

First word



Cllr Sue Baxter, NALC's first-ever female chairman, explains her vision for the sector

As the new chairman of NALC, I look forward to working with you over the coming year. Local councils, their clerks and 80,000 councillors do a brilliant job on behalf of their communities and I would like to thank you all for the work you do. I look forward to working with you to make the sector even more respected, effective and clearly recognised as the first tier of local government in England.

I feel very proud to have been elected as chair of NALC, especially because there has probably never been a more exciting time to hold this important office.

Local councils are well placed to address the sense of disengagement felt by communities from traditional politics and governance; such a feature of 2016.

We are the only growing sector of local government. Last year saw the creation of Kidderminster and Royal Sutton Coldfield town councils and we currently have 150 communities working towards creating local councils, including in Swindon, Ashford, Lowestoft, London and Birmingham. The growth of garden villages will add an increased force to this movement. NALC's ambition of seeing the whole of England parished has never been more realistic.

Local councils are doing incredible

things. Recent research for NALC identified extensive involvement in 'big ticket' items – 15% of councils said they were delivering health and wellbeing services and 12% active in economic development. Encouragingly, 70% of councils said they wanted to add such services to their remit.

We are at the forefront of neighbourhood planning, leading 90% of plans, and using them to shape communities and boost housing provision. These areas have 10% extra housing compared to those without Neighbourhood Plans.

Local councils are also working with principal authorities, helping with the austerity and devolution agenda, and running discretionary services, which would otherwise cease.

A big part of NALC's work is to lobby the government, national bodies and the media on your behalf and we will continue to do this in 2017.

We will push for fair funding. Before Christmas, with your help we persuaded the government not to extend referendum

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principles to the sector and this will also be a priority for this year. We will press for access to business rates, an effective Community Infrastructure Levy regime and a share of other income streams.

We will press for more effective powers for the sector and in particular to see Neighbourhood Plans strengthened, their influence enhanced and their recognition as a key building block of local communities.

We will push for strengthened local democracy, making it easier to create new councils, to reduce the number of vexatious parish polls by upping the number of

electors required to trigger them and seek support for encouraging people to get involved in councils and stand for elections.

We will work with the Local Government Association (LGA) to make sure principal authorities see us as part of the solution to their financial problems.

I will work with the 42 other councillor representatives from county associations that manage NALC to ensure it is well run, works smartly and provides the value-for-money services you want. NALC only exists to help councils help their communities.

I will need your help with all of this but in particular I ask you:

- to ensure your councils are well run, adequately resourced to do the job, with trained staff and councillors working on priorities your residents want;
- to make sure your councils are financially prudent and transparent, and engage fully with residents when any large precept increases are being considered;
- to consider joining the other hundreds of councils accredited through the local council award scheme;
- to get involved in the work of your county association and NALC;
- to communicate effectively with your residents;
- to let NALC know about your amazing work through Council Spotlight and Star Councils (see the Our Work section on the NALC website for both);
- put the dates of NALC's Annual Conference in your diary and register for a place. It is going to take place on 1 and 2 November.

I believe local people understand the needs of their area best. There must be the transfer of more powers so people can make more decisions locally, solve their own problems and create strong, attractive and thriving neighbourhoods.

If 2016 taught us anything, it was that some communities feel left behind by our national economy and politics. Local councils and the work they do to support these communities must be part of the solution.