

St Augustine's Centre, Halifax, UK
English for Life in the UK
Season 3 Episode 2 - How Does Local Government Work in the UK?

Mark Hello and welcome to the podcast: ***English for Life in the UK***. This Podcast is for those people who want to improve their English by listening to a range of native English speakers, talking about a number of different subjects - and at the same time, we hope that you will learn more about life in this country.

My name is Mark and I'm one of a team of volunteers from the Saint (*St*) Augustine's Centre, a charity based in Halifax, Yorkshire, where we support asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

This is the first full episode of Season 3 of the Podcast. In this season, we're going to interview a number of people with interesting roles¹, interesting jobs and experiences.

Today, we are going to talk about local government - that is: the way that decisions get made and who makes those decisions at a local level, in the United Kingdom. For us, here in Halifax, Yorkshire, it is Calderdale Council that makes those decisions, and we interview Councillor (*Cllr*) Jane Scullion, who is the deputy leader of that Council.

If you want to find out more about our work, and about previous episodes of this Podcast, then stay listening to the end, where we will give you the links to our website, and also, how to find the transcript for this and all other episodes.

For now, let's get on and listen to our first interview.

(Music) (2 minutes: 27 seconds)

Mark Well, I'm delighted to say I've got with me, today, Cllr Jane Scullion. She is the deputy leader of Calderdale Council. Calderdale Council is the local government area that we are in: our charity, the St Augustines's Centre, is based in Calderdale, and Cllr Scullion is the deputy leader of that Council, and we are going to talk a little bit today about what local government is, how it works, and why it's important. But, first of all, can I ask you, Jane, just to tell us a little bit about yourself and how you got involved in the Council?

Cllr Jane Scullion

Well, I retired from my professional career about 10-11 years ago and I really became a councillor because of a disaster. And that disaster was a big flood in our town, which damaged a lot of houses and I had to ... we had to leave our house - we had to live somewhere else. We had no power² - it was a long, long time for recovery.

¹ a role is a part that somebody, usually an actor, takes on in a play but can also be used, as here, to mean a part or position or job that someone takes on.

² power - in this sense, refers to electrical power, needed to run a household

Lots of people came to me, asking me for help, in terms of trying to get grants³ from the Council, trying to restore their houses, their kitchens and get back from the disaster. And I was dealing with the Council a lot and I thought "well, I could do this". I think I felt I could probably do better! So, I became a councillor. I think one of the things is, councillors are very ... in the UK, lots of different people. We're not experts; we're just ordinary people from the community - a range of people, who come together to try and work out what's best, in terms of decisions for the community.

Mark Just again, for our listeners who don't know the system here, to be a councillor: that involves getting elected - is that right?

Cllr Yes - you, basically, are a councillor for a place - a particular place, a town or a set of villages. And usually, it's about 7, or 8,000 people in that place - and you have to stand for a political party. I'm in the Labour Party. And you have other people who contest you in the election and I have now won twice, in my place, in my election⁴.

Mark And what role do you play on the Council?

Cllr Well, I am deputy leader and I'm also responsible for "Regeneration" - which ...

Mark What does that mean?

Cllr It means - in shorthand⁵ - it's a word that contains a lot - it means buildings, it means roads, and it means employment and skills, things for people to move around: transport to get jobs, buildings for businesses to start in and to work in, but also the skills to actually do the jobs that people are needed to do.

Mark So you're on the elected side of the Council - what else does the Council include?

Cllr About 2000 people work for the Council and they empty the bins⁶, they mend the roads, they fix the traffic lights, they help look after children and older people - they do all the things that society says: 'yes, we want these things done and we will pay tax⁷ to pay those peoples' wages to do them'.

Mark So, in simple terms, you, as the elected part of the Council, make the decisions about how the money is going to be spent: what services are going to be provided, and at what level

³ grants - allocation of financial assistance for specified purposes.

⁴ councillors are normally elected for a period of four years each time

⁵ shorthand means a simple or short way of explaining something

⁶ rubbish bins where people can put their rubbish and unwanted items and which are then collected and taken away by the Council

⁷ the tax paid locally is called Council Tax

and then there are people, employed by the Council, who actually go out and provide those services. Have I?

(6:33)

Cllr Yes - that's very clear. And sometimes people - and why should they know? - they think their councillors are the persons who come and empty the bins - once when we had a small flood, a woman rang me up and said "Councillor, can you bring some sandbags⁸ for my garden? There's water in my garden, can you bring some sandbags and put them in". But, actually, it's the workers for the council who do the jobs and as you rightly say, we determine policy and budgets and the direction of the Council.

Mark You say you're "deputy leader" - explain a bit about that - what's that role involve?

Cllr There are 51 councillors and we're all in different political parties. There are 28 of us in the ruling party which is the Labour Party. And the 28 councillors in the ruling party get together and they elect one person to act as leader of the group and then they also get together to elect a deputy. And I'm that person and so I substitute for the leader when he's unable to go to meetings or when he's ill. He recently had Covid, so I went to all of his meetings, meetings for him, and generally try and look after the big strategic⁹ things that don't necessarily fit in one place. Our thinking about the future - because one of the key things about ... the role that I have ... is about stewardship, which is a very old-fashioned English word - so, you're not only spending the money and making the decisions about spending the money, now - but you're also stewarding that money, looking after it, for the future, so that your children and your grandchildren also have the benefit of the decisions that you make now. So as leader and deputy leader, we're not just engaged with the decisions of "here and now", we're also thinking about that stewardship role - what would be good in ten, twenty or even thirty years' time? What might people need? And also being very careful that we don't use up all the money now, so there's nothing left for the future.

Mark That's really clear and very interesting. What would you say the relationship is between local government - so, the council as you've described it - and central government¹⁰ - so Parliament, in our case?

Cllr It changes - and it has changed in recent years and it's very different from other European countries really, where, I think, local government has got more powers, more money and is held in greater ... there's greater respect between national and local. Here, in the UK, we're a very centralised country and lots of the power and the money stays with the central government, and they decide what money you get.

⁸ sandbags - literally, bags of sand - a small scale, easily available, defence against flood water

⁹ if something is strategic it is of long term and overall importance, not small things

¹⁰ central government refers to government at a national level, for the whole country

In terms of local, we have really struggled in the last 10 years, in terms of enough money for the basics. And if I could just illustrate that by describing the revenue budget is around between 162 to 200 million [pounds] and we've a capital budget of around 200 million. Revenue budget is the day-to-day spending: wages of the staff who do the work, and capital is buildings, roads and so on¹¹.

(10:07)

Now, in terms of the revenue spending, we spend 70% [per cent] of that on looking after children and older people. And "older people" might be young adults with learning difficulties who need to be looked after - they cannot be looked after, at home. And we spend a lot of our money on that. We spend a lot of money on children who cannot live with their parents for some reason or other. So, 70% of that budget actually just goes on those two areas and I would absolutely defend that because that is what a decent society does : it looks after its children and then, it looks after its older people.

That means, though, that the remaining 30% of the budget is what we have to spend on our roads, our parks, our libraries - lots of things that people care about, like emptying the bins and clearing litter in the streets - and so we have to make that 30% work really, really hard¹² for us. Now central government have been gradually reducing the overall amount that we have and costs are rising - a typical problem - and one of the things we argue here in Calderdale, and in West Yorkshire, is actually, you know, we know where money should be spent. The government have responded by setting up a whole series of competitions, bids for money, so things that we want to do like improve our parks, we have to bid in to the central government, against other councils, to get that money. We say - no, give it out fairly, give us a fair allocation, because actually, we and local people know where that money should be spent.

Mark That's really interesting, Thank you.

Say a little bit about why you think local government is important, Jane. Why does it matter to people that they have a local council?

Cllr **How long have you got?** I think I've indicated before that decisions about local things should be made locally and actually for most people, your council - you should know very little about it. It just is there, **behind the scenes** - obviously, it comes out in emergencies like floods - but generally - just makes things happen. And you just **take it for granted**. Like, for example: you go to a cafe and you get food to take away - you take it for granted, in the UK, that that food will be safe. Because behind the scenes, we have a whole number of inspectors, food inspectors, making sure that things are safe. When you drive up to a traffic light, you imagine that it will work because a whole load of people, behind

¹¹ revenue spending is recurring that means it has to be spent regularly every year , whereas capital spending happens just once, eg. to pay for a new building or road

¹² (money) work really hard for us = a lot of services have to be bought with that money, it has to be spent very carefully on a lot of different aspects to get maximum value from it.

the scenes, are tuning¹³ those traffic lights, mending them, making sure that the traffic flows. And people sometimes say to me 'I don't know why I pay my Council tax, my bins did not get emptied this week' and I think local government is important because it is not just a commercial transaction¹⁴. You don't just pay local government to empty your bins - you pay local government to actually look after children, older people, your roads, your parks and things that are important to you.

And people say: 'but I haven't got any children in school, why should I pay for education?' and actually, a decent society educates its children. I sometimes say to people I know: I notice that you like a nice hair-do, you've got a nice haircut - would you like your hairdresser to be educated and to be able to read the difference between a packet of bleach or poison, and a packet of hair dye? Really, any society educates its children and we all pay a bit into the system to make that happen.

So I think - the reason that I'm a councillor, really - is that, in terms of the local decisions: people know what really needs to be done. Let me take planning¹⁵, for example - you might think, 'well actually planning can just be decided centrally', and the reality is that, actually, as a local councillor, living locally, you know how big a building is, you know how it's going to impact on its neighbours, you know what the traffic is going to be - and, actually, it's much better to decide these things locally.

Mark Thank you very much, Jane.

(Music) (14:50)

Mark Language Support

In this part of the Podcast I choose some words or phrases from the episode and talk about them to help you to understand how they are used in everyday English. There were quite a few useful expressions in this episode.

The first one I'm going to choose is, when I asked Jane a question, she said

"How long have you got?"

Now, what she meant there was - 'she's got lots of things to tell me as an answer to that question'. It's a question with lots of possible answers, with lots of things she'd like to say, or she could say - so she says "How long have you got?"

It's a kind of jokey way of saying "I've got lots to say" - but usually, after that, you would just pick one or two of the most important things that you want to say and then if the [other] person wants to know more, they can ask you.

Jane talked about the things that go on "**behind the scenes**" at the local council.

¹³ tuning - maintaining machinery in working order, taken originally from "tuning a piano"; you might also see "fine-tuning".

¹⁴ commercial transaction is directly paying money in exchange for a specific item or service

¹⁵ planning here means making decisions about what land is used for, eg. Housing or factories or open spaces and parks

Now the phrase "behind the scenes" comes from the theatre, from plays that are put on, where the audience sees what's going on, on the stage, but doesn't always know all the things that are happening behind the stage, behind the scene. And that might be the sound, or it might be the lights, or all the technical things, or all the makeup and the costume-making, that has to go into making a play. But you can use that expression in the way that Jane has, about anything that's going on, something that's happening and you say: "People don't always know all the things going on behind the scenes" so those are the less obvious things, the less visible things, but which can often be as important as things you obviously see.

And the third phrase I'm going to choose today, is when Jane said that people often "**take for granted**" that certain things are going to happen. So, she was talking about, for example, that the food that you might buy in a cafe, will be healthy and safe, that the traffic lights will work, on the roads. People take it for granted that that will happen. So that's an expression, often used in English, to mean something that you think will always be available, will always work, and work in the same way. You don't really think about how it happens, or the people who make sure that it happens, so you "take it for granted". You can also use it in the sense that you might say you take a person for granted. So you might say "it's easy to take your parents for granted" - in other words, you don't really think about how hard it is to be a parent. When you're a child, you just take for granted that they're going to look after you.

So that's it - I hope that's been useful for you, today - that's three phrases that you will quite often hear in English and that you may be able to use yourself.

So, that's it for this week - if you want to know more about our work, please go to our website - which is:

www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

where you can find out about our work, how to make a donation to help our work, if you'd like to do that and also, how to find the transcript - that's the written version of this episode - you can also find links to all the previous episodes and transcripts of this Podcast, on that website.

I'll finish by just spelling out the address of that website: so it is:

s-t-a-u-g-u-s-t-i-n-e-s-c-e-n-t-r-e-h-a-l-i-f-a-x.org (o-r-g) .uk

That's it, for this week - thank you for listening and we look forward to you joining us again for our next episode which should be coming fairly soon. Take care of yourselves.

Music (20:16 ends).