Cockell, the LGA's then Chairman, warned that by the end of the decade councils could be forced to wind down services unless we saw urgent action on the crisis in adult social care funding.

Five years later, the crisis is even worse – the funding gap now £5.8 billion – and yet the Secretary of State stood in front of you all 2 days ago and claimed that 'Whitehall is listening'.

The fact is social care is in crisis – everyone is saying this now. These are people's families. What kind of society are we when we can't prioritise decent care and help when people need it.

I know and appreciate that Local Government is filled with expertise, talent and leadership – and his department's lack of awareness highlights how detached the Government is from the real people making changes throughout our communities.

Local government has long been recognised as one of the most efficient parts of the public sector, leading the way on innovation, transformation and shared services.

They do an incredible job in often difficult circumstances. I say that having been a councillor on Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council for 12 years. My wife has been a Tameside councillor for 17 years, and I know the very difficult decisions she and her colleagues have had to make, and continue to have to make as a result of the rigid adherence to austerity.

Why is it this government can find money for the DUP to prop them up in a shoddy deal but can't find the money for our public services.

My political career began in Local Government.

I first entered politics as a councillor in my home ward of Denton West and spent 12 years there serving my community like many of you. The first political campaign that I got involved in as a newly elected councillor in 1996 was against the decision to close Denton post office, which was located on the market square. We lost that battle and overnight that market lost 25% of its footfall and never recovered.

I know whichever party you may represent you will be able to tell me a similar story in your ward.

When I took on the post of Shadow Secretary of State for Local Government I thought I would look back to the maiden speech that I made 12 years ago – it was during a debate on communities.

In the speech I spoke of the honour and pride I felt to represent my community – first in local government and then in Parliament – the area where I have always lived, where I grew up, went to school and am now bringing up

my own family.

I know all of you share the same pride in the areas you serve, day in day out, dedicating your own time to help people in need.

Today, I'm proud to stand here representing a party that is committed to giving you and your communities more power to shape the town centres that you represent.

We will put communities at the heart of planning and will update compulsory purchase powers to make them more effective as a tool to drive regeneration and unlock planned development and lift the cap to ensure councils can build the affordable homes we need.

The next Labour Government will also strengthen powers to protect our high streets – protect post offices, pharmacies, banks, pubs and independent shops and put in place measures to reduce the number of vacancies on our high-streets.

These sorts of locally owned businesses play a major role in serving our communities and it is with pride I can say that the next Labour Government will end the closure of Crown Post Office branches. We will also set up a commission to establish a Post Bank, owned by the Post Office and providing a full range of banking services in every community.

As your Shadow Secretary of State for Local Government I will show the Government what can be done when local government gets more freedom to innovate to meet the needs of their communities – and then as your Secretary of State I will work with you to make it happen. I will be your champion around the cabinet table.

Your role as local politicians will be central to making that happen.

It is not enough to say that Whitehall is listening.

With Brexit must come genuine and meaningful devolution, and regional and local leaders need to be involved in the process of leaving the EU and shaping what post-Brexit Britain will look like.

Voters did not vote to leave the EU to take back control from Brussels only for it to be held in Whitehall. Any local powers must be given back to local decision makers.

Andy Burnham made this clear to conference yesterday – Greater Manchester, like other regions, is ready to play a part and make a constructive contribution to the process of leaving the European Union.

It was claimed after local elections in May that regular meetings will be held with regional leaders, but yet again, local leaders appear to have been sidelined by this Government.

This is not the only example where those working in local government are being under-appreciated – and often also forced to take the blame when poor

decisions are made in Whitehall.

With the Secretary of State shifting blame to local government – my first priority in this job is to ensure that you have a champion in Westminster – in me –

This conference has demonstrated that certainty over local government finance is not a party political issue – and I will be joining the LGA and many other voices calling for an end to an ideologically driven approach to the way the government is managing its budgets.

There is a growing consensus in all parties that the austerity experiment has failed and is over – but in its place have emerged political and economic black holes in the government's plans for local government finance.

Last week I asked Sajid Javid three times as I sat opposite him in the Commons to clarify the Government's position on the missing local government finance bill, and I know the LGA have been asking for similar clarifications.

He has not responded.

We heard no further details from the Secretary of State during his speech to conference this week. I wrote to the Secretary of State today again asking for clarification and I will share the response with the LGA.

Following the Grenfell fire, I know many local authorities have been undertaking safety checks in your housing and installing fire prevention systems and I know many Labour councils have gone beyond that by looking at other public buildings like schools and hospitals.

Councils could face a bill of at least £600m because Government is failing to commit to funding the extra fire safety measures.

We have also been urging clarity from the Secretary of State on the support that will be provided to local authorities to ensure that housing is safe. There has been a suggestion that funding support will be offered, whilst only on a 'case by case' basis.

This is simply not good enough.

Councils have been warning that if no further funding is provided from Government other schemes like housebuilding could be impacted.

And yet the only response we have had from the Secretary of State was during his speech to you at this conference where he passed the buck and refused to admit it is his Government that has got a lot to answer for.

The immediate and efficient response to this crisis from many councils across the UK has been in stark contrast to the woefully inadequate response from central government. Local Government should not be required to make even more 'difficult decisions' after years of austerity to ensure that properties are safe for residents following this disaster.

Labour is urging Government to provide 'emergency funds' for councils to check cladding and install sprinklers in tower blocks around the country – and drawing on some of the practice of councils across the UK in the past week, central government must make safety of residents the priority in its response.

We've been through some testing times recently with horrific terrorist attacks on Westminster, my own city of Manchester, at Borough Market and Finsbury Park.

I pay tribute to the way all our communities pull together in the immediate aftermath of these terrible events.

Terrorists will seek to sow division in society but we will always stand tall and face down those who want to breed hatred.

And I pay tribute to the way our councils coordinated the emergency responses with the police, fire, NHS and others and I want to say a genuine, heartfelt thank you to our local leaders Sadiq Khan, Nickie Aiken, Andy Burnham and Sir Richard Leese, Peter John and Richard Watts and all who came together.

I have children and I can't begin to imagine what these families have gone through.

Many of the challenges we are facing will not be solved if austerity continues.

The current government have kicked the can down the road on the issue of adult social care. This crisis made sole in Downing Street – but now it is your street that is having to pay for it.

Ensuring that our local government has adequate funding to provide core services is not something that should be up for debate.

Labour wants to see a country based on hope and shared prosperity and Councils everywhere are already working to achieve that.

Working with you in local government, we want to take further the good work you already do – leading the way on innovation, transformation and shared services – and building a sense of pride in the cities, towns and villages you represent.

So I this to you Secretary of State stop talking down our councils and councillors, the failings of one council should not be used as an excuse to talk down those councils rising to the challenges every day.

Saj – it's your job to work with councils and support the work they do. To be their voice in Government.

If you want – step aside – because I will.