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Leading the way

Empowering councils to support the recovery

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Leading the way

In this edition, we look at local government's role in stabilising our national and local economies in the coming months, as people slowly return to their places of work and education (p10-11).

Council finances are struggling, hit by additional coronavirus-related costs and income falling off a cliff edge. The LGA continues to press for more funding (p4) and we have guidance for finance portfolio holders (p12).

Councils' discretionary culture and leisure services have helped many of us through this crisis, and have a vital role to play in the recovery from COVID-19 (p13). And we examine how working virtually is reducing emissions (p14), while taking a look at licensing (p15) and procurement (p19) in a pandemic.

We also feature our annual public health report (p16) – written before coronavirus, but showing that councils continue to make impressive progress.

Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner for England, writes about vulnerable children (p21), and we have guidance for cabinet members and leaders on leading communities through the current crisis (p29).

As some of this month's **first** may already be out of date by the time you receive it, please keep checking www.local.gov.uk/coronavirus for our latest updates and follow us on Twitter @LGAcomms and @LGAnews.

Cllr James Jamieson
is LGA Chairman



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Local 
Government
Association

Local flexibility needed on school openings

Councils should be given the power to close schools or nurseries where testing indicates new clusters of COVID-19, the LGA has said.

It wants local flexibility to allow some schools to take their own decisions about reopening, in consultation with their councils – for example, in communities where there is higher risk, such as those with a high

proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic residents.

Being in school is vital for a child's development and wellbeing, particularly for the most vulnerable, so councils are keen to support their local schools to get more children back as soon as possible.

Councils' top priority is the health and safety of local communities, and any decision

to reopen should be based not only on local circumstances, but the scientific evidence that underpins the Government's advice, the LGA has said.

The Department for Education (DfE) has published an overview of the scientific advice on COVID-19 in respect of children and schools, to try to reassure parents, pupils and teachers.

The LGA is also pushing for crucial tracing data to be shared with councils, to help them understand where local outbreaks are happening and act quickly to contain them.

As **first** was going to press, several local authorities had already advised primary schools not to reopen or had warned that they would be opening later than the Government's proposed 1 June start date.

Cllr Judith Blake, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "We know parents are anxious about sending their children back to school or nursery.

"Plans to reopen schools and early years settings must focus on reassuring parents that it will be safe for children to return to school. The safety of staff, parents and families is absolutely paramount.

"Councils need to be able to close provision where testing indicates clusters of new COVID-19 cases and it is vital that schools have the resources to provide staff with necessary protective equipment, as well as soap and hand sanitiser for cleaning." ● See p22, p31.



Councils 'need four times more funding'

Local government faces "unsustainable" financial pressures as the sector continues to lead efforts to beat the coronavirus pandemic, the LGA has warned.

The Government has so far provided councils with £3.2 billion, with an additional £600 million for infection control in care homes. But many councils continue to see costs spiral and income drop.

"Extra funding for councils will be helpful but they will need up to four times the funding they have been allocated by

government so far," said Cllr Richard Watts, Chair of the LGA's Resources Board.

"We are working with councils to provide the most robust evidence to government on the financial challenges they face. Their latest monthly returns should show the impact of a full month of cost pressures and income reductions and the impact of lower council tax and business rates collection rates.

"The Secretary of State promised that councils will get all the resources they need to cope with this pandemic.

"This commitment must be rock-solid and include the full cost to councils of meeting COVID-19 pressures and keeping services running normally, and compensation for all lost income.

"This needs to be explicitly guaranteed by government and demonstrated with ongoing and consistent funding in the weeks and months ahead.

"Without this, councils and the services our communities rely on will face an existential crisis. Some councils have warned that they will soon face the prospect of Section 114 reports. This would lead to spending blocks and in-year cuts to the vital local services that are supporting communities through this crisis and the national effort to beat this deadly disease."

● See p12





Cash for care homes

The Government has announced an extra £600 million for infection control measures in care homes in England and published additional guidance for the sector.

Its 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): care home support package' says the NHS will offer training on infection control and provide a named clinical 'lead' for every home, and recommends minimising staff movement between care settings to stop infections spreading.

The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics on community deaths highlight the prevalence of the pandemic in care homes, with 12,657 COVID-19 related care home deaths registered up until 8 May. Almost 40 per cent of care homes have had at least one confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19.

Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "Social care is the frontline in the fight against coronavirus and we need to continue doing all we can to shield and protect our most elderly and vulnerable.

"This extra funding for infection control in care homes is good news and will help councils' public health teams reduce and prevent coronavirus outbreaks.

"To play their full part in defeating this disease, councils need extra help and information to understand where outbreaks are happening and be able to act quickly to contain them. The Government needs to share this vital and up-to-date data with councils, as part of any contact-tracing programme."

Cllr Hudspeth added: "Councils have a close relationship with their local care homes and are already working alongside NHS leaders and service users.

"Councils will be reviewing their existing plans to continue supporting them and ensure those who rely on and work in social care are able to stay safe and well.

"Other aspects of care homes that councils do not have direct control over, such as the long-term future of the care home market, need to be met by government."

Pandemic highlights health inequalities

Black people are nearly twice as likely to die from COVID-19 than white people, according to figures from the Office for National Statistics.

Its data shows a similar risk for people living in the poorest areas of England, compared with those living in the richest areas.

Public Health England (PHE) has launched a review to establish more robust data on the factors impacting the number of cases and health outcomes for different groups within the population.

It will analyse how different factors – including ethnicity, gender, obesity and homelessness – can impact on people's health outcomes from COVID-19. The LGA is taking part in the review and PHE is expected to publish its findings shortly.

Meanwhile, Birmingham City Council and Lewisham Council have announced a joint review to gather insights into health inequalities within Black African and Caribbean communities – building on previous joint working on childhood obesity.

Damien Egan, Mayor of Lewisham, said: "Learning lessons needs to start now. This is not just about the impact coronavirus is having on BAME communities, but prompted by this current pandemic, we must seize the opportunity to drive an evidence-led approach on addressing health inequalities.

"News of the coronavirus-related deaths of frontline workers from these communities is heartbreaking and a stark reminder that we need to urgently address these health inequalities."

Roadmap out of lockdown

The Government has published its 60-page recovery plan, setting out how and when the UK will adjust its response to the coronavirus crisis.

Changes implemented in May included allowing people to spend more leisure time outside, encouraging those who cannot work from home to return to work, and allowing retailers such as hardware stores and garden centres to re-open.

From 1 June at the earliest, there could be a phased reopening of shops and some primary-aged pupils and children in early years settings could return to school (see left). From 4 July, some hospitality businesses and other public places could reopen.

Cllr James Jamieson, Chairman of the LGA, said: "It is encouraging that we are now moving into the next phase of tackling this virus and we look forward to seeing more details on the Government's plan.

"During this pandemic, councils' role as leaders of place has been more important than ever before. They will continue to lead their communities through this crisis as we adapt to this new way of life, working day and night to protect the most vulnerable, help local businesses, keep important services running and support national efforts to defeat this disease.

"The scale of the economic, environmental and community challenges that we will face cannot be underestimated. Communities will need to keep sticking together through this crisis and follow the Government's plan and social distancing rules to ensure people are not put at risk unnecessarily."



In brief

Youth services fund

The Youth Endowment Fund has launched a £6.5 million fund to support vulnerable children at risk of youth violence during the coronavirus emergency. Cllr Simon Blackburn, Chair of the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Board, said: "This will support youth services so that essential cost-effective prevention and early intervention work can help make the necessary step-change to tackle serious violent crime, including county lines activity and knife crime. We urge the Government to reconvene the Serious Violence Taskforce to look at how all partners can tackle serious violence and county lines activity, which may see a resurgence after lockdown measures are lifted."

Virus helps smokers quit

At least 300,000 people have quit smoking successfully and a further 550,000 have tried to do so amid concerns around coronavirus and the increased risk smokers face. A further 2.4 million have cut down on the number of cigarettes they smoke, according to Action on Smoking and Health (ASH). Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "We need to continue to support people to give up smoking altogether, both through the current crisis and beyond...Councils can help the Government achieve its ambition of eliminating smoking in England by 2030, but need certainty over their long-term funding to do so."

Rates revaluation deferred

The Government has announced that the next revaluation of business rates will no longer take place in 2021. It confirmed its commitment to more frequent revaluations but wants to provide more certainty to businesses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government also reaffirmed its commitment to a fundamental review of business rates with a view to reducing the overall burden on businesses, improving the current business rates system and considering more fundamental changes in the medium to long term.

New money for cycling and walking

A £250 million emergency 'active travel fund' will help encourage cycling and walking through new infrastructure such as pop-up bike lanes, protected space for cyclists, wider pavements, safer junctions and cycle and bus-only roads.

The Government will fund and work with local authorities on the measures, with the aim of encouraging more people to walk or cycle to work to relieve pressure on public transport, during the coronavirus crisis.

It has also issued guidance for councils on reallocating road space for cyclists and pedestrians in response to COVID-19.

More details of an overall £2 billion package of support – which aims to double cycling and increase walking to work by 2025 – were expected as **first** went to press.

The LGA is making the case for long-term certainty of infrastructure funding to ensure a sustained increase in active and cleaner travel.

Cllr David Renard, the LGA's Transport Spokesman, said: "Councils are leading local efforts to protect communities from coronavirus and will be central to the nation's recovery.

"We are pleased the Government has announced measures to allow councils to help the country transition to the new way we will need to travel around, including to and from work.

"If we are to achieve a sustained increase in active and cleaner travel, councils need long-term certainty of infrastructure funding. Local control over infrastructure and public transport budgets would enable them to deliver the widespread improvements needed to promote more active travel.

"This will not only improve public health but will reduce congestion and pollution and enable the creation of safe and attractive public transport networks."

Waste and recycling centres reopen

Queues formed at local waste and recycling centres as tips started reopening in May, two months after they closed at the start of the lockdown.

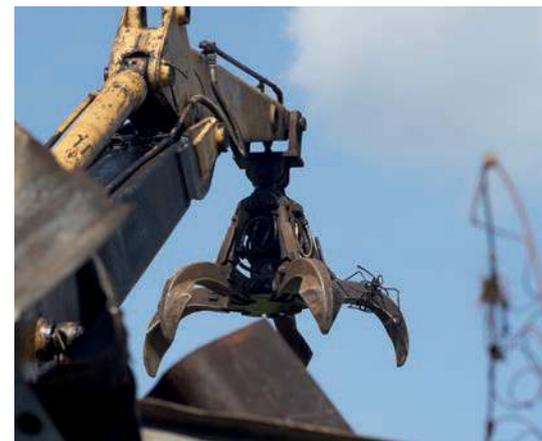
As **first** was going to press, the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT) reported that almost all local authorities expected to have opened about 60 per cent of their household waste and recycling centres (HWCs) by the middle of May, with more openings planned thereafter.

There was a notable change to food waste collections with 90 per cent of responding councils reporting collections operating normally, up from 68 per cent in ADEPT's previous weekly survey. Similarly, only 22 per cent of councils had not resumed bulky waste collections, with only 8 per cent not operating garden waste collections as normal.

The Government has issued guidance on re-opening HWCs, and regulations have been amended to allow people to travel to them under any circumstance, and not just where waste stored at home presents a risk of injury or to public health.

Cllr David Renard, the LGA's Environment Spokesman, said: "The decision to reopen sites will be taken by individual councils based on risk assessments in their area.

"This will be a gradual process based on whether they have enough staff, social distancing measures are in place to protect workers and members of the public, and waste staff are given personal protective equipment to reduce the risk of infection and provide reassurance."





Children's services 'ill-prepared' for coronavirus

Local authority children's services have been reduced to "crisis-driven fire-fighting" as a result of years of under-investment, children's charities have warned.

This has left them ill-prepared to cope with the torrent of extra challenges presented by the coronavirus lockdown, according to a report from The Children's Society, Barnardo's, Action for Children, the NSPCC and the National Children's Bureau.

They warn that local authority budgets have been so squeezed that councils can only afford to get involved when children have reached crisis point and need costly interventions – such as being taken into care – rather than intervening earlier to prevent a crisis.

Cllr Judith Blake, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "This report echoes our concerns about the welfare of vulnerable children during the coronavirus crisis and adds further support to our long-standing

call for children's services to be properly funded by the Government.

"Since stay-at-home guidance was issued, and with people self-isolating, children's social care referrals have fallen by more than half in some areas, from an average of almost 1,800 per day. Councils are extremely concerned about potential 'hidden harm' among children.

"Councils are working with their partners and communities to try to identify children who may be at risk, and putting in place plans so that, if there is a surge in referrals as children return to school, they are able to ensure children and families get the right help quickly.

"It is vital that councils receive the funding they need to support children, young people and families during the current phase of the crisis and through the recovery period. The impact of the pandemic on some children will be far-reaching, and it will be essential that the right services are there to support them."

SEND pupils 'missing out'

Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are not getting the support they need, with 47 of 94 local areas inspected by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission found to have 'serious weaknesses'.

An inquiry by the Commons' Public Accounts Committee (PAC) has warned that mainstream schools are struggling to meet the needs of SEND pupils. A lack of sufficient SEND places in some areas means councils also have to cover the higher costs of placing children in independent special schools.

The Committee is calling on the Department for Education to complete its SEND review as a matter of urgency. The review, announced last September, has been delayed by the coronavirus outbreak.

Cllr Judith Blake, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "This report raises some important areas of learning for councils, and it is essential that Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission work proactively with them to identify solutions to meet the needs of all children and young people.

"By working with parents, families and children with SEND, we can agree on what a 'good' system of support looks like.

"Since the extension of the eligibility for SEND support in 2014, councils have seen a near 50 per cent rise in children and young people with education, health and care plans, with more than 130 children and young people starting support plans with their council every day.

"The Government must use its planned review of the SEND system to ensure it works effectively for everyone. This must be accompanied by sufficient long-term funding for councils, and the powers to hold partners to account for their work to support children and young people with SEND."

Call for £1bn youth work guarantee

Employment experts have called for a £1 billion 'youth guarantee', and urgent investment in education and back-to-work support, as unemployment figures rocket following the coronavirus crisis.

Failure to take urgent action risks further entrenching the geographical inequalities that the Prime Minister pledged to narrow and creating a 'pandemic generation' of young people with poorer education and employment prospects, warn organisations including the Institute for Employment Studies, Learning and Work Institute, and the Association of Colleges.

Cllr Sir Richard Leese, Chair of the LGA's City Regions Board, said: "This helpful and timely report comes as we move into the

second phase of this pandemic and look at what more we can do to help our local and national economies get back on their feet.

"Councils and combined authorities are already working closely with employers, colleges and many others involved in education and job training to make sure nobody is left behind after we get through this crisis, as they are ideally placed to bring employment and skills initiatives together.

"It is crucial that any interventions from government are well timed and best meet the needs of local residents and businesses. Local government is best placed to lead on this, and we look forward to working with government and local and national partners to plan this."



In brief

Homeless taskforce

A taskforce led by Dame Louise Casey will help councils ensure rough sleepers can move into long-term, safe accommodation once the immediate coronavirus crisis is over. More than 90 per cent of rough sleepers known to councils at the beginning of the pandemic have been offered accommodation. Cllr James Jamieson, LGA Chairman, said: "Helping homeless people and rough sleepers off the streets has been a monumental effort by councils. They stand ready to work on a national plan to move them into safe housing after emergency measures are lifted. This must ensure they also have access to wider support they might need for substance dependency, and help with benefits, skills and getting work."

Building safety

The leaders of 25 councils have pledged to ensure vital building safety improvements continue during the pandemic, where this can be done safely, to ensure the safety of those living in high-rise buildings with unsafe cladding. They join the regional mayors, who previously committed to the statement.

Council bonds

A group of 30 councils – including Westminster City Council and Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council – is to issue three bonds this year through the UK Municipal Bonds Agency (UKMBA). It comes two months after the UKMBA, set up with investments from 52 councils and the LGA, issued its first bond.

Councillor forum

The LGA has set up an online forum for councillors in England and Wales, where they can seek and share ideas and good practice, and network and support each other during COVID-19 and beyond. Councillors can sign up for the group, using their council email address, on the Knowledge Hub – see <https://khub.net>

Act to help leisure providers

The LGA is warning that gyms and leisure providers face a crisis point, as many aren't eligible for the Government's support packages.

It has written to the Secretary of State for Culture, Oliver Dowden MP, calling for the Government to ensure leisure trusts have access to key funding to safeguard services. The LGA says leisure providers – many of which are charities – must be able to access the £750 million grant-based package for the charity and social enterprise sector.

With the average monthly leisure utility and energy bill alone costing £44,000, the Government and utility companies should also agree a short-term reduction in, or waiving of, standing charges for energy and water.

Meanwhile, Local Partnerships will provide support to councils that have contracts with Places Leisure, Greenwich

Leisure (GLL), Freedom, and Fusion, in response to requests from providers for financial assistance and/or changes to contractual obligations.

Cllr Gerald Vernon-Jackson, Chair of the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, said: "Leisure facilities are an affordable space for our communities to exercise and socialise with family and friends. They play a key role in improving our communities' physical and mental wellbeing.

"If we do not act to save these vital community resources, it will cost us much more in the long-term, both socially and economically. It is vital that government works with councils and leisure providers to identify any potential funding to avoid reaching a crisis point."

● 'Options for councils in supporting leisure providers through COVID-19' – see www.local.gov.uk/publications



'Reform RTB to get new homes built'

Desperately needed new social homes could go unbuilt unless the time that councils are given to spend money from Right to Buy sales is extended from three to five years, the LGA has warned.

With the building of new homes delayed or stopped by the coronavirus crisis, many councils are concerned that they will not be able to spend the Right to Buy (RTB) cash on replacing much-needed council homes sold under the scheme.

Meanwhile, more than 450,000 home buyers and renters have been given the green light to complete their moves, after the Government issued guidance on restarting the housing market and supporting planning departments.

Councils will be able to publicise planning applications online and smaller housing

developers may defer payments to councils to manage their cash flow.

The LGA has called for flexibility on construction site working hours, to be negotiated on a site-by-site basis with councils so they can consider the impact on local residents.

Cllr David Renard, the LGA's Housing Spokesman, said: "It is good that the Government has brought forward measures to ensure that planning departments can continue to operate effectively within current public health guidelines, and... has acted on our calls by increasing flexibility on publicity requirements for planning applications.

"The Government needs to go further by allowing councils at least five years to spend RTB receipts to avoid the coronavirus crisis exacerbating the current shortage of social housing.

"Councils also need to be able to keep 100 per cent of receipts, set discounts locally and increase the proportion of receipts that can be used to meet the cost of replacing homes. This is critical if we are to get building again as we begin the national recovery."

● See www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-planning-update, see p18

PARLIAMENT



Funding issues highlighted in Parliament

The LGA has been busy lobbying the Government on your behalf during the COVID-19 crisis – and will continue to do so

Throughout this pandemic, local government has worked – and continues to work – tirelessly to protect lives, livelihoods and the most vulnerable in our communities.

In Parliament, a number of select committees continue their work analysing the impact of the outbreak on various public services, and the LGA has been raising with MPs the support that councils are providing to their communities and the challenges they continue to face.

Cllr James Jamieson, LGA Chairman, recently appeared virtually before the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee to give evidence to that effect.

During the session, the Chair of the Committee, LGA Vice-President Clive Betts MP, paid tribute to councils.

He said: "On behalf of all the Committee, I would like to thank everyone in local government... particularly those frontline workers in social care, helping with the volunteers,

the environment and public health officials, and people who are doing our refuse collections on a daily basis."

Cllr Jamieson championed the huge difference councils are making – from the work of local resilience forums in delivering vital personal protective equipment, to the incredible efforts to accommodate homeless people and the delivery of financial support schemes to individuals and businesses across our communities.

The session was also another important opportunity to highlight local government's financial position, and to make the case that government must meet the extra costs and the loss of income many councils are facing.

Robert Jenrick MP, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, gave evidence to the

Committee on the work of his ministry, and similarly praised the work of councils in dealing with the crisis on the ground.

He stressed that the Government would ensure councils are fully compensated for the COVID-19 duties they are asked to undertake, but said that the financial returns received so far from councils suggested that sufficient funding had been provided to address the costs they had incurred.

It is clear that the overall funding shortfall is up to four times higher than the additional £3.2 billion in funding announced so far, and we will continue to make that case to government on your behalf.

Elsewhere, Cllr Richard Watts, Chair of the LGA Resources Board, gave evidence to the Public Accounts Committee on the issue of funding. The Committee is conducting an inquiry into local authority commercial investments and this follows a National Audit Office report that found local authorities had invested more than £6 billion in commercial property over the past three years.

Cllr Watts said that councils invest commercially for a variety of reasons, including to shape local places through regeneration. He cautioned against making it more difficult for councils to borrow, which could significantly impact their ability to deliver regeneration for our local communities.

We continue to lobby the Government and Parliament on your behalf, and have given evidence to more than a dozen select committees and all-party parliamentary groups during this pandemic, on subjects including the impact of COVID-19 on homelessness, education and children's services, and domestic abuse.



For more information about the work of the LGA in Parliament, please visit www.local.gov.uk/parliament

Leading the way

Councils have led the emergency response; we now need to be empowered to support the nation through the next phase



Councillor James Jamieson is Chairman of the LGA

In recent weeks, councils have led their local communities through this international crisis. We have created new services to support vulnerable people, ensured schools are kept open for the children of key workers, helped more than 90 per cent of rough sleepers off the streets and into safe accommodation, and ensured 98 per cent of kerbside waste and recycling collections have continued as usual.

Local government has led the way during the emergency response, and we now need to be empowered to support our communities as we tackle the unprecedented social and economic task ahead.

With the economy undergoing the biggest contraction the UK has seen since the financial crash in 2008, a pathway has been set to explore how businesses and industries might

operate again now and in the future.

Councils have already demonstrated support for the local business community, through the successful delivery of the new business rates reliefs for leisure and retail companies, in getting much-needed grants to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and using their supply chains to protect and redeploy local businesses.

Local government's role in managing town, village and city

“Councils need the economic levers to support the financial recovery as the emergency measures are slowly lifted”

centres, green spaces, transport hubs, the planning system and infrastructure will be central to stabilising our national and local economies in the coming months, as people slowly return to their places of work and education.

As local government's national membership body, the LGA has been promoting the leading role councils can, and should, play in planning the incremental easing of stay-at-home measures, and the support our residents, businesses and communities will need to prosper. We are sharing your insights and perspectives as new guidance and advice is prepared and published.

Local leaders remain hugely concerned about the financial pressures you face at this time. We appreciate the extra money the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Robert Jenrick MP, has secured from the Treasury – in response to the calls from councils and the LGA – as this will be helpful in the immediate term.

The Government has promised that councils will get all the resources they need to cope with this pandemic. This commitment must now be fulfilled by the Treasury and include the full cost to councils of meeting COVID-19 pressures and keeping services running normally, and compensation for all lost income.

Councils are playing their full part in the national effort by balancing their role as local leaders of place with their public health responsibilities. I have been shocked and saddened to see the statistics showing the number of care home residents and staff who have sadly lost their lives as a result of this pandemic. Every death from this virus is a tragedy, and each of these figures represents another terrible loss of a family member, friend or colleague.

The protection of our most vulnerable residents, and the frontline workers who look after them and keep our services running, must be at the forefront of everyone's minds as the restrictions on society are carefully relaxed.

That is why it is good news that the Government has allocated an extra £600 million to help control infections in care homes. This will help councils' public health teams in their efforts to reduce and prevent coronavirus outbreaks. The LGA continues to push for all the measures that we need to keep people safe and well.

In the coming weeks and months, the LGA will continue to represent the priorities of councils in our discussions with ministers and officials. To help keep you up to date with all the latest developments, we are continually updating our coronavirus hub (www.local.gov.uk/coronavirus) with links to resources, guidance, public health advice and other useful material. You can also follow us on Twitter at [@LGComms](https://twitter.com/LGComms) and [@LGAnews](https://twitter.com/LGAnews) for regular updates.

Do please let us know what else we can do to help, or raise your questions and concerns with us directly, by emailing coronavirus.enquiries@local.gov.uk. Your insights help to inform our engagement on your behalf.

These are issues our political leaders have been raising in our conversations with secretaries of state and ministers, as well as MPs and Peers from all parties, as we seek to build a consensus for our case.

Councils also need the economic levers to support the financial recovery as the emergency measures are slowly lifted. Every area has felt this pandemic in different ways and will need tailored

support to help get to the other side of this.

Local government has a unique and unrivalled insight into the needs of our communities, and we must be empowered to be able to reshape services around our areas. This could include enhanced devolution, proposals for a UK Shared Prosperity Fund, flexibilities on funding, and lower borrowing rates for council investment.

LGA events go virtual

The LGA has launched its virtual conference and events programme.

As **first** was going to press, we were holding a virtual briefing for our LGA vice-presidents, the MPs and Peers who work on your behalf in Parliament.

And more than 300 people joined a webinar on supporting the mental health and wellbeing of our communities, including children and young people, while self-isolating and/or socially distancing. The webinar aimed to help councils think through their local responses.

Other confirmed events include 'COVID-19 and ethnicity' on 2 June, with Professor Kevin Fenton, from Public Health England,

who is leading the Government's review into how factors such as ethnicity, gender and obesity impact on how people are affected by coronavirus; and 'Tackling Covid-19: an international view' on 17 June. We are hoping to have speakers from New Zealand, Germany and Denmark for the latter.

As we won't be meeting in Harrogate this year for the LGA's annual conference, we're also planning events over July and the summer.

Work has already started on next year's annual conference, taking place in Liverpool from 6-8 July 2021. Details will be published later in the year.

In the meantime, please keep checking our events hub – www.local.gov.uk/events – for the latest updates on our free events, and do let us know what virtual events you would find helpful in the coming weeks and months, by emailing events@local.gov.uk



Councillor **Richard Watts** is Chair of the LGA's Resources Board

Paying for the pandemic

New LGA guidance raises key issues for those struggling to balance councils' budgets laid waste by COVID-19

Councils across the country are doing everything in their power to support their communities but we know the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has already had a significant impact on local finances.

The current and future financial implications will vary across authorities and depend on size, geography and service responsibilities. However, additional costs are expected to continue throughout the current period of lockdown and beyond.

In response, the LGA has produced guidance for finance portfolio holders

on the key questions and issues they need to consider.

As a result of the additional costs of tackling the coronavirus and supporting our communities, councils are reporting cash-flow problems and we expect many to overspend against their budgets. Reductions in income from fees and charges such as car parking, leisure facilities and rental income from tenants, as well as from commercial investment, will also be contributing to the difficulties they face.

Given local councils are prevented by law from going into deficit, some of you may have already begun to think about your ability to balance your budget.

While guidance and funding are still evolving, the Government has so far provided councils with £3.2 billion to cover the costs of responding to this crisis. It has also made a series of announcements designed to

address councils' immediate cashflow concerns, including additional grant funding and allowing councils to postpone business rates payments to central government.

These measures are welcome, but the funding provided so far is unlikely to be enough. That is why the LGA continues to argue for government to provide additional grant funding to all councils to enable them to respond to the crisis and emerge from it with the capacity to resume local services and rebuild local economies.

Additional financial freedoms and flexibilities would also enable councils to respond appropriately to their own local circumstances and local needs.

Financial resilience has become a key issue over the past few years as councils have responded to significant reductions in grant funding and to growing demand for services prior to this pandemic.

Given the strain the crisis will place on reserves, together with any ongoing changes in council expenditure and income, the financial resilience of individual councils – and potentially the entire local government sector – needs to be reconsidered.

So while the nature, scale and level of government support is crucial, senior councillors will wish to work with officers to understand their council's potential longer-term financial position and plan a response.

Although the focus of the LGA's new guidance is on finance, it remains the case that local council budgets should be the financial expression of the needs, concerns and priorities of the local community.

Elected councillors and officers alike are currently concentrating much of their effort on the immediate response to the crisis, but senior councillors will also need to take time to reflect on how the pandemic will change their communities, affect the demand for services and potentially re-shape the way the council approaches workforce and service delivery over the longer term.

Local councils are known for their agility and resilience when facing difficult and changing circumstances and these skills will be tested again over the coming years.

“Council budgets should be the financial expression of the needs, concerns and priorities of the local community”



i 'Key questions and issues for finance portfolio holders during the COVID-19 pandemic' is available at www.local.gov.uk/publications



Councillor **Gerald Vernon-Jackson** is Chair of the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board



Councils' culture and leisure services have never been more important and have a vital role to play in the recovery from COVID-19

An unexpectedly positive development of the events of recent weeks has been the rapid adaptation of culture and leisure services to meet the needs of communities and the incredible flourishing of individual creativity under lockdown.

Libraries, museums, theatres and leisure centres were among the first to meet the challenge of COVID-19 by embracing digital solutions and, in so doing, have found new audiences.

Kingston Libraries have reached more than 10,000 viewers with their online Rhyme Time sessions; Barnsley Council's Cooper Gallery has attracted visitors from as far away as Brazil to its daily digital jigsaw challenge; and leisure centres are providing hugely popular online workouts.

Cultural services staff have been central in efforts to tackle coronavirus on the frontline, demonstrating how transferable their skills really are. Library and museum teams' experience in providing customer service and information has been invaluable in fronting community hubs. Events

specialists have applied their project management skills to scrambling teams to shield vulnerable groups.

Perhaps even more profound has been the change in behaviour among the public. Quarantine has resulted in an outpouring of day-to-day creativity as people shift from being audiences to producers of cultural content.

Exercise has taken on a new significance in people's lives, resulting in a boom in online classes and a new-found appreciation for outdoor spaces.

The massive popularity of creative, cultural and leisure activities during lockdown demonstrates the true value of these often-squeezed services. Under these most extreme of circumstances, they have been priceless in preserving people's mental and physical wellbeing. We must not forget this lesson as we move towards recovery.

Culture and leisure services have often been underfunded as largely discretionary services. Spending on culture and related services reduced by 45 per cent in the nine years between 2009/10 and 2018/19.

Council budgets will be under even greater strain coming out of this crisis, but we would be foolish to put culture

and leisure services at the front of the list for cuts. We must ensure that government also recognises this.

First, engagement in these activities really matters to residents when the chips are down. They are essential to people's mental and physical health.

Second, councils have a crucial role to play in delivering an economic bounce-back. Before COVID-19, the creative industries were the fastest growing part of the economy, along with tourism. These businesses are integral to our recovery and part of a complex ecosystem that includes the services funded and delivered by councils. We cut these services at our peril.

Instead, we should ask ourselves how can culture and leisure deliver recovery? How can we reshape our leisure contracts to ensure public health outcomes are embedded in delivery? How can we capitalise on the way libraries have been mobilised to support the most vulnerable in society? How can investment in everyday creativity stimulate local economic growth?

Ultimately, spending on culture and leisure is not a luxury: it is a commitment to the wellbeing of our residents and the economic future of our local places.

i **More information on the role of culture can be found in our publication, 'Cultural strategy in a box';** see www.local.gov.uk/cultural-strategy-box. For details of how culture contributes to economic regeneration, please visit www.local.gov.uk/culture-led-regeneration-achieving-inclusive-and-sustainable-growth



A 'green' silver lining?

COVID-19 has forced councils to hold key meetings remotely – but there would be environmental and other benefits to continuing the practice



Councillor **Liz Green** is Vice-Chair of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board

Councillors are, on the whole, sociable beings so we like face-to-face meetings.

However, the COVID-19 crisis has forced us all to work very differently to support our communities and keep up with essential council work and democratic processes. Virtual council and planning meetings, and even online surgeries with residents have become the 'new norm'.

There are, of course, many benefits to working in this way – not least in that it reduces our collective impact on the environment.

A recent Royal Society of Arts, poll found that 85 per cent of people want to see some of the changes they

have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic continue – including cleaner air and seeing more wildlife.

An ever-increasing number of councils have declared a climate emergency, often with greenhouse gas emission reduction targets at the core of their response. In areas where councillors – and council staff – would usually drive or use public transport to attend their often very busy schedule of meetings, we are currently saving on those emissions.

We are also reducing waste by greater use of online documents rather than physical papers.

Flexible and virtual working for councillors could also benefit those who have childcare and social care responsibilities, allowing them to continue their caring roles while attending council meetings from home. This could make the role more attractive to a more diverse range of people, helping ensure councillors better reflect the communities they represent.

Virtual working could also revolutionise surgeries, with councillors able to reach residents they would not normally encounter. There are, sadly, risks to face-to-face meetings, and virtual surgeries might also help reduce threats of physical violence.

We have proven, in the past few months, that local democracy can happen from the home and that there are significant benefits to our carbon reduction goals in doing so.

For remote working to carry on, and to continue to have a positive impact, we need to look to a 'mixed' future. Some meetings should be held remotely, some in person, and some with a mix of councillors and officers working remotely and in the room.

To do this, we need government to extend the permission to work this way. Then we need each council to decide for itself how best it can work – taking into account councillor wellbeing, individual circumstances, climate change and other considerations.

As always, the solution is local and will be different for different councils.

Reducing emissions with e-meetings

Councillor Andrew Cooper (Green), Chair of Kirklees Council's Corporate Scrutiny Panel and member of the LGA's Climate Change Improvement Working Group, says there is a change of culture in the air about virtual meetings

We began doing them as a necessity but once the COVID-19 crisis is over they will be recognised as a valid option, and often the preferable one.

Remote council meetings reduce the need to travel and that has a big impact on carbon emissions. In the UK, 28 per cent of our emissions come from transport, so anything that reduces travel while maintaining a functioning democracy must be a positive.

There is a lot of time wasted on travelling, particularly for car drivers who have little opportunity to work on their journey. So much as virtual meetings help save carbon, they are also often time efficient.

The ability to continue to play our part in representing the interests of local people through virtual meetings fills a real need. We must ensure more residents can meaningfully engage and ask questions at cabinet and full council meetings. There is a danger that fear of using technology will exclude people who are unfamiliar with it.

i **The LGA and its partners have created a Remote Council Meetings Hub providing advice and guidance on virtual working for councils, see www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/remote-council-meetings. For information about the LGA's climate change support, please visit www.local.gov.uk/our-support/climate-change**

Closing time



Councillor **Simon Blackburn** is Chair of the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Board

Councils have risen to the challenges facing the licensed sector during COVID-19, but greater local flexibilities would be better for businesses

Business closures and restrictions on people's movement arising from the response to the coronavirus pandemic have had a significant impact on the licensed sector.

Pubs and clubs have been forced to close, demand for taxis has fallen considerably and businesses like kennels have seen custom largely disappear as pet owners' holidays are put on hold.

As a result, councils have been receiving a large number of requests from licensees for advice about how they should be operating their businesses in a safe and legal way once they are able to open, and for support at a time where normal operations have been disrupted and the viability of some businesses is under threat.

Councils' licensing teams have also had challenges to contend with as officers and members work through how to manage practically the administration of licensing and decision making while working remotely.

The LGA has been lobbying government to provide detailed guidance for councils around licensing to support consistency. While government has not given detailed responses to many of the issues arising, it has instead encouraged councils to take a pragmatic approach where there is discretion to do so.

In March, Kit Malthouse MP, Minister for Crime and Policing, wrote to chairs of licensing committees to endorse this approach, which largely reflects what has already been happening.

In the absence of guidance from central government, the LGA developed some practical help for councils on approaches to managing licensing during the pandemic, which reflects on the practices and approaches being taken by some local authorities.

The guide sets out some key

principles and picks up on issues around fees, procedures and hearings, as well as dealing with non-compliance. The guidance, alongside other useful information related to licensing, is hosted on the LGA's COVID-19 hub (see www.local.gov.uk/coronavirus).

Councils have risen to the challenges that have presented themselves. Licensing committees have been pioneering the use of video conferencing to run 'virtual' hearings; digital licences have replaced physical ones; and, where possible, temporary licences have been issued so that people can continue to work.

One of the key challenges, however, has been where legislation has not had the flexibility to allow councils to make concessions for those businesses forced to close. For example, councils have come under pressure from pubs and bars to refund or reduce annual licence fees but, as these fees are set

centrally, councils do not have the discretion to do this.

The LGA has long argued for the localisation of licensing fees and this is perhaps a timely reminder of why the flexibility this would offer would be better for councils and businesses.

As the country takes tentative steps towards re-opening businesses and licensed premises, it is imperative that government provides the clear guidance and support that is needed for them to open safely, and for councils to be able to regulate this effectively to protect the public.

i 'Approaches to managing licensing and related issues during the COVID-19 pandemic: advice for licensing authorities' and other advice and guidance on licensing issues is available at www.local.gov.uk/our-support/coronavirus-information-councils/covid-19-licensing





Public health partnerships

Council-provided public health services continue to improve and evolve to tackle health inequalities, according to the LGA's latest annual report



Councillor **Ian Hudspeth** is Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board

Over the past seven years, public health has been the responsibility of local government, and tackling health inequalities across the country is one of the key priorities for the services that councils provide alongside local partners.

Since 2013, against a backdrop of rising demand for health and care services and a reduction in public health grant funding, the progress that

councils have made is impressive.

Each year, the LGA publishes its annual report on public health to take stock of the progress councils have made and what more needs to be done. Our latest report – published in May, but written before COVID-19 – shows how public health in local government, working closely with the NHS and others, continues to go from strength to strength.

The report bears witness to good practice from combined authorities and councils from across the political spectrum and the country, regardless of their size, population and deprivation levels.

Councils have continued to build on the work they have done in this area. Directors of public health are increasingly collaborating with public health colleagues in neighbouring authorities. They are pooling expertise and providing mutual support on health issues best tackled at scale

and across larger footprints; bringing together more expertise; positioning health and wellbeing as a key priority for services such as transport, housing and the environment; and commissioning public health services to improve access, outcomes and cost-effectiveness.

No doubt this experience and collaboration will have aided councils in dealing with COVID-19 in the way that they have.

Over the past year, there has been greater consensus about what needs to be done to improve health and tackle inequalities – and, to its credit, the Government has made real progress on the issue of public health.

As part of the Prevention Green Paper published late last year, the Government set out a framework for making health everyone's business and shifting the NHS from a model based on treatment to one based on prevention.

The Green Paper signalled a real shift of focus from the length we live our lives to the length we live them in good health, and there is much to be done in this area: a 19-year gap already exists between people in the most deprived areas and their more affluent neighbours.

The Government's approach

i 'Public health transformation seven years on: prevention in neighbourhood, place and system' is available at www.local.gov.uk/publications



Case studies

East Sussex

In 2017, East Sussex County Council created an integrated health and wellbeing service.

Its aim is to reduce the gap between the most and least deprived by making support more accessible to people with greater levels of need, delivering a streamlined point of access and supporting residents with a range of issues.

Single-issue services had previously led to users with multiple issues having to navigate a series of support services – so the council's One You East Sussex programme has brought together provision across smoking, weight loss, physical activity and alcohol misuse. Since the service launched, more than 14,000 people have received support.

The service runs programmes such as the football weight-management scheme Man vs Fat, and is designed to be flexible, with a mobile support unit bringing provision closer to those residents who live in harder-to-reach areas.

In the first nine months of 2019/20, 704 people took part in weight-management interventions, with a further 2,556 beginning interventions to quit smoking. The programme's Stoptober campaign resulted in the largest number of people beginning a stop smoking programme in a single month – 434 – double the number before these services had been brought together.

Quality has also improved, with 41 per cent of weight-management intervention users within the service achieving at least 5 per cent weight loss, compared with only 16 per cent of users under the previous service.

Cllr Carl Maynard, Lead Member for Adult Social Care and Health, said: "The return of public health to local government enables us to build on the achievements we have made in promoting and protecting the health of residents in East Sussex, and put health and wellbeing at the heart of everything we do.

"Having effective behaviour-change support services in place not only helps us address health inequalities, but it can also impact positively on other parts of the council by, for example, reducing demand for social care support."

Gateshead

Working in partnership with Teesside University, Gateshead Council has embedded a researcher in its public health team.

Together, they are working on a housing estate with high levels of deprivation, alongside a well-established local 'anchor' organisation, Pattinson House, a community project run by the charity Edberts House.

The aim of this project is to identify what local people think would help them to improve their health and wellbeing, and support them to implement their own ideas.

The research carried out by the public health team found residents were conscious of what they needed to do to be healthy, but faced barriers to entry, such as the ability to afford healthy food or to exercise safely.

As a result, the council put in place a series of interventions, brought to life by Pattinson House and the residents themselves.

These included a social enterprise providing weekly healthy pizza and food events, encouraging volunteering, training and paid-employment opportunities for local people. A continuing partnership with Harriers running club was also set up. This allows young people to run with the club, and has resulted in a national award from Athletics England for Innovation Project of the Year.

Gateshead Council supported Pattinson House and covered the cost of seed initiatives to make them self-sustaining.

The success of these projects has resulted in a similar support package attracting substantial further funding from the National Lottery Community Fund to develop work on a neighbouring estate.

"There is much in the Green Paper with which to be pleased"

emphasises personalised support and creating solutions together – and not just in Westminster. There is much in the long-awaited Green Paper with which to be pleased.

As ministers look ahead to their next steps – which no doubt will look and feel different from what they would have done before COVID-19 – we, as partners across the local government spectrum, remain committed to working with central government, the NHS and Public Health England to ensure our communities live healthier, longer lives.

Our work is far from done, and councils are ambitious to do more in areas such as air pollution, smoking, and what we eat. But amid the current pandemic, this year's public health report is a useful reminder that while local government is playing a leading role in the health of this nation – and has a track record of delivering first-class public health services – more can still be done with a long-term public health funding settlement.



Councillor **David Renard** is Chairman of the LGA's Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board

First homes

A new scheme to help first-time buyers could reduce the supply of other affordable and social homes for rent

Earlier this year, the Government proposed its First Homes policy, which is designed to deliver homes at a discounted rate for local first-time buyers in an effort to get them on the housing ladder.

The Government has pledged to roll this out as soon as possible and, in the meantime, has sought views from the sector, including local authorities.

In our submission to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's (MHCLG's) consultation, the LGA said that councils want to play a leading role in developing a locally responsive mix of tenures, which includes homes for sale, as well as social and other affordable homes for rent.

Councils are ambitious to increase

“First Homes could make a valuable contribution to the mix of housing options”

housing supply that is sustainable, meets demand, and is matched by the required services and infrastructure.

Local government has an important role to play in achieving this ambition, both as leaders of place through the planning system and as builders of homes in their own right.

The LGA broadly supports the principle of First Homes as a discounted home-ownership product, which could assist first-time buyers to purchase a home they can afford in their own communities.

The proposal to place an in-

perpetuity discount on First Homes, so that first-time buyers who move up the property ladder make way for others to benefit from the scheme, is also welcome. This is something the LGA called for during the Government's Starter Homes consultation.

The LGA's response also makes clear that, while First Homes could make a valuable contribution to the mix of housing options, local planning authorities need to maintain the levers to deliver them alongside other housing tenures in a way that takes into account local housing needs.

To illustrate why this is important, analysis undertaken on behalf of the LGA found that there are just four local authorities where the median-income household could afford to buy the average new-build home at a 30 per cent discount (the discount applied to First Homes) with a 5 per cent deposit.

The LGA is also concerned about the potential impact on the delivery of social and affordable rented homes if proposals for up to 80 per cent of Section 106 units to be First Homes are taken forward.

There is a risk that a nationally set First Homes requirement may displace other discounted homes, particularly affordable and social homes for rent, of which there is already an under-supply in some areas.

The LGA is also calling for local authorities to be able to set their own eligibility criteria for First Homes, determined with regard to local incomes and house prices.

Above all, council house building and reform to Right to Buy are critical to boosting the supply of new homes to meet the needs of local communities. Allowing councils to retain 100 per cent of sales receipts and set discounts locally will ensure that they are able to reinvest in new supply.



i For the LGA's full submission to MHCLG on First Homes, please see www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses. For more information about the LGA's work on housing, please visit www.local.gov.uk/topics/housing-and-planning



Supporting council suppliers



Councillor **Neil Prior** is Deputy Chair of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board and Productivity Lead Member

Local authorities have been rightly praised for the amazing work they've done for their residents during the pandemic – from coordinating food drops to the vulnerable to providing regular bin collections – all while others have been locked down.

But you might be surprised to know that they have also been doing their best to protect local businesses, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the local economy, all of which have been so devastatingly affected by the response to the COVID-19 restrictions.

Council procurement teams across the country have proactively been supporting and looking after our local supply base and doing their best to help SMEs and local businesses, which are the lifeblood of our local communities and economies.

They have been supported in this work by the National Advisory Group for Procurement (NAG), which embodies the LGA's sector-led improvement ethos. Set up in 2011 and composed of local authority heads of procurement from across England and Wales, it represents the whole sector, with seats at the table for fire and rescue services and the professional buying organisations. It's the eyes and ears of the sector, and shapes and informs the

Protecting community supply chains has been vital to keeping local services running

LGA's procurement work programmes, guidance, training and support offer.

Drafted in by the Cabinet Office, NAG was at the centre of developing best-practice guidance on supplier relief at the start of the pandemic. Along with the LGA and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, its members provided the 'boots on the ground' intelligence on what local suppliers would need to survive during this crisis and how, practically, councils could support them.

Many suppliers to councils have struggled to meet their contractual obligations, putting their financial viability, ability to retain staff and, crucially, our local supply chains at risk.

As contracting authorities, councils are required to support suppliers at risk, so they are better able to cope with the current situation and to resume normal service delivery – and fulfil their contractual obligations – when the crisis is over.

Suppliers have been put on immediate payment terms to maintain cash flow and protect jobs, while many councils have sought out at-risk suppliers and continued to pay them throughout the crisis on a 'continuity and retention' basis.

There have also been innovative ideas for redeploying unrequired service

capacity to other areas of need – for instance, school-meal providers supplying food for NHS and key workers, or school transport (taxis) being diverted to deliver food supplies and medication to the vulnerable.

Although the guidance does not apply to charities and the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector, a lot of councils have taken the same approach to requests for relief from these organisations.

Personal protective equipment (PPE) remains the number one issue for councils striving to protect their care staff and other frontline workers. The shared intelligence and experiences of the group's endeavours to source and procure equipment for their frontline staff has been crucial, as we continue to strengthen our body of evidence to lobby and influence central government on PPE.

Councils are going to be at the forefront of recovery, and having an effective and resilient supply chain is crucial. NAG will be at the centre of shaping and informing policy that enables councils to continue to support and protect our local suppliers, and deliver the services on which our residents and communities rely.

i For more information on procurement, please visit www.local.gov.uk/our-support/efficiency-and-income-generation/procurement. **The Government's guidance on best practice for public sector procurement, including during the pandemic**, is available at www.gov.uk/government/collections/procurement-policy-notes



Digital eagles



Councillor **Bill Hinds** (Lab) is Lead Member for Finance and Support Services at Salford City Council

Engaging staff and updating their IT skills has helped with the digital transformation of Salford City Council

Five years ago, I read bundles of printed committee papers. Now I've learnt to use an iPad and read a PDF via email, saving money in time, print and paper. This is just one example of how our Digital Eagles scheme has helped me and the digital transformation of Salford City Council.

With digitalisation rapidly transforming how we live our lives and access services, we faced a huge challenge in upskilling our employees so they could help customers interact with us online and use new digital services. Embracing digital technology was the answer.

“We faced a huge challenge in upskilling our employees”

Barclays had successfully helped thousands of customers switch to online banking. Would it be willing to help us? Several months later, the first digital partnership between an international bank and local authority was born and our Salford Digital Eagles scheme was set to soar.

It was open to all our staff, regardless of existing skills. They answered in their hundreds and new recruits still join.

In partnership with Barclays, we

created a programme to support our ‘eagles’ to develop digital and soft skills to help others. They share learning and skills among themselves and are supported with regular, ongoing training. Combined with the digital transformation of services across the council, there have been many success stories.

These range from dog wardens using Facebook to reunite stray dogs and owners, to customer services who have swapped hundreds of daily phone calls for Twitter to resolve customer queries; and from refuse collectors who helped colleagues learn to access online pay slips to youth workers who use the latest apps to engage with young people.

More than 400 eagles have supported some 3,000 people to be confident online.

Anyone, including councillors, can call on the digital eagles for help, and their skills have proved invaluable during the coronavirus pandemic. Hundreds of employees are now working safely from home and eagles have helped them master Microsoft Teams to continue team meetings and share files.

It was always our plan for eagles to share their skills with the community, by helping family, friends and neighbours, but we wanted to go further and bring 8,000 of the most digitally excluded online.

We partnered with Good Things Foundation, the UK’s leading digital inclusion charity, to launch Digital You

(see www.salford.gov.uk/digitalyou) and an army of volunteers. We use trusted faces in trusted places – friendly and helpful volunteers in local libraries, community centres or care homes where people feel comfortable learning new skills.

We’ve helped people Skype and FaceTime family and friends, save money by finding better deals online, and apply for benefits and jobs.

We also won Digital Council of the Year in 2018. Salford pioneered the industrial revolution – now we’re leading the digital revolution.

The LGA’s Digital Inclusion programme

This LGA-funded programme supports 11 councils to work with specific groups of residents to support those who don’t have the skills, confidence or infrastructure to go online. It will expand local government’s set of tools and solutions that aim to greatly improve resident opportunities in a growing digital world.

To find out more, please visit www.local.gov.uk/digital-funded-programmes-and-case-studies

Profiling child vulnerability



Anne Longfield
is the Children's
Commissioner
for England

Nobody knows better than local authorities the challenge of keeping vulnerable children safe.

The huge financial challenges that councils have faced over the past decade have made this job tougher, and we all know that, often, children are missing out on help – either because they are on the edge of statutory services and so don't qualify for support, or because they're falling through gaps in an overstretched system.

Identifying these vulnerable children is crucial and, in April, my office published new local area profiles showing the extent of child vulnerability around the country, council by council. This work is the latest stage in a three-year project asking: if society doesn't know how many vulnerable children there are, how can it do enough to help them?

It is the only comprehensive source of data on all risks to children currently available in England.

These local area profiles of child vulnerability are important tools for national government and for councils – helping them to identify how many vulnerable children there are in each local authority area.

During the coronavirus crisis, they also highlight the groups at heightened risk, and provide a framework for central government to target additional resources at the areas most in need.

Local authorities should be factoring this information into their decision-making when it comes to COVID-19 responses – so, if 26 per cent of the children in your area live in crowded homes (as is the case in Newham), making sure there is space for them to play outdoors, or getting them into schools, should be a priority.

Our data shows that there are more than 50,000 children in the country on child protection plans, but also that there is significant variation around the country. In Blackpool, for example, 13 children in 1,000 are placed on child protection plans, while,

in Westminster, it is only one per 1,000.

Our matrix of local need also suggests that the prevalence of domestic violence varies by area; around 5 per cent of children in Wokingham and Surrey live in a household where domestic abuse is occurring, while more than 10 per cent in Hackney do so.

These child-vulnerability numbers are stark. Indeed, we estimate there are more than two million children in England in homes where there is either a problem with drug or alcohol abuse, domestic violence or serious parental mental health problems. Our data contains many more examples.

In many ways, the COVID-19 crisis has forced government to act quickly to protect vulnerable children in a way none of us could have predicted even a few months ago.

After the crisis passes, I hope that the Government will understand better the dangers facing many vulnerable children, and that it will be bold and brave enough to recast our country to tackle many of these generational problems.

That must include providing much more support for councils and children's services, and better long-term funding for early help programmes.

It is undeniable that there are millions of children who are not part of our nation's progress. Identifying and then helping these children should not just be a consequence of a once-in-a-lifetime public health crisis. It should be the mission of every government and every council, of whatever political persuasion.

i For more information about the work of the Children's Commissioner for England, including the local vulnerability profiles, please visit www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/



Councils need a bigger cake



Councillor **Howard Sykes** MBE is Leader of the LGA's Liberal Democrat Group

The Government's response to the coronavirus crisis will, quite rightly, be judged by the historians and will focus on the human cost of the pandemic.

Confused messaging, delays to lockdown, the farcical distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) – all will be in the spotlight, as will the Government's abysmal response to the crisis in our care homes, which continues to unravel.

It is doubtful that local government finance will take centre stage in the history books, but the back-tracking on early 'commitments' from Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick MP are likely to have a devastating impact on the

economy and communities for decades to come.

Remember, we were told: "Whatever it takes."

Lost income is the biggest worry to councils. For most, the loss of income is a bigger figure than increased costs – a mega-issue for districts and even for my own unitary council. In Oldham, our latest full year cost estimates are: increased expenditure – £19.2 million; reduced income – £27 million.

I welcome the additional cash the Government has awarded the sector, but there is no doubt it wasn't enough – far from it. The latest funding (at time of print) was also paid for by the robbing of urban areas with high levels of deprivation.

The debate shouldn't be about how much of the cake we should be getting, but that the cake just isn't big enough.

Some of these issues have been simmering for a while – the crisis in adult social care, the underfunding of children's

services, failure to invest in public transport, the massive backlog in highway maintenance, caring for our green and public spaces, the endless additional burdens pushed down from government that are not being properly funded, such as tackling homelessness – to name just a handful.

Nearly a month ago, the Government confusingly changed its messaging to the public, while the other three UK nations retained the old slogan. Fingers crossed the new approach hasn't caused a major spike in COVID-19 numbers in England by the time you read this.

Stay safe everyone.

"For most councils, the loss of income is a bigger figure than increased costs"



Councillor **James Jamieson** is Chairman of the LGA

Rebuilding our lives and communities

As we look ahead to the coming weeks, the Government's phased approach to exiting lockdown means we can slowly begin to reset and re-build our lives, communities and economies, with many businesses and primary schools set to re-open from 1 June.

We know how vital it is for a child's development and wellbeing to be in school, particularly for the most vulnerable children, and that is why councils are keen to support their local schools to get more children back as soon as possible.

Councils are uniquely placed to know what works best for their local areas and, as there are different infection rates around the country, schools and councils must be able to work together to decide how and when schools open to more children.

The health and safety of our communities is our top priority and any



"Our common concern is making sure our communities are safe"

decision to reopen should be based not only on local circumstances, but the scientific evidence that underpins the Government's advice as we learn more about this disease and its impact on young people.

There are positive signs that this pandemic is easing, with the number of new infections and daily deaths continuing to fall, yet we only have to look at our care homes to know how serious this crisis continues to be.

There were 12,657 coronavirus-

related deaths in care homes up until 8 May, with deaths among care workers now double the rate of those in the NHS. Every death is a tragedy, a lost family member, friend or colleague.

Whether reopening our schools or getting our care homes back on their feet, our common concern is making sure our communities are safe.

The Government now needs to provide the reassurance our communities need and continue to listen to the concerns raised by local leaders on the ground. Keeping our communities safe also comes at a cost and, as we exit lockdown, it is vital that the Government continues to invest in local government so that we can support those who need it the most.



Councillor **Izzi Seccombe** OBE is Leader of the LGA's Conservative Group

Taking care of our mental wellbeing

The coronavirus pandemic – the most challenging health crisis for many decades – is having a profound impact on the mental health of the communities that we represent.

Uncertainty about the future, fear for ourselves and loved ones, disruption to our daily lives and, for some, social isolation, are having a negative effect, to a greater or lesser extent, on the mental wellbeing of many of us.

Following Mental Health Awareness Week in May, we should take the time to look after all aspects of our wellbeing and support those who are finding it particularly difficult to cope.

During this crisis, councils are working closely with mental health charities and voluntary organisations to offer a wide range of support to residents who need help, including helplines, local virtual wellbeing hubs and useful resources on their websites and other platforms. The LGA and the Association of Directors of Public Health have jointly produced a briefing, 'Public mental health and wellbeing and COVID-19' (see under 'public health' at www.local.gov.uk/coronavirus).

It was also very encouraging to see the Government providing £5 million to leading mental health charities to expand their support services, with grants of between £20,000 to £50,000 available for projects lasting up to 12 months.

“Uncertainty about the future...and social isolation are having a negative effect on many of us”

As we continue to do all that we can to protect our physical health during this pandemic, let us not forget the importance of taking care of our mental wellbeing as well – and supporting those who are finding this period of lockdown particularly challenging.



Councillor **Nick Forbes** CBE is Leader of the LGA's Labour Group

A collaborative approach to COVID-19

Nobody should underestimate the difficulty and size of the task that has faced the Government in tackling the coronavirus crisis, or doubt that ministers have had the best of intentions in their response.

But two months into lockdown, what is increasingly obvious is that an overly centralised response has hindered effective mitigation of the crisis. Many simply don't understand why ministers have not looked to local government for solutions.

From PPE supply to shielding, and from testing to business support, councils have shown they have a better understanding of how their local communities function.

“An overly centralised response has hindered effective mitigation of the crisis”

A 'one size fits all' national approach is also not helpful, as coronavirus has not impacted the public in a uniform way, with 'R' rates now clearly different in different parts of the country.

A collaborative approach could still lead to better protection of communities. In particular, it is vital that an effective local testing and contact-tracing system is put in place as a matter of urgency.

Councils are best placed to lead on this. We have experienced teams of experts trained in contact tracing available in our public health services who have the skills needed to get the system working quickly at a local level, and we already have the vital local relationships needed to engage with all stakeholders and residents effectively.

I hope the Government learns from past mistakes and does not impose a top-down approach. I'm convinced that by working together, councils can save lives and drive down the infection rate in every community across our country.



Councillor **Marianne Overton** MBE is Leader of the LGA's Independent Group

Councils leading with clarity

The latest government roadmap aims for more children to be back at school and more parents back at work by 1 June.

With the extension of outside exercise, some tourist areas are seeing an influx of visitors. Local councils have been quick to ask people not to visit and to remember that social distancing remains crucial.

The LGA has worked with councils to get waste and recycling sites reopened by appointment and other services running successfully.

Although the messages from government have been a little confusing, councils are leading with clarity.

Councils remain at the forefront of supporting the economic, social and environmental recovery and improvement of our new futures. The LGA is working jointly with our government ministers on this and on ensuring we are properly funded and have the flexibilities we need to do the job now and in the future.

“Councils remain at the forefront of supporting the economic, social and environmental recovery”

We are expecting to be reimbursed and are seeking full financial support to ensure we are able to lead the recovery, as we already are.

We would normally have had elections last month, but these have now been postponed until May 2021. It is time to strengthen our groups and work together to focus on what residents need.

We have a lot to do and it is vital that local democratic voices are at the heart of shaping the future: a future where communities, local economies and the environment are thriving.

Plugging the information gap



Councillor **Peter Lamb** (Lab) is Leader of Crawley Borough Council

With greater access to information than ever before, the problem we face increasingly is not a lack of information, but finding the 'right' information and avoiding misinformation.

This is a big enough problem in daily life, with phrases such as 'fake news' becoming common parlance, but in a crisis, the information gap costs lives.

As the pandemic hit, it became clear that, for all the briefings, the gap between government guidelines and what they meant on the ground was vast. For the lockdown to be effective

locally, residents needed a simple way to get answers to any questions they might have.

Our solution: give people a single place to get their questions answered in real time, with a weekly question-and-answer hour on Facebook Live with myself, as council leader.

To be honest, I had my doubts anyone would bother to tune in – after all, we live in cynical times. But the combined live and catch-up viewings have received between 3,000 and 8,000 unique views, reaching around 15 per cent of the borough's population.

“For the lockdown to be effective locally, residents needed a simple way to get answers”

While I've only committed to running Q&A sessions for the duration of the lockdown, the response has been uniformly positive, and various residents have asked would we consider running them, on a less frequent basis, once the outbreak ends.

Several things help explain this surprise success. At a basic level, residents clearly have more time on their hands and are more likely to have questions they need to raise.

Yet, beyond that, by giving the public the chance to ask questions directly of a leader, by answering every question – even if it's insulting or tongue-in-cheek – and by ensuring that answers are honest, unspun and as human as possible, we can re-empower citizens to hold local decision-makers to account. In the process, we can help rebuild the trust that has been lost over the years.

A new virtual reality?



Councillor **David Watts** (Con) is the Mayor of Polegate Town Council and a member of Wealden District Council

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed all our lives. Lockdowns, shutdowns and empty office buildings must surely raise a few questions about how we all operate and, indeed, how we may operate in the future.

Councils, like other businesses, must continue to operate, providing services to the public – and, as a councillor, I have still been able to conduct my role and operate effectively.

Under Section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020, local authority meetings can be held as 'virtual' or remote meetings. Technology allows this to happen over a

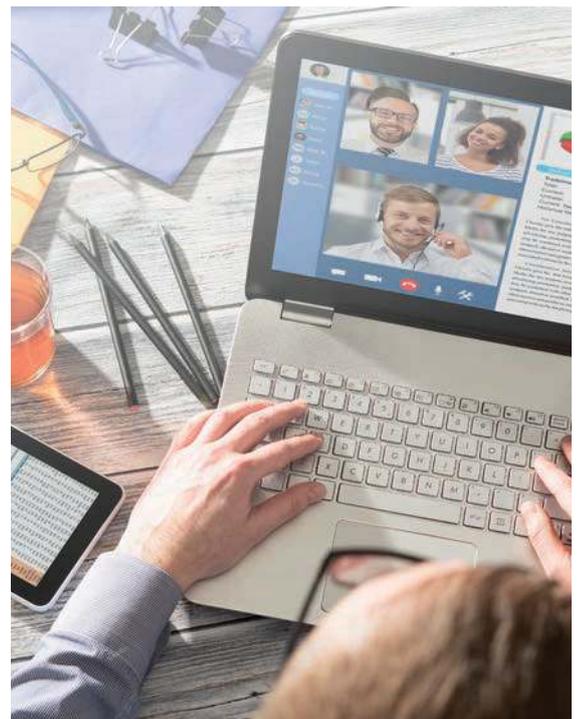
variety of platforms and, although not new to business, it is new to many councillors.

Many councils have recorded meetings for some time, either by video or just audio, and some have even broadcast meetings live. But the concept of a 'virtual' meeting is not necessarily something we have embraced as councillors.

Although alien to some, this concept could bring benefit for the future of councils – working more efficiently, saving time, minimising travel and reducing impact on the environment. It does allow decision-making, and that is what councillors do. A remote meeting does not stop debate, discussion or decision, and the public still has access.

I have attended a few of these meetings now and, I must say, I find them shorter and more focused and – funnily enough – attendance seems improved. We are creatures of habit and just because we used to do things the way we did before does not necessarily mean it is the right way, or indeed the only way.

Remote meetings seem to be a good thing and with many employees across the economy working from home, it poses a question about office space. Do we really need large office spaces, and to be paying heating, power, insurance and maintenance? Maybe



smaller hubs will be more cost-effective?

I am not saying that we should replace all physical meetings with 'virtual' ones, but I do think we need to consider how council life operates on the other side of COVID-19.



Councillor **Stephen Cowan** (Lab) is Leader of Hammersmith & Fulham Council

The power to deliver

When coronavirus hit, local government was among the first responders.

Despite government funding ambiguity, huge unforeseen pandemic demands and costs, and an immediate and significant reduction in incomes, councils across the country kept people safe and informed.

In the face of slow and sometimes contradictory government advice, the efforts of Britain's councils have been nothing short of heroic; from caring for shielded and vulnerable residents and finding accommodation for all rough sleepers, to redeploying teams to provide emergency provisions, mobilising armies of volunteers, sourcing urgent personal protective equipment (PPE), and supporting businesses and schools.

In short, local government – often the forgotten arm of government – has been maintaining the critical services that people depend upon, while also saving lives.

By early March, my colleagues and I at Hammersmith & Fulham had become uneasy about the Government's approach to the pandemic. It was noticeably out of step with other liberal democracies successfully responding, and it ignored

“The efforts of Britain's councils have been nothing short of heroic”

lessons that were already becoming clear.

Early projections indicated that, out of our borough's roughly 200,000 citizens, around 1,000 risked losing their lives to the contagion in just its first 12 weeks.

So, on 13 March, ahead of government instructions to curtail business as usual, we cancelled all meetings, moved our operation onto an emergency footing, and began a high-profile public health campaign, including posters and lamp-post banners,

with the Stay Home, Save Lives message the Government also adopted (pictured).

In the absence of a government-mandated lockdown, we moved early to limit crowds in parks and other public places, increasing the number of enforcement officers ten-fold to help our residents maintain social distancing and keep safe.

Similar examples abound throughout the country. In London, local government, of all political colours, has never worked so closely, urgently agreeing new measures, and sharing problems and best practice – all of which accelerated our ability to act decisively and move at pace.

As Britain views the horizon, these vital qualities will prove critical to rebuilding our society and rebooting the UK economy. Public confidence in the Government's lifting of its lockdown

measures is essential if businesses are to survive and economic activity is to increase. Short of a widely available vaccine or effective treatments, people will need to feel there is substance to the Government's test, track and trace approach – much of that relying on their all-important app.

But as the Bank of England speculates that this recession could be the worst since 1720, and the Treasury contemplates a U-shaped economic collapse with recovery holding off until 2023, public confidence cannot resuscitate the economy by itself. We need an economic miracle.

Such a miracle happened in the post-war Federal Republic of Germany. The Keynesian shot in the arm provided by the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan) was made more potent, in large part, because power and knowledge rested with its Länder and city states, which played the central role in remaking local economic ecosystems.

That should be part of the blueprint for Britain's way forward. Give councils the powers and resources and they will deliver.



Affordable credit for vulnerable families



Angela Clements is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Fair for You

Imagine you're in a low-earning or non-working household, and have a grand total of £85 in the bank. Imagine your fridge breaks, or the baby outgrows their cot. What happens next?

With more than 11 million people having less than £100 in savings, households across the country face this sort of agonising dilemma every day.

Broadly, they have two options – go without or pay a premium for the essential goods they need. The first, leaving children without a decent meal or a proper bed, absolutely shouldn't be tolerated in the UK in 2020. The second is equally unpalatable; there are plenty of

'rent to own' retailers and high-cost lenders ready to take advantage of families in their time of need.

Both create a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of the whole family, and make it harder to keep the household financially stable and paying its bills.

It is recognised that there is a dearth of affordable options for those unable to access mainstream credit. The social enterprise that I lead is helping to change that. Since 2015, Fair for You (FFY) – a non-profit lender – has issued more than 70,000 loans totalling more than £23 million, saving at least £37 million of the 'poverty premium' our



Fair for You Enterprise is a community interest company, a not-for-profit organisation, and is owned by the charity Fair for You Ltd. Its objective is to introduce better lending solutions that are fair to families, see www.fairforyou.co.uk



customers could have incurred at the hands of other lenders.

FFY provides flexible and supportive loans for essential items, with no late-payment fees. Many of the women who use us have suffered, or are at risk of, financial domestic abuse, and appreciate that we don't issue cash loans.

It's a proven, scalable model – and we've just been given that ability to scale. We're delighted to be one of five organisations to have received funds from dormant assets via the government-backed Fair4All Alliance, which should allow us to reach 111,000 new customers a year by 2025.

Affordable credit has the potential to transform lives and be a safety net for vulnerable families across the UK. I hope local authorities can work with us and fellow providers to make that happen.



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Andy Shields / 01223 378 005 / andy.shields@cpl.co.uk



Councillor **David Fothergill** (Con) is Leader of Somerset County Council

Pandemic exposes fragility of social care

The lessons learnt from the past few months will be many and far-reaching. None will be more important than the fragility of the social care system.

If ever a situation demonstrated the need to grasp the nettle of social care reform, COVID-19 is it.

I'm not just talking about secure, long-term funding for the sector – although that's a must. Bigger than that is the need for reform that recognises social care and health as part of a single system that cannot work properly until they're given parity.

Follow the narrative of this crisis – funding, personal protective equipment, testing – and you can only conclude that social care remains the support act for the NHS headliners.

On the frontline in Somerset, joint working and partnership is stronger than ever. But that's despite, not because of, the system of funding and division of responsibilities we all work within.

Twelve months ago, the first of the Panorama 'Crisis in Care' documentaries was broadcast (see **first** 636). Filmed over several months with our social care teams, it was an unflinching look at the service, the heartbreaking human stories and inspirational staff.

Above all, it laid bare the impossible decisions faced when funding has failed to match demand for decades and when the line between health and social care is complicated and fuzzy – more a hindrance than a help to doing what is right for vulnerable people.

The programmes could – and should – have been a game-changer, with national headlines, questions in Parliament, social care a hot topic in the Conservative leadership contest and further promises of action.

Yet we entered the coronavirus crisis with no Green Paper and seemingly no closer to a long-term plan than when the Panorama crew first walked through our doors.

The films created momentum and hope. How much of that has been lost and how will social care fair when the brutal



financial ramifications of this crisis become clearer for local government? COVID-19 has shown that social care reform is more important than ever, but has it made it less likely?

Right now, positivity is what is needed, so I am determined to see my glass as half full.

First, this crisis should be the catalyst for long-awaited reform. Second, the NHS stardust is finally rubbing off on the thousands of key workers in the care sector. This terrible situation is at least seeing recognition of social care as a valued profession. Let's hope this attracts more people to work in it.

Third, this country's neighbourliness, community spirit, community resilience – whatever you want to call it – has been revived. People are looking out for neighbours, running errands for people to whom they've never previously spoken, giving up their time for strangers. This matters, maybe more than anything else.

“The NHS stardust is finally rubbing off on the thousands of key workers in the care sector”

It's the sort of thing we have been stimulating and pump-priming in Somerset long before anyone had heard of coronavirus.

We've invested time and money in encouraging and developing community and village agent networks. This has helped us cope in a sparsely populated county with a disproportionately ageing population, and this crisis has also seen those networks strengthened. Will this neighbourliness evaporate once things return to 'normal'? Or will it grow?

Only time will tell. But if we can make some of these positives stick, then the COVID-19 legacy could be one of long-term hope as well as the short-term pain.

A local vision for the environment



Councillor **James Mallinder** (Con) is Cabinet Member for the Environment at East Suffolk Council

In 2019, after 10 years of merging back-office operations, Suffolk Coastal and Waveney District Councils became East Suffolk – the newest and largest (by population) non-metropolitan district council.

The environment is one of the principle foundations of the council's first administration, led by Cllr Steve Gallant, and I am responsible for developing and implementing this vision and engaging with all stakeholders.

We declared a climate emergency as soon as possible. We know we need to lead by actions not just words, to question the status quo and to make bold changes in how the council functions.

The environment is not just about the trees we see outside – it is also about jobs, employment, houses, consumption and waste. So, our environmental policy will involve working alongside business, not acting as a separate pressure.

Development can be positive if it uses fewer resources more efficiently and leaves a smaller carbon footprint. It is not

a binary relationship. We do not choose a tree over a house; instead, they must, and should, work together. This is the message that often fails to reach residents.

It is crucial in local government that themes and visions thread across all divisions. The environment should not be locked in a silo, so we are embedding environmental considerations in all policy formation and council decisions.

Often, the environment debate is focused on one aspect – carbon reduction, for example – but these issues should not be considered in isolation. In East Suffolk, we have proposed clean-energy projects, but these national infrastructure works can also have an impact on the environment, such as on biodiversity or a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The lesson is not to have such major works at any cost, but to look at the full picture. It's perverse to solve one aspect of the environmental conundrum while destroying something else you want to preserve and nurture.

We need to move away from talking about just the effects of the more environmentally friendly ways of doing things, such as increasing recycling or driving an electric car. We also need to look at how we can change long-term behaviour, such as buying and wasting less in the first place, or adopting more

“We do not choose a tree over a house; they must work together”

sustainable forms of travel – such as cycling or walking – where possible.

The key is to encourage residents to think about alternative ways of behaviour, and the coronavirus crisis has forced us all to act and think differently. Once we are all fully back to work, I want to make sure that East Suffolk continues with a different office mentality; working from home, hot desking and remote meetings are now top of the agenda.

Planning policy has a big impact on the environment, so we are working with officers on an extensive guide that will act as a reference point for our environmental vision. We are actively encouraging tree planting and less cutting of grass verges, but these changes need to be led by parish and town councils.

District councils, in particular, have an important role to play in leading by example and empowering local communities to do something. No matter how small the changes in our behaviour, any should be celebrated. It's these small changes that will make a real and lasting difference over time.



COUNCILLOR

Support for local leadership

The scale of the challenge that councils are currently facing requires strong, responsive and resilient leadership.

To address this, the LGA is refocusing its leadership offer so that senior councillors can continue to access learning resources and share experiences with their peers. This includes ensuring that you have access to online leadership tools, including new workbooks, to support you in your vital role in the national effort to respond to COVID-19.

Our latest workbook looks at the role of leaders and cabinet members. It covers: emerging key issues for leading members; local government's response to COVID-19; the role of leaders, elected mayors and cabinet members; governance

arrangements and officer-member relationships; community leadership and resilience; finances; other councillors; and member welfare and resilience.

Most importantly, it draws on the transferable learning that has been acquired from the experience of living through the COVID-19 pandemic, and includes case studies from council leaders and cabinet members from across the country – such as Warwick's Cllr Andrew Day, see right.



'A councillor's workbook on the role of leaders and cabinet members during the COVID-19 pandemic', see www.local.gov.uk/publications



Councillor **Andrew Day** (Con) is Leader of Warwick District Council

In this emergency, I've focused on giving confidence to the team, making clear and timely decisions, and driving for outcomes rather than political advantage.

All our operations have been thrown into disarray, with more than 90 per cent of officers working from home and councillors being formally disengaged from decision-making/scrutiny roles.

At the outset, it was vital for me to be calm, to listen and reflect, then give clear direction on immediate tasks, while always scanning to try to identify where the next issue was on the horizon.

The hardest part, initially, was to fully embrace the new reality; to put to one side all the cherished projects we'd worked so hard on over the past year, to bring together – and give full attention to – the mundane, routine services on which our residents rely.

I've spent most of my time communicating within and without the council. Residents are recognising afresh just how important the council is in leading a positive and constructive response to an emergency. My role is primarily as 'chief communicator', even when the messages haven't been popular – such as suspending the green bin service. As leader, I've tried to avoid hyperventilation in all communications or sounding like I'm now 'Churchill'.

A collaborative, cross-party approach is essential. I've invited the other group leaders to join all executive meetings. Our cross-party work on climate action has helped build a good level of trust and cooperation, so this is working well so far. This approach has thrown up real opportunities in planning for the recovery, including examining what council projects can be advanced to create more business confidence, job creation, and so on.

This is not for the faint-hearted. All I do is council business, 16 hours a day, seven days a week. I'm not alone in this response, but I worry just how sustainable this is.

This crisis highlights the importance of effective local government. It begs the question why councils have been under-resourced in recent years. I also believe that the Government will seek to reorganise local government on the back of this crisis, but doubt we'll get the financial investment needed to strengthen local services.

But that is for tomorrow; just now, I'm determined to demonstrate that this council can be trusted to 'roll its sleeves up' and get the job done.

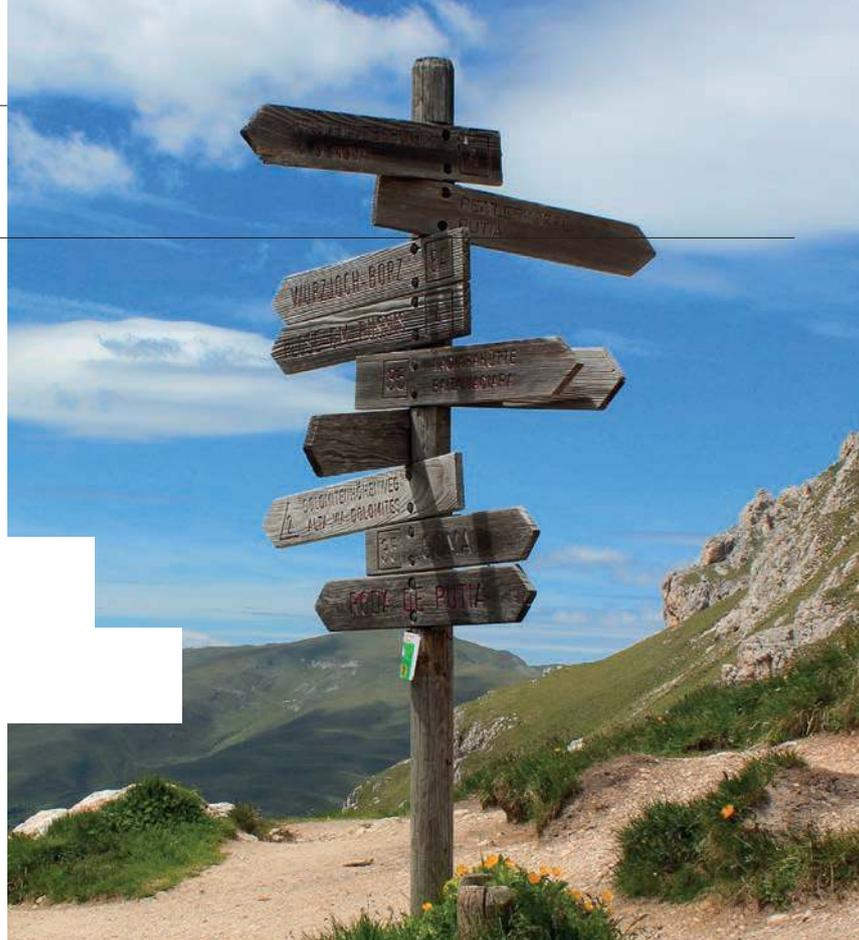


ELECTIONS

May's local elect woul



Professors **Colin Rallings** (r) and **Michael Thrasher** are Associate Members, Nuffield College, Oxford



We will never know, of course, but the Conservatives could have been celebrating their best local election results for nearly three decades.

Not since the contests that closely followed John Major's surprise General Election victory in 1992 has the party hit 45 per cent in our annual calculation of the 'national equivalent vote' – a measure of how the various parties would have fared if the local elections had taken place in every part of the country.

Opinion polls and local by-elections before the lockdown suggested Boris Johnson's electoral honeymoon would lead to a strong Conservative advance locally, with new targets in so-called 'red wall' areas such as Rotherham, Wakefield and West Bromwich (Sandwell), which returned Conservative MPs for the first time ever – or in generations – in last December's General Election.

Leaked analysis from Labour showed the party preparing for the loss of hundreds of seats and control of councils such as Crawley, Harlow and Plymouth. And it is unlikely that Sir Keir Starmer's accession to the Labour leadership on 4 April would have come in time to make a radical difference.

Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats have been leaderless and, in effect, rudderless since yet another disappointing General Election result, and the Brexit Party has disappeared as rapidly as UKIP before it. Currently, there are just 26 councillors across the country who call

"Johnson risks being derailed by a wholly unexpected event"

themselves 'UKIP' compared with a high of almost 500 in 2015. The Brexit Party can muster a mere ten.

In such circumstances, the Conservatives seemed to be facing an open goal. But local election triumphs are not always a marker of future success.

Labour's 44 per cent under Neil Kinnock in 1990 counted for little when the Conservatives were decisively re-elected two years later. Major's own general and local election achievements were wiped out in a matter of months as Black Wednesday in September 1992 wreaked damage from which he and his party never recovered.

The local contests held in the middle of the 2017 General Election campaign were thought to presage a landslide for Theresa May. Instead, the Labour vote surged in the final weeks before polling

and she was left a much-weakened occupant of Number 10 Downing Street.

As so often in the late 20th century, it was left to Tony Blair to re-write the elections history books. Labour's 47 per cent at the 1995 local elections marked the best performance by any party in terms of 'national equivalent' share of the vote.

The Conservatives, conversely, slumped to their lowest recorded score of just 25 per cent. And for Blair, of course, this was a sign of things to come, with his party winning more than 400 Commons' seats in both 1997 and 2001.

His successor, Gordon Brown, was not so fortunate. Badly wounded by the global financial crisis, he presided over Labour's worst local performances of 24 per cent in 2008 and 22 per cent in 2009.

Like Major and Brown before him, Johnson now risks having his premiership derailed by a wholly unexpected event. By the time almost every elector in Britain has the opportunity to vote in an election of any kind in May 2021, the electoral landscape could look very different to that of this year's hypothetical contests.

	High %	Year	Low %	Year
Con	46	1992	25	1995
	43	2008	26	2013
Lab	47	1995	22	2009
	44	1990	24	2008
Lib Dem	27	(5 occasions)	11	2014

Source: annual calculations by Rallings and Thrasher for Sunday Times

LETTERS

Reopening schools after lockdown

The Government's announcement on a phased return to school is both controversial and complex, but the safety of children and staff is paramount.

Since the 'lockdown', schools have remained open for some pupils. During that time, we have been supporting them and will continue to support them through this next challenge.

There is no simple answer to the phased reopening and I'm acutely aware that there is a nervousness about returning too early. This is completely understandable and while it will be great for all children to return to school, parents, carers and staff need reassurance about safety.

The focus is not on a specific date for schools to return but on providing support and guidance so that schools can decide when to begin a partial and phased return, which has the safety of children and staff at its core.

Durham County Council has provided extensive guidance to schools around a phased reopening and decisions on the timing of it, and the number of pupils returning will be based on an individual, rigorous risk assessment for each school.

I want to share my thanks and gratitude to all staff who have been working to keep schools open, providing homework and support to parents and carers and, in some cases,



delivering food and activities to family homes. Not only have they stepped up to take on these challenges, they have gone above and beyond what has been asked of them.

Cllr Olwyn Gunn (Lab), Cabinet Member for Children and Young People's Services, Durham County Council

? If you have a letter, or a story from the frontline of council services for our 'People & places' column, please email karen.thornton@local.gov.uk. Letters may be edited and published online

The challenges facing scrutiny

Correct scrutiny has always been a key part of a councillor's role. Having the ability to hold those who create policy to account, and to look at where improvements can be made, see how a project can be adjusted or encourage good performance, is a vital part of any local council.

The role of scrutiny committees has become more important than ever with the current COVID-19 pandemic. Cancelled meetings will have stopped agenda items being presented that, potentially, will create a backlog and may even overlap upcoming items, adding to the complexity of the situation.

When the scrutiny meetings recommence, many panels and chairs may have changed. Because of this, the handing-over of knowledge, history of individual items and ongoing projects should be encouraged from old committee members to new to ensure the best quality scrutiny.

Added to this is the importance of being well versed in the committee that a member is part of; being aware of the agenda is crucial to the success of each meeting.

Finally, a balance of correct scrutiny and accountability will have to take these difficult times into consideration. We will need to acknowledge the changing landscape of what is before us and be flexible in our thinking.

This will, of course, not alter the need for carrying out the role correctly and making sure that decisions taken are for the greater good of the area we represent.

Cllr Steve Gribbon (Lib Dem), Chair for Economy & Regeneration, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council



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Practical transformation and innovation support, together in one place

Our new self-assessment tool helps councils consider their approach to transformation and innovation. Following council feedback the tool has been simplified and now allows authorities to complete the modules which are of most use to them, from leadership of place; financial planning; the use of digital and technology; the use of data and intelligence; and procurement and commissioning.

Councils want to be able to continuously challenge themselves so they can do their best for the people that they serve.

Please encourage your senior management team to try the tool. For more information or support email transparency@local.gov.uk

Part of our sector-led improvement offer of support
www.local.gov.uk/transformation-and-innovation-exchange | #TIEx