

Justin Griggs: Give parish councils support they need to help build back stronger

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Measures are needed enable the most local tier of local government continue to play a vital role for their communities during the pandemic, writes the head of policy and communications at the National Association of Local Councils.



For the government's 'comprehensive plan' to ensure the financial sustainability of local government, it must be a plan for all of local government.

A plan that helps principal councils deal with the unprecedented financial challenges arising from additional Covid-19 cost pressures and lost income. And a plan that delivers on the government's promise to stand with councils and do whatever necessary to support their efforts.

But crucially, a plan that helps councils at all levels of local government, including parish and town councils, especially those whose finances have also been significantly impacted.

Let's not forget parish and town councils are the first tier of local government in most of England. The only growing part of the family with 48 new councils created in the last three years. Investing an extra £42m from residents directly in the community this year. And increasingly doing more, from health to housing, loneliness to local services, and community assets to climate change.

No surprises then this hyperlocal "parish power" – as described by the chancellor Rishi Sunak when local government minister – was among the

quickest off the blocks to react and [support our communities](#) at the start of the pandemic.

Co-ordinating emergency plans and volunteers. Collecting and delivering medicines and shopping. Acting as information hubs for guidance, advice and support. Helping businesses by publicising their online services. Establishing emergency grant funds including support for food banks. Continuing to maintain parks, open spaces and cemeteries.

Firmly cementing the important role they already play in building strong communities. A unit of solidarity and natural focus of community effort. Whose role in the response has been praised in a government letter and Number 10 press conferences.

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Yet now languishing in last place in the desperate race for government help, rapidly in danger of becoming what some are describing as “the forgotten sector”.

Community hubs and village halls, events, sport and leisure facilities, markets, cafes and kiosks, and car parks – just some of the income generating activity impacted as a direct result of the pandemic. Recent National Association of Local Councils research suggested predicted lost income and additional costs for the first quarter of the year in the region of £40m and £13m.

However almost all financial measures introduced don't apply to parish and town councils, they are not eligible for dedicated government funding schemes, and funding provided to principal councils isn't stretching far enough to be passed on.

We've been here before, of course. Most of the government funding intended to mitigate the impact of the localisation of council tax support wasn't passed down. The small parish share of council tax increased to make up for it, and everyone moved on.

Except here we are again, caught in the middle.

As we move into the recovery, parish and town councils have an even more important role in building back stronger and more resilient communities. The latest [Grimsey review](#) of the high street recognises this. Likewise comments by the government about [unlocking devolution everywhere and empowering communities](#) on a scale never seen before, including at the hyper local level such as parish and town councils. Except we must give parish and town councils every chance to play that enhanced role. The many have demonstrated resilience, especially financially. But for the few, that recovery and empowered role is at risk, and targeted support is urgently needed.

Which is why Nalc has proposed a package of measures to do just that. Business rates relief such as fast-tracking legislation to exempt public toilets. A further multi-year deal on council tax referendum principles. Use of capital reserves and borrowing for revenue spending. Repayment holidays from the Public Works Loan Board. A dedicated Coronavirus interruption fund. To name but a few.

Doing nothing leaves our most local councils facing difficult decisions that will ultimately reduce quality of life in our communities. Reducing or stopping services. Increasing council tax. And undermining further opportunities for devolution and community empowerment.

But with the right support, there is huge scope for parish and town councils to continue to play their part in the country's recovery. To help principal councils with the significant challenges they face. And to work with the government on many shared ambitions on its refocused domestic agenda.

The power of local is more important than ever. And 'parish power' has demonstrated like never before how communities are helping themselves.

If the financial plan for local government is to be truly comprehensive, it must be a plan for all of local government.

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