



Cllr John Fuller, DCN Chairman – DCN Conference 2018 Opening Address

Welcome to this our second DCN Annual Conference. The forum where we celebrate our successes, share our best practices, look to the future and develop the social & political networks and chemistry that keep us ahead of the game in a changing world where nothing stays the same.

When I Woke up this morning at 5.15 for Wake Up To Money, Councils and Council Funding led the news agenda. We are in the spotlight today and finance issues which we have always known to ourselves have now been forced in the national consciousness and my own appearance on BBC News Channel, TalkRadio and LBC this morning alone have reinforced the need for council finance to be put on more sustainable footing. And if my own comments weren't enough fellow district council leader and LGA Chairman Gary Porter has reinforced them.

Back in July when I was elected as your Chairman I said at the LGA Conference that “our time had come”.

That we were best placed to deliver a distinctive district approach to making better lives and stronger economies to be delivered in the national interest.

And that's because there has never been a more important moment for the Local State to look after those who need our help the most whilst growing the national economy, one local economy at a time, a process that generates wealth, opportunities and, frankly the cash, to maintain our country's place in the first rank of nations.

Our challenge is to balance raising the cash and looking after those who need our help at a scale people recognise and relate to.

We're a cross party, cross geography organisation. But I know that regardless of any differences we are united in seeking to create wealth and vibrant, investable communities with people and place at its heart.

Ours is a noble calling to seek to solve problems not manage case loads;

One Family at a Time

One Street at a Time

One Place at a Time

For districts It's in our DNA.

We understand that people want someone to be on their side – and time and time again it's the nearly 10,000 district councillors in 201 district councils that are there to pick up the pieces, to champion those without a voice and deliver the State with humanity and a human face representing over 40% of the population and 68% of the land area in England as the most efficient and focused part of the state we are in.

Our Councillors have the freedom to imagine a better place and the mandate to deliver local solutions to local problems.

Our task as leaders and chief executives is to ensure that the case is made time and time again to empower ourselves and local residents and business to work with US to make a difference. No, THE difference. That's why you are here.

So what's ahead over the next 2 days?

After the success of last year's first annual Conference, I'm delighted to be speaking to even more of you than ever before. Representatives of 102 district councils from all parts of England – over half the total are in this room.

Not only headline speakers like Gary Porter the LGA Chair and Sajid Javid our Secretary of State but also some of the key influencers in health and social care, housing & infrastructure provision and debt advice.

We've got some sessions for innovators to share best practice and I'm pleased to say that space has been found for the first time for Group Meetings tomorrow morning and a specific Chief Exec workshop as well.

But we need a Conference theme – and in case the penny hadn't already dropped in my earlier remarks, the theme of the Conference is better lives –stronger economies.

Some of you will have noticed that we have refreshed our logo to incorporate this new simpler and powerful strapline that resonates and is relevant to people and places.

So your 21 DCN Executive members have decided that this will now be embedded in all the DCN does going forward, to be reflected in the workstreams and spokesman roles

It's what we stand for and want to be judged by and it talks about what we want to achieve rather than ourselves.

Moving on.....

We live and work in the public eye and since I became your chairman I have been relentless to ensure that all our press commentary has been rooted in the needs of local people, the requirements of local businesses and the best interests of the local economies we serve.

That's what we want to be known for.

We also don't self-indulgently make the case for self preservation, We don't talk too much about the DCN itself. And we definitely don't talk about 'DCN areas'.

The tone I want to set is about people and place, not about organisations and structures.

Our organisation is about humanity delivered at a human scale. It's retail by people who know that retail is detail.

This is why this is 'our time' . It's because we know that we are rooted in and on people's side.

These are all general points. But what about the specifics? Why are we best placed to deliver this promise?

As the planning and housing authorities we're uniquely placed to deliver on the Governments number one priority *after* Brexit- building more homes we delivered more than the 91,000 new homes completed last year.

Our crucial role in unlocking more housing in our areas through our ability to deliver better infrastructure was recognised only last week when almost £900 million was allocated through the HiF – the majority of awards to ambitious districts so let's give credit where due to the Govt for putting money where their mouth is in trusting us to get on with the job.

But grants are only part of the story in putting roofs over peoples' heads.

We need other tools to actively manage and effectively plan for local housing markets, so we call for a lifting of the HRA cap, greater borrowing flexibilities for non stock holding authorities, compulsory purchase powers, step in rights to rebalance the negotiating powers of councils, which frankly falls away when land is allocated and developers suddenly appear to hold all the cards. That has to change.

Our message is clear – give us the freedoms to actively manage local housing markets and trust us to deliver in areas we know best.

We also looking after those who need our help. There is growing awareness in Local Government about our central role in reducing the burden on adult social care through prevention but there remains a hole in the thinking of the new ministry about recognising that through the final Local Government settlement. Ministers may say that it was they who found the money to fund the additional two billion of adult social care but lets not forget that part of that was funded through our new homes bonus with districts seeing the greatest fall in spending power whatever others may say.

We cannot carry on robbing the Peter Flemings to pay the Paul Carters. We must find a truly sustainable solution to social care funding and so I will be ensuring that we engage heavily in the development of the social care green paper and ensuring our voice is heard and our contribution recognised.

We're best placed because we have a mastery of 86 individual services that touch people's lived by preventing homelessness, improving the environment through recycling and building investable communities by providing fantastic recreation, sports and leisure opportunities.

Membership

And let's not forget that we're a member organisation and we exist by delivering services that you can value – and what value we give.

Over the last year 167 districts have attended a DCN event– 83% of our membership - which shows we're living up to our billing as a real network.

We don't just run meetings or spend time lobbying. We run a staff development programme for future managers that has given a chance for 70 leaders of the future to meet, share practise, grow in confidence. We co-ordinate regional specialist events where innovations can be shared.

Let's pause here for a moment to recognise our staff team here at the DCN, the events teams from the LGA, staff in comms,

All this for £410 a year - But, there is more!

We know how important our work is. But we can't just talk to ourselves.

Not least because 221 MP's touch a district. Given the current parliamentary arithmetic, it's never been more important to do more in Westminster. We have upped our parliamentary engagement and had one to one meetings with ministers, chairs of APPGs and former district councillors to ensure our voice is heard in the House. And I meet weekly with the front bench team, all of whom come from district council areas – and one of which is a former district leader herself.

In the last 6 months we have not only met with parliamentarians like Sajid Javid, Alok Sharma, Rishi Sunak & Heather Wheeler, our lead members have met with Liz Truss, Brandon Lewis, Clive Betts, Jake Berry, Marcus Jones, Jim McMahon, David Drew, Mark Pawsey, Martin Vickers, Graham Jones, Simon Hoare, , Lord Kennedy, Melanie Onn and George Freeman With further meetings lined up with Sir Oliver Letwin and Wera Hobhouse later this month – All parties, all geographies are hearing our message and MPs are now asking questions in Parliament that seek answers to issues that face us.

And this week I gave evidence to the CLG Select Committee on behalf of the district councils on business rate retention and fair funding – one of the big challenges facing the sector.

And I was able to make the case for our High Streets on Radio4's You & Yours – in an attempt to catch up to that Saturday morning fixture and Council Leader of the Year Peter Fleming one in a number of district leaders to win that award like Sharon Taylor.

The District Councils APPG that the DCN supports was also able to conduct and publish a full inquiry into collaboration and devolution. The impact of the report was such that there was a full debate in parliament on its funding and crucially on the record commitments from Ministers to the importance of districts both now and in the future in relation to devolution and transformation as well as delivering more homes and reaffirming our central role in developing local industrial strategies alongside LEPs.

I want to place on record our thanks to the Chair of the APPG Mark Pawsey for all his support and tireless efforts on our behalf.

SO I want to assure you that that when it comes to influencing parliament we have upped our game as my oyster card will attest with Tom and Paul assisting.

And I have sought to build bridges across the sectors within the LGA which has been reflected in their championing of the new homes bonus funding and recognition of the unfairness for those districts who cannot raise council tax by more than £5 rather than the concerns last year.

We have also worked with the LGA to deliver our press, we have made a clear case on fair funding and increased media profile with a view to influencing government policy

And it's working. We have had some real wins to celebrate:

- New Homes Bonus - no changes this year which was a direct result of our lobbying
- Planning Fees increase by 20%
- An extra 42 million for DFGs paid directly to districts
- £900m HIF funding – over half of which went to districts

- A commitment to review negative RSG – which will affect three quarters of us
- Lobbying for a bigger role in managing local housing and economic markets

We are cross party and cover varying geographies from all types of council. I want to pay tribute to my Vice Chairs, Cllr Tom Beattie, Cllr Paul Smith and Cllr Stuart Selleck who are all chairing sessions at this Conference as well as the 21-strong Member Board drawn from around the country who work tirelessly on your behalf.

Equally the Chief Executives Group led by its Chair Paul Shevlin and Vice Chair Louise Round are a crucial part of ensuring our continued success.

Look, I want to talk about plans for the coming year tomorrow but for today, let's celebrate where we have got to

- YOUR commitment to residents and local businesses
- OUR ability to make the weather and set the agenda
- our members across the country (great team, great conference, great times, and now a great logo).

So, this what we've achieved together. We are winning the battle of ideas and through innovations making life better one family, one street and place at a time.

We truly are creating better lives and stronger economies.

Tomorrow I'll talk about our plans for next year but for the rest of today lets be confident.....

ENDS