

Make a change to local communities

Looking back to my open letter just twelve months ago, no-one could have foreseen the coronavirus pandemic which has changed our lives and the country in so many ways since.

It was my contention then, that as the first tier of local government, England's 10,000 local (parish and town) councils can be at the centre of a movement of community change. That never before has it been so important for local councils to play our full part in this, to realise our potential to help bring the country and our communities back together after recent challenging years. And that we have a key role to play in the new decade ahead, we must be up for this challenge, and be ambitious for our communities.

Which is why I am immensely proud of how local councils mobilised so quickly to be at the forefront of the initial response to the coronavirus, **stepping up to support our communities** and play a vital role in the national effort to tackle the pandemic.

Co-ordinating emergency plans and volunteers to collect and deliver medicines and shopping. Acting as information hubs to provide guidance, advice and support from the government and other agencies. Helping businesses including publicising their online services. Establishing emergency grant funds such as supporting food banks. Continuing to maintain our never more important green spaces. Holding remote meetings to keep local democracy going which has seen an increase in people attending and watching.

All this cements the already crucial role local councils play as a unit of solidarity and natural focus of community effort in building strong and resilient communities.

My contention, therefore, remains – but is even firmer, and even more resolute.

Yet while 2020 was an undoubtedly the year of the response, recent events mean right now and over the coming weeks and months, our response role must continue or in some cases be stepped back up.

I know many councils are already doing just this and I want to again thank and pay tribute to all councillors, staff and volunteers, plus colleagues at NALC and in county associations, for your efforts. You are real unsung superheroes of local democracy and our communities.

We have reason to be optimistic, however, as the roll-out of the vaccines gives hope that many aspects of our national and community life will soon return. Back albeit different, with new ways of working, a greater appreciation of our immediate locality and the many things we previously took for granted, which I am sure will stick. Better in so many ways.

But our resolutions for 2021 must also look beyond the response, this must also be a year for a reset, a year to rethink the change needed to support the recovery and focus on the rebuilding of our communities. I want to set three rethinks for the year ahead which challenge all of us through a series of pledges to take action on, as we build back stronger, better communities.

Rethink relations

Where local councils work well, this is in no small part down to relationships and partnerships. Good, positive and effective relations, both within and outside the council, are the keys to delivering for our people and places.

Most local councils are well run, with clerks and council staff working as a team with councillors to deliver their ambitions for the community. But all too often we hear about the negative impact behaviour can have, by clerks, councillors and residents. NALC remains committed to promoting and supporting good governance and the highest standards of conduct and behaviour in councils.

I pledge to work with county associations and the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) on a civility project aimed at improving conduct and behaviour, as well as with the Local Government Association (LGA) on support and guidance. I ask you to pledge to take part in training opportunities and the Local Council Award Scheme and consider the new national model code of conduct developed by the LGA which we have contributed to.

Councils across all tiers are increasingly recognising the added value that greater partnership working brings to services and local people. Strong, enduring partnerships – not just with principal authorities but other agencies such as health, police and voluntary sector – ensure local councils can play their part in tackling the challenges our communities face.

I pledge to work with the LGA to encourage good relations between the tiers, share good practice and develop appropriate guidance. I ask you to pledge to build positive links with your principal authority plus other partners and to ask yourself how you can help them.

This awful crisis has demonstrated how important our sector is to local areas, and we will continue to make the case to the government and others that we should be at the heart of building back communities, further devolution and community empowerment. I am particularly keen for us to maintain a focus on forging good relations with Members of Parliament (MPs) and indeed parliament in general.

I pledge that NALC and county associations will be strong voices for the sector, that we will continue to promote ***A prospectus for ultra-localism***, speaking up for and championing local councils – your fantastic work as well as the issues you face – to government officials and ministers, political parties, the media and opinion formers. I ask you to pledge to engage positively and regularly with your MP, tell them what you are doing, invite them to events, but ensure they too know the issues you face and take them up on your behalf. Only by doing this together, nationally and locally, will we ensure our sector gets the recognition and support it deserves.

Rethink ambitions

Our relevance as the first tier of local government rests firmly on supporting and improving our communities and being at the heart of local place-shaping. We should rightly be ambitious for our people and places.

This will be increasingly important as the country rebuilds following the pandemic and in tackling the existential threat posed by the climate emergency. Many of the best councils, of all sizes, in both urban as well as rural areas, are already addressing these issues.

Such as through neighbourhood plans, supporting the local economy and high streets and town centres, setting up community businesses, working with others to develop climate action plans, promoting health and wellbeing, addressing loneliness and building dementia-friendly communities.

I pledge that NALC and county associations will encourage and support your ambitions, providing the tools you need to make a difference, building on our work to date on our big themes of **health and wellbeing**, **climate change**, and our recent guide on **community business**. Sharing good practice will remain at the heart of what we do through our case study collections such as *Points of Light*, **LCR magazine**, and our programme of online events aimed to enthuse and inspire you. Young people – who have been particularly impacted by the pandemic – is our next big theme and we will raise awareness of the work of local councils with and for young people. I ask you to pledge to actively encourage your council to work with residents and your partners to ambitiously shape the future development of your place. Making full use of the resources and powers you have, including attaining the general power of competence – a power of confidence and innovation – to make it easier for you to make the vital difference your community and the country needs. And to place young people's current and future needs firmly on your agenda.

Rethink engagement

Our 100,000 councillors are the closest democratic representatives to residents. They can play a key role in restoring faith in democracy and confidence in how our country is governed and decisions which affect our lives. But we cannot simply rely on the ballot box every four years to deliver this.

Communities thrive when people get involved, give up their time and come together to take action on the issues they care about. The pandemic has provided a real boost to this community spirit and my big aspiration for the year ahead is for all councils to build on this newfound civic pride, to find ways to keep new volunteers motivated and actively involved in the wider life of their community as the pandemic recedes.

It is by local councils being ambitious and realising your potential that I am sure more people will come forward as they recognise and appreciate the difference local councils really can make.

I pledge through NALC's **Make a Change campaign** to work with county associations to promote local elections, encourage more people to stand, and provide resources and information to assist local councils. I ask you to pledge to actively seek out and encourage more people to come forward to be a councillor. If you know someone who cares about where they live, ask them to stand. Make sure your council's activities and processes attract a wide and diverse mix of people of all backgrounds and ages. Provide time and resources to publicise, support and encourage elections and see them as the lifeblood of your democratic credibility.

The best councils continuously communicate with residents of all ages and from all backgrounds; online, in print and in person. They regularly engage with and consult people on key issues such as budget decisions, help residents to get involved through volunteering, provide opportunities to come together through events, and support community hubs and village halls for activities and people to meet when rules allow.

I pledge that NALC, as well as county associations, will communicate regularly with you, providing the information you need to do your job and on what we are doing on your behalf, through our **website**, social media channels, newsletters, bulletins, and opportunities to come together. I ask you to pledge to ensure you are engaging and communicating effectively with your residents and to use the flexibility to hold remote meetings to connect people with your important work.

I have never known a more challenging time for the first tier of local government. Yet it is a time so equally exciting and full of opportunity. A time where I know local councils will continue to be ambitious for our communities and make a change.

I pledge this to a year to help build back stronger, better communities, and I hope you will too.

S J Baxter.