

English for Life in the UK: Episode 14, Local Government

Welcome to Episode 14 of the podcast English for Life in the UK. This podcast is produced by a group of volunteers from the St Augustine's Centre in Halifax, Yorkshire and it is aimed at those people who wish to improve their English and at the same time to learn more about life in the United Kingdom.

This episode of the podcast is unusual as it is the first one that we have recorded since the United Kingdom has been on lockdown as a result of the Corona virus. The St Augustine's Centre is hoping to keep going as many services as it is possible to do within the restrictions that apply at the moment. In particular we want to keep some of the English language support going but obviously we are not teaching the courses at the centre. That means that these podcasts become even more important because they are the main way that we will continue to teach this course. So we hope that our centre users from St Augustine's but also our wider listeners will find that the continuing programme is of use to you.

Just to say as well that there are some differences as a result of the lockdown. This episode is produced by Christine and myself, Mark. In future we will be joined again by John but we will have to be doing it remotely so I'm in my house, Christine is in hers and we are recording this using the Anchor app that we use to produce our podcast but we're - instead of doing it in the same room together - we're doing it over the internet. That does mean, first of all, that the quality of the sound is not quite as good as it has been in the past because we are not able to use the external microphone that we usually use - but secondly there is a slight delay at times between myself and Christine because we are operating in different places, but obviously able to hear each other. [3:00 minutes] I should also say that, having listened back to this podcast, I realise that my voice is rather louder and Christine's rather softer, in this recording. I hope you'll bear with us.

OK so today's episode is about local government in the United Kingdom, or more particularly, in England. We hope you find it useful.

[3:30 MUSIC]

[3:40]

M: Well so we've talked in the past about the national government, so that's the government of the United Kingdom. And we have talked briefly about the fact that Scotland and Wales and Northern Ireland also have a slightly different form of government. But if we think about England - England has a structure of what we call **local government**. And that's different in different parts of the country but there are 2 main systems. So in the more rural areas we have what are called **counties**, so for example North Yorkshire is a county. And in that area there is a **county council**, so they run the services for - they run some of the services for the whole of North Yorkshire as a county. And then there is - at a more local level - something called **district councils**, so for example within North Yorkshire there is the district council of Harrogate and they run other services - different from the ones that the county one at a more local level in Harrogate. [5:00] So that's the pattern in the more rural parts. In the more urban parts (Like Halifax) like Halifax, and all the big cities, in most of those you have, again, two levels. You have what are called **metropolitan borough councils**

C: I've seen Calderdale MBC

M: That's correct, metropolitan borough council. Calderdale is one of those. And Calderdale runs a number of the services for this area, and I think Christine you're gonna talk about those a bit later. But the other thing – and this is new for this area - although it's been going in other parts of the country for a few years now – but across West Yorkshire - so that is Calderdale, Leeds, Bradford, Wakefield and Kirklees, which is the name for the area around Huddersfield - across that area, which is known as West Yorkshire, there is going to be an elected Mayor. Now at the moment we don't have that but we will have, I think it's from next year or it might be the year after, we will have an elected mayor for West Yorkshire.

C: So what difference will that make?

M: Well, the elected mayor will have responsibility for certain things - like transport, like planning, police, the fire service and certain aspects of housing and development across the whole of West Yorkshire. Whilst the other services are run at a more local level by Calderdale in our case for example. And this has been running for a while now, in London, they were the first to have an elected mayor - that was back in the year 2000. It's been going in Manchester for quite a while now a few years – 3 or 4 years I think in Manchester where they have an elected mayor. And it's being rolled out – spread out – across the urban areas of the United Kingdom. And it's West Yorkshire's turn to move over to that kind of system. And it's slightly complicated because all these smaller councils - they usually have a mayor as well, somebody called the mayor. But they're not an elected mayor, they're somebody appointed from within the council and they don't really have any major responsibilities, they are largely – we say – ceremonial. So they would go to events and they'd open a new hospital or do things of that sort. But they don't really make decisions and have power. But the new elected mayors will very much, very definitely have power and they'll be responsible for quite a large budget as well.

C: Interesting, as soon as you said mayor, in my mind, I picture a chain. Because traditionally mayors wear a big chain round their necks. I just see them as ceremonial (yes) people.

M: Yes, well that's definitely how it used to be. I don't know whether the elected mayors will also have a chain of office, they may do – I don't know. But certainly (I hope so) certainly the other ones always used to - that's true. So, Christine, tell us a bit about what services would – does Calderdale provide to its citizens?

C: Well it's interesting Mark they provide an awful lot of different services, some that everybody knows about - you know anybody who lives in an area will know because they're - Calderdale organises the bins, you know they look at refuse collection - or the bins as we call it and recycling. So that's something that every household in Calderdale will know about. For me - I - when I interact with Calderdale I use the library quite often. So in Calderdale there are several libraries in all the different towns. [10:00] Also I use sports centres, I even go swimming. So there are swimming pools and sports centres – leisure – across the borough, that means in all the different towns across Calderdale. They have museums and art galleries as well. I - truth is I don't use those so often but I certainly go swimming every week - recently I have been. They (what other services?) well one thing - any parent needs to be in touch with the local authority because they manage the admission to schools. Not all schools are run by the local authority any more although traditionally they used to be. Some are run privately, but the admission to schools is still run by Calderdale. So you need to know – you need to be in touch with them. Also they

have a big responsibility for health and social care. So they employ social workers, who are people who work with adults and children in need - in some kind of social or health need. Not enough to be in hospital but within the community. And then there's a lot of things that local authorities provide - an awful lot of services that you don't think of or you don't notice. They are the ones who record births, marriages and deaths. They organise elections. They, at the moment it's Calderdale, who's responsible for planning in the area. So if you want to make an alteration to your house or your property you need to get permission from the local authority. Will that change then, Mark? Will it become the West Yorkshire authority when we get a Mayor do you know?

M: I don't know in detail - I suspect there will be 2 levels of planning, so if somebody, as you say, wants to make a change to their house, I suspect that will still be handled at the Calderdale level, but I think when it comes to deciding on 'are they going to build a new estate of houses?' for example and put a new road through somewhere or develop an area for - new business area - those kind of decisions may well get made at the West Yorkshire level in the future But I'm not quite sure about how that's gonna work yet, Christine.

C: No, well we shall see. (we will)

C: Traditionally, through the previous - last century local authorities had a big responsibility for housing, in fact they had - and they built after the war council houses - was what they were called. Houses built and run by the council for people, for families offered at fair rent.

M: That used - there used to be large numbers didn't there? I don't know what the figures were but as much as a third of houses in the country were that kind at one stage. But that's not the case any more is it?

C: No, because they bought in the Right To Buy - so people bought their houses and so they're no longer run by the council. I mean, in order to provide social housing - the council - there are housing associations, so they're not run by the council but work in partnership with the council to provide that. (Yeah) Also they have responsibility - the local services include transport, particularly road maintenance so if they're digging up the road in your street, it's the council that people get cross with often. Actually Mark, I've just said that but that may not be true because people mainly dig up the road to put in some of the utilities either the electric or the gas, or water.

M: Yes I'm sure you're right though that the maintenance of the road is, in the end, the responsibility of the local council. I notice, Christine, you referred to local authorities, so we should perhaps explain [15:00] that the **local council** and the **local authority** they are really the same, they're **synonymous**, you can use either phrase I think for that.

C: Thank you mark, good point. And there's any number of other things that the council have a responsibility for - pest control.

M: What's pest control?

C: If you find your house is infested with rats, so you have rats coming into your house, or - I can't give any other pests at the moment...

M: I think wasps, if you had a wasps nest for example, yeah?

C: You can call the council and somebody from the council will come and try, at least, to get rid of that pest.

- M: Yes so as you say there's really rather a large number of services run by local government, local authorities, and some of them we know about and some of them are a bit more hidden aren't they? (Yes) Some I suppose you only know when you come to use it. (Indeed). So I thought I might say something about how Calderdale is currently run and organised. So each council – Calderdale included – will have elections and the elections are organised at the level of what is called a '**ward**' and a ward is a small area within a council. So for those of you who are familiar with the St Augustine's Centre, we're in a ward that's called Park Ward, and covers a few thousand homes in that area. And each of those wards has three councillors and they are elected actually every year there's an election for 1 councillor and they become a councillor for 4 years. So every year there is an election and then on the 4th year there's no election, and then they start again and they – so they alternate which councillors are changed or go – are up for election. And the people, again, local people, might be interested that one of our local ward councillors is councillor Jenny Lynn and she is also a trustee of the St Augustine's Centre, so we're very heavily involved with her and very grateful for the support she gives us as a centre.
- C: Yes and our original plan for this session, before corona virus hit and we were required to cancel the face to face session and just do this podcast. The original plan was that Jenny would come and talk to the students (that's right) about her role.
- M: And I'm sure we'll be able to organise that at some stage in the future when we get back to normal – or whatever the new normal is. So Jenny is actually a labour councillor, that is - she is a member of the Labour Party. And it is Labour that currently controls Calderdale Council, that means they have a majority of the councillors and therefore the leader of the council and the people who take responsibility for the key areas of the work of the council are Labour councillors at the moment. That hasn't always been the case, Calderdale has been controlled by different political parties in the past. But currently it's under control of the Labour Party. Now I think, Christine, that both you and I used to work for local authorities, so tell us about what you did.
- C: Well I did, it was my last job before I retired, I worked for Lancashire County Council, I worked for the – it was called the Ethnic Minority Gypsy Roma and Traveller Achievement Service.
- M: Wow that's a long title.
- C: It's a long title. And it was very interesting, my job was to support schools across the county - help them with their provision they made for children who spoke other languages, so for English as an additional language and for gypsy, roma and traveller children. My particular area of responsibility was the E.A.L. team – the English as Additional Language team. So I used to work with schools across the county. [20:00] And when I was there – I mean I retired 3 or 4 years ago now – there were – the reason why I mentioned the cuts, the lack of funding was because of the scale of the cuts that were in process when I worked there. So all the services were being pared down really across Lancashire (reduced). It was very interesting though it is one of the largest councils in the country – Lancashire County (yes I believe so) it's huge. It was very interesting. What about you Mark, you worked for a council too didn't you?
- M: I did, I worked for a few different ones actually in and around this area. I suppose the most interesting job I did was in Blackburn. It was called Blackburn with Darwin Borough, Unitary

Council it was called in those days and I was the Director of Education there, so that meant I had responsibility for all the schools in that area and for the support of those schools. And at that time almost all the schools did come under the control of the local authority, so that was a really interesting job. I had to work with – so we had the elected councillors, one of whom was called the Cabinet Member for Education, so he was the politician who had the ultimate responsibility for the education service. And I was the lead professional, so I was a professional educator and I was the director of education and I had to – I worked with the elected councillor who’s responsible for that. Over – and I did that for about 4 years in Blackburn and then I did a similar job to that in Bradford as well.

C: Very interesting, very interesting.

[MUSIC 22:15]

Language Support

In this part of the podcast I choose a few of the words or phrases from the podcast and talk a bit about them to help you to understand and develop your language. The first phrase I’m going to pick on from this podcast is that Christine talked about the ‘Right to Buy’. This was a policy introduced by the government of Margaret Thatcher, back in the 1980s and it gave those people who lived in council houses - that’s houses provided by the local council and where people were renting from the council - they had a right to be able to buy the house, so that it became theirs to own. And that’s what led to significant reduction in the number of council houses that were available to rent.

Second thing that Christine talked about was the cuts in local government services. This simply means the reduction in the services as a result of less money being available to local councils, local authorities. So these services were reduced, they were cut. Because there was less money available.

Finally I wanted to pick up on the word ‘synonymous’. I said that “the phrase local government and local authority were synonymous”, that means that they mean roughly the same thing. I thought this was worth highlighting because all languages have synonyms, that is words that are different but mean the same or roughly the same. And there are lots of synonyms in the English language, I’m sure you already know.

Some examples would be:

“old” and “ancient”

“beautiful” and “pretty”

“rich” and “wealthy”

“scared” and “afraid”

“ask” and “inquire”

“wrong” and “incorrect”

“occur” and “happen”

And there are lots more. It is often a useful thing when learning a language to know 2 or 3 different ways of saying the same thing so synonyms can be quite useful for you.

That’s it for this week’s episode. Just a reminder that the transcript of this episode will be available in a few days time on our website at www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk thank you for listening and stay safe in these challenging times. Till next time, goodbye