

## **Welcome and DCN Chairman's address**

### **DCN Annual Conference 2020**

**Chesford Grange, Kenilworth, Warwick, CV8 2LD**

**6 February 2020 13.00 – 13.05pm**

Welcome everyone. Having done this job for nearly three years I'd hope that you'd know by now that my name is John Fuller, your Chairman.

I feel I need to say that because I'm delighted that for many of you, this is your first time at a DCN Conference. Its nice to see so many new faces. Over 250 people are registered from well over 100 different Councils. And we still have a waiting list having filled a second hotel. Wow. Welcome to Kenilworth.

Our hashtag is #DCN2020. If there's a fire, follow me.

We have a fabulous line-up of sessions, speakers, sponsors and events that will provoke and inspire you all in the next two days.

It's the largest such gathering in the local Government calendar and the first since the election and Brexit. Our timing couldn't be better. Boom!

Just as we thought we had the job under control, everything's changed. Mind you, adapting to change is what we do. Nationally, we may even have a 4<sup>th</sup> Secretary of State in 3 years by this time tomorrow.

Internationally, now we have left the European Union our country needs to renew its purpose and place in the world. We must open our arms to new and old partners. And extend our reach into new areas. It's a time to be bold, smart and focused.

And so for our Country it is the same for Our Councils.

Now is the moment to restate our place in world. Now is the time to make and take opportunities as they appear. Now is the imperative to innovate and do more for less.

When Boris talks about Britain being a Global Catalyst, it's the district councils that are the local catalyst

It's our responsibility to redefine and reimagine what the local state can and should be like. We are the people best placed to lead this change grounded as we are in every community and to lead debate about the art of the possible.

The next two days provides an opportunity for us to think big, to set the direction for our role in world. Not just for us or our organisations. But for the people and places we represent and serve.

To win the battle of ideas for *them*, not us

I want to get the business of defining, reinventing and rewiring local government with the citizen at its heart. **done**. To build better lives and stronger economies in a post Brexit world.

One family at a time, one street at a time, one place at a time.

If we don't think out of the box about the best way to deliver it in a changed environment, and with a government with a serious majority, then who will?



So let's remind ourselves what we do here

- We are the people who get a roof over everyone's head getting homes built. Last year we granted permission for 190,000 new homes, offices, retail space and so on – almost half of all consents in England!

But we could do so much more with new tools to ensure that landowners developers keep their promises to get homes built.

I'm told that the planning system is broken. I don't believe that. It's the delivery system that's bust because the government that has withheld the tools to enable us to manage our housing markets.

- We are the people who keep the streets clean – that address low level crime and antisocial behaviour.

But we could do so much more to help the police sort out knife crime and county lines by focusing on people-trafficking, housing standards and rooting out rogue landlords.

- We are the people who provide parks, playgrounds & leisure facilities to help people of all ages lead active and healthy lifestyles.

And we could do so much more if only the NHS valued the work we do to reduce obesity and diabetes which now consumes 10pc of the NHS budget and gets people home from hospital more quickly.

- We are securing infrastructure. Creating the vision that attracts investment, ambition and growth.

And we could do so much more with greater powers to borrow against future CIL as we can with s106.

- We are tackling homelessness. Supporting the most vulnerable to deal with any number of different issues to secure a home and get on in life.

And we could do so much more with the tools to shape welfare and skills support by taking over DWP functions that get in the way of solving gritty problems.

- We are revitalising our town centres. Remodelling them for the interests and needs of communities into the future.

And we could do more if we followed the lead of Mayor Kris de Clerk in Roeselare in Belgium who has reimagined what a town centre can be. I'm pleased to announce that we'll be launching our pamphlet "Championing our High Streets - Lessons from Roeselare" based on our DCN field trip tomorrow.

- We are protecting the environment. Working with our communities to drive up recycling. Addressing carbon neutrality.

And we could do so much more

Every single one of us comes to work to address problems one family at a time.

We exist to solve problems, not to manage caseloads.

We're the people who pick up the pieces when things go wrong. We know more than anyone else that Councils aren't purely transactional entities. Our work is much more than numbers and spreadsheets. We are on *your* side.

So let's celebrate our achievements. And recognise that all this happens because of our hard work convening, enabling, and leading. Working with residents, businesses and partners every single day, maximising quality of life. Making great places to build a business and raise a family.

We are the builders of better lives and stronger economies.  
One *family* at a time, one *street* at a time. One *place* at a time

And the DCN amplifies **your** work

- Our events share best practice and provide opportunities to meet and exchange ideas
- Our research evidences...the impact of big policy changes across issues from waste to homelessness. Our analysis of the impact of the Waste and Resources strategy showed a potential new burden at £382m across districts. We are working with the LGA on some more robust analysis to equip our members with.
- Our staff development scheme has helped 70 bright stars within districts this year understand the wider political landscape and supports them to take the next step in their careers.
- Our engagement with Parliament via our APPG to which 64 District Leaders & Chiefs attended last week influence policy
- We make personal connections with many of the 220 MPs that touch a district. And we've made contact with all of them – with many coming to our events in parliament
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- My meetings with ministers ensure our voice is heard with real benefits
  - The elimination of Negative RSG which benefited districts £56.2 million across 19/20.

- Delay to the Business Rates Reset which would have seen 65% of our business rates growth removed at a stroke. Our analysis with LG futures and my personal contact with Ministers directly resulted in the average district receiving £1.79 million on average compared with current levels.
- And I ensured that every district received money to prepare for Brexit – something that MHCLG hadn't even thought of.

And all of this for about a grand a year. Wow.

If that doesn't prove that we run the best value part of the local government sector, nothing will.

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The DCN is a Member Association and a cross party organisation.

We are a Network in every meaning of the word.

We run a portfolio model within our 20-strong Cabinet. A cross party leadership team spearheads our messages. Taking those messages into the corridors of power.

- Cllr Mark Crane, leading Selby, and leading our calls for powers to get homes built and to drive growth
- Cllr Sharon Taylor, leading Stevenage, and leading our fight for a fair funding deal
- Cllr Dan Humphries, leading Worthing, and leading our action on the environment, and maximising the value of our prevention power in the health system
- And Cllr Giles Archibald, leading South Lakeland, and leading our campaign to build better lives, ending homelessness by preventing homelessness

And they are supported by a team of other leaders from every part of England reflecting every Political hue. And a symmetrical network of Chief Executives working alongside.

Thank you to you all for ensuring that our voice is heard everywhere from the Village Hall to Westminster Hall.

I'm sad that we're losing our friends in Dorset, Buckinghamshire & Northamptonshire. So many of you have contributed so much to get us to the place we are today: Tom [Corby], Isobel [Chesham], Katrina [Wycombe], Ian [Cherwell]. Thank you.

But this is not goodbye. We are working to ensure that these 'District Unitaries' and others unitised former districts like Southend and Wokingham can contribute to advancing the 86 different services we provide.

The DCN is there to ensure that we add scale to all the work we do and provide, and I'm pleased that 85% of our councils attend at least one event each year, almost 600 people.

We're all doing a great job. Real Achievements. Real Impact. Real results.

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But I am not Complacent. I feel the wind of change

You might have expected me to be pleasantly surprised with the Government's explicit focus on our Towns and Cities. And I am. It didn't happen by itself.

Our APPG last week pleased me just as much when Labour's Shadow Front Bench spokesman Jim McMahon spoke about his party's commitment to renewing a local democracy that is also grounded in local communities.

The new Government's Manifesto and the Queens Speech both spoke of reconnecting with residents, of reviving towns and cities, of having more accountability across functional economic areas.

You want to know what they are?

These are the areas over which people live their lives, and over which businesses draw their customers. These are the areas of local bus routes, of travelling to work areas, of heading to the shops, of going to the park, of visiting your friends. And yes, most often the canvas from which local football teams draw their supporters. These areas where families have built strong emotional ties over generations.

I was astonished and delighted to see that the office of national statistics has lately published a whole new section on its website focused on describing what Towns and Cities and their hinterlands look like. The Government is helpfully codifying the canvass of our work.

There's something going on here that we can embrace and develop. Because these are our territories. We're shaped around them.

We know these places. We know what makes them tick. It's the local geography that people recognise and relate to. It's about the place. And we are close enough to that place to shape and to enhance local hopes and dreams.

This is who we are. It's what we do.

That same Queens Speech I referred to earlier spoke about reducing fragmentation.

So it's time to openly acknowledge a truth. Frankly spoken, we know our administrative boundaries don't make as much sense as they once did. Mind you, that's not just our boundaries. The same applies to all the others.

But we work with what we've got. That's why we have joint local plans that reflect housing and commuting geographies. It's why we work together with our neighbours to address homelessness and rough sleeping.

And why we form partnerships across commuting geographies to address skills and infrastructure investment.

Some even pool CIL blind to administrative boundaries across a functional economic geography.

Does that make us less relevant? No!

But does it mean that we have to put up with it? No.

Every 50 years since the Great Reform Act of 1832 there has been a big change in the local government landscape. It's now 50 years since Redcliffe Maud set in train the process that created us in 1973. That moment coincided with a significant vote on Europe. And now we've had another. Big. European. Change.

So it's our job to reimagine a better future. We have the chance to map out that journey based on our understanding of what works in the real world.

The ONS describes 1186 towns greater between 5,000 people and 225,000. There is a key role for Towns but not if it means going back to the urban and rural district councils of the pre-1974 reforms.

Because **we** know these places.

Our new mission is to define ourselves as the building blocks of growth and prosperity across the geography of our towns, cities and their hinterlands.

And have prepared carefully for this moment. Two years ago we worked with Grant Thornton who gave us robust ways of describing functional economic geographies – those markets for labour, goods and services which describe how people live their lives.

We now have exclusive data from ONS based on the latest towns and cities analysis.

If change is coming, we have the drive and ability to describe what that change should look like. And what it should not.

Because change is coming. Make no mistake. And we should throw down the gauntlet and make that change our own.

When the Prime Minister spoke of taking back control, he didn't mean giving more power to remote administrative bureaucracies. With power and control located miles away. In County-shaped constructs in buildings without a customer centre. And where its computer loves to say 'No'.

Do we put our heads in the sand. Or we make the weather? I have never been one to carry an umbrella.

Our job is to make the sunshine. To show our residents what those sunlit uplands can and should look like. To redefine and recalibrate what local government must and will look like for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We should be doing this anyway in the Towns and Cities that we represent across England.

This is an opportunity for us to take. To embrace. To lead.

Whooooo. This is all ballsy talk. That's what I think. It reflects discussions that we've had around the twenty of us that sit around the DCN Board table. And I know our chiefs have had similar discussions. And our friends in Cumbria are at the coalface as well.

So, we've tweaked the conference agenda to have a private session tomorrow to come to a collective DCN view. We are a membership organisation. And we must discuss this all together. So that each of us can make the local decisions that reflect local circumstances but safe in the knowledge of how others are thinking.

But I tell you this: With a government with a majority of 80 that's focused on delivery, Devolution affords the opportunity to rethink services around the residents in our towns, cities and communities. To put residents and businesses at the heart of positive public sector reform. And for us to set the tone.

Districts working together over functional economic areas are the natural building blocks that optimise the balance of cost and scale of delivery with democratic representation.

We must be clear and uncompromising on this. Our communities voted to level-up. Levelling up does not mean sitting this one out.

And if it means a Mayor that fixes infrastructure and raises money internationally so I can spend it locally, that sounds like good business. Mayors are all Number Ten knows. Get over it.

**We need a local government that looks forward to 2066, not back to 1066.**

So, today I'm announcing a new forward-looking DCN #hashtag that I'm going to ask all of you to include on your social media #2066not1066 whenever we do something innovative or smart that takes the district devolution story forward.

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Moving on....

It's probably a moment to thank Matthew, Pippa, Brogan & Emily for their service and to Nick, Stephen, Vicky and Jess for taking us forward.

Three years ago when I assumed this position I said that our time had come.

Back then we had a clutzy slogan "Innovative & Collaborative Solutions for People and Places" Now it's "Better Lives, Stronger Economies".

So we've come a long way in that time. Our voice is heard. And listened to. And it shows.

But now I think our time has come in a different sense.

It's time to lead the renewal of this country. Contributing to a country that is match-fit to play on the global stage

It's time to ensure the voice of local residents is heard so that they can lead, shape and champion their own communities.

We must be the Champions. Working across political and administrative divides to champion our interests in Whitehall and Westminster.

We have an important time together over the next two days. The 250 people in this room have the power and licence to reshape our nation for the next generation. For our children and grandchildren.

The Secretary of State apologises that he must prioritise Cabinet over being here this afternoon – although he was prepared to come had we been meeting this morning.

The Budget and Devolution White Paper are just around the corner. The Chancellor has sent a video message, which I'll play in a moment.

Brexit's done. Let's look forward. It's a pivotal moment.

It is the most important DCN conference that there has ever been.

We must use this time to set the direction for districts as champions of community in the years ahead.

This is our moment. There is no dilemma. We must help this country to look forward to 2066 or be dragged back to 1066.  
Let's do it! It's what we came into Local Government to do.

**ENDS**