

Local Government Association annual conference 2022: Secretary of State's speech

It's a pleasure to be here in Harrogate for this LGA Conference, my first in this role.

And I'd like to begin by saying something I suspect you all hear much too rarely. Thank you.

Anyone who puts themselves up for election – and seeks to serve their community – deserves the gratitude of us all.

And as James has reminded us, all too often when people do put themselves forward for public office, they are greeted with incivility. We need everyone to speak out against that and everyone to celebrate that our democracy depends on your efforts. In particular, I want to say thank you to everyone here for the way in which you've risen to the challenges that James illuminated in his speech. I know that for local government these last few years have been tough – tight budgets, rising costs, a deadly pandemic and now the percussive shocks of war on the European continent.

I want to thank everyone in this hall – and beyond – for the hard work, imagination, creativity, resilience, and compassion you have all shown in the face of these challenges.

In particular, I'd also like to echo the thanks James extended to Izzi Seccombe, Nick Forbes, Shaun Davies, Joe Harris and Marianne Overton. The Local Government Association – and those of us in government – benefit from the hard work of councillors from all parties and none. Your feedback – always constructive, often robust, is vital to ensuring that I can help you deliver for the communities you serve.

And I also particularly want to thank James for his exemplary leadership. James is always scrupulously fair, he is determinedly energetic on behalf of councils everywhere and formidably forensic in scrutinising what we in central government are doing. He is a model public servant and I hope we can all show our appreciation for James, Izzi, Nick, Shaun, Joe and Marianne.

This 25th anniversary of the LGA comes at a time when the role local government plays is at the heart of our national political debate.

Every single one of the major challenges we now face as a country depends on local government. Whether it's levelling up and tackling inequality, helping the most vulnerable deal with inflationary pressures, reaching net zero, providing our citizens with safe, affordable, warm, decent homes, protecting and enhancing nature, tackling poor health or supporting those who need social care as our population ages, or improving economic productivity.

Without local government playing a leading role, we cannot meet those challenges.

And every one of those challenges is easier to meet and master when local government is stronger.

I believe we have the strongest cohort of local government leaders in generations – and you have proved that in response to the challenges of the past 3 years.

It's been local government that has ensured that we as a nation can play our part in supporting those fleeing conflict and persecution across the world.

Over 70,000 Ukrainians and 20,000 evacuees from Afghanistan have been welcomed in the UK over the last year. On top of that over 110,000 visas have been issued to British nationals from Hong Kong coming to our shores.

Of course, there is more to do to support both our Ukrainian and Afghan friends.

As you'll be aware, we've just announced that we will allow children and minors under 18 who have already applied through the Homes for Ukraine Scheme to come to the UK without a parent or guardian.

But we simply couldn't have provided that support and wouldn't be in a position to help so many without the active and engaged work of local government support.

On behalf of the whole Cabinet, can I thank you for everything you're doing on the behalf of those who need our support most.

Through the pandemic too, you have shown local government and public service at its best.

With councils like Swindon turning its iconic historic railway station, "Steam", into a vaccination centre.

Or Oxfordshire, which pooled resource between the county council and district councils to put in place a comprehensive system which ensured there was a coherent and holistic approach to Covid Compliance and Enforcement.

And indeed Oldham, who worked closely with community leaders to address vaccine hesitancy, getting nearly all over-60s to have a first vaccine last April.

In addition, everyone in this hall, through Everyone In and Protect, you've contributed to a 37% decrease in rough sleeping from 2019 to 2020, with a further 9% reduction over the last year.

As a result, rough sleeping is now at an 8-year low. This is a remarkable achievement adding up to lives protected and saved by you in local government.

These achievements deserve to be celebrated. But it's not enough just to acknowledge local government's achievements, we need to ensure local government has more power to make a difference. Power should always and everywhere be exercised as close to the people as possible. Devolution, decentralisation, decisions made by accountable local leaders, that is the path to democratic renewal – the real taking back control.

That's why the [Levelling Up white paper](#) puts strengthening local leadership and local communities at the heart of our mission to reverse the persistent geographic inequalities which hold back communities across the United Kingdom.

It's clear that overcoming these indefensible divisions is a shared challenge for all parts of government; central and local. For all political parties; Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green, Independent.

No-one has a monopoly on all the necessary solutions or tools to achieve this. We need to work together. That is why I want to see local government – whatever the political colour of its leadership – empowered and strengthened. It's why I will be in Liverpool on Thursday working with Steve Rotherham and why I will be in West Yorkshire later this month to work with Tracy Brabin. My duty is to support local democratic leadership to deliver for communities that have been undervalued and overlooked.

This is what the communities we serve expect – and what I am committed to work with you to achieve.

Tackling persistent inequalities is a social justice mission which is more urgent and important now than ever.

Inflationary pressures bear particularly heavily on the poorest. And we are committed to doing everything we can to support the most vulnerable through this difficult time.

My friend Rishi Sunak has, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, delivered a £37 billion package to help those hardest hit by inflation and local government is an indispensable partner in the delivery of that support through reductions in council tax and the administration of discretionary payments.

But if we are to check and reverse inequality in the long term we must do more. Not just support for the most vulnerable at this time of trial. But reform to ensure all our communities are stronger, more resilient, more productive and in more control of their destinies.

I appreciate that in the immediate months ahead local government faces formidable pressures.

The accumulating demands on adult social care, the challenges facing children's social care, the pressures to support children with special educational needs, the economies which affect non-statutory services, the additional expectations we have in planning and housing.

And we will do everything we can to support you through these challenging

times. James and other colleagues have outlined to me what we can do, in terms of funding and by other routes, to support you at this time.

But while I do not, for a second, underestimate the pressures that we all face in the months ahead, they only reinforce my conviction that the way to emerge stronger, and fairer as a nation over time is to further empower local communities to build resilience, shape solutions to our problems, innovate and drive regeneration.

It is those principles which underlie our Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill – which is designed to strengthen local government and strengthen local leadership.

The Bill – and our wider approach towards devolution – marks a significant and I hope irreversible commitment towards strengthening local leadership.

Respecting local democracy means, of course, recognising that there will be different solutions and structures which work in different parts of our United Kingdom. What works in Sunderland may not be right in Surrey. But more power to Sunderland and more control for Surrey's local leaders has to be the way to go.

However, as we do devolve, I have to observe that there are certain models which have clearly been successful – and have the potential to be even more transformative in seeing power move away from Whitehall and Westminster. My friend, and former colleague, George Osborne, took considerable risks in extending the mayoral model outside London. But his judgement has been more than vindicated.

At the time the institutional Treasury view was sceptical – do you really want to give up control, minister? Some of my Conservative colleagues were fearful – Tees Valley having its own mayor, isn't that a recipe for less economic dynamism when we need more? The men and women in Whitehall worried that since they knew best this was folly, all too many voices in Westminster thought that SW1 was where the really important decisions should always be taken. In the postcode lottery they had won the crucial ticket and they should remain the decision-makers.

But George's judgement has been powerfully, and rightly, vindicated by events. You can't have a Northern Powerhouse without more power being exercised in the North. You can't have the economic growth equitably spread across this country which we need without strong, locally accountable, leaders whose mandate and mission is driving prosperity in their areas.

So, in Tees Valley, Ben Houchen has been presiding over his region's rebirth as a high-tech, high-skill global powerhouse.

He has made long-term decisions to set up Teesside for future success by borrowing against their GainShare and Enterprise Zone income to produce a £588m Investment Plan for 2019-2029.

And, as a result, he was able to secure flagship strategic investments such as taking over Teesside International Airport – delivering on the priorities

on which he was elected, ensuring re-election and bring prosperity to his region.

In Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham has also shown leadership. Now I disagree with Andy on lots. But he has a clear mandate, and he has demonstrated what strong local leadership can do – on transport, where he has shown vision, on economic development, where he has been broad-minded and on innovation where he has taken political risks to support the private sector. Andy knows that his period in office will be judged on results – and that is at the heart of the devolution

As Andy Street also knows in the West Midlands. He has shown amazing leadership on brownfield regeneration, on tackling homelessness and rough sleeping, on adult education, on transport investment, on support for manufacturing and innovation and on work to meet our Net Zero commitments. He led work to develop a competitive, flexible and secure modern energy system through Energy Capital. Its aim – to facilitate low cost, clean and efficient power – is local leadership helping to meet a global emergency.

As I argued earlier, I believe we have the best cohort of leaders in local government for many generations, but I also believe the mayoral model has, undeniably, seen many more talented leaders devoting themselves to public service in local government – whether it's Ben Houchen and Andy Street or Andy Burnham and Tracy Brabin the future in politics is increasingly local – and that is an undeniably good thing.

The stronger the powers local leaders have, the more they will be judged on their decisions, instead of other factors intervening. I believe that with a mayor, having a directly accountable figure, with a fixed term and a clear mandate, makes it much easier for local communities to make judgements based on local performance and local delivery rather than the ebb and flow of national politics.

Local leaders deserve to be judged on their performance rather than suffering, or benefitting from, national political trends. Just as US state governors can be elected or re-elected in red states or blue states depending on their plans and record rather than the plans and record of those in Washington, so we should seek to make local mandates matter more and local delivery decisive when it comes to elections.

That's why we are working with you to strengthen and deepen the devolution. Negotiations for a new Mayoral Combined Authority for York and North Yorkshire are now in their final stages alongside plans for an expanded Mayoral Combined Authority deal for the North East.

And we are also strengthening the hand of existing mayors through our 'trailblazer' deals with the West Midlands and Greater Manchester, with greater flexibility over how revenue is raised and spent.

While I'm an unabashed admirer of the mayoral model, I also recognise it won't be right everywhere.

But greater devolution is right everywhere. Which is why we're offering every part of England that wants one a new devolution deal by 2030 under a new, coherent devolution framework.

It is an agenda that will see counties, regions and districts which so far haven't benefited from devolution offered the chance to secure the kind of devolved powers which currently only our largest cities enjoy.

We have announced negotiations with Cornwall; Derby and Derbyshire and Nottingham and Nottinghamshire; Devon, Plymouth and Torbay; Durham; Hull and East Yorkshire; Leicestershire; Norfolk; and Suffolk for early County Deals. And we want to go further with more deals, more devolution, more power to the frontline.

Taken together, this amounts to the greatest devolution of power to local leaders and local communities since the Second World War.

And to make the most of this moment we need not just more power to local communities, but I also believe more transparency and accountability as well.

Local communities want to know more about how all of us are performing, how effective new policies are, how cost-effective service delivery is.

And we all want to be able to learn from the best, to celebrate success in local government and spread good practice.

But at the moment it's difficult to make those judgments, to get a granular way, to get a proper understanding of where excellence lies.

The answer lies in the better marshalling of data and the consequent ability to make meaningful comparisons.

Which local authorities have the most innovative and effective children's services departments, which councils have contributed most to Net Zero, which communities have the best performing planning departments?

The more accurately we can answer those questions, the more effectively we can capture and disseminate the public policy solutions to shared problems.

The information may well be out there, but the chances of finding it in one place, in a credible, easily understandable, easily accessible form, are remote.

And this is also a challenge for local councillors. How can they hope to scrutinise their leaders effectively if they don't have this sort of vital information to hand?

I know this is a priority for the LGA. James and his team are working to ensure we have better data collection and analysis across local government through LG Info and other tools. I will do all I can to support and champion that work. And we won't just cheerlead. We'll get on the pitch as well.

We're creating a new body – the Office for Local Government – to shine a

light on how local authorities are performing and delivering.

It will initially bring together, analyse and publish existing data – because we want this to be useful to authorities rather than an administrative burden.

This will cover the services that matter most to the public such as education, refuse collection and recycling, adult social care and will, in time, look at broader issues such as climate change, the race to Net Zero and also the effectiveness of all partners in the integration of health and social care.

As a result, taxpayers will be able to see which councils are going the furthest on the environment, which are pioneering transformative children's services, and which are providing best value for money in an annual report on local government performance overall.

It must be right to have clear information on measures like finances and value for money – and also it must be right to have the opportunity to highlight excellence in local government, to celebrate it and and share best practice.

We really should celebrate the work of councils like Essex, which through its Care Leavers Charter, is providing a great model of wraparound services that better supports care leavers while also saving time and money.

We should also celebrate councils like Newham, in London, which has reduced fly-tipping by over 70% over 2 years through a hard-hitting enforcement campaign informed by an imaginative research partnership with Keep Britain Tidy.

I want to strengthen the hand of the authorities like these which are doing the right thing, innovating and delivering for those they serve.

At the same time, I want to improve our understanding in central government of the picture across local government so we know where action needs to be taken, where support needs to be given and what it is we need to do.

To that end, I want to work with you in the sector, with the experts, to ensure we get this right for councillors and residents alike.

We will be announcing more details about this work to shape the body in the coming months.

But, as well as celebrating the best of local government, and there is so much to celebrate – we must also – from time to time – take action when authorities do fall short.

Two recent, high-profile instances – although they are not the only ones – have thrown this into sharp relief: I am referring to Liverpool City Council and Slough Borough Council.

In Liverpool's case, the arrest of the former Mayor and ongoing police

investigation into alleged corruption and illegal activity triggered a Best Value Inspection in 2020 and my department had to send in Commissioners last year.

In Slough's, long-running mismanagement by the borough council, with little or no effective scrutiny over decision-making let residents down. Again, we had to send Commissioners going in to address failings in its financial management and governance.

In both there's the common thread of weak leadership.

I'm sure, like me, you find these failings wholly unacceptable. It's not just the case that the people of Liverpool and Slough deserve better, it's also the case that local services matter.

The cause of greater devolution and decentralisation, the reinvigoration of our democracy, is set back when there are conspicuous and glaring failures in some councils.

So, in backing you, I am asking you to back what is right for the sector. For us all to be more assertive and willing to speak up when things are going wrong and the noble ideals of public service and local democracy for which local government stands are not being respected.

In return, I can promise that I will remain a strong and determined champion of local government and decentralisation.

I'm acutely aware, given the economic backdrop, that this means playing my part to ensure you get the resources and tools you need to do your job in the months ahead.

That you get the financial certainty you need not just to deliver services over the coming period, but to think long term about investing in levelling up.

The case for multi-year funding settlements has been well made by James and others in the LGA team.

So, I'm pleased to confirm that, from next year, I will be introducing a 2-year financial settlement to give you that certainty and confidence. My department will launch a consultation on this shortly.

We hope that this will allow you to plan ahead with a greater degree of confidence and really focus on the delivery of great public services that represent value for money.

I'm also conscious if we talk about funding, the number of government funds is well into the hundreds and the amount of bureaucracy around them puts a significant burden on local government. And so, I am looking closely at what we can do and we will reduce the number streams and reduce the burdens on you.

I hope this greater certainty and the prospect of funding simplification is

good news for local government. But we all know that this difficult period isn't going to end overnight, so we will continue to work closely with you all, with the LGA, to keep the financial situation under review and to understand the impact in the coming weeks and months.

And I encourage you, through this time, as you did over the pandemic, to be collaborative and creative. To be open and flexible to new ways of doing things and learning from others. Not to be hampered by boundaries or functional responsibilities.

But I also promise you that I will be there to ensure you have the support and funding necessary to get through this. What matters is how together, we serve our people and places.

Ultimately for central and local government, success comes through partnership.

We won't always agree. And the difficult days ahead will no doubt test us all.

Backing you to give the greatest possible devolution of powers to local leaders. Making sure that communities feel that they're back in control. Increased investment and certainty over funding. Making sure there are incentives to innovate, collaborate and excel.

Balancing those with stronger accountability and transparency. Higher standards of stewardship and a greater willingness to challenge those who fall short.

The potential prize within our grasp could not be greater: better public services, the delivery of greater opportunity, progress towards greater social justice, our democracy renewed and strengthened.

This is what it means to level up and unite our country.

And, with your support, that is what I believe we can together, deliver. Thank you.