

Speech: Sajid Javid's speech to the County Councils Network conference 2017

Good afternoon everyone, many thanks to Paul [Carter] for that kind introduction.

And thank you also for everything you've done as Chairman of the CCN.

You've shown tireless leadership and endless enthusiasm for the task, and it has been a real pleasure working with you.

The last time I spoke at a major local government conference, it was the [LGA's one back in the summer](#).

And I think it's fair to say the reception was a little mixed.

Views were diverse.

Some said it went down like a bucket of cold sick.

Others disagreed – they liked it even less!

I know you've had a great day today.

I've been looking at the agenda and it looks like a brilliant programme.

I'm sorry I'm not able to join you for this evening's festivities.

Sadly I've got to rush back for votes, which is a shame as I see Gyles Brandreth is tonight's after-dinner speaker.

He's certainly worth sticking around for.

I'm sure you all know that Gyles used to be a Conservative MP, from 1992 to 1997.

A very different time, when a minority government was beset with sleaze allegations and facing divisions over Europe...

Less well-known is the fact that, in 1978, Gyles was European Champion at the board game Monopoly.

True story.

So he certainly knows how to get houses built.

And in central London too, not on the green belt!

It's a pleasure to be here in lovely Marlow, on the edge of the Chiltern

Hills.

It's a very historic town.

Mary Shelly lived just down the road when she was writing Frankenstein.

The story of a well-meaning individual who wants to do the right thing but ends up unleashing a monster.

Kind of like me with that LGA speech, actually...

With so much focus on the outcome of June's General Election, a lot of people seem to have forgotten about May's county polls.

Well, a lot of people outside this room, anyway!

Congratulations to everyone here who got elected or re-elected.

Paul, for example, he won 66% of the votes in his ward and leads a group that holds more than 80% of the seats in Kent.

80%!

I think it's fair to say us Conservative MPs are a little envious!

I know it's not easy to ask your fellow residents to judge you, put their faith in you, vote for you.

I've done it 3 times myself now and it's certainly a humbling experience.

But a great many men and women did just that back in May, with thousands winning the backing of their local communities and proudly taking their seats on county councils.

In the weeks before the vote I travelled the whole country, talking with and listening to county councillors, candidates, officials and residents and hearing about what really mattered to them.

I often talk about councillors as being on the frontline of democracy and my tour of the counties really reinforced that.

What you do matters.

The decisions you make matter.

The people you serve rely on you to get things right. Time and again – you deliver for them.

You don't do it for fame or riches.

You certainly don't do it for an easy life.

You do it because you want to make a difference.

Because you want to make life better for the people of your counties.

You represent the very best aspects of public service and of British life.

And it's an honour, an absolute honour, to represent you as Secretary of State.

The topics being debated here today and tomorrow show just how important our county councils are.

Social care, children's services, transport, jobs and more.

These are the building blocks of daily life, relied on by millions of people.

And of course the thread that runs through all of them is the thread that runs through all of politics and government.

The thread alluded to by my Labour Shadow just a few minutes ago.

Funding.

I know that I could stand here all night and make any number of announcements and pronouncements and promises...

...and you'd all nod along politely and then say "that's great, Saj, now show me the money".

With the Budget happening on Wednesday and the local government finance settlement to come, it wouldn't be right for me to get into specifics right now.

But, whatever the Budget brings, whatever the finance settlement brings, I remain totally committed to speaking up for the needs of local government.

Twelve months ago I stood in front of you and promised to fight for county councils in the year ahead.

To speak for you, lobby for you and be an advocate for you at the Cabinet table and beyond.

Twelve months on, that's a promise I've worked hard to keep.

Over the past year, Marcus Jones and I have never stopped fighting to secure finance agreements that work for everyone.

For Whitehall, for the counties, and above all for the people we all serve.

That's why we announced an extension of the business rates retention pilots.

That's why we secured sizable amounts of fresh funding for adult social care and just last week announced plans for a [new green paper](#).

And that's why we're continuing to push ahead with our work on Fair Funding.

I recognise this is still a difficult financial climate. I know the pressures that you face, particularly with respect to adult and children's social care.

I'm also not naïve enough to think there's a single magic bullet that will instantly solve all of the issues you face.

I'd advise you to raise a sceptical eyebrow at anyone who claims to have one.

I'm interested in the long-term, not the quick fix.

Sustainable change, not an easy win.

And that's why I will keep working with you to better understand these challenges so I can continue to fight your corner.

With many of your councils dating back to Victorian times, it's easy to characterise counties as the dusty old relatives of the local government world...

...especially when compared with the shiny new unitaries, combined authorities and so on.

But that stereotype couldn't be more wrong.

Because this is an exciting time for anyone involved with county councils.

A time of new opportunities, new roles, new ways to better serve the people you represent.

I know that in some corners of local government there's still this outdated attitude that says councils should stay in their lane.

"We're responsible for this, the districts are responsible for that and never the twain shall meet".

You don't need me to tell you that such thinking is woefully out of date.

The future – not to mention the present – is all about joined-up thinking, working together strategically to get things done.

Look at housing, the single biggest challenge of our age.

Most counties are not planning authorities, directly responsible for delivering homes.

But you're all responsible for transport.

For schools.

For roads.

For creating an environment in which homes can be built, in which communities can be created.

I know that tomorrow you're going to hear from Ed Lister about the role of counties in getting homes built.

And it's great that you're discussing it, because the only way we will build the homes this country needs is if we all roll up our sleeves and do our bit.

There are also opportunities for closer working across county lines.

There was a time when most peoples' lives extended no further than a day's walk from their home, but such days are far behind us.

In 21st century Britain, people are mobile.

Their work is mobile, their lives are mobile.

They are not constrained by lines on a map, and nor should you be.

No man is an island and – with a handful of literal exceptions – no council is either.

All local authorities are intrinsically linked with their neighbours on issues such as transport, housing and the economy...

...even the Isle of Wight with its links to Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton.

Earlier this month I was in China, where interest in the [Northern Powerhouse](#) and [Midlands Engine](#) was pronounced because potential investors want to look at opportunities on a regional level, not just individual towns, cities and counties.

That's why strategic co-operation between councils has never been so important.

Sometimes that will be an informal process, sometimes more official.

We already see a great many Local Enterprise Partnerships crossing local authority lines, recognising the flows of people and money in the modern economy and the need for strategic decision-making.

And of course combined authorities, with a directly elected mayor, are already delivering results right across the country.

Up to now relatively few county councils have been involved in devolution deals.

Devolution has been seen as something for the big cities, the metropolitan centres.

This government remains absolutely committed to the devolution agenda, but I see no reason why its benefits should be limited to the cities.

That's particularly important given our Industrial Strategy, which is built around the goal of sharing the benefits of growth right across the country –

north and south, urban and rural, cities and counties.

Devolution and localism, for me, is all about making decisions at the most appropriate level.

Some things, matters of national importance, will always be best decided at Westminster.

But for everything else, there are all kinds of opportunities to redistribute power in all kinds of ways.

Just look at [Transport for the North](#), set to become a statutory body in the spring, and recognising the benefits of looking at transport on a regional level.

What does this mean for counties?

Well, if you have an idea for making local government work better, one that serves the interests of local people, then please come and tell me about it.

If local people want it, if local businesses want it, I'll do what I can to help you make it happen.

And that could include non-mayoral combined authorities in, for example, rural areas where a single figurehead isn't necessarily suitable.

To help with that process we're looking at how to design a devolution framework.

As promised in our election manifesto it will be a common set of guidelines.

Rules that everyone plays by, so that everyone involved in the process...

...local authorities, businesses, residents...

...knows where they stand and what is expected of them.

Work is still in the early stages – and I'd welcome your support in shaping the final product.

But I want a framework that, above all else, provides clarity and consistency about what a successful devolution agreement looks like.

What standards will need to be met, what outcomes will need delivered, what red lines there are for the whole process.

Expectations about leadership, scope and levels of local support.

With a clear position on how devolution negotiations should proceed, authorities at all levels will be much better placed to develop and put forward proposals that suit the unique needs of their residents and businesses.

It will help ensure that the right decisions are made at the right levels, so that local people get the services they deserve.

Of course, devolution and combined authorities aren't the only changes that counties are talking about right now.

I've now received two proposals setting out competing visions for the future of Buckinghamshire – whether that should be as one unitary or two.

These show councils at their best – ambitious, innovative, and ready to come forward with exciting ideas for the future.

We're now going through both sets of plans very closely and will be making an announcement on next steps as soon as we can.

And, earlier this month, I announced that I'm minded to support the plan for a pair of unitary authorities in Dorset.

I know that's a decision that was welcomed by the CCN, it's great to be on the same page as you.

But, more importantly for me, it's a decision that was also supported by two-thirds of Dorset residents.

By the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership.

By the vast majority of local businesses.

By 6 of the 9 local councils.

By most of the county's MPs.

I've always been clear that any change to council structures should not be dreamed up or imposed by Whitehall, but led by local councils and local people.

And that's exactly what we've seen in Dorset.

Yes, some people disagree with the move.

That's what happens in a democracy.

And that's why, when I announced that I was minded to support the change, I made it very clear that further steps are needed to try to secure local consent before a final decision is made.

Last year I told you that I wasn't going to force all of you to go unitary.

That's still very much the case.

But if councils want to come to me with proposals that will improve local government, improve public services, and give better value to local taxpayers...

My door is always open.

And if, as in Dorset, those plans are built on a foundation of local support,

it will make any decision I have to make a great deal easier!

Speaking of councils coming to me with ideas, let me take this opportunity to thank the CCN and Respublica for the fascinating report you've just published.

At a time when opportunities and challenges are plenty, it's great to see you proactively looking at innovative ways of dealing with them.

In Budget week in particular, it's very easy for politicians who aren't in power to offer blank cheques they know will never be cashed and empty promises they know will never be kept.

Actually coming up with workable, practical ideas is much harder.

So this report is a welcome addition to the debate.

It certainly provides food for thought, and my team and I will be looking at it closely.

And I'll also be asking Paul to sign a copy so I can give it to Marcus Jones in the Secret Santa next month!

All ministers have annual fixtures in their speaking diaries – the CCN conference is one such example.

But, because I've run 3 departments in less than 4 years, this conference today is actually the first time I've managed to speak an annual event 2 years in a row!

I think it's fitting that the CCN is where I break that particular duck.

Because local government is very, very important to me.

I talk about housing a lot, everyone knows it's my number one priority, but that doesn't mean I'm not full of admiration for what you do.

So it's great that I'm able to come back year after year to build relationships, reflect on progress, and work together on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

That's why, rather than talking at you for an hour, I'm going to give over the rest of this slot to Q&A.

I want to hear your views, your concerns, your ideas.

I want a conversation with local government, not a lecture.

County councils have roots that go back through the centuries.

They are a significant part of this country's history.

They play a vital role in its present.

And, when I look around this room, I see no shortage of ambition for the future.

I'm looking forward to working with all of you to turn that ambition into results.

Thank you.