



Sector-led improvement

A local government success story

10

12 **Localising test and trace**
More resources for councils

13 **Local lockdowns**
How community engagement has a key role to play

16 **Planning reforms**
Councils are committed to building new homes

21 **Race inequalities**
What is the point of yet another government review?

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CONTENTS



Sector-led improvement

Councils are best placed to help each other improve, and it's a principle that has long underpinned the LGA's sector-led improvement (SLI) offer.

I'm glad to say that you – our members – also support this approach to improvement, according to recent independent evaluations of our SLI programme (p10).

Elsewhere in this month's **first**, we look at the localisation of Track and Trace (p12), at how councils are leading local lockdowns (p13), and new COVID-19 guidance for councillors (p14).

We examine the Government's consultation on planning reforms (p16) and have new guidance for councils on improving the private rented housing sector (p15).

You can also find out about the LGA's work in support of councils before the end of the current transition period following the UK's exit from the EU (p19).

Cllr Sharon Thompson writes about the Government's plans for a commission on racial inequalities and Birmingham City Council's work on tackling inequalities within its workforce (p21).

In addition, Nigel Riglar, President of the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport, writes about a blueprint for the support local authorities need to accelerate a green recovery from the pandemic (p26).

Cllr James Jamieson
is LGA Chairman



FEATURES

- 10 Peer support**
The success of sector-led improvement
- 12 Test and trace**
A greater role for councils
- 13 Local lockdowns**
Engaging with local communities
- 14 Coronavirus recovery**
The role of councillors as community leaders
- 15 Rented homes**
Improving the private rental sector
- 16 Planning reforms**
Communities need quality places to live
- 18 The show must go on**
Creative industries and economic growth
- 19 Brexit transition**
From ports to policy – key issues for councils

COMMENT

- 21 Time for change**
Yet another review of race inequalities?
- 24 On hold?**
Savings to be made from unused lines
- 24 Aims of almshouses**
An old solution to today's housing need
- 25 Local youth**
Lockdown: a disaster for young people
- 25 Anyone for tennis?**
Helping councils get people active
- 26 Climate change**
A blueprint for a green recovery

REGULARS

- 04** News
- 22** LGA chairman and group leaders
- 27** Councillor – climate change questions
- 28** Councillor – scrutinising care
- 29** Local elections – tackling low turnout
- 30** Letters



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Councils face imminent £2bn funding gap

Councils in England face a £2 billion funding gap in the current financial year and could be forced to cut services if the Government does not meet the cost of soaring COVID-19 spending, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has warned.

Its report, co-funded by the LGA, says that, without additional financial support, councils “face a difficult choice between depleting their reserves to low and potentially risky levels or cutting spending on important local services”.

The IFS calculates that, although the Government has so far provided £5.2 billion in extra funds, councils expect to spend £4.4 billion more than planned this year because of the pandemic, and face £2.8 billion in losses from fees and charges, leaving them with a £2 billion shortfall. This is in addition to losses on business rates and council tax.

Even if the Government offers additional support this year, the report warns that the crisis facing local government is likely to continue into 2021/22, when collapsing council tax and business rates collection since lockdown starts to feed into council budgets.

Although the simplest way of preventing cuts would be for ministers to provide more grant funding, they could also relax rules that prevent councils from borrowing money to fund day-to-day services – which would

help spread the pressure over several years, said the IFS.

While English councils, collectively, have identified around £3.3 billion of available reserves, the IFS estimates that around 40 per cent of councils would still be unable to balance their books, even if they spent all their reserves.

Cllr James Jamieson, LGA Chairman, said: “The funding already received from government has been a positive step and recognises the crucial role councils have played in keeping the country going throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

“This independent research shows that unmet funding pressures remain. The LGA therefore reiterates its call for the Government to meet all extra cost pressures and income losses in full, so that councils aren’t faced with making tough decisions on in-year cuts to services to meet their legal duty to set a balanced budget.”



Obesity fuelling adult social care pressures

Weight-related stigmas need tackling to help prevent rising levels of obesity from having a significant impact on demand and cost pressures in adult social care, the LGA has warned in a new report.

Up to a third of adults are predicted to be obese by 2024. The LGA says council care costs are rising as levels of obesity increase, with more people living longer

in ill-health with multiple and complex needs, requiring costly housing adaptations, specialised equipment and personal care.

Councils are concerned that a fear of offence and a lack of referral services for severely obese people sees some health practitioners only record a person’s condition, such as diabetes or stroke, and not obesity or body mass index (BMI) – even though

that is often the underlying issue.

Practitioners also often compensate for the loss of mobility in obese clients with more equipment – which means they move about even less and their problems are compounded, increasing their likely long-term reliance on social care services.

In its new report, ‘Social care and obesity’, the LGA urges doctors and health professionals

to have an honest conversation about people’s weight when they consider it to be the underlying cause of a condition, and for weight to be routinely recorded to help inform prevention work and ensure that services are tailored to population need.

Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA’s Community Wellbeing Board, said: “Obesity needs to be tackled head-on, otherwise people’s health will continue to suffer, health inequalities associated with obesity will remain, and the economic and social costs will increase to unsustainable levels.”

New health protection organisation launched

Public Health England (PHE) is being replaced by a new body, the National Institute for Health Protection, which will be focused on preparing for external threats such as pandemics.

The new institute brings together PHE and NHS Test and Trace, as well as the analytical capability of the Joint Biosecurity Centre, under a single leadership team.

Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "PHE staff have been working closely alongside their council counterparts, day and night, since this outbreak first emerged to contain and prevent the spread of this devastating virus, and they deserve all our thanks.

"This pandemic has highlighted the value of local knowledge, supported by national coordination and resources. A local response should be at the forefront of our approach to the next phase.

"Directors of public health in councils can boost their health protection and prevention roles, working alongside other council services, including environmental health, but this needs to be joined up with the new system.

"Councils have a proven track record in improving public health services over the past eight years. National policy-making has an important role to play, but this cannot be a substitute for local leadership and local responsibility.

"We need to establish where the core health improvement functions of any future public health system are best held, backed up by necessary funding.

"We will need to reflect on how we, as a country, responded to coronavirus – but, for now, our focus needs to remain firmly on how best to prevent and manage a possible second wave later this year."

More localisation of Test and Trace

The NHS Test and Trace system in England will cut 6,000 staff by the end of August, with the remaining contact tracers working alongside councils' public health teams to reach more infected people and their contacts in communities, the Government has announced.

The overhauled Test and Trace programme will mean council teams can track down anyone who cannot be reached by the national system after 48 hours, to

tell them to self-isolate. All local authorities with public health responsibilities will have dedicated, ring-fenced teams from the national service to support their local activity.

Councils have already made a success of their own contact-tracing programmes in areas including Blackburn with Darwen, Luton and Leicester.

LGA Chairman Cllr James Jamieson said: "A strong national and local partnership is critical for Test and Trace to work as effectively as possible, and it is right that local resources are kept under constant review to ensure everyone involved is able to help stop the virus spreading further.

"Using councils' unrivalled local knowledge and vast experience of contact tracing within local public health teams is vital in the Government's national efforts."

The LGA is working with Dr Carolyn Wilkins OBE, Oldham's Chief Executive and the national tracing lead, and colleagues in NHS Test and Trace on the design of the proposed approach to contact tracing.

● See p12



In brief

Modern slavery

Referrals of suspected child victims of modern slavery by English councils have soared by 1,452 per cent in five years, from 127 in 2014 to 1,971 in 2019, putting children's services under increasing and significant pressure, the LGA has warned. It is urging government to ensure councils are properly funded in the long term to tackle modern slavery and support its victims, and to create a future-proof National Referral Mechanism system – the UK's framework for referring and supporting victims – able to support the growing numbers of victims.

Children's vaccinations



The LGA is leading the call for parents, families and guardians to contact their local GP, school or health centre to make sure their children's vaccinations are up to date. Research from Public Health England found immunisations fell by 20 per cent in the first three weeks of lockdown. Cllr Judith Blake, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board said: "The national immunisation programme is highly successful in reducing the number of serious and life-threatening diseases such as whooping cough, scarlet fever and measles. High vaccine uptake can prevent a resurgence of these infections, which can cause harm and put unnecessary added pressure on the NHS."

Working carers 'need more support'

Two in three employers want more practical assistance from care and support services to ensure their staff with unpaid caring responsibilities can stay in work, according to a recent report from Carers UK. Previous research by the charity suggests 600 people give up work to care for older or disabled relatives each day. Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, reiterated the LGA's call for social care to have parity of esteem with the NHS, backed up by a long-term sustainable funding settlement. "Caring can place a real strain on carers, which is why councils are committed to doing all they can to support them."

Schools should be 'top priority'

Education should be "prioritised over other sectors" if the country goes into lockdown again, Children's Commissioner for England Anne Longfield has said in a new briefing paper.

Her intervention came after large parts of the north of England were placed under a regional lockdown amid rising cases of COVID-19.

It also comes amid growing concerns about learning lost during partial school closures, especially among the most disadvantaged children, who are less likely to have accessed remote education.

The Government has said that reopening schools in September is a "national priority".

Cllr Teresa Heritage, Vice-Chairman of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "We know that many children will have been out of school for up to six months, which will have an impact on their mental wellbeing and development, and we support the Children's Commissioner's calls to keep schools open for as long as is possible.

"Councils have been working closely with schools throughout the coronavirus pandemic to ensure they remain open for vulnerable children and families, and, where needed, councils have delivered vital IT equipment for children.

"As we look to return to normal from September, councils will continue to work with all schools and local partners, but it will be essential that councils have the capacity and necessary data to play their full part in the Test and Trace programme.

"Any local decision to close a school will need to be based on scientific advice."

The Government has written to councils about funding for its 'wellbeing for education return' initiative, which will provide training to help staff support children and young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing on their return to education in September – something for which the LGA has been calling.



Mental wellbeing 'crucial' to recovery planning

People's mental wellbeing will play a crucial role in every aspect of recovery planning, the LGA has said in a new joint report with the Centre for Mental Health.

This includes schools reopening, workers returning from furlough, people who have been shielding, dealing with the economic and housing consequences of coronavirus, and planning for possible further spikes in infections.

The report says a national focus is now needed on helping everyone stay mentally well, including those affected by COVID-19. This should be backed up by funding for councils to spend with local partners, such as the voluntary and community sector, to meet their communities' mental wellbeing needs.

The total cost to society of mental health problems in the UK was £119 billion in 2018/19, with research showing that children from the poorest 20 per cent of households are four times as likely to have serious mental

health difficulties by the age of 11 than those from the wealthiest 20 per cent. A separate NHS Confederation report revealed that mental health services are facing rising demand because of coronavirus.

Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "Councils have always had an important role in improving and maintaining people's mental wellness, but coronavirus has proven the value of this more than ever.

"Our mental health is so closely linked with other essential areas of our lives, including housing, employment, social inclusion and economic development. Councils are uniquely placed to use their services to connect all parts of this system together and help ensure the country is prepared for the future.

"We need to refocus our policies and funding towards these preventative local services, to help reduce health inequalities and ensure better mental health for all."

Social care 'needs extra winter funding'

Social care needs extra funding to help it deal with the aftermath of coronavirus and prepare for winter, alongside a long-term funding settlement, according to a new report from the NHS Confederation.

It said any new plan for social care should also include help to develop the workforce.

In a separate letter to the Prime Minister, the NHS Confederation and other members of the Health for Care coalition have said they are concerned about the ability of social care services to cope with the potential impact of a second wave of coronavirus. They called for help to clear the backlog of routine hospital operations that have been postponed because of the pandemic.

Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "Social care deserves parity of esteem with the NHS. Every pound invested in council-run services, including social care, helps to relieve pressure on the health service, which, as this report states, is facing a huge backlog of operations.

"We have established our own set of principles (see **first** 650), with support from a number of prominent organisations across the health and care sector, to help inform and underpin the Government's thinking on the future of adult social care in this country.

"The Government and other parties need to begin cross-party talks on the future of adult social care, as soon as possible."

'Keep public participation at heart of planning'

The LGA has reiterated the need for new homes to be delivered through a planning system "with public participation at its heart", after the Government announced proposals to reform the way the country builds.

Ministers have published a series of consultation documents, including a 'Planning for the future' White Paper that would see land designated for growth, renewal or protection.

It will also require every area to have a local plan in place within 30 months and to move towards a digital planning system, with a new infrastructure levy to replace Section 106 agreements and the community infrastructure levy.

Cllr James Jamieson, LGA Chairman, said: "Councils are committed to ensuring new homes are built and communities have quality places to live.

"It is vital that these are delivered through a planning system with public participation at its heart, which gives communities the power to ensure new developments are of a high

standard, built in the right places, and include affordable homes.

"We also need to ensure that new homes are supported by new funding for community infrastructure such as schools, playgrounds and roads.

"Nine in 10 applications are approved by councils, with more than a million homes given planning permission over the past decade yet to be built. The system needs to ensure planning permissions are built.

"Any loss of local control over developments would be a concern. It would deprive communities of the ability to define the area they live in and know best and risk giving developers the freedom to ride roughshod over local areas.

"It is vital that government fully engages with – and takes advantage of – the expertise in local government to ensure that their aspirations of an improved system works in practice."

● See p16

Homelessness 'will soar without support services'

A new report by the Salvation Army is calling on the Government to fund homelessness support services properly in this autumn's Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR).

Without this, it warns that homelessness and rough sleeping will soar, and that families will be forced into expensive and unsuitable temporary accommodation, as councils struggle to manage rising homelessness levels.

The charity's report, 'Future-proof the roof', sets out a range of solutions to sustain the progress made in recent months in helping rough sleepers off the streets.

It says that temporary accommodation cost councils nearly £1 billion last year.

Cllr David Renard, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the significant challenges councils already



faced supporting homeless people.

"In the short term, to prevent any immediate rise in homelessness, the Government should bring forward its pledge to end 'no fault evictions', which would help reduce the number of people evicted, and commit to maintaining local housing allowance rates at the lowest third of market rents.

"In the longer term, housing must be a central part of the recovery from coronavirus, with the CSR delivering a genuine renaissance in council house building that reduces homelessness, gets rough sleepers off the streets for good, supports people's wellbeing and is climate-friendly."

In brief Green homes

The Government has announced further details of its new Green Homes Grant Scheme, providing up to two-thirds of the cost of home improvements in more than 600,000 homes. All local authorities in England can bid for funding under this scheme, to improve the energy efficiency of low-income households in their area. This must be done before the deadline of 1 September 2020.

Water safety



The LGA called for children and young people to be made more aware of the dangers of swimming in open water during the summer holidays, when accidental drownings typically peak. The warmer weather and a likely increase in 'staycations' because of uncertainty over COVID-19 travel restrictions abroad, means young people may be more tempted to swim in the sea, rivers, canals, lakes and quarries – but could be unaware of the dangers, including cold water shock, which is a leading cause of death. The LGA says swimming or personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) lessons need to cover water dangers in different swimming settings and all primary school leavers need to be able to swim 25 metres.

Climate design

Councils in England can now apply to the Design in the Public Sector programme, which this year will equip participants with the design skills to tackle climate change locally and assist in a green economic recovery. Cllr Peter Fleming, Chairman of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board, said: "To date, we have supported more than 70 councils and over 350 public sector leaders to adopt design tools and methods through Design in the Public Sector. By working with the Design Council, participants will refocus their challenge around their residents and as a result, are more likely to develop more user-appropriate systems and services, alongside progressing their climate action aims in their communities." To apply, please visit www.local.gov.uk/design-public-sector-programme

In brief

Business support

As first was going to press, the Government was due to close down three support funds for businesses struggling with the economic shock caused by the pandemic, with millions of pounds in unallocated funding to be returned to the Treasury. The LGA has called for more time to ensure eligible businesses can be reached via one of these, the Discretionary Grants Fund. Cllr Richard Watts, Chair of the LGA's Resources Board, said: "Shutting the discretionary scheme would be a mistake by the Government at this time. Councils need more time and flexibility to ensure as many businesses can benefit from this funding."

Decaying teeth

Some children and young people who have been at home for months during lockdown could be risking their oral health by snacking on sugary food and drink, and will have missed out on health education advice from schools and early years settings. The LGA warning comes as new figures show hospital operations to remove rotten teeth in children and teenagers went up 17 per cent in 2018/19 compared with 2012/13, to 44,685 (177 a day) – costing the NHS £41.5 million. Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "We need to do all we can to reduce how much sugar our children eat and drink, including investing in oral health education."

Air pollution coronavirus link

The coronavirus pandemic led to a big drop in pollution levels in early April, and deaths involving COVID-19 were more common in highly polluted areas, particularly early in the pandemic, according to Office for National Statistics analysis. The correlation between pollution and mortality fell as deaths rose and lockdown was introduced, before levelling off in early May. Cllr Darren Rodwell, LGA Transport Spokesperson, said: "This analysis shows why it is vital the Government continues to support councils to invest in long-term measures, such as cycling and walking infrastructure, to reduce harmful transport emissions."

Call for tougher licensing powers

The LGA has called for councils to be given tougher licensing powers to close down pubs and other licensed premises that are not following COVID-19 safety guidelines.

It wants to see the introduction of a temporary public health or COVID-19 objective in the Licensing Act 2003 to enable councils to take action where premises are not protecting the public during the pandemic, such as not collecting people's contact details or maintaining social distancing.

Licensing laws currently do not allow councils to take action on public health grounds, such as where COVID-19 guidelines are not being followed. They would need to use general health and safety legislation, which is less specific and makes it harder to intervene.

The LGA is also calling for COVID-19

safety guidance to be made mandatory and legally enforceable through the Licensing Act. Councils have recently been given powers to close premises, but these can only be used where there is already a serious and imminent risk to public health. The LGA says Licensing Act sanctions – such as requiring a business to apply new conditions to operate safely – would be better suited to preventing the risk of infection spreading than the tools available under health and safety laws.

Cllr Nesil Caliskan, Chair of the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Board, said: "Some councils are beginning to see isolated cases where the guidelines are not being followed and they are limited in what they can do to stop it.

"It needs to be mandatory for premises to follow this government safety guidance, and councils need the right powers to intervene and take action if necessary."

Extra funding for buses and school transport

A further £256 million of emergency funding to help keep bus and tram operators running during the coronavirus pandemic has been announced by the Department for Transport.

Passenger numbers on bus and light rail services have been significantly below normal levels during the pandemic, despite the bus network running at more than 80 per cent of normal service levels.

The announcement takes the total funding allocations for bus services to more than £600 million and has helped support more than 130,000 local bus services across England.

The Department for Education also announced £40 million for home-to-school transport this autumn, to help local authorities create extra capacity and allow hundreds of thousands more students to use alternatives to public transport, while social distancing measures remain in place.

Cllr David Renard, the LGA's Transport Spokesman, said: "Bus services and light rail... have a critical role to play in the national recovery from COVID-19 and beyond, through supporting local economies, tackling poor air quality and

congestion and reaching the country's net zero carbon targets by 2050.

"The most effective way forward would be for the Government to give councils oversight of local bus services, so they can ensure effective targeting of any public funding."

He added: "We are pleased funding has been announced to support home-to-school transport. It will be important for the Government to work closely with schools and councils to ensure that the costs of covering extra transport capacity are fully covered."



PARLIAMENT

Influencing the lawmakers

The LGA's engagement with Westminster remains one of the most important ways to ensure we continue to be the national voice of local government.

Influencing debates, legislation and select committee inquiries has been even more important as we face one of the most serious public health emergencies of our lifetimes.

Each year, we produce a report providing an update on our work with MPs and Peers, as we seek to influence the parliamentary and political agenda, on behalf of councils across the country.

Our engagement has looked a little different over the past year, but we have still been able to influence key issues and celebrate the outstanding work of local government.

While the pandemic continues to challenge us all, the General Election in December 2019 means we are in the middle of a Parliamentary session, with a lot of legislation still being agreed. That said, influencing legislation as it is debated and agreed by Parliament continues to be vital to our lobbying.

For example, in response to representations from the LGA and councils, the Government amended the Coronavirus Act 2020 to make provisions for the Secretary of State to lay regulations so that councillors can attend, speak at, vote in, or otherwise participate in local authority meetings without being together in the same place.

This allowed councils to postpone meetings and engage in decision-making and voting remotely, providing them with the flexibility required to serve their local communities during the coronavirus crisis.

We also lobbied for the Business and Planning Act 2020 to be amended so that smoking could be restricted in pavement areas outside of hospitality businesses licensed through temporary pavement licences.

After wide-ranging support, including from the LGA, for a cross-party proposal on the issue, the Government introduced its own amendment to make reasonable provision for seating

The LGA's engagement with Westminster has looked a little different this year, but we have still influenced key legislation and committee inquiries

in outdoor areas where smoking is not permitted.

As well as working on these important proposals, we continue to engage with legislation on fire and building safety, domestic abuse, the environment and agriculture.

We have also enjoyed success in influencing select committee inquiries. In the past year, we have submitted evidence to a range of inquiries, including on business rates, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), the Government's resources and waste strategy, and long-term, affordable rented housing, plus a variety of inquiries opened in response to COVID-19. These

include on food supply, the impact on education and children's services, adult social care, and Care Act easements.

Looking ahead to the next Parliamentary session, the LGA will be making the case for a sustainable financial package in the upcoming Comprehensive Spending Review. The Government must provide councils with the financial certainty they need to continue to support residents.

Our parliamentary engagement will be important in supporting our narrative that now is the time to 'Re-think local' as the Government looks at its levelling-up and devolution agendas.

Meanwhile, we will continue to make the case for social care, demonstrating to parliamentarians why it is so important that these vital services have parity of esteem with the NHS. And, of course, there is much to be done in the months ahead to make the case for a local, democratically accountable planning system.



Our annual 'LGA in Parliament' report will be available soon at www.local.gov.uk/parliament
For the LGA's Re-thinking local campaign, see www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/re-thinking-local

"Influencing legislation as it is debated and agreed by Parliament is vital to our lobbying"



Sector-led improvement – a success story

Councils are very supportive of the approach of helping each other to improve their performance, according to an independent report



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

We recently commissioned an independent review of the past three years of the LGA's sector-led improvement offer. I'm delighted to say that the vast majority of you – our member councils – believe it is the right approach to improving local government.

Sector-led improvement (SLI) is about councils helping each other to improve. It's based on the principles that we are responsible for our own performance, accountable locally, not nationally, and have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a whole.

The role of the LGA is to provide the tools and support needed, which we do through our comprehensive and wide-ranging SLI offer. This includes: free corporate peer challenges; a range of subject-specific peer reviews, covering everything from children's services to council communications; leadership and training support for councillors and officers; expert consultancy and advice on a range of issues, including productivity, digital and behavioural insights; and benchmarking data and analysis via LG Inform.

Between April 2017 and April 2020, more than 4,000 instances of sector-led improvement support were delivered to councils, including 447 peer reviews and follow-up visits. All councils received at least six parts of the SLI offer.

The independent review of all this, from Shared Intelligence, found very high levels of satisfaction with SLI, with 80 per cent of councils believing that the LGA's offer added value to the sector.

The take-up of the variety of SLI offers is high, while satisfaction levels are "remarkably high", according to the report. The proportion of senior leaders within the sector who consider that SLI is the right approach has increased.

There is extensive and very positive evidence of the impact of SLI on councils' effectiveness, improvement and innovation, and the LGA's support offer has strengthened the sector's capacity to improve itself.

During these challenging times, it was no surprise to find that councils are using our SLI offer, including COVID-19 refocused support, to find the best solutions to support their communities during the coronavirus pandemic.

This report has been published alongside another independent report on the LGA's SLI programme for children's services (see right), which highlights the "significantly positive impact on improvements in council children's services" that this offer has made.

So what now, for the future? These independent reviews show that sector-



led improvement is a local government success story. The evidence and feedback collected demonstrate overwhelming support for SLI among councils and very high levels of satisfaction with our offer – clearly showing that SLI remains a valid approach and an important tool for support within the sector.

The review of our SLI offer also highlights that councils are keen for there to be a longer-term funding arrangement for the SLI programme (currently funded annually by government). A longer-term funding arrangement would help to ensure that councils can receive the improvement support they need, while leading local recovery and renewal over the next three years.

As we look ahead to the post-coronavirus recovery period, we will continue to work closely with the Government and councils to embed sector-led strengths, bringing fresh ideas and innovation, and using clear data and evidence to build resilience and meet sector needs.

These reports provide helpful reflections that point to the inherent value of the programme and will help to enhance SLI in the future. We'll be working closely with all councils over the coming months to ensure that SLI fully reflects your needs over the next three years.

i 'An independent evaluation of sector-led improvement in local government' and 'Evaluation of the LGA sector-led improvement programme for children's services' can be downloaded for free at www.local.gov.uk/our-support/our-improvement-offer/sector-led-improvement-reviews. For more information about the LGA's SLI offer, please visit www.local.gov.uk/our-support

“The relationships between children’s improvement advisers and councils are highly valued”



Support for children’s services

The LGA’s sector-led improvement offer has helped support improvements to local leadership of children’s services in England

In 2018, the LGA received funding from the Department for Education to deliver a two-year programme of support aimed at improving children’s services through targeting political and corporate leadership.

The development of the children’s sector-led improvement (SLI) programme

was based on the principles of the LGA’s SLI offer (see left) and used its already established framework for this kind of work with councils.

The programme consists of three support strands: support for lead members; intensive support for, predominantly, local authorities that have received an Ofsted judgement of ‘inadequate’ or ‘requires improvement’; and children’s services peer challenges.

The LGA’s approach is based on the principle that peer processes – harnessing the skills, expertise and experience that exists within the local government sector – can play a significant role in enabling long-term improvement.

As part of the LGA’s ambition to

improve its offer, it commissioned an independent report, conducted by Shared Intelligence, to evaluate its sector-led improvement programme for children’s services.

The report found that, between April 2018 and March 2020, the LGA’s children’s improvement advisers spent time in 91 councils around England. Demonstrating the importance of our support offer, the report also found that 83 per cent of councils have improved or maintained their Ofsted judgements for leadership.

This coincided with a 35 per cent decrease in the number of councils judged ‘requires improvement’ or ‘inadequate’ by the inspection agency.

At a political level, Shared Intelligence found that the LGA’s Children’s Leadership Essentials courses provide unique and valuable opportunities for learning, and that the networking – and the trusting nature of the relationship that develops through peer mentoring – enables learning and positive changes.

Similarly, the relationships between children’s improvement advisers and councils are highly valued, and are the foundation from which much positive change has been made.

With the fieldwork for the evaluation and report taking place before the full impact of the coronavirus pandemic was known, and before lockdown measures were implemented, it is possible that the experiences and situations of councils reflected within the report will have changed.

Moreover, the pandemic is likely to cause a knock-on impact for how children’s services are led and delivered in the future.

However, the report concludes that the LGA’s children’s SLI programme is a well-rounded offer, supporting collaboration at a regional level to make positive change and bringing together whole councils on their improvement journey.

As the country moves through the transition and recovery phases of the pandemic, the messages in this report will form a basis for future offers – but may need further consideration in the context of the ‘new normal’.



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

Localising test and trace

Councils are to get additional national resources to help them reach more people with COVID-19

The scale of the international coronavirus crisis means there have undoubtedly been challenges for governments across the world.

Minimising the spread of infection by testing, tracing and isolating the contacts of those who are infected is just one of those issues it has been difficult for national leaders to get right. Given the World Health Organization's message that these prevention and response measures are key to tackling this global pandemic, it is in all our interests for our Government's national plan to test and trace people for COVID-19 to work effectively.

This pandemic has highlighted the value of local knowledge, supported by national coordination and resources. In local government, we are lucky that our directors of public health and their teams have unrivalled skills and vast experience of contact tracing.

This is alongside a whole host of teams, across the local government family, who want to play their full part in stopping the spread of infection. This includes those working in environmental health, emergency planning, trading standards and infection control.

Since this outbreak took hold, the LGA has consistently made the case for councils to have the necessary powers, resources and authority to be able to lead the response locally and tackle outbreaks swiftly and effectively.

We know that COVID-19 is best understood as a pattern of local outbreaks, rather than

a national pandemic with a similar impact in every community. Even where powers were initially constrained and data did not flow as it should have, councils went above and beyond to deliver localised responses.

The success of any programme depends on the continued cooperation of the public. The LGA's recent polling shows that 73 per cent of residents trust their local council to make decisions about how services are provided in their local area, compared to 18 per cent who said they trusted the Government. Empowering councils to provide much needed reassurance to their residents therefore make sense.

So it is good news that the Government has announced additional national support to local authorities, in order to reach more people. Councils have already made a success of their own contact tracing programmes in areas including Blackburn with Darwen, Luton and Leicester.

All local authorities with public health responsibilities will now have dedicated, ring-fenced teams from the national service to support their local activity. This integrated national and local system merges the best of both worlds, combining specialist knowledge, essential data and additional resources.

As we move into the next phase and what could be a challenging winter period, it is important that councils continue to have the tools to be able to understand where the outbreaks are happening and be able to act quickly to contain them. This will require local leadership and local responsibility, backed by necessary funding.

The LGA will continue to make these points as the Government expands on its plans to merge Public Health England, NHS Test and Trace and the Joint Biosecurity Centre into a new body – the National Institute for Health Protection – to tackle COVID-19 and protect the nation's health.

The LGA continues to push for the powers, flexibilities and funding councils need to support our communities and shape our places. This includes lobbying for long-term, sustainable funding through our engagement ahead of the Comprehensive Spending Review (see p22).

i For more information and coronavirus resources, please visit www.local.gov.uk/coronavirus

Community engagement and local lockdowns

Snapchat and 'community ambassadors' are helping councils communicate public health messages about COVID-19 to local residents



Planning, preparation and community engagement are key to managing local coronavirus lockdowns, according to speakers at a recent LGA webinar on 'Local outbreaks and living with COVID-19'.

Officers from Warwickshire County Council, Leicester City Council and the national test and trace service shared their experiences of preparing for and leading local lockdowns during the communications best practice webinar, attended by nearly 300 delegates.

Jayne Surman, Strategy and Commissioning Manager, Communications, at Warwickshire County Council, said social media was crucial to getting lots of public health messages out quickly to lots of different groups.

The pandemic drove Warwickshire to try new platforms such as Snapchat, which proved a "fantastic channel" for reaching 13 to 19-year-olds. The council used it for mental health and safeguarding messages, as well as those about COVID-19.

Ms Surman also highlighted how local public health analysts can give insights into often "bewildering" local testing and outbreak data to help shape and target communications materials and messages. For example, Warwickshire created additional social media materials featuring men when it emerged that far more women than men were getting tested.

She flagged the help elected members can give as the "eyes and ears" in their local areas, and Warwickshire's use of 'community ambassadors' – including faith leaders and speakers of particular languages – who have helped deliver public health messages to their communities.

Brian Lisowy, Communications and Marketing Manager at Leicester City Council – the first UK city to go into a local lockdown – also raised the importance of getting messages out to all communities, without making any of them feel they were being singled out.

Messaging aimed at trusted community leaders and voices – for them to share through their own channels – was vital. Community radio stations proved helpful in this respect, with presenters translating messages into local languages.

"You can get as many messages out as you like from the council voice but the community has a greater impact in getting messages out and understood – and hopefully acted upon," said Mr Lisowy.

The issue of community engagement during local lockdowns was picked up by his colleague Andrew

Shilliam, Head of the City Mayor's Office at Leicester City Council.

As part of its proactive community engagement, Leicester has been trying to understand the issues, barriers, constraints and some of the successes "as our communities consider them to be" when it comes to tackling COVID-19 in their areas, he said.

Qualitative research undertaken with Public Health England and the Behavioural Insights Team points to financial barriers and issues with communication, enforcement and housing.

It was also important for residents to see progress was being made, and for there to be trust in what the council was doing. Engaging with trusted organisations, including faith and community representatives, was key to that, and the engagement activity has left the council with a "much richer picture of our communities", said Mr Shilliam.

"It's important to focus on positive things we have done as a city and a local authority instead of constantly telling people how they need to behave."

The webinar also heard from Mary Thomas, of the NHS's test and trace programme. Talking to areas that haven't yet had a local outbreak, she said: "You can't contingency plan enough...be really familiar with what's in your local outbreak plan."



Resources and presentations from the 'Local outbreaks and living with COVID-19' webinar are available at www.local.gov.uk/local-outbreaks-and-living-covid-19-13-august-2020

Recovering from COVID-19

Supporting councillors to lead and represent their communities and councils as the country emerges from lockdown is the focus of a new guide published by the LGA

As the work of councils shifts from coronavirus emergency to recovery, 'COVID-19 outbreak: reset and recovery' – the second in a series of LGA councillor guides – considers the changing role of councillors.

The guide brings together good-practice examples of place-shaping activities that councillors up and down the country are involved in, and provides further inspiration about the political, civic and community leadership roles they can play in the recovery from the pandemic.

The LGA's March 2020 guidance, 'COVID-19 outbreak', correctly predicted that "the coming months will make huge demands of all of us connected with councils, as well as a great many other people in our communities".

While many of the most immediate and challenging pressures of the

response have reduced, there are still huge demands on councils to continue to deliver some aspects of this work while supporting stabilisation and recovery.

Councils and health services are not only playing a leading role in the emergency response, they are also running response and recovery in parallel, for periods well beyond anything seen before. For example, in places such as Bournemouth, Liverpool and Leicester, councillors and local leaders played a substantive role in leading their organisations as they responded to issues experienced in each area.

Other specific challenges include the development and implementation of plans and structures for managing local outbreaks, increases in resident vulnerability, and rising councillor caseloads as the impact of the outbreak hits households.

In addition, with so many people

adversely affected by COVID-19 – whether through bereavement, stress, mental health issues, or financial troubles relating to the economic impact of the lockdown – the number of residents seeking help from the council and looking to engage with their councillors has increased.

It also remains the case that many staff and councillors, in common with local residents, continue to juggle the demands of supporting family members alongside their council roles, or may have been impacted by the pandemic in terms of their own health or by bereavement.

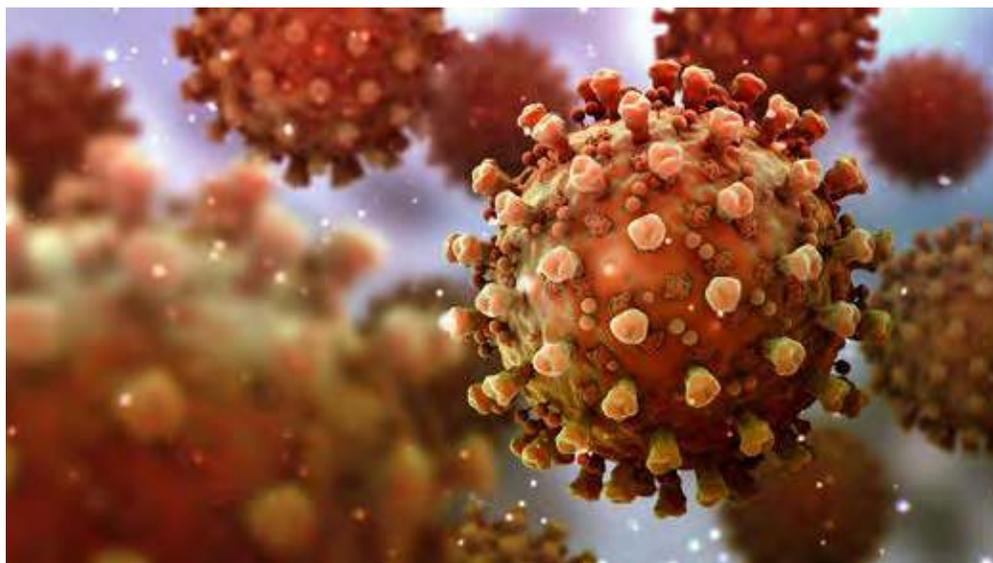
The pandemic has subverted many of the usual emergency management norms with which councils are familiar. However, throughout the response, councillors have found new ways to contact residents, using telephone and videoconferencing to meet virtually and discuss problems and complaints.

Councillors also have a leadership role to play through local outbreak control boards, which will lead communications with the public and help to lead their communities through local outbreaks of COVID-19 where they occur.

The LGA is collating and sharing good practice on the test, trace and contain system, including local outbreak control boards, in a Knowledge Hub site that councillors can join at: khub.net/group/lga-containment-covid-19/group-home

There is no doubt reset and recovery from COVID-19 will be a multifaceted and long-running process. But it absolutely remains the case that councillors will have a significant role to play in shaping recovery in a way that enables local areas to build on the opportunity to strengthen community resilience and improve local places.

i You can read 'COVID-19 outbreak: reset and recovery' in full at www.local.gov.uk/covid-19-outbreak-reset-and-recovery-councillor-guidance



Improving the private rented sector

New guidance is available to help councils improve the health and wellbeing of tenants in the private sector

The private rented sector has grown considerably over the past two decades, housing 19 per cent of households compared with 11 per cent in 2001.

Some segments of the private rented sector work effectively, such as build-to-rent. However, poor housing conditions are generally concentrated at the lower end of the market, which provides accommodation to vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities or long-term illness.

Approximately 40 per cent of the sector comprises households in the bottom third of incomes.

The LGA commissioned Housing Quality Network (HQN) to produce a good practice guide on the role of councils in raising the quality of the private rented sector, with the aim of improving the health and wellbeing of tenants.

The guide includes a report, a set of case studies and a toolkit. These are based on the findings of a policy and research review, interviews with national stakeholders and local case studies.

The report sets out national policy and the strategic role of councils, looks at consumer regulation, enforcement and emerging issues, and makes a series of recommendations to councils.

Although the focus of the project is on local authority policies and actions, a recurring theme is the inadequacy of national policies. Based on case study interviews, key issues include the need to simplify the multiplicity of legislation and regulations covering the sector, and the challenges posed



by the welfare system – in particular inappropriate local housing allowance rates, although these have been addressed in the Coronavirus Act 2020, on a temporary basis.

The case studies highlight the diversity and complexity of the sector. The proportion of properties in the private rented sector in local authority areas ranges from just over 15 per cent to more than 40 per cent.

The array of issues councils face include: short-term lets (for example, via Airbnb); demand for student accommodation; migrant workers living in appalling conditions that are sometimes associated with modern slavery; vulnerable households living in poor-quality properties that are inadequately managed; and failing neighbourhoods where in excess of 50 per cent of the stock is privately rented and more than 20 per cent is empty or abandoned.

Councils are addressing these issues through landlord accreditation schemes and forums; property management services including social lettings agencies; financial support, such as bonds and rent deposit and guarantee schemes; and supporting tenants' groups and tenancy advice services.

The good practice guide's recommendations to councils include ensuring there is leadership and corporate commitment to addressing the local challenges of the private rented sector, Councils need to develop a strategic framework setting out their role and function in addressing local issues, ensure there is a high-quality evidence base to understand the changing nature of the local private rented sector, and work in partnership with other stakeholders and neighbouring authorities.

Future-proofing policies and procedures is vital, the guidance says. The changing nature of the private rented sector is leading to new challenges such as the conversion of offices into poor quality private rented accommodation without the need for planning permission, while the impact of COVID-19 and the 'new normal' is a major issue that councils are beginning to address.

The diversity of the private rented sector means a localist approach is essential, and councils and their partners understand their individual unique challenges and opportunities, concludes the report.

i 'Improving the private rented sector: a guide for councils' can be downloaded for free at www.local.gov.uk/publications

Planning for the future



The Government has published a series of proposals for overhauling the planning system



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

In early August, the Government unveiled its ideas for delivering new housing through changes to England's planning system.

'Planning for the future' proposes an overhaul and streamlining of current planning processes that will require primary legislation.

The White Paper contains 24 individual proposals across three 'pillars' – planning for development, planning for beautiful and sustainable places, and planning for infrastructure and connected places – and a final section on delivering change.

Among the proposals are a requirement for every area to have a local plan in place within 30 months, with sanctions for councils not meeting this deadline. The local plan will set rules, rather than policies for general development.

Land will be designated in the local plan as either for growth, renewal or protection. Development in growth areas will be approved at the same time as plans are prepared, and be subject to local design standards. Renewal areas will be suitable for some

development, while protected areas will restrict development to protect, for example, areas of outstanding natural beauty and national parks.

The intention is that communities will set the agenda for their own areas, with the categories for all land across England decided through local consensus. A key aim of the White Paper is to "move the democracy forward", so that the focus is on developing the local plan rather than determining individual planning decisions. The consultation explores the accessibility of the planning system, with the aim of ensuring the process engages local communities at an earlier stage.

Other measures include moving towards a digital planning system, and a new infrastructure levy that would replace the current system of developer contributions via Section 106 agreements and community infrastructure levy.

A fast-track system for 'beautiful buildings' would be created, and all new homes would be 'zero carbon ready'. There are also proposals that aim to protect green spaces, allow for more building on brownfield land, and more trees in streets.

In addition to the White Paper, there is a parallel consultation called 'Changes to the planning system'. It proposes delivery of a First Homes scheme providing newly built homes

at a 30 per cent discount for first-time buyers. A minimum of 25 per cent of all affordable housing units secured through developer contributions would have to be First Homes.

There are also proposals to change the standard method for assessing local housing need; secure First Homes through developer contributions; temporarily lift the small sites threshold for affordable homes; and extend the current 'permission in principle' to major developments.

In the LGA's response to the Government's consultation on First Homes in May (see **first** 648), we raised concerns about the potential impact on the delivery of social and affordable rented homes – of which there is already an undersupply in many local authority areas. Ministers have now responded to those submissions (see panel, right).

The Government has also issued a call for evidence on its proposals to improve the transparency of contractual mechanisms used to exercise control over land, such as land options, rights of pre-emption, and estate contracts. It is seeking views on the design of the policy and evidence on its likely impacts.

As we said in our widely reported media response to the White Paper, councils are committed to ensuring new homes are built and communities have quality places to live.

Councils share the aspiration of improving the current planning system to provide greater certainty for communities, encourage brownfield development, to deliver

better infrastructure and increase local involvement.

Any new system needs to focus on ensuring planning permissions are built and providing local control over developments, and to have public participation at its heart.

We look forward to engaging with the Government to ensure its aspirations of an improved system work in practice. We will also engage with councils as we develop our response, so please share your own views with jo.allchurch@local.gov.uk or christina.kaiser@local.gov.uk. We would be particularly interested to have your thoughts on the following:

- Which proposals are you most concerned about or supportive of, and why?
- What is your view on the role that councillors will have in the proposed new system?
- What resourcing do you think your council would need to lead the change process and to implement these new proposals?
- What model would you suggest for a new infrastructure levy?

Consultation details

The Government's planning consultations include:

- 'Changes to the current planning system', a consultation on changes to planning policy and regulation, which closes on 1 October, see www.gov.uk/government/consultations/changes-to-the-current-planning-system
- 'Planning for the future', a White Paper that proposes reforms of the planning system to streamline and modernise the planning process. This closes on 29 October, see www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future
- 'Transparency and competition', a call for evidence on proposals to improve transparency and competition in land control. This closes on 30 October, see www.gov.uk/government/consultations/transparency-and-competition-a-call-for-evidence-on-data-on-land-control

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government also published the following, alongside the launch of the new proposals:

- A study it commissioned into the use of developer contributions (Section 106 and community infrastructure levy), see www.gov.uk/government/publications/section-106-planning-obligations-and-the-community-infrastructure-levy-in-england-2018-to-2019-report-of-study
- Its response to the First Homes consultation, see www.gov.uk/government/consultations/first-homes



Please share your views of the proposals with the LGA by emailing jo.allchurch@local.gov.uk or christina.kaiser@local.gov.uk



Consultation webinar on the LGA draft Model Member Code of Conduct

Thursday 17 September 2020, 6.00pm-7.00pm

Join us for this evening webinar to find out more about the consultation version of the LGA's Model Member Code of Conduct. There will also be opportunities to ask questions and make suggestions to the draft code.

Confirmed speakers include:

Paul Hoey

Co-Director, Hoey Ainscough Associates

Thelma Stober

Corporate Legal Adviser, LGA

Abigail Gallop

Senior Adviser, LGA

This event is free to all councillors. For more details and to book your place go to www.local.gov.uk/events

The show must go on

Councils across the country are backing the creative industries to help drive economic recovery in local areas, despite significant funding pressures



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

Creativity is what binds communities together. Cultural and creative activities have kept people occupied and connected during lockdown – from e-books, digital exhibitions and streamed theatre shows to crafts activities and community singing, the crisis has demonstrated how important culture can be in supporting mental wellbeing.

Creativity also has a vital role in affecting how a place defines itself and is seen by outsiders. People like living in places with a thriving creative and cultural life.

So, it's not surprising that councils of all shapes and sizes have been considering how they can support the local creative economy for the benefit of their communities.

Some are developing wide-ranging strategies, while others are making smaller, more targeted interventions.

The LGA has called on the Government to support this work by ensuring councils retain the planning powers they need to curate their communities and grow their local economies.

They have also published a guide to help councils learn from best practice when looking to implement new creative economic strategies that will lead to positive results.

Illustrated by examples and case studies, and with tips from councils across England and the sector, we believe the measures outlined in this guide are vital to supporting what is an

incredibly important asset to our local economies and communities.

Creativity and culture have a huge role to play in social innovation, helping councils – and other parts of the community, voluntary, third and public sectors – co-create with communities a vision for the future of their local area and everyone's role in its 'new normal'.

Examples of councils taking supportive action for the creative industries include communities in Greater Manchester that have come together to support their creative economy, coordinated by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA).

Launched at the beginning of April 2020, the United We Stream project raised £260,000 in 30 days, with all proceeds going to the city region's night-time economy, cultural organisations and charities.

The wider economy needs to innovate fast, and commercial innovation requires creativity in inventing new products and services,

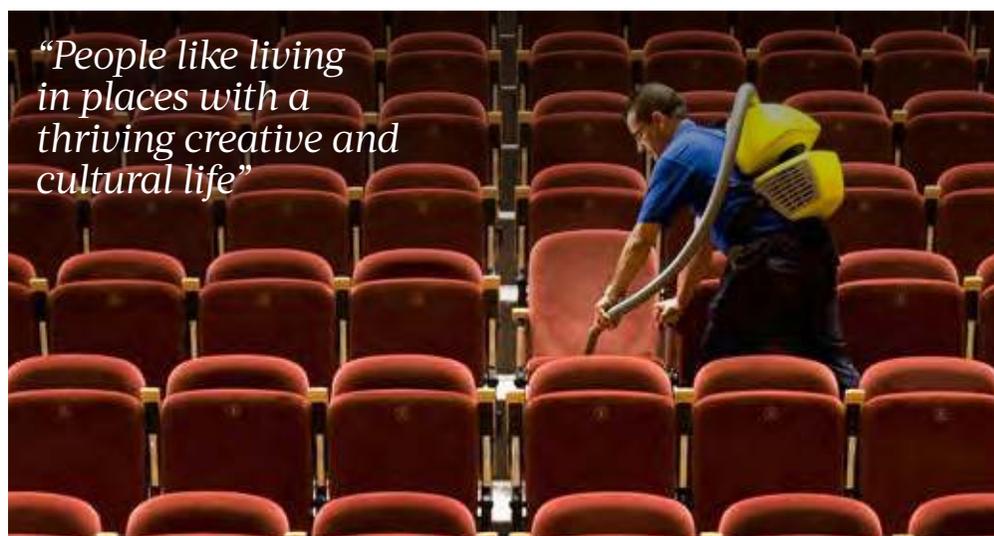
and new ways to promote, deliver and monetise them. It also benefits from unique ideas, knowledge and creative assets, in which the cultural sector is very rich.

Before the pandemic, the creative industries were one of the fastest-growing sectors, contributing \$111 billion to the UK economy in 2018. More than two million people work in the UK's creative industries and, before the COVID-19 crisis, the sector was projected to create another million jobs by 2030.

As we move into the recovery phase, we must harness the creativity and innovation inherent in the sector to take on the challenges of a post-COVID world, generating jobs and investment in local economies.

If we value the sector, we must all work together to secure its future.

i You can read the LGA's 'Councils' role in supporting their local creative economy' at www.local.gov.uk/creative-places-supporting-your-local-creative-economy





Opportunity and challenge

The LGA is working hard to support councils through the end of the transition period following the UK's departure from the EU



Councillor **Kevin Bentley** is Chair of the LGA's EU Exit Taskforce

The LGA's EU Exit Taskforce is stepping up preparations for the end of the EU transition period on 31 December 2020.

As trade negotiations with the EU continue, we meet ministers regularly to ensure councils' key priorities are being directly addressed.

For example, on local economies, councils will need the local levers and

powers to deal with any local economic changes that may occur, regardless of how the negotiations turn out.

The negotiations may define future rules regarding state aid, procurement, environmental services, environmental health, trading standards and social protection. Councils need long-term certainty about the regulation of public services, and to know how the regulatory regime will operate as it affects vital aspects of local public service delivery.

Elsewhere, ports are at the forefront of many councils' work to prepare for the end of transition. As port health authorities, some councils are legally responsible for undertaking checks of certain imports as they enter the country, including products of animal origin and high-risk food products.

Should there not be a trade deal, full checks of goods are planned to start in July 2021. This increases

the demand for councils' services in these areas, on top of the COVID-19 testing and tracing work that councils' regulatory services have taken on. We will continue to raise the resourcing of regulatory services with government.

We are also raising issues with the Department for Transport about the capacity on local roads linked to congestion at ports.

Meanwhile, if a zero-tariff deal is not secured, councils will need to know any change in costs (both reduced and increased) that will be introduced as a result of the UK's new tariff regime. This is in relation to both councils' own procurement activities and the impacts on small and medium-sized businesses, which may need support to adapt.

We are also raising issues of policy formation beyond the end of the EU transition period, including funding for regeneration and economic growth, employment and immigration, and devolution.

Regarding the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) – the replacement for EU regeneration funding – the Government has confirmed that there will be cross-departmental discussions after the Comprehensive Spending Review this autumn.

The LGA has long argued that the UKSPF should be locally driven, democratically accountable and allocated based on locally determined outcomes. It should also be aligned to wider growth funding. We continue to highlight the impact of any gap between EU funding ending and the start of UKSPF.

Councils are playing a role in identifying hard-to-reach individuals as we approach the June 2021 deadline for the EU Settlement Scheme. As the Government develops its immigration policy, it needs to ensure care workers are included in the new health and care visa to help fill staff shortages in the adult social care sector.

Last, but not least, the UK's exit from the EU must not result in a centralisation of powers in Whitehall. This is a unique opportunity to empower local communities. We need new devolution settlements in England and across the UK to bring new powers to communities through local democracy.

The end of the EU transition period will be a landmark date. Our task is to help ensure that councils are ready for everything, that the challenges are met head on, and that local areas capitalise on opportunities for change.

i For more information on the **LGA's European and international work**, please visit www.local.gov.uk/topics/european-and-international



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- council leaders/health and wellbeing board chairs/vice chairs
- portfolio-holders/lead members for public health
- portfolio-holders/lead members with responsibility for adult social care
- lead political role/chair in an NHS partnership or devolution arrangement.

Leadership Essentials

15–16 October 2020

We are running the two day programmes for **leading healthier places** and **adult social care** simultaneously and as a virtual event. This will be a mix of live webinars, virtual facilitated workshops and networking, one-to-one sessions plus web-based materials, to allow members to build their own programme.

Leading healthier places

19–20 January 2021

We will continue to develop the format for this session over the coming months.

For more information and to book your place, please contact grace.collins@local.gov.uk



Councillor **Sharon Thompson** (Lab) is Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods at Birmingham City Council



Time for change

Together with a number of Labour councillors in Birmingham, I wrote to the Prime Minister in June, urging him to rethink plans for a new government commission on racial inequalities in response to issues highlighted by the Black Lives Matter protests and, instead, to act now on the detailed findings of previous reviews.

The letter came about because, as a group of councillors representing a city with a large black population, we were angered by the Government's decision to once more 'kick the can down the road' rather than act to address widely acknowledged issues.

Any commitment to address long-standing and deeply entrenched inequalities is to be welcomed, but the communities we represent have heard it all before, and they're sick and tired of talk without action.

The Lammy Review, the Angiolini Review, the Windrush Lessons Learned Review and Baroness McGregor-Smith's Review produced more than 200 recommendations, but if those reports just sit around gathering dust, then what is the point of yet another review?

The global protests after the horrific death of George Floyd prompted many welcome displays of solidarity from individuals and organisations. These gestures matter; symbolism matters.

But lighting buildings purple and removing inappropriate statues will only take us so far. True solidarity can only really be demonstrated by action to tackle systemic inequalities that have been ignored for far too long.

Some action will come at a national level, but we must not be passive locally. As the UK's largest local authority, we must get our own house in order and lead by example.

"We are committed to challenging and removing barriers to advancement within the council"

I'm one of two black women on Birmingham City Council's cabinet, but our senior management team is not as reflective of the city and that needs to be addressed. The Leader of the Council, Ian Ward, and all of my cabinet colleagues are committed to this – as are interim Chief Executive Chris Naylor and his senior team.

We are committed to challenging and removing barriers to advancement within the council, and a cabinet report next month will outline the council's wider plans to tackle persistent inequalities.

We will ensure our workforce reflects the communities we serve by working with our staff, managers, trades unions and others to become a beacon for equal opportunities. We will introduce a 'Rooney rule' for job shortlists to address the current, visible imbalance in gender and black, Asian and minority ethnic representation across the authority, and ensure all council interview panels are similarly representative.

We have also agreed that cabinet members will no longer appear on all-white or all-male panels, and we will encourage partners to take a similar stance.

An important lesson for national and local government is that it should not take a crisis before issues of equality are addressed. I take solace in the fact that, while the Government continues to talk a good game, councils such as Birmingham and others are acting

Similarly, we surely didn't need the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 to highlight long-standing health, housing and economic inequalities.

In 2020, racism, discrimination and inequality continue to impact on the lives and life chances of far too many people, and that's simply unacceptable. So, collectively we must do better.

We're determined to play our part in Birmingham. The challenge for the Government is to do the same. We don't need another review – we need change.

Keeping in touch with members



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

As the summer comes to an end and autumn approaches, I hope you had the opportunity to enjoy some time off after what has been a very busy six months for us all.

Without the opportunity to meet at the LGA's annual conference this year, I thought it was important for the Conservative Group to keep in touch with our members by organising a series of webinars, covering topics as diverse as devolution, the 'green recovery' and the future of care homes.

For the first of these webinars, I was delighted to welcome Local Government Minister Simon Clarke MP to discuss the Government's plans for devolution ahead

of the publication of its White Paper later this year. Unsurprisingly, this was by far the best attended of all our webinars, and there was plenty of time for questions and discussion with Simon after his opening remarks.

Our 'Green recovery' webinar was chaired by Cllr David Renard, Chairman of the LGA's Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board, with Megan Trethewey, from the Conservative Environment Network, leading the discussion.

Megan highlighted some of the positive impacts of the lockdown on the environment, including cleaner air and a greater appreciation of nature and open spaces. She also stressed how councils can respond positively to the practical challenges posed by climate change and highlighted some of the Government's achievements in this area.

Finally, David Pearson CBE, Chair of the Social Care Sector COVID-19 Support

Taskforce, was the speaker for our 'Future of care homes' webinar, which also covered the impact of COVID-19 on the sector. Again, we had a lively question-and-answer session, covering a variety of topics.

I am delighted that the feedback from those attending these webinars was very positive – so much so that we are planning to hold further sessions shortly. For information about these events please follow us on Twitter @LGACons and check the regular email bulletins that are sent to all Conservative councillors.

“Positive impacts of the lockdown on the environment include cleaner air and a greater appreciation of nature and open space”



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

A joint endeavour

With a Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) under way, I have been writing to ministers on behalf of the LGA's member councils.

The CSR is taking place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis. Councils have played a significant role in supporting the Government's efforts to tackle this pandemic, while supporting their local communities and businesses.

Working in collaboration with national government, councils have worked hard to protect lives, livelihoods and our most vulnerable residents, and have ensured that our most important public services have kept running successfully.

This work has had a significant impact on our budgets. Councils have faced increased costs and demand pressures at the same time as a significant drop in income used to fund services.

Even before the pandemic, local government faced a funding shortfall of £6.4 billion. While the Government has provided some support, significant

challenges remain, and existing inequalities have been exposed. These will have a lasting impact on our communities.

In the letters to ministers, we urge them to use the CSR to provide councils with long-term financial sustainability, alongside a decentralised and locally led fiscal and policy framework.

This will provide local government with the funding and freedoms to deliver a long-term transformation of the economy, communities and the environment – and, in doing so, support the Government's own work on a wide range of issues, from adult social care to training and skills.

Councils welcome the Government's

ambition for the CSR to level-up economic opportunity across all nations and regions, with investment in infrastructure, innovation, people and public services.

With the right funding and powers, councils can provide the local services on which communities rely and grasp the opportunity to move beyond the COVID-19 pandemic – developing a green renewal, addressing skills gaps, and rebuilding the economy so that it benefits everyone.

As we rebuild our communities and respond to the significant economic challenges ahead, it will be vital that we have a joint endeavour in place between local and national government.





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

Will warnings on council finances go unheeded?

Another week, another U-turn – this time, the botched A-level results saga. And a government that claims to be ‘levelling up’ has proved once again that this is just one more empty slogan to add to the pile.

This was an entirely foreseeable calamity. The disparity between the treatment of state and privately educated young people was obvious to anyone who looked at it, but also because it was predicted by the Commons’ Education Select Committee weeks ago.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson MP refused its request to publish the standardisation model to allow for proper scrutiny. And ignored its warning that the algorithm was oversimplified.

Williamson’s incompetence derives from his brush-off of the voices of experts and select committees.

Perhaps the Communities Secretary should take note of the Education Secretary’s experience, as he is similarly deaf to the grave warnings of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee on the likelihood of councils’ financial collapse.

“Coronavirus has pushed some councils beyond the edge”

Even before coronavirus hit, the committee warned that the Government had been “derelict in its duty” when it gutted funding to councils, leaving them barely enough to cover “bare bones” services.

Coronavirus adds even more pressure and has pushed some councils beyond the edge. Robert Jenrick MP won’t be able to claim he wasn’t warned.

There is still time for him to act, but not much. Let’s hope he chooses not to follow in Williamson’s footsteps by sleepwalking the Government into this foreseeable disaster too.



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

Riding roughshod over local communities

We finally saw the Government’s planning reforms, sneaked out at midnight on a Wednesday, just before the start of the summer holidays.

And they weren’t joking, were they? They are indeed some of “the most radical reforms of our planning system since the end of the Second World War”.

“Any loss of local control and accountability over development is unacceptable”

It is very rare that you unite politicians from across the political divide and, at the same time, bring together the Town and Country Planning Association, the Royal Institute of British Architects, Shelter, CPRE (the countryside charity), and the Wildlife Trust – and even upset the Association of Archaeologists – in opposition to a government proposal

Let us make it nice and clear to ministers – any loss of local control and accountability over development is unacceptable. It would deprive communities of the ability to define the places in which they live, as well as give developers freedom to ride roughshod over local areas. And we all know how ministers stand up to developers – not!

I am not apologising for going on about planning again, but these changes will result in affordable housing provision dropping by 20 per cent, with new developments up to 50 homes no longer having to provide any.

Yet again, ministers are blaming others – in this case, local government – for failings in their own policies and procedures, which we know are what really slow down the delivery of housing.

Maybe it’s not about increasing the supply of homes and tackling waiting lists, but who you sit next to at a fundraising dinner.

Ministers, put your own house in order first!



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

Planning ‘does not prevent development’

August was dominated by new government proposals on planning, scene setting for a White Paper on recovery and reorganisation, and the school exams fiasco.

As councils face mounting challenges to our finances, governance, licensing, care and climate, the government squeeze on local authorities now extends to centralising planning policy into a framework that increases permitted development, undermines local plans, reduces the likelihood of affordable housing, and diminishes the public voice.

It’s a myth that planning is holding up development. Permissions for a million homes over the past decade have not been built, and a tax could be applied to those.

Many councils have 20-year local plans, but new building targets, insurmountably greater in some areas, will require new local plans and design codes – at a time when resources are already stretched.

“Permissions for a million homes over the past decade have not been built”

This Government refuses to accept that local is better – we know our communities best and deliver both the Government’s agenda and our local priorities. We will respond to the planning consultations and I encourage your councils to do so too.

We are also fighting mounting pressure to reorganise into big, mayoral-led unitaries, at a time when districts have proven their worth like at no time before – leading local resilience, recovery and cohesion during the pandemic.

Areas may choose to change, but unless all members and residents agree, we will be pushing back on top-down reorganisation.

We need the distractions to stop, and to focus on what we want to do: build thriving local communities in partnership with our residents.

On hold?



Councillor **Janette Williamson** (Lab) is Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources at Wirral Council

Local authorities across the UK own a multitude of assets that rely on communications technology to keep in contact with business, customers and third parties.

Over the past decades, reliance on 'legacy' technology – such as telephone lines – has diminished, as an abundance of emerging technologies have replaced solitary phone lines.

Without robust tracking systems, however, line cancellations may not occur as expected and, if left unchecked, telecommunication providers will continue to charge organisations for unused telephone lines.

We have proven that the onus of telephony management is on us and, ultimately, we cannot depend

on telecommunication companies to responsibly notify customers when telephone lines are only incurring rental charges.

Through an extensive auditing exercise, we verified asset data by approaching several telecommunication firms to provide details of every telephone line registered against the business, inclusive of full installation address, source account and associated numbers.

This source data was imported into a database for quality assurance purposes; having the data in a secure, tamper-proof environment allowed the team to integrate it with incoming quarterly electronic phone bills.

In the absence of any procedure for monitoring telephone lines, we examined telephony charges and found familiar patterns emerging, with an abundance of lines that were only generating line-rental charges.

As a council, we decided that, if the telecommunication companies were unwilling to assist, we needed to introduce controls of our own. We pursued a project of designing, testing and investigating, which led to the

cancellation of 350 telephone lines, equating to a yearly saving of £100,000.

While examining the data, we introduced elements of automation to assist with line cancellations, and developed programs to assess whether telephone lines had ever had any voice calls or other activity over 12 months.

Having established a more robust control system, we were able to challenge telecommunication companies. In 2019, we received £175,000 in refunds for telephone lines that should have been cancelled in 2016.



Nick Phillips is Chief Executive Officer of the Almshouse Association

An old solution to today's housing needs

While most people are aware of the traditional and fine almshouse buildings dotted all over the UK, few know exactly what they are or realise how vibrant the almshouse movement is today.

There are more than 36,000 people living in about 30,000 almshouses with another 750 in the pipeline. Often established through legacies, and as charities run by local trustees, they are established in perpetuity, exempt from Right to Buy.

Almshouse charities are woven into the fabric of almost every local community. They are responsive to local need, and have a proactive philosophy of encouraging neighbourliness, reducing loneliness, and maintaining affordable community housing.

Residents pay a weekly maintenance contribution set well below the average local rent and usually well below the 'affordable housing' level. The charge helps



The Tooley's and Smart's Almshouses in Ipswich

maintain the almshouses, allowing residents to live independently in a supportive community that removes the strain on lengthy local authority waiting lists.

At its heart, the almshouse movement is all about people. Almshouses create communities, a sense of belonging, and provide social connection, which in turn has a positive impact on residents' wellbeing.

A 2016 study by Age UK found that

there are 1.2 million chronically lonely elderly people. Social isolation and exclusion affect people of all ages and social groups, particularly those who are poor, as well as young care leavers, the bereaved, divorced, the disabled, and the chronically ill.

The problems associated with insecure, unaffordable and unsuitable housing and the serious negative consequences of social isolation, then, are unfairly concentrated in those people who are already struggling and disadvantaged. These are the people for whom the almshouse movement exists.

With a greater need for affordable homes today than ever before, the Almshouse Association has the experience, expertise, management structure and national reach to more than meet these challenges.

We will continue to champion the almshouse movement, so that it can adapt and flourish, and continue to provide good quality, affordable community housing, for the welfare of residents within their local communities.

i For more information about the Almshouse Association, please visit www.almshouses.org

Youth clubs: promoting community engagement



Councillor **Paul Maginnis** (Con) is a member of Erewash Borough Council

When I was first elected to the council last year, one of my goals was to set up and run a youth club in my local area.

There was an abundance of evidence that my local community wanted this youth club. Speaking to people on the



doorstep over several years – and from verbal requests, surveys and social media – the number one local issue was anti-social behaviour and comments such as ‘the kids have nothing to do’.

We started in March 2020 and ran two sessions – tripling the numbers in the second week – before lockdown put a stop to any momentum.

For the two hours our young people are with us, we split the time between the usual games (pool, table tennis) and team-building sessions to improve their soft skills. As a careers adviser, I firmly believe soft skills are crucial to making young people employable for the future.

During the summer, we have been meeting outdoors to complete a variety

of community and sports activities. This has included a befriending programme, and the delivery of accredited First Aid and Asdan Youth Achievement Awards qualifications. This means that, as well as promoting intergenerational activities, our young people gain qualifications in the process.

All these projects wouldn't be possible without the fantastic grant support from Erewash Borough Council, Derbyshire County Council and Tesco. The support from local councils and businesses has been absolutely crucial to our success.

Lockdown was, undoubtedly, a necessity, but it has clearly been a disaster for young people – educationally, socially and psychologically.

COVID-19 resulted in young people being isolated at home from their friends and family. As the only youth club in our area, we play a crucial part in combating social isolation and anti-social behaviour, and promoting community engagement.

An easing of lockdown has helped us get the youth club up and running again, to bring our community together.

“Lockdown was, undoubtedly, a necessity, but it has clearly been a disaster for young people”



Scott Lloyd is Chief Executive of the Lawn Tennis Association

Anyone for tennis?

As the national governing body for tennis, we would normally be reflecting on another brilliant grass-court season. Sadly, this year, that's not the case.

However, there are grounds for positivity, with huge numbers of people playing recreationally since lockdown restrictions eased in May.

Our vision is to open up tennis so more

people can enjoy its unique physical and mental health benefits.

One vital element of this work is focused on park tennis facilities, where nearly 1.5 million people have played tennis in the past 12 months and almost half are from lower socio-economic groups.

We recognise the significant challenges that local authorities are facing, particularly around provision of sporting and leisure facilities. That is why we have announced a comprehensive, cost-free offer to local authorities to help support provision of flexible, free and low-cost opportunities for people to get active through tennis.

At the centre of this offer is LTA Rally, our new digital platform designed to make it much easier for participants to find and book a court, group coaching and people with whom to play. It is free to sign up to for local authorities, and we want as many as possible to list their park venues on the platform, to make the participant journey to the tennis court much easier.

In nearly 1,000 priority target parks across England, which we have identified as particularly important sites for opening up the sport to more people, we will also

fully fund the installation of gate-access technology, to help local authorities track usage and generate a sinking fund where court-hire costs are in place.

A number of local authorities that have adopted these initiatives have had significant success. Leeds City Council has seen a 10-fold increase in court bookings since adopting the LTA Rally system across nine of its park sites. Meanwhile, Wokingham Borough Council's nine-court Cantley Park site has generated 7,500 hours of court bookings in the first year since adopting our gate-access model.



i To discuss signing up to LTA Rally or discuss other initiatives around park courts, please email PublicAffairs@lta.org.uk



Nigel Riglar is President of the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT)

The power of place

With the prospect of local government reorganisation and an overhaul of the planning system alongside responsibility for local outbreak management, the public sector can be forgiven for thinking it has a lot on its plate.

And that's before we get to economic recovery, leaving the European Union, the Comprehensive Spending Review and, critically, climate change.

To move forward successfully, there must be a focus on the power of place. Give local places the power and resources and the people in them can do extraordinary things.

There is widespread public acceptance of the importance of tackling climate change, but also a greater recognition of our own back yards. People have been reconnecting with their local places during the pandemic, and I think we are seeing a fundamental shift in how we live and work.

ADEPT's work on addressing climate change began some time ago and accelerated with councils' declarations of climate emergency. We were invited to join the London Environment Directors' Network (LEDNet) and other organisations in their work with Friends of the Earth and Ashden, a charity working on sustainable energy and development. It published a report in March 2019 on how local authorities could tackle climate change.

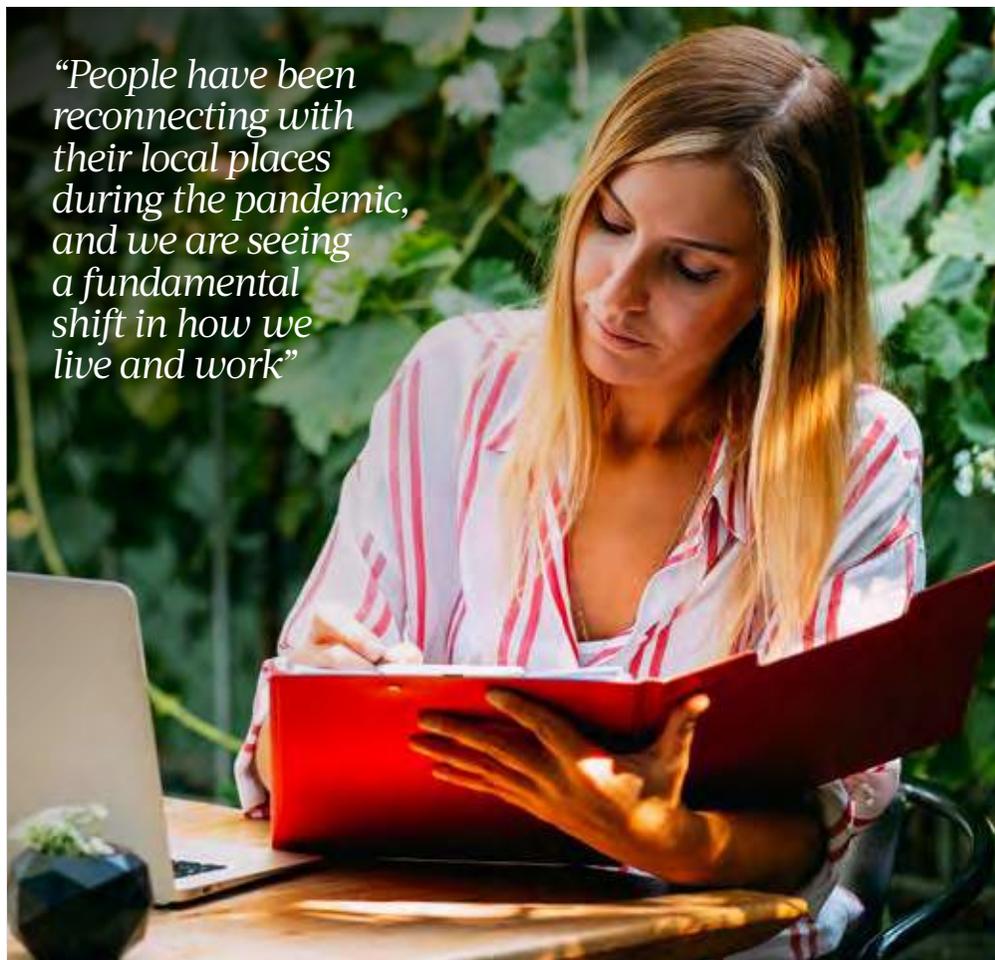
The result has been the publication of 'A blueprint for accelerating climate action and a green recovery at the local level', and the formation of a coalition of local government, research and environmental organisations.

The blueprint is a comprehensive assessment of the support local authorities need from government to accelerate a green recovery from coronavirus and meet the 2050 target for net zero carbon.

We set out five immediate priorities, from investment to reskilling, retrofit to green infrastructure, and making it easy for people to walk, cycle and work close to home.

The blueprint goes further still by setting out how this can be done, which is very much in line with the 'Seven

"People have been reconnecting with their local places during the pandemic, and we are seeing a fundamental shift in how we live and work"



Pathways' work being done by the UK's Committee on Climate Change.

Our seven key themes focus on: growing the zero and low carbon economy; retrofitting homes and buildings; decarbonising transport; delivering zero carbon planning and development; reducing waste and encouraging sustainable consumption; restoring nature for all; and developing local authority systems that are fit for purpose.

Each of these themes is achievable with government support for strong local leadership. Councils are not just mechanisms for local government, they enable huge networks of communities, businesses, people and places, which together have the knowledge and experience to drive forward on climate

change and to push for local solutions and innovation to create beautiful places.

The blueprint shows how councils are already delivering on climate change, but also that we need the power and resources to scale up. The experience of responding to coronavirus has demonstrated how we can and do react quickly, but it also exposed the current weaknesses of our systems.

We are still getting to grips with these and, with more government policies on their way, we will be publishing an updated blueprint in November.

We want to use the document to engage in active discussion with wider local government partners, including the LGA and, crucially, with government in the run up to COP26. To find out more, please email secretariat@adeptnet.org.uk

COUNCILLOR

New challenges for scrutiny



Kate Grigg is Senior Research Officer at the Centre for Public Scrutiny

Action on climate change is urgent, and the stakes are high – but the size and scale of the task can make local action feel like a Herculean challenge.

How can 'act local' have real impact, how can the steps taken at this level lead to significant and sustained outcomes, and how can progress be aggregated across the county?

The challenge of climate change has been thrown into sharper relief by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. At first glance, it may seem that the consequences of lockdown have advanced short-term gains against the negative effects of climate change, but in the medium and long term, the position is more uncertain.

What's clear is that both the pandemic and the continuing threat of climate change

have demonstrated the need for places and communities to become more resilient.

There is a growing understanding that a holistic local response is necessary, and that this recent shock to the system could present an opportunity to radically shift practices and behaviours.

So what steps could local scrutineers (councillors sitting on scrutiny committees and the officers who support them) take to ensure that the learning and 'positives' from the pandemic correlate with climate challenges ahead? How effectively will councils revise their climate action plans to accommodate the new thinking that has emerged?

Almost 70 per cent of principal

councils have answered the call to action by declaring a climate emergency and, in the wake of the pandemic, many are actively planning a green recovery.

But there is some uncertainty about what such declarations actually commit councils to in practice, and how plans will be funded considering the post-COVID financial situation for local government. Councils that have made these bold commitments now need to show how they will prioritise and embed climate action in all policy areas.

This is where scrutiny has a vital role to play. The nature of climate change, as a critical global problem, is a tough one for scrutiny to tackle, but the scrutiny function can provide a cross-party forum to develop evidence-based recommendations, support improvement and provide public assurance.

Scrutiny has a critical role to play in testing assumptions in the development of climate action plans, particularly in light of the pandemic. Scrutiny can ask how well the council understands the need to take action locally, and how it will establish an accurate overview of the risks and opportunities in the local area.

For an effective response, there must be visible council leadership and ownership to drive strategy forwards and maintain accountability. Scrutiny can secure wider political buy-in for long-term action as well as holding decision-makers to account.

Crucially, scrutiny can also serve as the critical friend by challenging how climate change mitigation and adaptation is being embedded into the activity of each council department. It can explore how climate implications are assessed, while ensuring there is a system for evaluating progress and scheduling regular updates.

Among the most important roles scrutiny will play in climate action is in channelling residents' views and supporting the council in engaging with local partners – to better understand needs and align priorities for environmentally and socially sustainable transformation.



i The Centre for Public Scrutiny and the LGA have recently published '10 questions to ask if you are scrutinising climate change' and are hosting a virtual event on the subject on 18 September. For more information about the report and the event, please visit www.local.gov.uk/centre-public-scrutiny-10-questions-scrutinise-climate-action

Local government and integrated care



Councillor **Ketan Sheth** (Lab) is Chair of Brent Council's Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee

For those councillors in local government who scrutinise the NHS, it seems to have become an expectation that as one great change ends in our local health services, another begins.

A good few years ago in north-west London, we saw the start of the sustainability and transformation plans, later rebranded as sustainability and transformation partnerships – or STPs, as they were widely called.

Now it seems another change is on the way. By April 2021, an integrated care system (ICS) will have been introduced, taking forward much of what was developed by the STPs. ICSs are coming at a time of incredible change for the NHS and local government as a result of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

An ICS brings together health providers and commissioners, along with local government, to plan healthcare based on local population health needs in a defined geographical area.

I've noticed the term 'place' features frequently in the NHS documentation and

published reports. The underpinning and thinking for them is set out in the NHS Long Term Plan.

They started in 2018 in a few areas and around half of England's population is now covered by an ICS.

As for my local proposed ICS, this will cover around 2.3 million residents across eight boroughs in north-west London, stretching from Westminster to Hillingdon, with multiple providers, community healthcare trusts, clinical commissioning groups and local authorities.

What I want to address here is this: how does an elected member sitting on an overview and scrutiny committee start getting to grips with effectively reviewing and holding to account the development of a 'system' of such complexity, and in the constraints of the time and resources we all know elected members face? What should our starting principles be?

It's not easy to answer, but I have a few suggestions.

As an elected member, I don't necessarily need to worry about being a 'systems thinker' but I do like to test their thinking constructively. I would perhaps ask this: thinking about the ordinary residents in my ward, what will an ICS deliver for them? What will it do to make them and their families and children healthier, and be able to live

longer and with a better quality of life?

For me, that's what organisational systems in our public services should be about – simply a means to an end of delivering something better for ordinary people and our communities.

Also, while we talk about 'systems' in health services, let's not forget that when we refer in particular to hospitals, we are often talking about important institutions which command a lot of local pride and

“Thinking about the ordinary residents in my ward, what will an ICS deliver for them?”

attachment – and not just because of the services they provide, but because of the outstanding research they do. Also, in my home borough of Brent, they are important local employers.

I think this way of looking at the world from the grassroots should not be lost in these changes.

So that's a few ways we can start to get to grips with such a big change, and complexity. Then it might be time to prepare for the next one, whatever that may be.

ELECTIONS



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



Tackling low turnout

Low and declining turnout is a long-running feature of local elections in the UK. Indeed, the gap in turnout with parliamentary elections is one of the largest among liberal democracies.

This has led to calls for changing the voting system from 'first past the post' to a form of proportional representation (PR).

Countries that use PR generally do have higher turnout, but this effect applies more at national than local level. Scotland's experience of switching voting systems has not unequivocally led to higher turnout.

Critics of 'first past the post' believe the system allows single-party monopolies; many electors are unwilling to engage, and smaller parties suffer a disadvantage. Some administrations have been either Labour or Conservative since the early 1970s, but, equally, the number of hung councils rose dramatically when third-party representation increased.

Do more competitive local elections lead to higher turnout?

One way of exploring this question is to examine levels of by-election turnout after considering a ward's marginality at the previous May election. We used more than 7,000 by-elections held since the 1980s in this analysis.

The most marginal seats are those where the incumbent party's winning margin over the second-placed party is 10 percentage points or lower. A second category runs from 10-20 percentage points, with safer wards in a third category.

At first glance, there is a relationship between the two variables. Percentage by-election turnout in the two most competitive categories is 33.3 per cent and 32.8 per cent respectively, compared with 29.9 per cent in safer wards. But these differences in turnout are also

present at the previous May elections.

Alternatively, we can compare turnout in seats that changed hands with those safely defended. The data show that there is an even chance that a party defending a seat with a majority of less than 10 per cent will lose it.

Where the incumbent's lead stretches to 20 per cent, four in 10 of these contests also see a change of party control. Even in safe seats, a fifth of by-elections produce a new winner.

Almost every vote does matter, therefore. Local parties all know this. Do the voters? Regrettably, in most cases, it appears not. There are some keenly fought campaigns that do appear related to broader engagement by the electorate, but these are few.

The correlation between by-election and May turnout in seats that changed

hands is the same as it is for those that were safely defended. It is as though there was nothing at stake as far as voter participation is concerned.

This is not to say that campaigning is a waste of effort. Election results do not tell us much about individual voters. But the evidence suggests no easy fix for the turnout problem. Altering the electoral system, moving from partial to whole council elections, and using all-postal voting are all changes worth discussing.

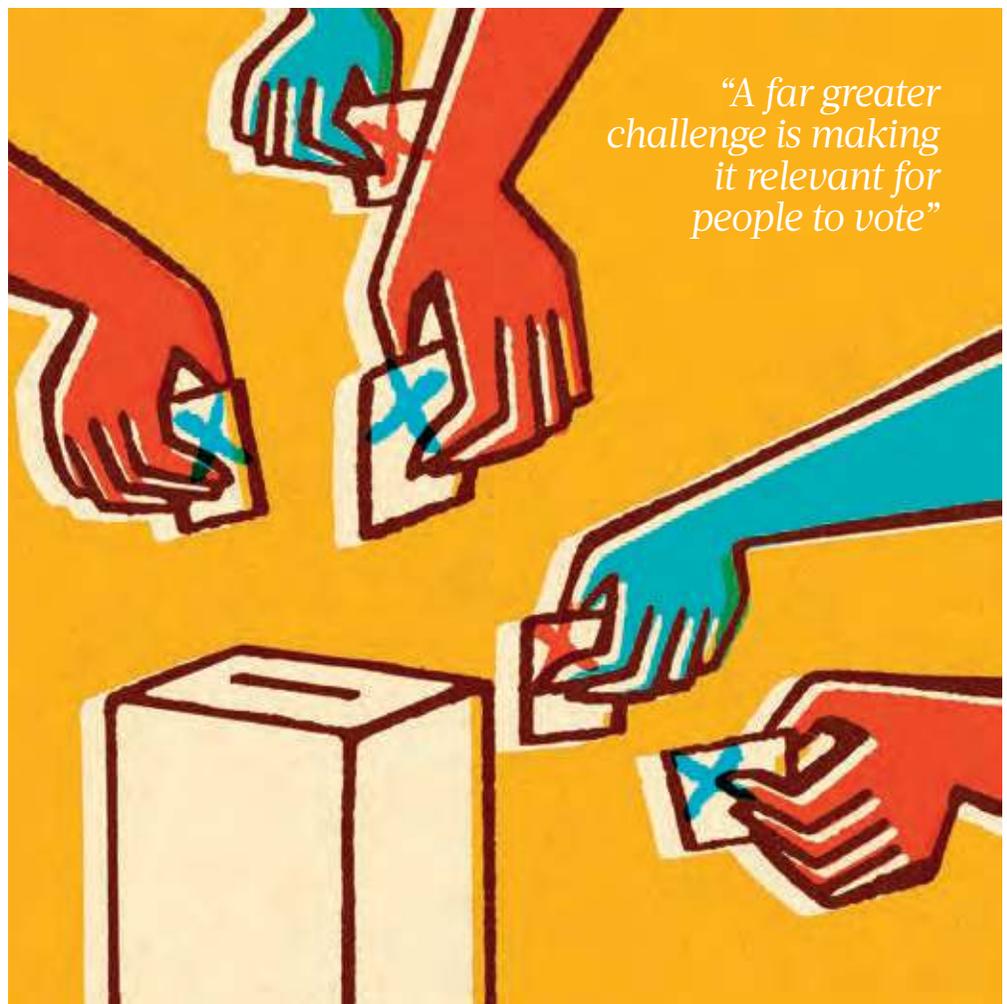
But a far greater challenge is not about making it easier for people to vote, but rather making it relevant for them to vote.

During the pandemic, local authorities have been at the forefront of maintaining essential services, a role that is likely to expand greatly over the coming months.

The next step should be constitutional, giving and maintaining a much stronger role for local government. Were that to happen, then it is highly likely that voter turnout would increase.



For a longer version of this article, please visit www.local.gov.uk/first



LETTERS

‘Not a job, but a vocation’

I read with interest Cllr Barry Lewis’s reflections on allowances (**first** 650). His point about it just feeling ‘wrong’ to accept increases that outstrip those of frontline council workers resonates with me.

However, I do believe we, as councillors, should not consider allowances as comparable to pay in the conventional sense.

Allowances are reasonably given to councillors to compensate them for their time, effort and expenses in undertaking political representative work. Special responsibility allowances, in turn, are given for work that exceeds that.

The essence being, this is not a job, it is a public service vocation supported by allowances, not pay. I would apply the same principle to parliamentarians.

It is healthier, given the vocation of councillors, to not regard allowances as pay for services rendered. For example,

we are free to not accept them, or to accept them in part only, or to donate them elsewhere.

Cllr Lewis also makes an interesting (and tempting) suggestion about linking allowances to council workers’ pay. I would object to this because it falls into the realm of treating them as salaried remuneration.

Rather, I would prefer that there be a truly impartial, objective and independent system to set allowances, without them being ratified in council and, therefore, by councillors themselves.

Councillors are often preoccupied with allowances as though it is a very important issue to the public; seldom are there topics in local government on which councillors are so expert.

It strikes me that allowances are rarely a matter of general contention, unless they are egregiously high, with those in receipt controversially voting for increases. On the latter point, there are too many shameful examples to list.

Cllr Jason Hughes (Con), Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames



Memorials to COVID-19 victims

The coronavirus pandemic is the worst tragedy most people have suffered in their lifetime. It has devastated families and communities, and changed the way we live, perhaps forever. Loved ones have been taken before their time. Essential workers – such as doctors, nurses, care workers and even shop assistants – have given their lives protecting and serving the public.

Some have likened this crisis to World War II. I think the least we can do is make sure those who have tragically died from the virus are never forgotten.

That’s why I suggested a permanent memorial to the victims in Rochdale. I would like to thank the council’s Labour and Conservative Leaders, Councillors Allen Brett and Ashley Dearnley, for their support, and



for proposing a motion on this issue, which was approved at the council’s July meeting.

There will be four memorials, one in each of the borough’s townships, so that residents can easily get to see them. The public will be consulted on the final designs and location of each of them.

I am sure there will be widespread public support for the memorials as a fitting and respectful way to remember all those who have so tragically lost their lives.

Cllr Faisal Rana (Lab), Assistant Portfolio Holder for Finance, Rochdale Borough Council

Hybrid meetings: the way forward

I write to fully endorse Cllr Paul Hayward’s recent letter regarding hybrid meetings (**first** 650).

As a district councillor who has a 32-mile round trip to attend meetings, as do many of the public in my ward, I would welcome the ability to attend certain meetings virtually, on grounds of time-saving and carbon-footprint reduction, not to mention air pollution, from road transport.

With the current virtual operation of council and committee meetings, it has been quite apparent that I can now ‘attend’ meetings, with rapid access to background information, without the need to first guess relevant points or carry a stack of papers into a meeting.

In terms of public accessibility, I accept that virtual attendance requires a certain level of technology (the sort that the average 10-year-old seems to have on their smartphone).

I would suggest that allowing virtual attendance for members of the public would only add to the accessibility of council meetings and, hopefully, to the accountability of councillors.

Cllr Mike Croker (Green), Horsham District Council



‘Privilege to be a councillor’

There are many members of the public who think that we, as councillors, get an awful lot more money than we actually do. I sometimes think this is because they confuse our allowance level with the sums paid to senior officers – individuals who, in some cases, receive a six-figure sum.

In reality, however, a typical councillor like myself, not on the cabinet or receiving any special responsibility allowance, gets a payment of around £8,000. This is similar to what a retiree on pension credit is entitled to – though we, of course, don’t get the perks of age, such as free bus travel and help with heating costs.

Yet older citizens recall the days when councillors didn’t obtain any monetary reward for carrying out their civic duties. So, while we need to put people right as to what we receive, we shouldn’t grumble about our lot. After all, it is a privilege to be a councillor.

Which brings me nicely to the letter from Cllr Barry Lewis (**first 650**). At a time of economic crisis and uncertainty, it was wrong for those in Kent to vote themselves an inflation-busting 4 per cent hike in allowances.

We in North East Lincolnshire do as Cllr Lewis suggests, and limit any rises to the same level as council workers’ pay. That means we aren’t open to the charge of feathering our own nests, with the decision on payments effectively taken out of our hands.

To me, that’s the way forward for all local authorities.

Cllr Tim Mickleburgh (Lab), North East Lincolnshire 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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