

Speech: County Councils Network conference 2018

Introduction

Good morning, everybody.

Thank you – it's a pleasure to be at my first CCN conference.

I was reflecting back to January, when I was first appointed as Local Government Minister. It's obviously my first ministerial job, so you make that transition from being a backbencher to joining the government. And it does make you think about who your boss now is going to be.

As an MP, it was pretty clear my boss was the people of Richmond in my constituency, but now as a Minister and a member of the government, who was I answering to?

Some would tell me 'well, of course, it's your Secretary of State'; some said to me 'well no, no, it's the Prime Minister'. But very quickly on the job I learned that my real boss was going to be this chap called Paul Carter.

In all seriousness, it's been a real pleasure getting to know Paul and the rest of you over the past several months – and I'm very grateful for everything you do to make the case for counties in Westminster. So, thank you to you, your team, and everyone else in the CCN for continuing with that fantastic and very valuable effort. It's been a genuine pleasure working together over the past few months.

I read an article recently making a powerful case for strong local government. The article compared national politicians and ministers like me to "generals in Tolstoy novels... moving pieces around the board, while the actual battle is nothing like they imagine".

That struck a chord with me. Even as a constituency MP, I have always been envious of the incredible, tangible and direct impact that you all have on people's everyday lives.

There are simply hundreds of services that you have to provide: from social care and children's services to broadband and highways, from trading standards and weddings to blue badges and fostering.

And you do all of this for 26 million people across 86% of England's landmass and half of England's economy. When you think about it, it really is an incredible responsibility.

And I am the first to recognise that you have been delivering these services in what has been a very difficult financial climate.

I think it's fair to say that no other part of government has carried a

greater share of the burden in improving the country's finances.

You are very much on the front-line, and you have shown unmatched leadership and creativity in delivering high quality services over the past several years. And I pay tribute to your work in this regard.

I am genuinely honoured to be your champion in government, and today I thought I'd spend my time to touch on three themes about why I'm incredibly optimistic for what the future holds for County Councils:

Firstly, I'm going to talk about the new fairer funding system.

Secondly, I'll touch on the crucial role you have in driving social mobility in our country.

And finally, the vital role you play in helping our society's most vulnerable.

Fairer Funding

Isaac Newton once said: "Nature is pleased with simplicity."

I think, then, we can safely assume that Nature wouldn't be that pleased with the existing local government finance formula!

I very much want our County Councils to be on a solid and fair financial footing for the future.

We can't do that without a new formula that is more accurate, simpler, and fairer.

I can assure you that introducing this new formula is among my highest priorities.

The opportunity for such a comprehensive, fresh look like this doesn't come that often.

So I am clear: we absolutely have to get this right.

That's why I'm extremely grateful for the thoughtful and detailed contributions that many of you and the CCN have already made to the department. I have spent a lot of time reflecting on the issues that you have been absolutely right to highlight to us.

I just want to touch on a couple in particular:

Deprivation. To suggest that vast areas of the country that you represent have no pockets of deprivation simply isn't a reflection of reality. So it is right that any new formula recognises deprivation at a more local, individual level – it isn't just something that happens in cities.

And we are all too aware that our country's demographics are changing. Far faster than the designers of the current formula may have even thought

possible – particularly in county areas.

The new formula must be smarter – keeping track of our rapidly changing population, giving a realistic, up-to-date picture of the pressures driving actual expenditure on the ground.

Nor will the formula overlook how rurality creates challenges for service delivery. My own constituency in North Yorkshire has a county division with more sheep than people – and while the new formula isn't likely to accurately capture the sheep population – it certainly should deal with the genuine cost of delivering services in more rural areas.

I'm pleased to say that we will publish the latest round of our consultation shortly, ahead of implementation in 2020/21.

And I am confident that a simpler formula, which recognises relative need and resources much more fairly than ever before, is a prize that is now finally within our reach.

Social Mobility

I am very passionate about ensuring that everybody, no matter what their background, has the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

A fair chance to build a good life for themselves regardless of their family circumstances, or where they came from.

Spreading opportunity and unlocking the enormous potential of our people – that's why I came into politics and I am sure the same is true for many of you.

But, like almost every area of public policy, without local government this ambition simply can't be realised. So I'd like to thank you sincerely for all your work on the Social Mobility in Counties report.

The report was absolutely right to highlight that social mobility is a particular issue for our counties.

There is of course no one silver bullet but the work that you are doing every day is making strides towards a more socially mobile society:

Providing the transport networks that a young apprentice might use to travel to their work placement, equipping them with the skills they need for a successful career.

Rolling out the high-speed broadband that an entrepreneur will use to start a successful business and increase local employment.

Investing in nursery provision to ensure high-take up of early years education – so crucial for a child's development.

At every step of the journey for a person to fulfil their potential, you all are there.

I commend the CCN for using its powerful voice to show both your commitment to social mobility, and your willingness and capability to make it reality.

As the Secretary of State rightly said at the report's launch, the government will look closely at the recommendations you have made to see how best we can empower you to do more.

It is clear that when it comes to spreading opportunity, you all have a vital role to play. I am delighted that you have made it such a priority and I look forward to backing all of your ambitions.

Supporting the most vulnerable

Now, of course it is exciting and inspiring to talk about how you are all helping to help people achieve success, but we should also remember that:

Yours are the first hands that reach out to those who fall on hard times.

You are the front line of how we treat the most vulnerable in our society.

It is a really daunting responsibility that you shoulder, but you never let us down, and I thank you for all your work. But the important work that you do isn't just about fixing the problems of today. I am more ambitious than that, and I know that you are too.

At this very moment, your key workers are helping to bring stability to the lives of tens of thousands of families dealing with multiple complex issues through the Troubled Families Programme.

My first visit as a Minister was spending time with some of the families that the programme has helped. It is an experience that I will never forget.

This revolutionary way of working, this whole family support, has saved children from going into care. It has helped people find the dignity and security of employment.

And it has ensured that families stay strong and stay together.

It is a testament to how your intervention today prevents problems tomorrow.

I want your councils to be free to innovate and tackle problems before they even arise. So as the spending review approaches, I think we, collectively, need to think about how best your councils can be resourced to invest in prevention.

I am passionate about learning from all of you how central government can best support your aspirations in this area. Because your track record already shows us that you can make a major difference.

If we can get this right in the future, working together, we can truly transform the lives of tens of thousands of the most vulnerable people in our society.

And that really would be something to be enormously proud of.

Conclusion

So, while the intense debate may continue to rage at Westminster and dominate the headlines, I know that you will go on delivering for your 26 million constituents.

Ensuring that their communities are enriching places to call home.

I have always seen my role as being your champion in government.

Now, of course, my voice is one of many – so I can't promise that we will win every argument.

But I can promise you that I will keep making your case.

And I genuinely believe that the concerns of local government are being listened to now more than ever.

I hope that the recent announcements in the budget were a clear sign that this approach is working.

If we can get this right in the future, I'm incredibly positive about all the good that we can do.

So, in conclusion, I am very proud to be your champion.

I'm humbled by seeing everything that you have achieved.

And I'm enormously excited about what we can achieve working together in the future – ensuring that our communities and our constituents can look forward to a safer, brighter and more prosperous future.

Thank you.