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Association

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While we couldn't meet in person in Harrogate this year, the LGA's first 'virtual' annual conference proved a great success, with more than 4,000 virtual views or visits to our series of webinars (see www.local.gov.uk/lga-annual-conference-webinars).

We heard from speakers from across the political spectrum, and launched our new conference paper and campaign, 'Re-thinking local' (see p10). A range of lively 'spotlight' sessions on council good practice and learning from the COVID-19 crisis helped fill the conference gap left by the Innovation Zone (p12).

Elsewhere in this edition, we take a look at the Government's funding package for councils (p13), the LGA's proposals for building 100,000 affordable homes a year (p15), and how localising powers over education, training and skills could help avert an employment crisis, especially for young people (p16-17).

We have an interview with Simon Clarke MP, Regional Growth and Local Government Minister, in which he discusses the Devolution White Paper and economic recovery (p20).

And we hear from Lambeth's Cllr Sonia Winifred on the costs of inequality (p23), and Professor Colin Copus on the changing role of councillors (p29).

As ever, please keep checking www.local.gov.uk/coronavirus for our latest updates on the pandemic.

Cllr James Jamieson
is LGA Chairman



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Spending review 2020 kicks off

Securing the long-term sustainability of local services must be the top priority of the Government's 2020 Comprehensive Spending Review, the LGA has said.

The review, due out in the autumn, will determine public spending for the three years from 2021/22, and capital spending for the next four years.

Cllr James Jamieson, LGA Chairman, said: "Councils urgently need certainty about how local services will be funded from next year and beyond, so we are pleased that the spending review process has begun.

"With the right funding and freedoms, councils can provide local services that communities rely on and grasp the opportunity to address the stark inequalities the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed, develop a green recovery, address skills gaps and rebuild the economy so that it benefits everyone."

The spending review announcement follows on from the Chancellor's Summer Economic Update and the Government's COVID-19 funding package for councils.

The Chancellor acted on council calls by announcing investment in skills, and creating jobs, apprenticeships and opportunities for young people.

Cllr Jamieson said: "The social and economic challenge we face as a nation cannot be underestimated. Councils are deeply concerned about local economic decline and rising unemployment.

"Locally led action will be key if every part

of the country is to bounce back from this economic shock – as set out in our discussion paper 'Re-thinking Local' (see p10).

"Councils want to work with the Government on how to best target increased national investment to help young people and adults secure jobs and get millions of people back into work (see p17)."

Meanwhile, the Government's

COVID-19 funding package for councils – which includes an income guarantee, a commitment to address local tax losses and an additional £500 million in unringfenced funding (see p13) – contains some positive measures and recognises the pressures councils are facing, the LGA has said.

But it continues to call for the Government to meet all extra cost pressures and income losses arising from the pandemic, including fees, charges and commercial income – warning that otherwise councils face tough decisions on in-year cuts to services to meet their legal duty to set balanced budgets this year.



Time for fiscal devolution?

Local government across the western world has been able to react to the COVID-19 crisis with greater powers and autonomy than councils in the UK, according to a new report from the think-tank Localis, commissioned by the LGA.

It explores how local authorities in Germany,

Switzerland and Holland can access a diverse range of revenue sources and are able to adjust and introduce local levies in consultation with their residents and businesses.

In comparison, English councils have become increasingly dependent on revenue from council tax and business rates, with government

grant funding having reduced by almost £15 billion over the past decade.

The LGA wants to work with government on how its forthcoming Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper can explore options for greater fiscal freedom for local communities, such as raising local tourist or e-commerce levies, and having greater control over how national taxation is spent locally.

Cllr Kevin Bentley, Chairman of the LGA's People and Places Board, said: "England is an outlier when it comes to fiscal

devolution. As we look ahead towards the long process of economic and social recovery, this gap in local power and autonomy across England risks seeing our communities fall ever further behind.

"Councils want to work with the Government on how local communities can have the freedoms and flexibilities to play a lead role in the nation's economic recovery and better connect local leaders to decisions made about how money is spent and raised for the benefit of their communities."

Local lockdown powers introduced

New powers have been announced for councils to close specific premises, cancel events and close public spaces, to help tackle coronavirus outbreaks.

The Prime Minister outlined the local, targeted measures in the Government's Contain Framework, which sets out how NHS Test and Trace and the Joint Biosecurity Centre will work with councils, Public Health England and communities to contain and manage local COVID-19 flare-ups.

This is set to be backed up by draft regulations, setting out government powers to intervene at a local level where necessary.

LGA Chairman Cllr James Jamieson said the new framework rightly shows councils know their local communities best and that locally led responses have proven to be the best way to deal with significant outbreaks.

He added: "Greater powers for councils to take swift and effective action to address local

outbreaks will hopefully help avoid the need for more stringent measures to be imposed locally.

"Managing local COVID-19 outbreaks will always need to build on the consent of local communities and an effective system of tracing and testing. The use of enforcement powers should be an option of last resort where individuals or organisations are unable, unwilling or opposed to taking actions that reduce the spread of this virus."

The new powers will help save lives by allowing councils to react immediately, for example by shutting down premises in response to public health concerns. Previously, this would have required going to a magistrates' court, a process that can take several days.

The flow of data to councils has also improved, with patient identifiable data to be provided on a daily basis to councils' directors of public health to help track down and isolate future flare-ups of the virus.

Social care principles unveiled

Adult social care needs a reset and must not simply revert back to the way it was prior to the pandemic, the LGA has said.

A year after the Prime Minister first pledged to set out a clear plan to "fix social care", the LGA, with the support of dozens of health and care organisations and charities, has put forward a set of key principles which must underpin social care reform and which draw on the lessons learned from the coronavirus crisis.

The seven principles cover vital aspects of every part of social care, support and wellbeing, including putting people first, social care's local dimension, adequate and sustainable funding, supporting the care workforce, how care is provided and commissioned, health and integration, and the scope of care and support reform.

The signatories to the principles – including the Alzheimer's Society, NHS Confederation and the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services – insist the



Government needs to publish its timetable for social care reform before Parliament returns from summer recess in September.

Cllr James Jamieson, LGA Chairman, said: "For too long, we have been promised a plan to fix the social care crisis, but people who use and work in these vital services are still waiting. The COVID-19 crisis has proved that we need a complete reset, not a restart.

"These seven principles, which have support from a number of prominent organisations across the health and care sector, need to inform and underpin the Government's thinking on the future of adult social care in this country.

"We urge the Government and other parties to begin cross-party talks on the future of adult social care, so we can get on with the job of realising our shared ambition of supporting people to live the lives they want to lead."



Council investments 'pose risk'

Some councils have exposed themselves to commercial investments that risk cuts in local services and a big bill for local taxpayers, according to the Commons' Public Accounts Committee.

It found local authorities spent an estimated £6.6 billion acquiring commercial property in three years – 14 times more than in the previous three-year period – with a further £1 billion in the first half of 2019/20.

Up to 91 per cent of this commercial property spending was financed by borrowing.

The report recognises that much commercial investment was in response to financial pressure on local authorities' budgets and was encouraged by the Government. It calls on the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to carry out more oversight of council borrowing and investments.

Cllr Richard Watts, Chair of the LGA's Resources Board, said: "Councils have faced a choice of either accepting funding reductions and cutting services or making investments to try to protect them.

"As the committee rightly highlights, this was an approach that was encouraged by government. Investments are not only made to try to plug funding shortfalls but also to help contribute to local economies.

"Councils continue to face significant extra cost pressures and huge income losses as a result of the pandemic. The Government's commitment to fund a portion of lost income from fees and charges is a step in the right direction but does not cover full losses, nor does it extend to commercial income losses.

"We reiterate our call to government to meet all extra cost pressures and income losses from fees and charges and other sources, including commercial activity."

● See p13

In brief

Children's health review

Former minister Andrea Leadsom MP is to lead a review into improving health outcomes for babies and children from disadvantaged backgrounds, focusing on the first 1,001 days of their lives. Cllr Judith Blake, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "We share the commitment of the review to reduce inequalities and ensure every child has the best possible start in life. The importance of early intervention and prevention services cannot be overstated. We are keen to work with the review to ensure councils have the right resources to support infants and parents when they need it most as part of a long-term sustainable funding settlement for early help and support services."

Tourism funding

A new £10 million Kick-starting Tourism Package was announced at the LGA's virtual annual conference in July, by Local Government Minister Simon Clarke MP. The funding will provide immediate support for small businesses in tourist areas to adapt to working with coronavirus. Cllr Gerald Vernon-Jackson, Chair of the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, said: "We are pleased that the Government recognises the important role that tourism plays in boosting the UK economy and that it has provided this much-needed funding. Councils are best-placed to boost visitor economies and are trying to find innovative ways of supporting culture and heritage."

A recovery for children

A new discussion paper from the Association of Directors of Children's Services highlights the impact of the pandemic on children, in particular the most disadvantaged, and calls for children and young people to be put at the centre of national recovery planning. Cllr Judith Blake, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, called for investment in preventative, universal and early help services, adding: "This report rightly highlights the need for properly resourced, long-term strategies to ensure all children have access to the right support."



PPE supply warning amid second wave concerns

Urgent clarity over the governance and distribution of vital personal protective equipment (PPE) is needed in the event of a second wave of coronavirus, MPs have found.

Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said councils and social care providers need concrete assurances about ongoing supplies of quality PPE, following the report by the Public Accounts Committee.

"We have been calling for a clear long-term strategy for the sustainable supply of PPE to be published," he said.

"Staff working in care homes and in people's homes have been doing an incredible job in extremely challenging circumstances. They deserve to know that they will have the equipment, resources and support they need to continue doing so to ensure their safety and those they are caring for, at all times."

The report comes as the Prime Minister announced that the NHS will receive an extra

£3 billion to protect it against a possible second wave of COVID-19. Scientists have warned the UK could see about 120,000 new coronavirus deaths in a second wave of infections this winter in a "reasonable worst-case scenario".

LGA Chairman Cllr James Jamieson said the Government is right to try to ensure the health service is as prepared as possible this winter, but that there cannot be a sustainable NHS without a sustainable adult social care system.

"You cannot protect one and not the other. Adult social care services remain on the frontline of this crisis and need parity of esteem with the NHS. We urge the Government to also further address the immediate financial pressures facing the sector."

Cllr Jamieson said investment to ensure adult social care is also ready and able to cope with a second wave, alongside adequately funded public health services, would be "of enormous benefit to our much-loved NHS".

'No care workers on health visa'

Social care workers will not be able to use the new health and care visa to enter the UK via the Government's points-based immigration system, which is to be introduced next year.

Further details have been published on the new requirements, including salary and skills thresholds for skilled workers and other eligibility criteria.

The LGA has urged government to ensure that social care has parity of esteem with the NHS, that it is adequately and sustainably funded, and called for greater investment in training and development for care workers.

LGA Chairman Cllr James Jamieson said the country faces significant skills

challenges, with one of the most serious being in our social care system.

He added: "During the pandemic, our social care workers have demonstrated more than ever how important and valued they are in caring for our loved ones.

"With 122,000 care worker vacancies, the Government needs to ensure that social care workers are included in the new health and care visa to help fill these vital roles."

Cllr Jamieson also said that salary thresholds should be variable across sector and region, to reflect the needs of different employers, alongside a reformed and devolved skills and employment system to tackle existing national skills shortages.

● See p16-17

'Keep planning local'

As first was going to press, a policy paper was expected from the Government setting out its proposals to radically overhaul the planning system.

It comes after the LGA joined with more than 15 other organisations in calling on ministers to keep planning in England local.

In an open letter to The Telegraph, the LGA and partners warned that taking planning powers away from communities and councils will only deprive them of the ability to define the area they live in and know best, and risks giving developers the freedom to "ride roughshod" over local areas.

As the country embarks on recovering from COVID-19, the letter underlined the importance of local communities being at the heart of the recovery.

This followed the Prime Minister announcing a plan to "Build, build, build" as part of a 'New Deal' for Britain, including investment in infrastructure, as well as further planning reforms to enable buildings

to change use without planning permission, such as converting commercial properties into housing.

Cllr James Jamieson, LGA Chairman, said: "Investment in infrastructure will be vital, but with local control over how this funding is spent, councils can play a key role in providing genuinely affordable homes, fixing the nation's roads, delivering high-speed broadband and high-quality mobile connectivity, boosting local economies, and tackling environmental challenges.

"Planning powers must also remain at a local level, to enable councils to deliver resilient, prosperous places that meet the needs of their communities."

New laws have also been announced that will mean full planning applications will not be required to demolish and rebuild unused buildings as homes, and will allow homeowners to add up to two additional storeys to their property to create new homes or more living space.

'Councils should be more diverse'

Under-representation of ethnic minority communities is "perpetuating racial inequality and disadvantage" in the UK, according to a report by University of Manchester academics.

Professor Maria Sobolewska and Dr Neema Begum conducted the first census of all sitting councillors in all four nations of the UK and found that 7 per cent of them are from ethnic minority communities, compared with 14 per cent in the population as a whole.

Metropolitan boroughs have the most diverse councils but London's councillors are still less diverse than they should be, given the diversity of the city's residents.

An LGA spokesperson said: "The LGA has been constantly working with all councils towards increasing diversity and inclusion.

Councils want to see more people from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities, women, parents and carers stand for election and to step up to leadership roles in local government to create a working environment that is attractive and supportive for people from all groups and backgrounds."

● Many local authorities have been carrying out supplementary risk assessments and having conversations with their BAME employees to find out what additional support can be put in place to manage the safety of these staff at work, given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on ethnic minority communities. Some examples are available at www.local.gov.uk/covid-19-good-council-practice



In brief

'Poor quality' conversions

An independent government-commissioned report into the quality of homes converted under permitted development rights has concluded that they seem to create worse-quality residential environments than planning permission conversions, in relation to several factors widely linked to the health, wellbeing and quality of life of future occupiers. Cllr David Renard, LGA Housing Spokesman, said: "This independent report rightly backs our long-standing concerns over the detrimental impact on local communities of rules allowing home conversions without planning permission. It provides further evidence on why it is more vital than ever that planning should remain local."

Flooding funding



The Government has announced funding of £5.2 billion for new flood and coastal defences in England by 2027, and an immediate cash injection of £170 million to accelerate work on shovel-ready flood defence schemes that will begin construction in 2020 or 2021. The funding "is good news and will support protection work by councils to prepare for heavy rainfalls", said Cllr David Renard, the LGA's Environment Spokesman. But he added: "Funding for flood defences needs to be devolved to local areas to ensure money is directed towards projects that best reflect local needs, which includes protecting key roads and bridges to keep local residents and businesses moving."

Bailiff costs 'add to debt'

Bailiff costs and court fees could add more than £150 million worth of debt to households already in council tax arrears because of the coronavirus pandemic, charity StepChange has warned. Debt collectors can resume their work from 23 August following months of inactivity due to the pandemic. LGA figures estimate that 800,000 households owe close to £700 million in unpaid council tax.

In brief

Parking losses

Councils are set to lose millions of pounds in parking fees and charges, according to analysis by motoring organisation the AA. Cllr David Renard, LGA Transport Spokesman, said: "Councils continue to work all day and night to support communities through the COVID-19 crisis but have faced extra cost pressures and significant income losses as a result, as this survey highlights. The Government's commitment to fund a portion of councils' lost income from fees and charges is a step in the right direction. We reiterate our call for it to meet all extra cost pressures and income losses from fees and charges and other sources, including commercial activity, if councils are to avoid having to make tough decisions on in-year cuts to services."

Outside smoking

The Government has said it will not ban smoking outside pubs and restaurants following a bid by the House of Lords to extend restrictions to new outdoor seating. Instead, establishments will have to make "reasonable provision" for no-smoking areas outside if they want a pavement licence. This has been supported by the LGA, which had also backed further measures requiring all pavement licences to be issued on condition outdoor seating is completely smoke-free. Cllr Paulette Hamilton, Vice-Chair of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "Reducing smoking in public places has been vital to improving public health, which councils are responsible for."

Homelessness duty

Problems with the way councils are meeting new housing duties are making some homeless people's situation worse, according to a new report from the Local Government Ombudsman, based on the first 50 cases it has investigated under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA). Cllr David Renard, LGA Housing Spokesman, said: "Councils fully support the principles of the HRA. However, significant and ongoing funding challenges have limited their ability to full deliver the Act and prevent homelessness." Councils overspent on homelessness services by £140 million in 2018/19, because of rising demand and a lack of affordable housing to accommodate people at risk.



EU money 'going unspent'

More than £730 million in vital EU cash – which could help local communities bounce back from COVID-19 – risks going unspent and being sent back to Brussels if the funding is not allocated by the Government before the end of the year, the LGA has warned.

It said 24 per cent of England's allocation of the European Social Fund remains unspent.

The LGA is calling on the Government to urgently work with councils and combined authorities to ensure the remaining money is allocated quickly to support the national recovery from the pandemic.

The fund, in which the UK is continuing to participate until the end of the programme, is used for supporting employment, skills and training.

With unemployment expected to rise and local businesses likely to struggle to get back on their feet, the LGA says investment in employment and skills will be more important

than ever in the coming months and that it is vital that the remaining funding is used to respond quickly to support people and places where it is most needed.

Councils are also concerned about the ongoing lack of detail around the Government's proposed UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), which will replace EU funding.

The LGA said councils and combined authorities want to work with the Government to co-design the UKSPF, based around local need and alignment towards a single pot of growth funding.

Cllr Kevin Bentley, Chairman of the LGA's EU Exit Taskforce, said: "As the country looks towards how we bounce back from COVID-19, this funding is more important than ever.

"This is vital money, which, as it stands, risks going unspent and returned to Brussels, when instead it can and should be invested in jobs, skills and training critical to the national recovery."

Leisure facilities 'could disappear'

With the Government's obesity strategy expected as first went to press, the LGA has warned that significant losses of income have left many leisure centres on the brink of financial collapse.

Leisure facilities are a key tool in the national effort to reduce obesity, but they need urgent funding to cover lost income during the pandemic, as well as maintenance and utility costs, according to the LGA.

Many leisure providers are concerned that memberships and visits to facilities will not return to pre-pandemic levels for some time, meaning they will be unable to generate the income needed to cover the service costs of reopening.

While some people have been able to try online classes and new forms of exercise during lockdown, many

others have seen their activity levels decrease, with health experts warning the lockdown has worsened the epidemic in childhood obesity.

The LGA also said the coronavirus pandemic has hit those from more deprived backgrounds and from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities hardest, whether that be through deaths, digital poverty or a lack of access to parks, private gardens and green spaces to exercise.

Cllr Gerald Vernon-Jackson, Chair of the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, said: "The Government urgently needs to provide funding to ensure leisure facilities stay open to all communities and to recognise their role in the fight against obesity, inactivity and poor mental health, which in turn will help to save the NHS being overburdened in the future."

Devolving skills support

Local politicians and parliamentarians met to discuss the vital role of councils and combined authorities in helping people into work

The first virtual meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Devolution took place in July.

Set up in 2014, the APPG provides an important cross-party space in Parliament for open discussion on the need for a new devolution settlement and for putting across the views of councils on a range of policy areas.

Andrew Lewer MP, former Leader of Derbyshire County Council and an LGA Vice-President, chairs the APPG, and is joined by members from across Parliament, including the LGA's President, Lord Kerslake.

Following the launch of the LGA's report on creating green jobs in June (see **first** 649), Cllr Kevin Bentley, Chair of the LGA's People and Places Board, Cllr Susan Hinchcliffe, Vice-Chair of the LGA's City Regions Board, and our Chairman, Cllr James Jamieson, led the discussion with parliamentarians about the vital role of councils in supporting people into employment.

COVID-19 has demonstrated how national policies are best delivered by local government's democratically elected leaders through their insight and intelligence on the ground. Economic recovery will mean different things in different places, and the APPG event was an opportunity to highlight that recovery must be locally designed and delivered within a broad national funding and policy framework.

In particular, national skills and employment schemes – and funding – need to be devolved to councils and combined authorities, so councils can

work with businesses and education providers to train and retrain people of all ages so they can benefit from new local opportunities (see p16-17).

The APPG heard from councils across the country about the work they are already doing to help their communities with skills and employment support in Blackpool, Portsmouth, Staffordshire and Greater Manchester.

It was clear that their unique ability to engage with partners across their local areas was the key to the success of their employment schemes, and that greater flexibility around funding and responsibilities would enable them to achieve even more.

It was also useful to hear from Mark James, Head of Skills Strategy at the Department for Education, who spoke about the Government's ideas to make the skills system more responsive to local need.

Reflecting on the event, APPG Chair Andrew Lewer MP said the meeting "was an opportunity to discuss with

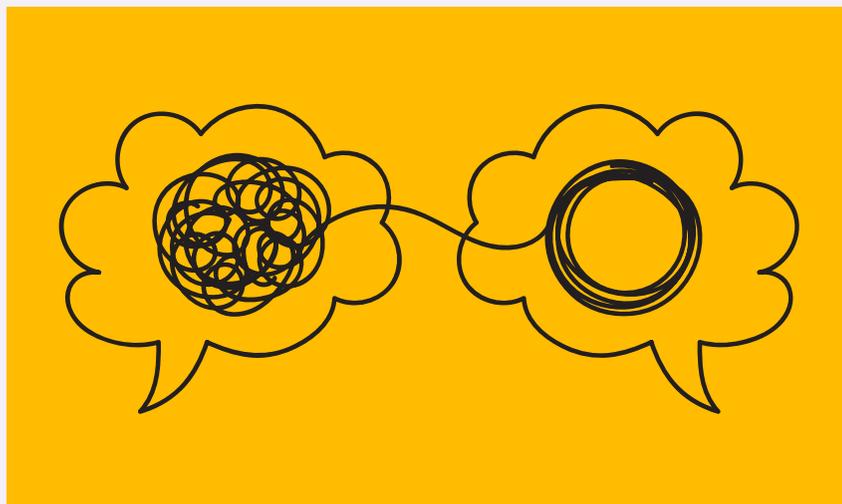
parliamentarians the excellent work that local government – both councils and combined authorities – are doing to deliver skills and employment programmes, and how devolution in this area could help secure a green economic recovery".

He added: "It was a hugely valuable exercise in discussing practical measures around the devolution agenda and securing parliamentary engagement with this. I look forward to the APPG's next opportunity to convene, in September, on the issues of fiscal devolution."

The APPG is an effective way for us to build support among MPs about the issues many of you have raised around skills, employment and the green economy, as well as to showcase the brilliant work councils are already doing.

We will keep the conversation going through our programme of briefings, tabling questions in Parliament and writing to ministers.

It is vital that we continue to engage with MPs across the political spectrum to make the case for a devolution settlement for local government, as we look ahead to the Devolution White Paper this autumn. The LGA's new Re-thinking Local campaign (see p10) will be key to driving this in Parliament.



i For more information about the LGA's work in Parliament, please visit www.local.gov.uk/parliament. See p16-17



Empowering local communities

'Re-thinking local' provides the framework for councils to take their destinies in their own hands and deliver locally focused recoveries



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

As we continue to emerge and reopen the country's economy in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we must prepare for a new normal, different from the past.

This crisis has changed the way we do things, personally and professionally in the public sector, and the speed at which they are done.

People will ask themselves if they want to return to spending hours every day commuting to a large, packed office building. We have all benefited from the improvement in air quality and recognise the importance of accessible green space.

And I am sure, like me, you have all greatly appreciated having local shops within walking distance.

More is now being done online.

I recently 'met' leaders from the North East and South West and took a webinar, all without leaving my home. While I do miss the personal contact and conversations, I do not miss the two days away that would previously have been necessary.

And as consumers, our habits have shifted, increasing online sales from 20 to 30 per cent in a matter of weeks. We have attended virtual appointments with GPs, solicitors and other professionals, and found them to be much more convenient and accessible in many cases.

Councils are using the web to stay in contact in adult and children's services, and have seen residents use it to access more of the vital services they need.

All this reflects the immense effort councils across England have made to support their communities. The vulnerable have received food and medicine, the homeless have been found safe places to stay, businesses have received grants to tide them over until they can re-open, and the bins have continued to be emptied.

We have been more agile than Whitehall, delivering new services in

days that previously took years, and shown the importance of local delivery – gaining an enhanced reputation for local government.

National government should trust councils to deliver, following our excellent response to the pandemic. Avoiding 'one size fits all' solutions by giving them the powers, flexibilities and resources to ensure locally driven recoveries, suited to every community, is the way forward.

There are things we would like to go back to, but there are also changes we should build upon. We need to think this through as we come up with the right local solutions.

In 'Re-thinking local', launched last month at the LGA's first virtual annual conference, we called on the Government, in the upcoming Spending Review and English Devolution White Paper, to provide local leaders with the right fiscal and policy framework to deliver vital, long-term economic transformation.

Ministers should also commit to support our 'Work Local' skills programme, empowering councils

What does 'local' mean now?

'Re-thinking local' is the LGA's campaign to start the debate on the future shape of local public services

COVID-19 has redefined how we think about where and how we live.

Returning to the old normal is no longer enough. We need to reassess what we want from our local areas, public services and lives, and take the lead in rebuilding our communities.

'Re-thinking local' is the LGA's campaign to start the debate on the future shape of local public services. Councils and communities need to bring forward the innovation and creative thinking they have demonstrated during this crisis.

It is this conversation and the actions we take in partnership with government that will help us recover and rebuild. But only if we allocate the resources where they are needed – rather than determining everything from Whitehall – can this process achieve what the country needs.

Councils have worked tirelessly to support their local communities during this unprecedented crisis, but we must now ensure their financial sustainability if they are to continue to innovate and invest in their services and local economies. Despite welcome emergency government funding, LGA analysis shows councils still face a considerable funding gap as a result of dealing with the pandemic.

As we head into the autumn, with a proposed Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper in September and the Autumn Budget in November, we must show how councils can use this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to not just recover but to go even further – and address the stark inequalities the virus has exposed, develop a green recovery, address skills gaps and rebuild the economy so it benefits everyone.

We recently launched our 'green' jobs research (see **first** 649) showing that a sustainable economic recovery could create up to 694,000 direct jobs in the low-carbon and renewable energy economy by 2030.

We have joined with others to collectively urge the Government to keep planning local, so people have a say over development in their communities.

We've examined how the power to raise more money locally – and have greater control over how national taxation is spent – would provide the targeted economic development support needed to level-up communities.

And we are launching a new debate on the future of care and support – with a set of principles to underpin adult social care reform in light of the COVID-19 experience (see p5).

Our work over the coming months will amplify the voices of our communities, and councils' solutions to the issues that impact those communities. We invite all councils, partners and national government to engage in this conversation and Re-think local.

 **You can find out more about the campaign** at www.local.gov.uk/re-thinking-local and [#CouncilsCan](https://twitter.com/CouncilsCan)

developing in the future, and ultimately lead to happier outcomes.

These policies will empower local communities and councils to lead in rebuilding and levelling up, while also tackling our society's most long-standing inequalities. The LGA has consistently argued for this with councils, and the past six months – including our leaders' responses to the challenges, and the high regard local residents have for their councils – support us.

'Re-thinking local' is, however, just the beginning. We will keep gathering the experiences, ideas, and needs of councils up and down the country as we enter this new normal. This will enable us to continue representing everyone across local government, while presenting national government with the best possible insight and input.

It will then be up to the Government to listen, to acknowledge this evidence, and to engage with local leaders on the question of how we build services for the future. Councils will then be able to get on with ensuring the bright future on which we are all relying.

So, thank you for all your hard work over the past six months – saving lives, holding communities together, keeping businesses afloat and showing what local government can do.

 **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 [@LGACOMMS](https://twitter.com/LGACOMMS) and [@LGANews](https://twitter.com/LGANews) for regular updates.

“National government should trust councils to deliver, following our excellent response to the pandemic”

to develop their own skills and employment plans, tailored to their local areas (see p16-17).

In 'Re-thinking local', the LGA offers to bring together all those looking for a long-term solution to the adult social care crisis, to bring about the right funding and proper, locally led integration between health and its wider determinants, such as housing and community.

We want to see all those involved in the delivery of health services, from the NHS and its partners, to councils and health and wellbeing boards, empowered to collaborate on commissioning and planning of place-based plans and neighbourhood delivery to prevent widening health and other inequalities in our communities, particularly as a result of COVID-19.

Building on the effective partnerships and collaborations between councils, schools and other education providers is also a necessity. Government must ensure children and young people have the practical, emotional, education and mental health support they need.

This will prevent more serious issues

Spotlight on our councils

Learning from the coronavirus crisis and supporting a sustainable recovery were among the themes discussed at the LGA's virtual Innovation Zone



Councillor **Peter Fleming** is Chairman of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board

This year's Innovation Zone – our vibrant, creative space and programme within the LGA's annual conference – was going to be the best yet. You would have been able to touch and feel gadgets, engage in debate with fellow councils and hear the most innovative, groundbreaking ideas in local government.

But when COVID-19 put paid to holding a physical conference, we devised an innovative way to shine a virtual 'spotlight' on councils and their response to this crisis with our 'Spotlight on...' webinar series.

'Learning Through Crisis' was the first event in this series and focused on lessons from the pandemic (see also **first** 649): what worked, what didn't, and making this knowledge stick.

We heard about Shropshire Council's work with local partners to provide safe and stable accommodation, and how Hull City Council worked with young people to give targeted guidance and support via the www.howareyoufeeling.org.uk website.

Hackney Council highlighted how

data can identify the most vulnerable and help provide targeted support, while Watford District Council demonstrated the meaning of leadership through crisis, mobilising a unified workforce and community, and using the learning from this to underpin a new corporate strategy.

Our 'Green Reset' webinar explored how new 'green' behaviours and a renewed focus on the environment can achieve a more sustainable recovery.

Cllr Liz Green, Vice-Chair of the Improvement and Innovation Board, highlighted how quarantine measures have resulted in changes to the way we work and live that benefit the environment. The webinar also heard from Swindon Borough Council, Local Partnerships, Wirral Council and London Borough of Waltham Forest.

Another webinar showcased the rapid response of councillors during COVID-19. Cllr Judi Billing, Deputy Chair of the Improvement and Innovation Board, discussed how the pandemic has led to new, positive ways of working and the need to build on these for the future.

The webinar heard practical examples from councillors across the country of how they have worked in different and innovative ways to meet the needs of their residents, and what they have learned from the experience.

This prompted further discussion

around the importance of diversity in local politics, our mental health as councillors, and how we can support each other as we continue to effect positive change in our communities.

Our final session focused on the LGA's sector-led improvement (SLI) offer and launched our end-of-year report, giving highlights including that 94 per cent of leaders and 98 per cent of chief executives say support from the LGA has a positive impact on their authority.

This was a lively and interactive session, attended by 150 people, involving a virtual Q&A and polling, an excellent line-up of speakers – including colleagues from St Helens Council, Essex County Council and the National Audit Office – and reflections from lead members of the Improvement and Innovation Board.

Audience feedback from this session will be used to assess how we can strengthen SLI so that it continues to meet councils' needs, now and in the post-COVID world.

This truly sector-led series of events would have been impossible without the councillors and officers who spoke at them – so, thank you again to all involved.

While this virtual webinar series was a world apart from what we had in mind at the start of this year, it was a roaring success.

Now begins the countdown to Liverpool 2021 – I hope to see you there.



i **Recordings and presentations from the Spotlight sessions** are available at www.local.gov.uk/lga-annual-conference-webinars. **To read our SLI report**, please visit www.local.gov.uk/sector-led-improvement-end-year-report-2019-20.



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

Getting finances on track



The Government's funding package for councils offers some positive measures and recognises the pressures they are facing, but more is needed

The LGA has been calling for the Government to urgently bring forward details of its comprehensive plan to ensure the financial sustainability of councils this year and next.

At our virtual annual conference in July, Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick MP announced a package of measures that seeks to address the financial challenges facing councils as they continue to lead communities through the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.

If a council incurs lost income from sales, fees and charges worth more than 5 per cent of its previously planned income, 75p of every additional pound lost will be reimbursed by government. Councils will remain liable for the first 5 per cent of all such lost income.

The Government will also bring in changes to allow councils to spread council tax and business rates deficits over three years instead of the current one-year rule. It will decide how irrecoverable local tax losses will be shared between central and local government in the Comprehensive Spending Review (see p4).

In addition, local government as

a whole will receive a further non-ringfenced \$500 million in response to spending pressures in local areas – building on the \$3.2 billion non-ringfenced funding already allocated to councils and \$300 million from clinical commissioning groups (CCGs).

While this package offers some positive measures and recognises the pressures councils are facing, more is desperately needed to fully address the severe financial challenges facing councils and our local services as a result.

With the Government's income guarantee failing to cover full losses, and not extending to commercial and other income losses, the LGA has warned that councils will still be left having to absorb a substantial and unforeseen loss of funding, in particular the loss of local taxes.

So we have reiterated our call for government to meet all extra cost pressures and income losses from fees and charges and other sources – including commercial activity – in full. Otherwise, councils may have to make tough decisions on in-year cuts to services to meet their legal duty to set a balanced budget this year.

Councils have been completing detailed monthly returns to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on the financial challenges they face. This shows the Government is committed to fully understanding the impact of the pandemic, and the robust evidence provided by councils shows a looming financial crisis that cannot be ignored.

The latest MHCLG survey of all councils found that – between March and June – councils incurred \$4.8 billion of extra cost pressures and income losses as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this figure could reach \$10.9 billion.

Local communities have rightly looked to their council for leadership during this crisis – and they have delivered. Without costs and income losses being met in full, councils will have to take measures in anticipation of future funding shortfalls. This could mean in-year cuts to vital local services that are supporting communities through this crisis and crucial to the national recovery.

As **first** was going to press, the next monthly MHCLG finance survey was due to be sent out to councils. The LGA will continue working with government on the further measures and funding needed to protect local services.

i For more on the LGA's work on council finances, please visit www.local.gov.uk/topics/finance-and-business-rates

What next for rough sleepers?

Time is ripe to make a once-in-a-lifetime change and end homelessness for good



Zelda Wolfe is Assistant Director of Housing and Communities at Reading Borough Council

Following Dame Louise Casey's 'Everyone in' announcement in March, directing local authorities to house rough sleepers, councils have worked hard to accommodate everyone. In Reading, our response was immediate, starting with those identified by our outreach team as verified rough sleepers – accommodated within a single night.

More than 120 rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping were placed in a range of B&Bs and hotels across the borough.

We were able to respond effectively to this crisis because a previous focus on eradicating the use of B&Bs for homeless families meant capacity was available within the local B&B sector to provide assistance.

In 2017, we had more than 130 families in B&B accommodation, and within 18 months this had fallen to zero, saving more than £1 million. Strong, proactive early intervention and a holistic approach to solving homelessness – linking households with services addressing their other problems – paid dividends.

In addition, our highly regarded Rent Guarantee Scheme has led the way in the sector in demonstrating how you can build mutually beneficial relationships with private sector landlords to provide decent housing for homeless households. Our pioneering development of modular

housing for homeless families has also made national headlines.

As regards rough sleeping, the question now for all local authorities is what next?

We are all glad to see people off the street right now, but this is not just a housing issue. For this to become the norm, we need sustainable pathways out for rough sleepers.

'Housing First' is often seen as the solution, a model where the housing is provided first and then a package of individually tailored support is put in place. Unfortunately, funding is not available to scale this up to make a significant impact for more people.

We need to move away from generic support and invest in the provision of trauma-informed, wraparound support that is personal to the individual. This

"This is not just a bricks and mortar issue"

means identifying historical trauma, and the provision of specialist support to deal with it; effective management of mental health and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); effective substance misuse recovery, social care and health provision; tenancy sustainment support alongside decent affordable housing; and appropriate education, training and employment.

Groups with similar needs living together in hostels can create an environment where risky behaviour and co-dependency issues can prevent people moving forwards.

Local authorities have met targets to keep everyone safe for now, but



will the Government now commit to keep them off the streets for good? The Government has announced some funding for specialist support services, but more is needed to help vulnerable adults who need services tailored to their individual needs.

At Reading Borough Council, we thrive on strong partnerships involving local and national charities such as Launchpad, the Salvation Army and St Mungo's, the faith sector, and NHS outreach nurses. Their support and dedication is unquestionable, but this alone will not solve the problem.

This is a moment when we could make a once-in-a-lifetime change and end rough sleeping for good across the country. People who have no recourse to public funds should not be excluded from this ambition.

However, it requires the right type of systems thinking, and significant government investment in a trauma-informed approach. Services provided must address the fundamental issues individuals face, and it must be acknowledged this is not just a bricks and mortar issue. Without that, we will not succeed.

i For a longer version of this article, including a case study, please visit www.local.gov.uk/first. To find out more about Reading's work on homelessness, please email zelda.wolfe@reading.gov.uk



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

Homes fit for heroes

The LGA is calling for 100,000 new social homes to be built every year, to help kickstart recovery

Just as councils have led the way during the emergency response to COVID-19, they should also now be empowered to spearhead the national housing recovery.

As the nation comes through the biggest crisis it has faced since the Second World War, we owe it to those who risked their lives to keep the country running to provide them with affordable, high-quality housing.

A post-pandemic building boom of 100,000 social homes a year is needed to provide a kickstart to the economy, as well as housing fit for social care, health and other key workers who have fought coronavirus on the frontline and for the families of those who lost their lives.

In a recent report, the LGA has called on the Government to let councils take charge, by giving them the powers and tools to build the affordable homes the country desperately needs.

Our proposals include expanding council housing delivery by bringing forward and increasing the £12 billion extension of the Affordable Homes Programme announced in the Budget earlier this year, with an increased focus on homes for social rent.

Reforms to Right to Buy are also needed, to allow councils to retain 100 per cent of receipts from the sale of homes under the scheme. The deadline to spend the money from sales should

also be extended to at least five years, and councils should be able to set the size of discounts locally.

And we need a skills and jobs strategy to increase the capacity of the building industry, which has suffered during coronavirus, and to meet the needs of accelerating a social housing building programme.

Delivering 100,000 new high-quality social homes each year would also bring significant benefits to the national economy.

Our analysis has found that investment in a new generation of social

housing could return £320 billion to the nation over 50 years. It also found that every £1 invested in a new social home generates £2.84 in the wider economy, with every new social home generating a saving of £780 a year in housing benefit.

In addition, the scheme would not only meet a third of the Government's 300,000 house-building target, it would also generate a range of social and economic benefits, boost the supply of affordable housing and enable the country to get building again following a downturn in construction as a result of many house builders closing their sites.

A large-scale social house-building programme, supported by the required infrastructure and services, would also help realise the Government's ambition of providing 6,000 new homes for rough sleepers taken off the streets during the pandemic and alleviate pressures on health and social care that result from poor housing conditions.

Above all, we believe now is the time for a genuine renaissance in council house building that reduces homelessness, gets people off the streets for good, supports people's wellbeing and is climate friendly.



i 'Delivery of council housing: a stimulus package post-pandemic' is available in full at www.local.gov.uk/delivery-council-housing-stimulus-package-post-pandemic

Employment and skills recovery

Councillors and their councils have the democratic mandate, expertise and local insights to change our communities for the better



Councillor **Abi Brown** is Vice-Chair of the LGA's City Regions Board

Over the past few months, local government has shown extraordinary capability to lead communities through the coronavirus crisis.

As well as protecting people's lives and keeping public services going, councils have been trusted to deliver advice and grants to local businesses, help the unemployed while Jobcentres dealt with universal credit claims, deliver a hardship fund to the most vulnerable, and keep adults learning through their community provision.

All of this has only been achieved because local government has the delivery infrastructure and relationships in place with residents, businesses, partners and agencies, and the ability to convene and mobilise quickly.

These connections are hard to cultivate at any other level and this has led to the real 'added value' local government has already brought to dealing with the economic implications of the crisis.

But we can do so much more and should be at the forefront of recovery. That's exactly what the LGA's jobs and skills recovery policy advocates, based on what you told us you needed: things like more apprenticeship levy flexibility; investment in local job support; accelerated investment to create jobs, including in the green economy; skills investment to retrain people to new jobs and existing vacancies when affected by

job loss; and tailored support for adults and young people (see related article, right).

To bring this together, we need a co-design partnership with central government to maintain political focus; urgency of action and dialogue; local taskforces to pool expertise; and a multi-year, flexible local funding pot to turn decisions into action quickly.

It was good to hear the Chancellor announce initial training and employment support schemes in his Summer Economic Statement in July. As a local leader, my first reaction was that these schemes must join up, connect with local services, fit local needs, and link to local opportunities. In other words, we need to join it up, as we can ill-afford for people to fall through the cracks.

This is where we come into our own. We are 'the' place experts to coordinate a jobs and skills recovery plan.

In my area of Stoke-on-Trent, that's what the Jobs, Enterprise and Training (JET) integrated employment service does every day, coordinating all-age careers advice, job support, apprenticeships, adult learning and sector skills support.

It now plays a lead role in the county-wide Redundancy Task Group, offering employment support to those made redundant and a jobs brokerage service to help local businesses recruit. Many of you have something similar.

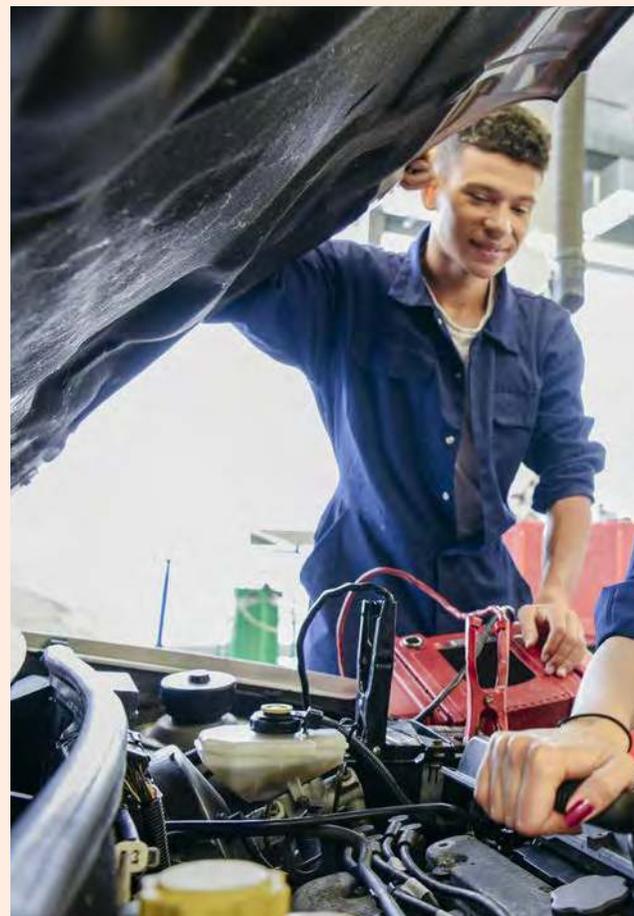
Our job now is to convince the Government and Whitehall to localise resources so we can lead recovery for our communities, given we have the infrastructure in place. We already have the trust, with LGA polling showing 71 per cent of residents trust their council.

We are getting this message over to politicians and senior officials across

Government; I spoke on these issues on behalf of the LGA at the Learning and Work Institute's Employment and Skills Convention in July. Collectively, we can all play our part in pushing these messages.

Moving beyond the crisis, with a Devolution White Paper around the corner, employment and skills will be a key devolution ask for many of us. Our longstanding Work Local proposals provide a ready-made blueprint to make this happen.

i For the LGA's jobs and skills recovery policy, please visit www.local.gov.uk/lga-jobs-and-skills-recovery-integrated-local-employment-and-skills-offer-june-2020. See www.local.gov.uk/topics/employment-and-skills to find out more about Work Local





Councillor **Kevin Bentley** is Chairman of the LGA's People and Places Board

Jobs support for young people

Powers over education and training for young people need to be localised to avert an employment crisis

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, improving youth participation in education was a key priority for councils and combined authorities – not only because of our statutory duties towards young people, but also for its significance to the future workforce of our local economies.

While youth participation rates have improved, to 81.6 per cent over recent years, the challenge for local government has remained.

Although we have a number of statutory duties relating to youth participation, including ensuring all young people up to the age of 18 are engaged in high quality education and training (and up to 25 for disadvantaged groups), we lack the appropriate formal levers – power and resources – to undertake these responsibilities effectively.

Most of the provision for young

people continues to be nationally commissioned by Whitehall departments without any assessment of local need.

Over several months, the LGA engaged with sector colleagues and many of the leading education, employment and skills organisations across England to look at the challenges of the current system and to explore and develop potential solutions.

Then COVID-19 came along. It will be some time after furlough ends before official statistics start to reflect the real impact of the pandemic on the labour market, and young people.

But many experts indicate that young people will be disproportionately affected – particularly those in schools and colleges, on apprenticeships, or in sectors mostly bearing the brunt of the pandemic crisis.

What started as a health crisis will become an economic and employment crisis as well, unless bold action is taken to avert this catastrophe.

As part of the LGA's jobs and skills recovery response, we are calling on the Government to:

- provide greater apprenticeship flexibilities to enable local pooling
- pause the expiry of apprenticeship levy funds
- establish local 'training agency' models to keep people employed
- create jobs for people and places where back to work and/or training support is insufficient
- extend the September offer for guaranteed education, employment or training places for those due to leave school or college
- consider maintenance grants for

those on the September offer who are disadvantaged and are, or at risk of becoming, not in education, employment or training (NEET). With the potential for more than a million young people to be a NEET statistic this September, the scale of the challenge facing our young people is enormous.

The Government's recent announcements of Opportunity Guarantee measures, apprenticeship bonus, traineeship incentives, a kickstart scheme for under-25s, and further investment in careers advice and guidance are positive, and will go some way to supporting young people through this difficult period.

But these can only be successful if they are localised by building on councils' local intelligence and delivery models, working in partnership with employers and providers.

Councils and combined authorities have already gallantly shown how they can respond rapidly to local needs by forging partnerships, adapting provision and delivering advice and support to young people in need.

We now stand ready to play an equal part with government in the economic recovery – supporting young people to ensure that the next generation doesn't end up as a forgotten generation.

i For the LGA's jobs and skills recovery policy, please visit www.local.gov.uk/lga-jobs-and-skills-recovery-integrated-local-employment-and-skills-offer-june-2020



Managing cyber security risks

Cyber criminals will continue to attack councils and the vital public services they deliver



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

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to drastic increases in remote working arrangements, major IT changes and further accelerated digital transformation, which councillors have embraced and championed across the country.

However, this shift from business as usual has resulted in an increase in the number of cyber security vulnerabilities for councils.

There is also an increased threat to councils due to a range of malicious cyber criminals looking to exploit the opportunity to generate money and cause disruption, which means that councils are more likely to be the victim of a successful attack. This was confirmed in a recent report from the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC).

Cyber security is not a very accessible term and many of us tend to switch off when it's mentioned. However, for local authorities, the impact of a cyber incident is very real, with attacks growing in number and sophistication.

i If you have any questions about cyber security, please email our team at cybersecurity@local.gov.uk

A recent, successful attack on a small borough council led to the complete loss of all key IT systems, all network services and almost all IT equipment (laptops, mobile devices), with £2.5 million spent on recovery so far.

Local authorities will likely continue to be an attractive target because of the data they hold and their links with government and the NHS.

Therefore, there has never been a better time to understand and manage the risks. In doing so, we are more likely to protect key services, and be able to respond and recover more quickly when an incident occurs. Essentially, for councils, cyber security is about protecting the critical public services delivered for some of the most vulnerable in society.

In 2018, the LGA was awarded three years of funding from the National Cyber Security Programme to work with English local authorities to improve their cyber security, and similar work is going on in Wales, funded by the Welsh Government and facilitated by the Welsh LGA.

The programme provides support to councils to improve their cyber security. It focuses on delivering sustainable cultural change within councils that both directly improves cyber security and indirectly leads to members and officers viewing it with increased importance.

So far, the programme has delivered four phases of grant funding, totalling £3.2 million, and has worked with 90 per cent of councils.

The funding has been targeted towards improving leadership, governance and awareness; most recently, we funded more than 80 per cent of councils to gain key cyber security qualifications.

But there are things we can do as individuals to better protect ourselves, and questions we can ask, as elected representatives, to ensure our councils are digitally secure for the communities we serve (see box, below). The role of community leadership should not be undervalued here.

Reducing the risks

When it comes to cyber security:

- educate yourself – specific training for councillors is available
- use strong passwords – see www.ncsc.gov.uk/ for advice
- report suspicious emails, websites and links to the NCSC via report@phishing.gov.uk, then delete them, and don't click on links.

Ask your officers:

- for regular cyber security updates – including on threats, incidents and near misses
- for sight of response, recovery and continuity plans – and volunteer to take part in tests of these plans
- how the council is protected against ransomware
- how officers back up council data – are there secure offline back-ups?
- about the council's use of free NCSC services.



Councillor **Peter Fleming** OBE is Chairman of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board

Reflecting on recovery and renewal

The LGA has launched a new Remote Peer Support Offer to help councils with their vital work during the pandemic



It is councils that have led communities through the COVID-19 crisis and that will continue to support them through the recovery, renewal and rebuild phases.

Our recent polling shows that 71 per cent of residents trust their council and three-quarters are satisfied with the way their local council runs things in their area.

The LGA is here to support you in your vital work protecting communities and maintaining services during the pandemic and beyond, including through our sector-led improvement (SLI) offer. As many of you know, this is a coordinated approach across local government to help councils improve collectively through sharing best practice.

Our recently published SLI report highlights our key achievements of the past year, including delivering 129 peer challenges and enrolling nearly 1,000 councillors on leadership programmes.

We have refocused our SLI support to councils to ensure our resources are best placed to help with the immediate challenges you face now and in the future. With this impetus, the vast majority of the LGA's operation is now focused on supporting local

government and communities to address COVID-19 and its consequences.

For example, our new Remote Peer Support Offer is designed to help councils with this vital work, providing them with opportunities to reflect on their responses to COVID-19 and to engage in open and collaborative conversations about their recovery and renewal plans.

Building on our well-established improvement support programme – which has been helping councils for nearly a decade – the offer will bring together peers from our unique pool of politicians and officers into a virtual panel, focusing on improving leadership, governance, finance and identifying any practice and learning to share with the sector.

i For more information about becoming a peer for any of the remote peer offers, please email peer.updates@local.gov.uk. The LGA's resident satisfaction with councils poll is available at www.local.gov.uk/polling-resident-satisfaction-councils-june-2020. For the LGA's sector-led improvement report, please visit www.local.gov.uk/sector-led-improvement-end-year-report-2019-20. For more information about the LGA's Remote Peer Support Offer, visit www.local.gov.uk/lga-remote-peer-support-offer

There are two strands to this new offer. The LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel is a focused, two to three-hour remote session, facilitated by the LGA with a small panel of our member and officer peers.

This will give councils the chance to explore sustainable solutions to how they lead their communities and local economies to re-establish prosperity and resilience, while continuing to meet their statutory and political responsibilities.

The second strand extends this offer, offering Bespoke Remote Peer Support over a two to three-day period. This will provide councils with support to focus on specific issues or sets of issues that they want to review in greater depth and will again draw on the strong, peer-based approach.

I invite you now to sign up to the Remote Peer Support Offer by contacting your regional principal adviser (see www.local.gov.uk/our-support/lga-principal-advisers).

As our end-of-year report shows, councils can continue to use the LGA's sector-led improvement offer to learn, share best practice and work together, to ensure they continue to deliver effective and efficient services for their communities.

INTERVIEW

A convinced devolutionist

The Government is not in the business of delivering underpowered mayors, says Local Government Minister Simon Clarke MP



It has been a baptism of fire for Simon Clarke MP, not yet six months into his tenure as Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government.

He moved to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government from the Treasury in February, as the pandemic broke.

"History will forever be dominated by what's happened since March. It has been very full on," he says.

He feels the Government's funding package for councils, announced in July, will prove flexible enough to answer local government concerns about increased costs and lost income arising from coronavirus.

And with lockdown easing, he is keen to focus on economic regeneration and

the Government's forthcoming Devolution White Paper.

The estimated financial challenge councils face as a result of the pandemic could reach £10.9 billion, based on the Government's own surveys of councils' spending.

The funding package – providing a further unringfenced £500 million, reimbursement of 75 per cent of lost income, and repayment of council and business rates tax deficits over three years instead of one – is "capable of responding to whatever the true situation emerges as being", says Mr Clarke.

"The guarantee around income from sales, fees and charges is precisely designed to allow us to support authorities depending on the extent of the recoverable losses that they experience.

"If you want the full suite of [devolved] powers and funding, it will need to be the mayoral combined authority route"

"In that regard, it should give real comfort to local authorities that, if the situation is really adverse, that guarantee is capable of capturing them and supporting them.

"We also announced that the Treasury has accepted the principle that there will need to be a similar arrangement for irrecoverable losses from council tax and business rates. What we will get in the Comprehensive Spending Review is the

“We should be humble in terms of recognising the limitations of the central state”

respond at speed to crises is flawed.

“We in the centre need to learn to let go and trust. In turn, there will need to be a robust accountability framework to make sure that the local areas to whom we devolve deliver against key benchmarks.

“Speaking to mayors and council leaders, they’re very eager to have the chance to do that.”

While he says the Government will consider other arrangements, Mr Clarke is clear that “if you want the full suite of [devolved] powers and funding, it will need to be the mayoral combined authority route” – ideally sitting over unitary authorities.

“We believe strongly in the merits of unitarisation,” he says.

“Obviously, we will be sensitive to what proposals emerge locally. But we will be setting out rational incentives for people to look seriously at that route. We believe the time has come where it could yield real benefits as an integral part of the process of creating mayors.”

Mr Clarke feels mayoralities are appropriate everywhere and is keen to create them in rural as well as urban areas.

“You may want to choose a different nomenclature for a mayorality in an area that doesn’t have a city at the heart of it,” he says.

“But the principle of the combined authority with a directly elected figure at its head is something which we are keen to expand to rural areas because we believe it has very significant benefits for them too, if they can get the full package of powers and funding that accompanies the mayor.

“That’s linked to the fact that we repose the greatest confidence in a mayoral arrangement because of the heightened level of accountability.”

He continues: “We are really ambitious for what mayoral combined authorities ought to be able to achieve. There is still an open invitation to the sector to set out what it believes might sensibly be vested at mayoral level.

“We believe the powers that the mayors have, in particular around economic recovery, including key issues like spatial planning – those very important issues which span a wider geography than a usual council would – are capable of being addressed at an area

level, allowing a city region to make full use of its hinterland and the whole area to play to its collective strengths.

“We want the new mayoralties to be fully empowered; we’re not in the business of creating under-powered mayoralties because what would be the point?”

But he adds: “What we do not want is for people to feel that this is a top-down process. Both the Secretary of State and I are really clear that this is something where we want to work with local communities to make sure that proposals that emerge are fashioned in accordance with local priorities, local geographies, and as far as possible in line with established units of political geography that make sense to people.

“This is a process that is intended to be constructive and helpful rather than the 1974 process, which is certainly not what we are going to embark upon. It’s important that I provide that reassurance to people now that we understand fully the sensitivities that go with any kind of new era and we are really not going to be difficult or aggressive partners in that.”

Mr Clarke believes there are “real savings” to be made from local government reorganisation that could be reinvested in local areas, but says the primary objective is improving the quality of local government and “making sure the British state is as resilient and effective” as possible.

This is in part to help support economic recovery following the pandemic, and Mr Clarke is clear about the key role councils have to play.

“It is absolutely vital that all local authorities give thought to how we deliver the strong pro-growth agenda that the Prime Minister outlined in his [‘Build, build, build’] speech... We don’t want a second round of austerity, so we need very robust growth. Councils sit at the heart of that process,” he says.

“The department genuinely is interested in getting feedback from local government about what it is that would be most helpful in terms of supporting growth, what new powers would be of most interest.

“We’ve got to get into the most pro-growth mindset possible. I’m struck that so many of the council leaders I work with are incredibly clear sighted on the importance of this.

“The country has been through the worst economic shock in any of our lifetimes, and we badly need to rebound from it with a very strong economic recovery. We absolutely have to make it a green recovery. And that is what we are trying to engender.”

He references the Chancellor’s

precise apportionment between central and local government in that regard.”

If more of the income losses can effectively be allocated to the guarantee scheme, that in turn makes the £3.7 billion in expenditure pressures funding already allocated look more generous, he added.

Mr Clarke spoke at the LGA’s virtual annual conference in July, where he flagged plans for a Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper in the autumn, connecting local recovery with levelling up.

Describing himself as a “convinced devolutionist”, he says: “I think we should be humble in terms of recognising the limitations of the central state.

“The idea that an overly centralised state – and England is one of the most centralised in the western world – can

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proposals in his Summer Economic Statement for government funding for home improvements that save energy, such as installing double glazing and cavity wall and floor insulation.

“That obviously is partly job creation, it’s partly because it reduces energy bills, but it also massively impacts on our carbon emissions,” he says.

More generally, Mr Clarke flags the need for flexibility when it comes to supporting businesses – for example, by helping promote an outdoor drinking and eating culture this summer to support restaurants and cafes.

He also references the Government’s plans to “liberalise the planning system”, and get more homes built “to ensure that a generation aren’t shut out from the dream of home ownership”.

That means making sensible use of brownfield land and of new permitted development rights, including to make it

easier to convert shops into homes as the high street changes.

The LGA and 19 other organisations have signed an open statement calling for retention of a local planning system, which enables councils to deliver resilient, prosperous places and better homes that meet the needs of their communities.

Mr Clarke insists the Government is “trying to make sure that there is an appropriate balance struck” – for example, in respect of extending permitted development rights to build upwards, by requiring developments to be in keeping with the wider character of the street.

“That will be for councils to determine

“We don’t want a second round of austerity, so we need very robust growth”

what is or is not in keeping...we’re not removing that important element of local discretion as to what is, in practice, suitable in any given area.”

More generally, there is often resistance to new homes being built, he acknowledges, “because they are seen as of no benefit to the existing community”.

“There is common purpose across the department that we should build more, that there obviously should be the right rewards for those communities who actually choose to step up to the challenge on this,” says Mr Clarke.

“Ensuring there is a clear linkage between greater resources for the council, between new community facilities, be they schools or doctors’ surgeries or whatever it might be, is absolutely vital to maintaining popular consent to house building.”

He wouldn’t be drawn on the specifics of such rewards – “that’s for [Housing Minister] Chris Pincher and I to continue to flesh out”.

But he added: “We certainly are very supportive in principle of the idea that councils should see real benefit from greater home building. That is a theme we will continue to develop over the months ahead, that we want to see a strong linkage between people doing the right thing and seeing the rewards for that.”

Meanwhile, the long wait for another White Paper – on adult social care – looks set to continue. Mr Clarke says he and Secretary of State Robert Jenrick are in regular contact with their counterparts at the Department of Health and Social Care, who are leading on this area, but that it’s “not going to be to the same timetable as the Devolution White Paper”.

“Social care is one of the big issues at any time, and the events of recent months have thrown into sharp relief how important this is and how important it is to deliver a sustainable long-term settlement,” he says.

“We’re keen that when we do come forward with proposals that they are absolutely grounded in the maximum possible degree of consensus and that they are fully developed and reflect all the different aspects of this very complex debate.

“We do need to make sure that there is a properly funded, compassionate and effective model of social care that doesn’t threaten individuals with a lottery. And that is absolutely at the heart of our thinking. We need to create something which, not just for the next few years but really for the next generation, is a model capable of holding water and providing care and dignity in old age.”



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COMMENT

The costs of inequality



Councillor **Sonia Winifred** (Lab) is Cabinet Member for Equalities and Culture at Lambeth Council

Witnessing the distressing scenes of George Floyd's death as a white police officer knelt on his neck as he gasped for air was beyond belief.

The demonstrations and protests across the world brought about by his death are the voices of black people and white people coming together to say 'enough is enough!'

Sadly, the disproportionality of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) casualties to COVID-19 is staggering and seems to reflect the disproportionality of inequalities experienced by black people in UK society.

Despite making up only 14 per cent of the population, these groups are most likely to be on the frontline whether in the NHS as care workers, shelf stackers in supermarkets, or bus and cab drivers.

While the difference between ethnic groups in COVID-19 mortality is partly a result of socio-economic disadvantage, a remaining part of the difference has not yet been explained.

Lambeth Council is taking action by carrying out a community survey with our residents. We want to hear about how they are coping and their thoughts on life post-COVID-19.

We have also been speaking to community groups, businesses and Faiths Together in Lambeth about their fears and concerns around reopening. We are listening to them and supporting them with risk assessments, and will continue networking to ensure services are tailored to the needs of the BAME community.

The council is committed to listening to and working with all our communities to discuss what our services will look like, post-coronavirus.

Lambeth has a wonderfully diverse and tolerant community, of which we are proud. In June, we commemorated the contributions made to this country

by the Windrush generation and its legacy in Brixton.

At the time, I wrote to Home Secretary Priti Patel MP calling on her to reconsider the proposed decision to place a Windrush memorial in Waterloo Station, and instead to site it in Windrush Square, Brixton.

The square was named to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the Windrush. It is home to the Black Cultural Archives, the only historical institution of its kind in this country dedicated to collecting and preserving the history of African Caribbean people in Britain, and to the national war memorial to African and Caribbean soldiers.

What better place to have this monument, providing both the historical and educational experience of the Windrush generation, for generations to come?

What has become abundantly clear over the past few weeks is that our BAME

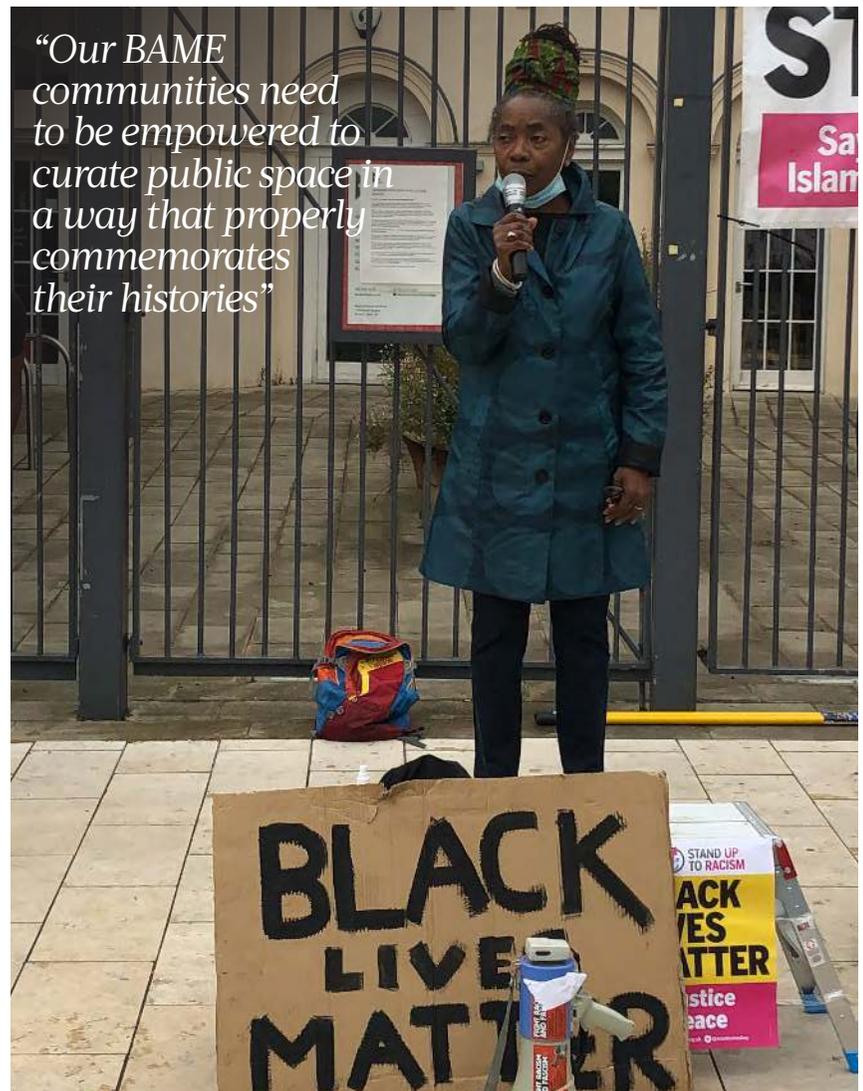
communities need to be empowered to curate public space in a way that properly commemorates their histories.

Many of the Windrush generation are critical of the Government's decision to build a monument in Waterloo Station, and they need to be listened to.

The council is carrying out an audit of all statues, monuments, landmarks, street names and works of art in Lambeth linked to the slave trade. On completion, we will consult the community, sharing the outcomes and make decisions collectively.

But as well as an honest debate about some of the shameful acts of British history, it is also vital to use our public spaces to properly celebrate the achievements and diversity of our history, of which we should be proud.

i For more information, see www.lambeth.gov.uk



Reorganisation – a pointless deckchair shuffle



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

After six months at the frontline of the emergency response to COVID-19, the unique ability of councils to respond to the needs of local communities has never been more evident.

As we enter recovery, everyone agrees councils now need financial and organisational stability, the space to reflect on how to respond even more effectively to subsequent waves, and the opportunity to reflate local economies.

Everyone, that is, apart from Local Government Minister Simon Clarke MP, who astonishingly has chosen this time to instead inflict instability, confusion and distraction on councils by dusting off his department's tired plans to 'reorganise' local

government from the top down, powered by the usual dubious arguments that prioritise neatness, uniformity and sterility over local identity, sense of place, and genuine devolution.

The idea of reorganisation is superficially attractive, with the small carrot of possible future 'efficiency gains' looking delicious to councils that have been starved of resources for more than a decade. But even where it is not contested, council reorganisation demands a massive upfront investment of resources and, crucially, officer capacity.

Both are in such painfully short supply today that I can hardly think of a less opportune moment for ministers to demand councils switch their attention from handling a serious global pandemic to a pointless deckchair shuffle.

Reorganisation supporters fail to recognise that much of the strength of our 'messy' system comes from its historical rooting in communities of place, and

underestimate both people's attachment to local identity and the anger that will spark when it looks like their town or city will lose its ability to self-govern.

So I predict that Simon Clarke, when confronted by MPs, councillors, and even fellow ministers who are baffled at being told to waste scarce time, energy, and money on a reorganisation that won't deliver efficiency benefits for several years, will either come to his senses or become a victim of a different 'reorganisation' of his own – the dreaded ministerial reshuffle.

"Reorganisation supporters fail to recognise that much of the strength of our 'messy' system comes from its historical rooting in communities of place"



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

Locally led devolution

The LGA has long called for greater devolution to councils, for local leaders to have the powers and resources they need to better deliver locally determined and democratically accountable outcomes.

This message was underlined in our recent annual conference publication, 'Re-thinking local' (see p10 and www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/re-thinking-local). The focus should be on devolving as many powers and as much funding as possible from Whitehall to councils, because devolution will deliver better outcomes for our residents and communities.

We have also been clear in our

"Devolution will deliver better outcomes for our residents and communities"



argument that, just as the challenges and opportunities differ across the country, there is no one-size-fits-all model, and local governance must be shaped locally.

Councils' work is now focused on economic recovery and renewal. The LGA has been clear that powers and resources are needed now and cannot wait for the debates that will follow the publication of the Government's Devolution and Local Recovery White Paper in the autumn.

Simon Clarke MP, the Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government, spoke at the LGA's virtual annual conference about the White Paper, and discusses it further in his interview in this edition of **first** (see p20).

While ministers will consider other arrangements, Mr Clarke says the

Government expects councils to adopt a mayoral combined authority model if they want to secure the full range of devolved powers and funding.

We are awaiting the details of the Government's proposals and what they are likely to mean in practice. We will continue to press for greater clarity on these issues and to argue for greater devolution that is led by local councils and driven by the priorities of residents.

Meanwhile, I would like to thank all our speakers and those of you who joined us for our first virtual annual conference in July. I hope you will agree the discussions on how we solve the biggest challenges facing local government were fascinating, and you can catch up on them at www.local.gov.uk/lga-annual-conference-webinars



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

More engage with virtual conference

The LGA's virtual annual conference, spread over two weeks in July, featured webinars with prominent speakers from local and central government, including Secretary of State Robert Jenrick MP and Local Government Minister Simon Clarke MP.

This provided a fantastic opportunity for more people to engage with speakers, and Robert's and Simon's webinars were attended by 877 and 400 delegates, respectively.

Key announcements from Robert's session included the additional £500 million in funding to deal with COVID-19 financial pressures, a new scheme to reimburse councils for lost income, and enabling them to spread their tax deficits over three years rather than one.

Simon used his speech to announce a new £10 million Kick-starting Tourism Package, which will give small businesses in tourist destinations grants of up to £5,000 to help them adapt to new ways of operating.

This was followed by the Summer Economic Update, in which the Chancellor urged us to focus recovery plans on jobs and announced a £30 billion package to boost the economy and give young people a better start.

"The Chancellor's funding announcements will help councils continue delivering services on which residents depend"

These funding announcements will help councils to continue delivering the services on which their residents depend, while also recognising that they are an integral part of the national response to COVID-19 and the leaders of the recovery in their local areas.

Thanks to everyone who facilitated and participated in this unique annual conference and made it such a success in difficult circumstances. Hopefully, we will all be able to meet in person in Liverpool next year.



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

Plan to stop the slums of the future

The Prime Minister has demanded that we "build, build, build" our way out of the economic crisis caused by COVID-19.

He echoes a call of mine, and of my Liberal Democrat colleagues, that investing in homes, schools, hospitals and infrastructure must be done properly. But he ignores that local government should be playing a leading role in delivering this much-needed investment in our communities.

"The Government conveniently forgets the thousands of planning applications sitting there without a brick being laid"

What totally depressed me was his promise of "the most radical reforms of our planning system since the end of the Second World War". Not again, please!

When will the government wake up to the fact that councils aren't the problem with getting homes built, nor is the planning system?

How many times do we have to say that councils approve nine in 10 planning applications? The Government conveniently forgets the thousands of planning applications sitting there without a brick being laid, the hundreds of thousands of homes that lay unbuilt.

We need powers to force developers to build these out. Don't demonise us and point the finger again at local government, blaming us. We don't need rhetoric – we need partnership.

More than 13,500 affordable homes have been 'lost' over the past four years as a result of permitted development changes already in place, meaning less investment in the schools, doctors' surgeries, roads and facilities these new homes will need.

We were promised beautiful, high-quality homes, improved building safety, environmentally friendly housing – and we will be getting the 'slums of the future'. I do despair.



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

Encouraging active, healthier lives

The LGA held its annual conference remotely in July, bringing sessions to our members. Our councillors did a great job, raising good questions and entering the debate.

On your behalf, I chaired the session with LGA Vice-President Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, one of our most successful Paralympians, who spoke passionately in support of our councils and our shared work in encouraging people into active, healthier lives.

Baroness Grey-Thompson presented evidence of the value of leisure activities, something we continue to raise with government.

All of us at the LGA have been working in a coordinated way to inform and respond to recent ministerial announcements. We made the case strongly for funding – rewarded to a point – and continue to call for full cover of lost income, costs, and irrecoverable council tax and business rates.

We're also adamant that support should not be linked to any forced reorganisation. The Conservative manifesto committed to further devolution to local government, not to forced

"Government plans for planning, devolution and licensing pose a risk to local democracy"

mayor or unitary arrangements.

As we approach summer recess, work continues on our transition from the EU, with members raising points about ports and regulatory issues, which the Government is working to clarify. We are also responding to the LGA's draft member code of conduct consultation, open until mid-August.

With government plans for planning, devolution and licensing all posing a risk to our local democracy, you can be assured we are working hard to represent our members and demonstrate the importance of our councils as effective and essential leaders of place.



Councillor **Rebecca Lury** is Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure, Equalities and Communities at Southwark Council

The transition to a more sustainable future

Having declared a climate emergency in 2019, we believe Southwark was the first England council to appoint a director of climate change, tasked with taking forward a plan that is inclusive, transparent and ambitious.

We are also embedding our approach to climate change in every policy within the council.

Conscious of the disparities in wealth across our borough, we want to ensure that our approach supports a transition where the burden of change to a more sustainable future is shared among those who can most afford it – whether that is through putting carbon neutrality at the heart of new developments; accelerating our sustainable transport infrastructure; launching a Southwark Nature Action Plan to protect and promote our borough's biodiversity; creating a circular economy that reduces consumption; or moving towards zero carbon and green energy for all

businesses, residents and services in the borough.

All this has been accelerated in light of COVID-19.

For example, our Streetscape plan, which looks to increase cycling and walking through street closures and pavement widening, will have long-term impacts on the way in which we think about transport and movement options in the future.

We also want to retain and build on our commitment to our exemplary parks and green spaces. We know how much these have been valued during the past few months by so many of those who do not have gardens.

Combined with investment in a tree planting programme, the greening of our borough will continue apace.

But we cannot do this alone. While we have a role to lead and to bring together different people and ideas, everyone needs to work together.

We look forward to continuing the conversation with our residents, neighbouring boroughs, the Mayor of London and the Government, as we collectively look to stop, and ultimately reverse, the damage being done to our environment.



See www.southwark.gov.uk/environment/climate-emergency

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Getting communities back on their feet



Councillor **David Williams** is Chairman of the County Councils Network

With the hospitality sector now open, the country is slowly leaving the first phase of the pandemic.

Many of us are turning our attention to the next phase: economic recovery. If councils have played an integral part in combating the virus, they will have an equally important role in helping their communities back onto their feet.

Emerging findings from upcoming research by Grant Thornton for the County Councils Network show the unique challenges facing our areas. The analysis shows that county areas contain the highest proportion of jobs within 'at risk' sectors such as manufacturing, retail, and tourism.

Considering that differing areas will have differing needs – some may be

vulnerable to a drop in tourism, others to a decline in the global economy – a successful recovery will be one that is place-based, rather than a 'one size fits all' national solution.

County authorities can play a hugely important leadership and visionary role in setting out how their economies can recover, bringing together local partners. They can then translate these plans into results on the ground, utilising their scale to attract inward investment and spend government funding wisely on the right projects for their areas.

Here, a strong dialogue with business will be imperative and any effective recovery from the virus must look beyond

“A successful recovery will be one that is place-based, rather than a ‘one size fits all’ national solution”

simply just the high street – as important as that is. Economic recovery must address all the components of our local economies – from retail, to infrastructure, to skills.

That said, there will be similar issues played out across the country which will need to be addressed from the centre. Local government has come out of the epidemic with its reputation enhanced and county leaders are ready and willing to work with government on a two-pronged recovery role, supported by targeted funding and powers.

This will be especially pertinent in relation to employment, where a quick and bold response will be needed. It is crucial that recovery plans are tailored to the requirements of specific local markets.

We have much of the infrastructure in place: we simply need the resources and powers to make the greatest impact. Counties have the scale and expertise to work effectively with local business and education providers alongside the Government.

Considering the scale of the challenge, there should be no limit to ambition, with upper-tier authorities playing a substantive role over several programmes: ranging from tailored support to re-skill people so they can quickly move into emerging employment sectors, to a flexible apprenticeships programme and ensuring young people leaving education have the support to secure a job or training.

The Prime Minister's re-commitment to the 'levelling-up' agenda is hugely welcomed, and we have long argued that many of the left-behind localities in England are located within county areas. It is imperative all these areas receive support and resource, including access to devolution deals that work for those places.

As we look longer term, we cannot forget about the other global crisis – climate change. We cannot lose sight of the good work councils have done so far, and we cannot afford to put these endeavours on ice.

So, let's roll up our sleeves and get on with the next phase: there is a huge amount of work yet to be done but also the opportunity to do things differently.



i To find out more about the County Councils Network, please visit www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/



Pandemic has taught me so much



Thomas Wrench is a National Management Trainee at St Albans City & District Council

When a pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization on 11 March, I was fresh out of university and only five months into my role at St Albans City & District Council.

I had been fully prepared to meet a series of complex challenges when I embarked on this career path through the LGA's National Graduate Development Programme. But I never expected to be thrust into the centre of a pandemic response, having been asked to directly support the council's COVID-19 Incident Management Team.

This senior team discusses and scrutinises every aspect of our response and the implications of the coronavirus on service delivery. From cemeteries to car parks, rough sleepers to rent payment holidays, no aspect of the council's work is overlooked.

The payment of business support grants, the compassion offered to grieving families at graveside burial services, phone

calls to thousands of vulnerable residents, and the preparation of temporary accommodation for rough sleepers are just some of the ways colleagues have worked tirelessly to protect our community and ensure that recovery work can begin apace.

So here is a summary of what I have learned.

First, thinking matters. When new information must be digested quickly and decisions made frequently, finding time to think can be difficult. But encouraging debate, enquiry and the experimentation of new, well-examined ideas can be fruitful, especially when innovative solutions can literally save lives.

Second, collaboration is key. I've seen

“Our councils are the bedrock of our communities and will become cornerstones of regional recovery work”

first-hand that the redeployment of colleagues can lead to the emergence of new ideas and hidden skills. Moreover, strong partnerships with neighbouring authorities, the police and local voluntary organisations has been key to ensuring a community-wide approach.

Third, data dominates. I compile a weekly report demonstrating the council's performance in customer-facing service delivery. From this, we identify gaps in our response and redeploy officers, according to the pressure placed on certain teams. It also helps to document the good work we are doing and builds trust.

Fourth, technology can uphold democracy. The necessary introduction of virtual council meetings has posed a huge challenge for IT teams, but the adaptability of officers and councillors and a general willingness to experiment with new applications pays dividends.

Fifth, homeworking can be helpful. A shorter commute, fewer distractions and unnecessary meetings, and the opportunity to work irregular hours has, for some, proved welcome. However, nothing can replace face-to-face discussions, nor is every local government worker fortunate enough to have a strong broadband connection, a suitable desk or study, and a quiet home environment.

Finally, councils care. A chance conversation with an elderly resident demonstrated why local government is so indispensable to the welfare of our communities. In desperate need of a food parcel, I was struck by the relief she expressed when I assured her that help would come. I saw the council at its very best that afternoon.

This intense learning experience may well prove to be one of the most valuable and rewarding of my career. Being thrust into the heart of a category 1 response has opened my eyes to the range of functions and services that local authorities offer.

Our councils are the bedrock of our communities and will become cornerstones of regional recovery work, ensuring a constructive dialogue between key partners while acting as defenders of the vulnerable.



For more information about the National Graduate Development Programme, please visit www.local.gov.uk/national-graduate-development-programme

COUNCILLOR

Councillors: bringing order to chaos



Colin Copus is Emeritus Professor of Local Politics at De Montfort University and Visiting Professor at Ghent University

The constancy of change in local government, more often than not resulting from central government policy, shapes councillors' experiences.

Government oversight, constraints and regulations – none more frustrating than the wait for government regulations to be able to hold virtual meetings – means councillors' main task is carving out as much policy and political discretion as possible in governing their area.

Devolution could be presumed to strengthen the councillor as a politician and community governor. But the focus on combined authorities and the ever-present threat of reorganisation upheaval has seen councillors become the forgotten part of devolution. Overlooking councillors is a major flaw in devolution, especially as the work of the councillor is changing.

It is our councillors who are confronted with demographic change and shifting populations, austerity, the pressures of urbanisation or declining rural populations,

increasing service demands at a time of diminishing resources, growing demand for public participation within local representative democracy, and the continued territorial upheaval in the public sector landscape. Then there is COVID-19!

Recent research among councillors has revealed how much their work is changing. While the council remains an important arena as the body to which councillors are elected, they are confronted with a fragmented landscape of public service provision and an often chaotic environment involving a vast array of public, private and third-sector bodies that they must navigate.

Myriad competing and interacting organisations, and a complex network of agencies and bodies, demand councillors' attention and – compared to the council – those bodies will have different purposes, goals, resources, policies, structures, ambitions and powers.

Many operate beyond councils' boundaries and have little or no accountability to the public or any concern for place or community; yet they will spend public money, make policy decisions and take action that will affect the wellbeing of communities for decades to come. They do this with little or no democratic link to the communities that their actions affect.

Councillors are spending more of their time engaging with, negotiating, pressurising, building alliances and coalitions, influencing, informing and shaping the policies and decisions of these other bodies. Councillors are investing considerable time and effort in joining together fragmented networks and holding to account public and private organisations.

Such work by councillors has two dimensions: the strategic and long-term, which is about developing an overview of how the local area will develop over time; and the pragmatic and day-to-day, often focused on a ward or a division, to create solutions to practical local problems.

It is not just councillors who are members of health trusts, police and crime panels, local enterprise partnerships, drainage boards, areas of outstanding natural beauty partnership committees, national parks committees, flood defence committees and public transport consortium (to name a few) that have these tasks.

All councillors are engaging with the police, the health service (in all its manifestations), transport bodies (bus and rail companies), private developers, probation services, telecommunication companies, public utilities and government departments.

Securing democratic public accountability and governing through other organisations is a vital role for all councillors and councils need to ensure that work is recognised and our councillors supported in a new dimension of local government.



“Councillors have become the forgotten part of devolution”

ELECTIONS



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



The right time for remote voting?

The pandemic has concentrated attention across the world on the philosophy and practice of remote voting.

In a handful of countries, including Canada, Estonia, and Switzerland, elections of one kind or another have been conducted using online voting. In most places however, including England and Wales, it is voting by post that has expanded to save electors having physically to go to the polls.

Remote voting is an issue that can spark fundamental political divisions. For those on the left, anything making the process of voting easier and more inclusive, and which brings 'disadvantaged' groups into the electoral arena, is a good thing. Right-wingers, conversely, worry more about potentially less secure methods of casting a ballot and a greater incidence of fraud.

The argument is currently being played out in the early skirmishes of the US presidential election. Donald Trump is raging about the likely increase in 'mail-in ballots' this November and trying to sow doubts about the integrity of an election in which they form a substantial fraction of the votes.

The Democrats, on the other hand, are keen to expand the eligibility to vote by post, with cases in Alabama and Texas currently before the courts.

In Britain, all electors were given the right to 'demand' a postal vote under legislation introduced by the first Blair administration in 2000. Since then, and

not least following a damning ruling by an Election Court about events in Birmingham in 2004, significant amendments have been introduced to improve the security of the system.

Nonetheless, in the past two decades, the proportion of the electorate able to vote by post has risen from just 2 per cent to almost a fifth (see table, below). Coronavirus is likely to increase this number still further when – and if – elections resume next May.

However, the attitude and zeal of local administrations and political parties continues to lead to substantial council-to-council variations in take-up.

In Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Stevenage and Sunderland, for example, postal voters number between a third and 40 per cent of all electors. Apart from each being under Labour control, all three authorities had experience of conducting all-postal ballots as part of pilot schemes conducted in the early 2000s.

Other councils with a similar pedigree

have much lower levels of electors opting to vote by post, though. In Halton, the figure is less than 9 per cent, in Hull it is just over 10 per cent, and in Liverpool it is 13 per cent.

There is little doubt that turnout is higher among those with a postal vote, whether because they are already more engaged or simply reflecting the ease of the process. In Newcastle upon Tyne at the 2018 local elections, turnout was 67 per cent for postal voters but less than 23 per cent for those who still needed to visit a polling station. In Liverpool, the two proportions were substantially similar.

Some argue that the greater prevalence of postal voting has only served to disguise a continuing crisis of participation among some groups. What remains less certain is which, if any, political party systematically benefits from a wide roll-out of postal ballots as their impact will vary from place to place.

Percentage of electorate with postal vote, UK General Elections 1997-2019

1997	2.1
2001	4.0
2005	12.1
2010	15.3
2015	16.7
2017	18.0
2019	c.20.0 (est)

LETTERS

Hybrid solution to meetings

I felt compelled to respond to Cllr Mickleburgh's letter regarding the consequences of Clause 78 legislation on council meetings (**first 649**), from the somewhat unique position of being the district council ward member for two of the three parish councils for which I am clerk.

In recent years, sadly, public attendance at councils has been decreasing – unless, of course, a contentious planning application is on the agenda.

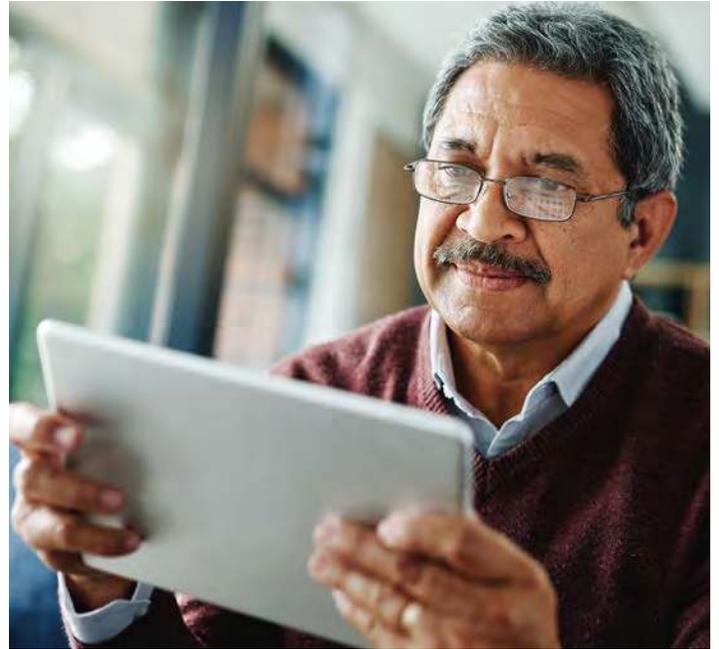
Clause 78 – and the ability to broadcast council meetings live onto a tablet, PC or phone – has revolutionised local government. While not all councillors approve, a great many are as keen as mustard for this legislation to be carried forward – as are a great many clerks, given that the rules we currently adhere to are nearly 50 years old.

Surely, the answer is for Westminster to consider some hybrid integration into the process of convening and holding council meetings? Those who wish to attend in person at the venue can be free to do so, but others may wish to stay at home, and participate that way.

This new style of democratic engagement allows those with disabilities, transport issues, childcare obligations and work commitments to still play an active role in their local council.

More importantly, it gives us far more opportunities to engage with those that we serve – the public – who can watch, listen and participate but without the hurdles that are often cited to explain their absence at 'real' meetings.

We cannot use the excuse that technology is not 'our bag' to hold back progress. The benefits of digital democracy – from the environmental savings and improved engagement to the time efficiencies – are clear to see.



We must use legislation to enable both to be used, and then let time and technology take us forward to a new era, while still accepting that, for some, the old way of doing things is preferred.

Ultimately, the public will decide how they wish to see their elected representatives at work – in the village hall, or on a screen in their living rooms. My money is most certainly on the latter.

Cllr Paul Hayward (Ind), Deputy Leader, East Devon District Council

Meeting face to face

Cllr Tim Mickleburgh (**first 649**) is right to prefer face-to-face meetings for council, planning and other committee meetings.

Virtual meetings have been necessary during the pandemic, but normal meetings are more likely to avoid technical hitches, are open to residents who may not have computers, and allow easier press coverage.

I hope that we can get back to them soon.

Cllr David Skinner (Con), Coventry City Council



Councillor allowances

I am one of three councillors in Kent who are refusing to accept an increase in allowances, in my case because of the impact of coronavirus on our local communities.

It just feels wrong, when the council is £100 million in debt and our constituents are suffering through the pandemic and losing their jobs. How many of them are going to get a 4 per cent pay rise?

If we are to represent the people of our communities, we have got to represent their lives.

Previously, I have given my pay rises to local charities, but I still feel uncomfortable about the situation.

This is not a party-political issue – one of the other councillors refusing their allowance increase is Conservative, the other Labour.

But I would be very interested to hear other views about the issues around councillor allowances and pay. I think some of the sensitivities could be reduced by linking councillors' allowances to council workers' pay and fixing them for four years.

Cllr Barry Lewis (Lab), Kent 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

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