CCN Conference Speech

Cllr Sean Matthews, CCN Chair

Good morning everyone,

It is a real privilege to welcome you to the CCN Annual Conference.

And to address you for the first time as Chairman of CCN.

Before anything else, I want to thank our conference sponsors and partners for their support.

I also want to thank the CCN officer team for the exceptional work they do throughout the year.

And finally, I want to pay tribute to every councillor and officer who has helped shape CCN into the organisation it is today.

Their excellent stewardship has made my job much, much easier!

You may or may not know that in a former life, I was a Metropolitan Police officer.

To be fair – I hardly ever mention it!

Well, back then, when I was serving, I never imagined that one day I would be addressing a room full of council leaders, senior councillors and chief executives as chairman of CCN.

I know my former colleagues very much enjoy ribbing me about the direction my life has taken.

Yet as different as those roles may seem, they are connected by one simple idea.

Public service.

Whether you wear a police uniform, work in social care, manage highways maintenance, or sit in a council chamber, the motivation is fundamentally the same.

You want to make life better for the people and places you serve.

That belief, above all else, has brought us together today.

Because regardless of our political colours, our commitment to serving residents is what unites us.

That is why, in putting myself forward for this role, one of the things that attracted me to CCN was its tradition of cross-party working – our collective superpower.

In national politics, disagreement often dominates the headlines.

But here, within CCN, we know that the foundations of our organisation are built on finding common ground.

The issues facing our councils do not recognise political boundaries.

Our residents expect us to work together to tackle those challenges.

And that is exactly what CCN has always done.

That approach will remain at the heart of my chairmanship.

And ensuring that our cross-party voice is heard louder than ever.

Because there has never been a more important time for that collective voice.

We meet at a crucial moment.

A moment of challenge.

A moment of uncertainty.

But also a moment of opportunity for county and rural England.

As we will debate and discuss at this conference, the local government landscape is shifting rapidly.

We are living through the most significant period of change in a generation.

- Devolution and rewiring the state.
- The development of a 'national care service'.
- Far reaching planning, SEND and children's social care reforms.
- And for many of us local government reorganisation.

Each policy carries significant opportunities.

But also substantial risks.

And over the last 12 months, CCN has stood by your side.

Working tirelessly to ensure that counties and rural areas are at the centre of these national conversations.

Perhaps nowhere has CCN's role been more important than on SEND.

CCN has been at the forefront of the campaign to reform a system that is failing too many children, too many families and, increasingly, the councils responsible for delivering it.

We have consistently worked with government and sector partners to make the case for change.

Not because councils wish to spend less on supporting children with special educational needs.

But because every child deserves a system that delivers the right support at the right time.

Over the last year, CCN has continued to lead that debate, securing a wide-ranging commitment to reform.

But also, crucially, over £5bn in deficit write-offs for the sector and our councils.

However, there is still more to do.

Last month our analysis showed that SEND deficits could reach £10bn by 2028.

And the financial challenge runs much deeper for county and rural authorities.

Many of whom were hardest hit by the government's Fair Funding Review.

CCN councils face £7bn of additional annual costs by the end of this parliament.

But new government funding will meet just 2 pence in every £1 pound of these pressures.

That is why CCN will continue to stand up for our areas.

Arguing for the resources our councils need.

Including writing-off all remaining SEND deficits in 2028.

Fairer funding for prevention in children's services.

And continuing to challenge the government on the removal of remoteness from the funding formula and the unsustainable reliance on council tax to fund everyday services.

CCN's campaign for fair and sustainable funding remains as important as ever.

But over the coming weeks, we will do even more to articulate the unique challenges facing our councils across a range of areas.

Today, we launch a major new report on neighbourhood health planning in the county and rural context.

Tomorrow, you will see the emerging findings of our work with Newton on homelessness.

And in the new year, we will publish a major report by Impower on children's social care.

But underpinning this all is our advocacy on devolution and rewiring the state.

CCN has been relentless in banging the drum for faster and deeper devolution to help drive economic growth across our areas.

With the case clearly articulated in our recent report with Grant Thornton.

We therefore welcome the government setting out further plans to devolve powers and funding to 12 county areas.

These are significant developments.

And CCN will continue to make the case that our members must be at the heart of this agenda.

Because if we are serious about rewiring the state, we must get the relationship between central government, local government and our communities right.

Devolution cannot simply mean moving power from Westminster to mayors.

It must mean empowering and not diminishing the role of local government.

Putting our councils in the driving seat of public service reform, while ensuring they receive a fair share of the proceeds from fiscal devolution.

But devolution can only succeed if the constituent councils that form Strategic Authorities are strong, effective and sustainable.

For many of us, that means confronting the situation we now face with reorganisation.

The way this programme has been handled has been deeply disappointing.

And I know many of you would go much further in your criticism.

The process has been repeatedly changed and the goal posts moved.

Councils have committed enormous amounts of time, money and resources.

And it has damaged our staff's morale and caused major disruption.

CCN called for, and welcomed, the reorganisation review.

The government are right to withdraw previous decisions and look again.

And the minister has said he 'opened minded' on the choices that lay ahead.

But as we stand today, the recent announcement provided little reassurance that the process will be robust, fair and transparent.

Indeed, there is a growing concern that this review is less about reaching better decisions in line with the original objectives of reorganisation.

And more about strengthening the Government's legal position, ending previous challenges, and avoiding the full disclosure of previous ministerial advice.

Whether or not that is the Government's intention, the perception is very real, and potentially, very damaging.

Because this review must be about getting the right decisions for communities – not simply finding a way to better defend **previous** decisions which many feel were politically driven.

The government speak of restoring confidence in a process that WE believe has failed.

And it may be reset for the Minister and Secretary of State.

But it is not for those of us who have lived with it since December 2024.

Trust in the government's handling of reorganisation has already been severely damaged.

And for many, it is on the verge of completely evaporating.

If this is to be averted, the government must demonstrate it is not simply protecting its own position.

But genuinely reconsidering decisions that went against the criteria and pose a significant financial, implementation and service risk.

The Government has one last chance to get this right.

But that requires a transparent process and decisions based on evidence rather than political or legal expediency.

As CCN, we will continue to engage constructively with ministers.

We will support our members through the uncertainty and transition ahead, whatever the outcome.

We will argue for the financial compensation our areas deserve.

The full disclosure of the evidence used to reach their decisions.

And a realistic approach to implementation.

But most importantly, we will collectively hold the government to account for their decisions if they create councils that are more fragmented, more complex and more costly than those they replace.

Because our responsibility is not to defend structures for their own sake.

It is to defend the public services, the communities and the people those structures exist to serve.

In conclusion.

As we look ahead to CCN's 30th anniversary next year, I want to be clear that the need for our network has never been greater.

Because this organisation is not defined by council structure, nor its name.

It is defined by place.

It is defined by the communities we represent and the unique challenges that bind us together.

The pressures of delivering services across dispersed populations.

The opportunities and challenges of coastal communities.

The importance of market towns and county economies.

Those issues will not disappear because council structures change.

Indeed, at a time when urban areas are increasingly prioritised over their rural counterparts, they become even more important.

That is why our business plan this year set out a refreshed mission for the future:

Strengthening our role as the cross-party voice of counties and non-metropolitan areas.

Equipped to support a growing membership of unitary authorities with shared characteristics.

And ensuring county communities remain central to national policymaking.

This plan was rightly built around a renewed corporate strategy and central campaign theme of **"Stronger Counties, Stronger Communities."**

Because in a new local government landscape, our network and its members must not become weaker.

They must become stronger.

More influential.

More visible.

And more ambitious.

Because the simple truth is this.

There will always be a need for a champion for county England.

A national organisation that understands the realities of delivering services across our unique geographies, with the evidence and expertise to back it up.

And one that acts as the only counterbalance to London and metropolitan lobby groups.

A body that can bring together leaders from different political parties around shared priorities.

A trusted collective voice that government listens to.

And one that will also strongly challenge ministers – whatever political persuasion they may be.

That voice is our network.

We will continue to grow, evolve and adapt to ensure that remains true for many years to come.

So, as we begin this conference, my message is one of confidence.

Confidence in the strength of our network.

Confidence in the importance of county areas.

And confidence that by working together, across party lines and across geographical boundaries, we can secure a stronger future for the communities we all serve.

Thank you for the trust you have placed in me.

Thank you for everything you do for your residents.

And thank you for being part of the collective voice of England's counties.

I wish you all a productive and enjoyable conference.

Thank you