

Speech: Sajid Javid's speech to the National Association of Local Councils conference 2017

Good afternoon everyone, it's great to see you all here today.

As it's Halloween I'm sure that, like my kids, you'd rather be out, cap in hand, demanding treats and threatening unpleasant consequences if you don't get them.

Or as I like to call it, "Negotiating the local government finance settlement".

When I arrived at No 10 today for Cabinet, the Prime Minister complimented me on my scary Halloween mask.

I had to say "No, Prime Minister, this is just my face."

Perhaps she thought I had come as 'Uncle Fester'!

Before I go any further, let me congratulate NALC on reaching its 70th birthday.

I'd like to thank Sue Baxter, in particular, for all her work as chair.

She's a leader you should all be very proud of.

And I'm not just saying that because she's one of my constituents!

You did vote for me Sue, right?

In this special anniversary year it's great to see that more people than ever before have turned out for your annual conference.

Someone was telling me you've literally outgrown your previous home.

I'd like to think you're all here to see me, although I know the real draw is Angela Rippon...

The growth of your conference is no accident.

It mirrors the growing role, profile and importance of parish and town councils.

It shows that the sector is in robust health, that it is ambitious, keen to do more, looking to the future.

I often talk about councils and councillors being the front line of our democracy.

And that's particularly true of the kind of councils represented here this afternoon.

Just look at the town we've gathered in, a town that is also celebrating a significant birthday this year.

The MP for Milton Keynes South, the wonderful Iain Stewart, he represents more than 130,000 people.

That's not just registered voters, but everyone who lives in his constituency.

On the borough council, this hotel is in Bletchley Park ward.

That has three councillors and is home to about 15,000 people.

So between them they can engage with about 5,000 people each.

But on Bletchley and Fenny Stratford town council, the two councillors responsible for this ward, Queensway & Denbigh North, they represent only about 2,000 people between them.

Let's say a thousand each.

That gives them an extremely strong connection to the individual men, women and children they serve.

The kind of local insight that even the most well-meaning MP or Minister could never hope to match.

And that's why local councils are so important.

You truly are a part of the communities you serve.

Your parish's priorities are your priorities.

Its problems are your problems.

Of course, it's a hugely diverse sector too.

Big and small.

Rural and urban.

Parish and town.

Two-thirds of you spend less than £25,000 a year, but 30 have a precept worth over a million pounds.

In this year's LGC survey, local priorities ranged from provision of car parking to – my personal favourite – the problem of “feral boar and free-roaming sheep”.

But some issues are universal.

Just look at housing.

I've made no secret of the fact that fixing our broken housing market is my number-one priority in this role, the measure on which I expect to be judged.

And you have a massive role to play in that.

Neighbourhood Planning has revolutionised community involvement in the planning process, giving people a whole new voice in the big decisions that affect their lives.

Far from being the "NIMBY's charter" that some predicted, we've found that neighbour plans actually lead to MORE new homes getting built than would otherwise be the case.

And in nine out of 10 cases, the development of those plans has been parish-led.

It's a great example of the value of that bond between local councils and local people.

With your ear to the ground and your finger on the pulse, you know what your community will need in order to make new housing work.

It's a great example of the most local tier of government helping Westminster to get things done.

You don't just help to implement neighbourhood planning – you helped to shape it too.

NALC worked extremely closely with my department to make sure the Neighbourhood Planning Act really worked for the people it was meant to serve.

So thank you – on behalf of the whole government, but also on behalf of the countless families who will finally be able get a home of their own as a result.

It's local councils delivering for local people.

And that's something I want to see more of in the months and years ahead.

Because let me get one thing absolutely clear.

Both myself and government remain absolutely, 100 per cent committed to localism and devolution.

Last June, the people of Britain told us that they wanted to take back control.

That they wanted more influence over their lives.

That they didn't want to be governed by some remote legislature and executive over which they felt they had little influence.

Yes, the referendum was about Europe.

But the message, the lessons, go much deeper.

Ask most British people where they live and they won't name their principal local authority area.

They'll tell you about their town, their village, their neighbourhood.

Local identity isn't about lines on a map, it's about community.

People are more attached to their town or village than to their district or borough.

By their very nature, a top-tier authority has to act in the interests of tens or even hundreds of thousands of people.

And on such a crowded stage, a single community can struggle to make its voice heard.

That's not a criticism of principal authorities.

It's just the way it is.

So among the public the appetite for greater localism, the desire for communities to take back control, is clearly there.

National government is eager to see it happen too.

Principal authorities are looking for ways to delegate delivery of some services.

And, together, that makes this a truly exciting time for ambitious parish and town councils.

That ambition is already bearing fruit, right across the country.

We've seen parishes setting up business improvement districts, driving economic growth locally.

You've taken on responsibility for running libraries, maintaining green spaces, delivering youth services and more...

...all of it tailored to meet the needs of your community, not the needs of a distant bureaucrat.

I'm particularly pleased to see so many of you getting involved in health and wellbeing, one of the themes of this conference.

Whether it's through social prescribing, tackling isolation, or helping communities become dementia-friendly, your local connections mean you can deal with small challenges before they become big problems.

That takes the pressure off local health services, and helps us in in

Whitehall to deliver on national priorities.

So you're already doing so much more than just caring for allotments.

And I see no reason why, if you have the capacity and the will, you can't continue to expand your responsibilities.

I want you to think big, I want you to innovate.

The general power of competence has given you a great tool with which to do.

But if there's still a barrier that is stopping you from improving services I want you to tell me so I can help you tear it down.

A perennial obstacle is, of course, finance.

I know many of you have found new, innovative ways to raise money, that's great to see.

Others have used your reserves to help maintain services and keep the cost to local taxpayers as low as possible.

But I also know that not enough cash from the principal support grant is finding its way down to your level.

And that's just not right.

Principal authorities should be devolving responsibilities to local councils because you best placed to deliver more tailored services...

...not so that they can save a few pounds and get important work done on the cheap.

They certainly shouldn't be using parish precepts as a means of avoiding their own cap on council tax increases.

Doing more with less is one thing.

Doing something for nothing is quite another.

The government has previously issued guidance to billing authorities on this, making clear that they should work with parish and town councils to pass down appropriate levels of funding.

But from my conversations with you, it's clear that too many top-tier councils aren't following that guidance closely enough.

So let me promise you all today that I'll be exploring ways in which I can strengthen the requirement for principal authorities to pass a share of local council tax support to their towns and parishes.

It's the least you deserve.

As you do more for your residents, so their interest in your work is likely

to increase.

If you're going to maintain the incredible trust and close relationship that you currently enjoy with the communities you serve, then you're also going to have to deliver equally high standards of transparency and openness.

It's two-and-a-half years since the transparency code for smaller authorities became mandatory for the very smallest councils, ending the need for complicated external audits.

I know that complying with it hasn't been straightforward for many of you.

You're running very small operations, some of you didn't have the in-house expertise needed to get material online in an appropriate manner.

Some of you didn't even have websites!

That's why my department invested £4.7 million in the transparency fund to help you meet the new standards.

NALC know more about local councils than anyone, which is why we asked you to manage the fund through your county associations.

And you've done a great job.

Last time I checked, the grants team had approved well over 3,000 applications worth millions of pounds.

That translates into hundreds of thousands of people gaining a greater insight into and understanding of the work that their councillors do.

And that means they will trust you more, support you more, and encourage you to do more.

Of course, the code is only mandatory for the smallest of councils.

That means, for a significant number of you here today, it is merely best practice – a guide you should follow, but can choose not to.

I'm not going to stand here today and say I'll force all you to follow its principles.

But I think it's in your own interests to do so.

As larger councils, you're far more likely to be taking on the delivery of more local services.

And if you do that, your taxpayers will, quite rightly, expect a greater degree of transparency about where their money is being spent.

Yes, there will be audited accounts and annual meetings and so on.

But in 2017, people expect that data and details about the services they pay for will be easily available to all.

Making sure that happens is vital to maintaining the trust that you have built up over so many years.

Basketball coach John Wooden once said that “the little things make big things happen”.

That’s a mantra that should be carved into the wall of every local council office in England.

Because what you do matters.

It always has done.

But in 2017, 70 years after the NALC first met, it matters more than ever.

With a national government committed to localism...

...top-tier councils eager to devolve service provision...

... and a population clamouring to take back control of their lives, your role on the front line of democracy has never been more important. Yes, the areas you’re responsible for may seem small in the grand scheme of things.

Maintaining a small park seems insignificant when compared to running the social care system, negotiating Brexit, or tackling nuclear proliferation.

But the little things make the big things happen.

You hold our communities together.

You make our towns and villages places that people want to live and work.

You provide the solid local foundations on which we can build an outward-facing global Britain.

And now is the time for the little guys to think big.

To innovate.

To show ambition.

Now is the time for local councils to build on their unique experience and insight, to step up and show what they are capable of.

There has never been a more exciting time to be in local government.

There have never been more opportunities ahead of you.

Making the most of them won’t be easy, there will be challenges ahead.

But know this.

If you show ambition, if you stand up, if you want to do more, I will support you every step of the way.

Thank you.