

I welcome this Bill, to act as a catalyst, as I hope it will be, to support, release and empower the vibrant and often untapped resources within our local communities. In recent years, many individuals and community groups have been hindered or frustrated, either by impenetrable bureaucracy, centralised control of local priorities or simply a sense of disconnection from what happens in the confines of the Town Hall and out there in the rest of the community.

This Bill seeks to bridge that gap.

I spent six years as a local Councillor, before coming into this House. Six years during which I experienced continual frustration on behalf of a myriad of community groups and individuals who I felt had so much to offer and yet who struggled to have their voice heard.

Committed groups like those who run the Oaks community centre in my former Ward of Penketh, who converted a former junior and infant school into an excellent all age community centre, popular and in constant daily use. Yet they told me how they struggled to obtain even the tiniest public funding support. And this whilst two other local

authority community halls languished underused and largely unloved – expensive capital resources, the use of which, with a Community Challenge bid, as now provided for within this Bill, could have been reviewed.

I am fortunate now to represent a constituency with a high degree of community participation, strong voluntary groups and Councillors and Officers who are often willing, indeed wanting, to work in innovative ways with the local community, recognising that co-working can achieve so much more than working alone. Middlewich Vision works side by side with Middlewich Council, together

they have done much to strengthen community life in the town.

The Congleton Partnership is an impressive, well organised and visionary group working to ensure the sustainability and success of Congleton as a vibrant market town for visitors, workers and residents alike. It too is working closely with Congleton Town Council and only last week the Chief Executive of Cheshire East Council agreed to discuss how strategic input from professionally run charities such as Crossroads Care Cheshire East could help resolve one of the authority's major challenges for the future – that of providing

adult social care for an increasing elderly population. These are all examples of a willingness to work in partnership; what this Bill will, I believe, do Mr Speaker is to provide mechanisms for greater partnership working, to help release a greater deal of community energy. And what it will also do is to help foster a cultural change – this Bill is, I believe, sending out a signal. A signal to residents, community groups, to local business people that your views, that your contribution really matters – indeed that it is invaluable. Contributions such as the after school club volunteer, the hospital radio helper, the local businessman who helps mentoring aspiring

entrepreneurs, the Clean Team litter picker or the ArcAngel volunteers working to reduce teenage alcoholism. If we want to see flourish the kind of communities which so many of people we represent want to live in, these contributions not only matter, they are invaluable. Indeed, there is no other way for society to flourish. Everyone's contribution matters. No insignificant person has ever been born.

Turning now to some specific elements of the Bill, I am particularly encouraged to see within it the community right to challenge, offering as it does the opportunity for community groups to ensure

threatened local facilities continue. The very fact that this provision is in the Bill will, I believe, promote improved dialogue between residents and the local authorities which represent them. Issues such as the Alsager Sports Partnership, representing a swathe of local residents, most keen to have their voice heard about the future use of the former MMU campus as a community sports facility

Mr Speaker, small shops and local businesses are equally essential to thriving communities. Many of them have suffered a battering during the recession and this combined with other economic

and market pressures mean that most people who bravely start up and develop businesses often work continuously long hours with few holidays and unpaid family members support. Local people want, and value, a busy high street and local employment with the colour and character which they bring together with their individual service and valued customer relationships.

Business rates are a major monthly outgoing for small businesses, perhaps the difference between initial survival and closure.

For a local authority to be able to demonstrate the tangible support of their local community by providing a business rate free period or discount is something which this Bill provides and is to be most welcomed, especially at a time when so many of our market town high streets are facing particular challenges.

I hope this will also be just one of the many ways in which this Bill will engender a closer working relationship between local businesses and local authorities and in this respect from my own experience as a local Councillor, with a Finance Portfolio, this is something which I believe is,

indeed, wanted from both sides – but the mechanisms to facilitate the sharing of expertise between the public and private sectors at local level have often been weak.

Prior to my taking up the Finance Portfolio, as a Councillor, I remember that the statutory annual consultation to local businesses on the Council's budget was sent out by email to a handful of local businesses and the responses received were from just six businesses and fitted on to less than one A4 sized sheet of paper!

I started up Budget Consultation meetings with the local business sector and – admittedly after some hard work, telephoning, leafleting and convincing local businesses that the Council really did want to hear their views about our budget priorities – dozens of business people turned up to fill the Town Hall Council chamber with their views.

This Bill, Mr Speaker, I said at the outset, is most importantly a catalyst.

The aspirations within in it for greater public participation in local democracy, for the expenditure of funds to be more representative of

local priorities, and for the release of immense and often untapped contributions which voluntary and faith and community groups can make in even greater measure than they already do will only happen if we make it happen.

If we, as elected representatives at national level, together with our colleague Councillors and Officers at local level have a determination to communicate the provisions within this Bill and the opportunities which it offers, clearly and convincingly to residents, businesses and community groups; indeed, to everyone with an interest in their local community and the ability to

make a difference so that the capacity and opportunity to do so really can, under this Government, be there for the taking.