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Going to the polls

Good luck to everyone standing for election on 2 May, and thank you to those of you who are stepping down for your service to our local communities.

Professors Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher have our usual pre-election review of the local polls (p30), as well as analysis of the latest by-election results (p29).

Also in this edition, we launch our new Sector Support programme for 2024/25 (p10), and take a look back at how our work with the Devolution All-Party Parliamentary Group has influenced the debate.

I'm delighted that Joanna Killian, the LGA's new Chief Executive, has now started work with us, and you can find out more about her in an interview with *first* (p12).

Elsewhere in the magazine, we look at the transition of local enterprise partnerships to councils (p9); the role of council leaders in improving outcomes for local children (p15); and biodiversity net gain in planning (p21).

We also have a report from our annual public health conference (p18) and an update on the Local Government Challenge (p22); and our lead comment this month is from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (Solace), which is marking its 50th anniversary this year (p23).

Councillor Shaun Davies
is LGA Chair

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Local 
Government
Association

LGA calls for respect during local elections

The LGA has joined forces with the Electoral Commission and the Jo Cox Foundation to call for no abuse towards candidates at the 2 May local elections.

The call comes amid concern about the growing levels of abuse and intimidation aimed at local councillors, which can become heightened during election campaigns.

Recent LGA research found that three-quarters of councillors in England and Wales experienced some form of intimidation or abuse during the 2023 local election campaign.

Although the majority of abuse is low level, a growing number of councillors have experienced more severe abuse, including stalking and threats of violence, some of which has resulted in criminal prosecutions.

Cllr Marianne Overton, Chair of the LGA's Civility in Public Life Steering Group, said: "It's really important that everyone participating in these local elections is treated with respect and we do not see instances of abuse and intimidation.

"We must do all we can to stamp out

abuse from public life and encourage healthy debate if we are to safeguard the future of our local democracy."

Louise Edwards, Director of Regulation and Digital Transformation at the Electoral Commission, said: "The safety and security of candidates and elected representatives is of paramount importance, and it should go without saying that there is no place in a democracy for abuse or intimidation of those who participate in elections.

"We will be working with parties and campaigners ahead of the elections to

understand their experience and to discuss the standards of behaviour that all candidates should be able to expect."

Su Moore, Chief Executive Officer of the Jo Cox Foundation, said: "Abuse and intimidation of elected politicians is a threat to democracy in this country.

"The Jo Cox Civility Commission call to action, published earlier this year, has a clear set of recommendations that, if implemented, can make a genuine impact on this serious issue at a national and local level."

• See p30



Satisfaction with social care 'lowest ever'

Public satisfaction with social care services has dropped to just 13 per cent – the lowest level ever recorded – according to findings from the British Social Attitudes survey, published by the Nuffield Trust and the King's Fund charities.

The survey, carried out by the National Centre for Social Research in September and October 2023, is seen as a gold standard measure of public attitudes in Britain.

It found the proportion of

people dissatisfied with social care remains at a historically high level, with 57 per cent of respondents either 'quite dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied'.

Reasons for dissatisfaction included inadequate pay, working conditions and training for social care workers (57 per cent); people not getting the social care they need (56 per cent); and there not being enough support for unpaid carers (49 per cent).

Dissatisfaction was markedly

higher among those who had used or had contact with social care services (for either themselves or someone else) in the past 12 months, and among those aged 65 or over.

Simon Bottery, Senior Fellow in Social Care at The King's Fund, said: "These are awful results, but they are sadly unsurprising.

"For many years, governments have taken too little action on social care and this is now seriously affecting those who draw on services, the

families who support them and the staff who work in the sector."

Cllr Kaya Comer-Schwartz, Social Care Spokesperson for the LGA, said: "These stark results are very worrying for councils, care providers and most importantly people who draw on care and support.

"We need to see further urgent investment in adult social care and a boost to the workforce, to ensure the best possible care for those who draw on it."

Guidance needed to support smoking ban – LGA

The LGA has called for sufficient lead-in time and guidance to be provided ahead of legislation on smoking and vaping coming into force, so that councils, retailers and others understand their new obligations and can prepare accordingly.

As **first** was going to press, the Tobacco and Vapes Bill – which would effectively ban smoking for future generations – was due to start its report stage in the House of Commons.

The bill would prohibit the sale of tobacco to people born on or after 1 January 2009, and would bring in rules regulating the marketing, flavours and descriptions of vapes.

The LGA believes this is a progressive piece of legislation that would impact on smoking prevalence and



ultimately reduce rates of smoking-related disease; it has previously called for measures to restrict the availability and marketing of vapes to children.

Cllr David Fothergill, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "Councils work hard in their communities to help long-term smokers quit and so are fully supportive of the

Government's 'smokefree generation' ambitions.

"Smoking remains one of the leading causes of preventable ill health, disability and death in England. This creates additional pressures on our health and care systems and affects the quality of life for some in our local communities."

New £3.6m fund for care leavers

Local programmes in England offering tailored support to young care-experienced adults are being supported by a new £3.6 million fund.

Managed by UK Community Foundations, the Care Leavers' Programme aims to improve the life chances of care leavers through decentralised regional funding.

The £3.6 million match-fund programme will run over three years and is being funded by the Local Authorities' Mutual Investment Trust (LAMIT), a shareholder of the UK's biggest charities asset manager, CCLA.

Seventeen community foundations are working closely with their respective local authorities to fund a range of individual care leavers and charitable organisations that help care leavers navigate their way through adulthood.

Types of support include giving guidance for care leavers experiencing homelessness in the West Midlands; providing positive practical experiences for young care leavers in Cambridgeshire; offering one-to-one personal and professional work-based mentoring in Cumbria; and helping parent care leavers and migrant care leavers in Essex.

Cllr Richard Kemp CBE, Deputy Lord Mayor of Liverpool and Chair of LAMIT, said the fund was also intended to engage new partners at all levels, including in the commercial, justice and health systems, to improve support for care leavers nationally.

Cllr Shaun Davies, LGA Chair, said: "Councils support thousands of young people who become care leavers every year, whether that is finding a home to live in or help into work.

"Alongside our communities, the LGA is delighted to be able to support this fantastic new initiative that can help to transform care leavers' lives as they make the transition into adulthood."

• See p24



Oflog's independence 'key to success'

The Office for Local Government's (Oflog) success depends on it being both independent, and seen to be independent, the LGA has told MPs.

Cllr Abi Brown OBE, Chair of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board, gave evidence to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee inquiry on the organisation in late April.

Oflog was set up by government to increase understanding about the performance of local authorities, warn when authorities are at risk of serious failure, and support local government to improve itself.

Cllr Brown stressed the importance of ensuring the organisation's independence so that it is not subject to seeking approval from ministers for its work.

The LGA fully supports Oflog's ambition for independence and believes it is crucial for the organisation's success for it to be independent and to be seen to be so by the sector.

Some of the key issues discussed were Oflog's relationship with the sector; and the Local Authority Data Explorer, and how together with LG Inform, the LGA's own database for local authorities, it can strengthen councils' performance transparency. There were also discussions on Oflog's 'early warning conversations' and how these complement the LGA's Corporate Peer Challenges (see p10).

Meanwhile, the LGA has paid tribute to Lord Morse, who stepped down from his role as the interim Chair of Oflog in March, for unexpected health reasons. LGA Chair Cllr Shaun Davies wished Lord Morse well and thanked him for his leadership, and for his extensive engagement with the LGA and wider local government family.

Cllr Davies said: "Lord Morse has brought essential integrity to the role and we look forward to continuing to work closely with Oflog, and his successor, for the benefit of the sector and the public."

In brief

Recruitment campaign

Plans for a national recruitment campaign for local government will be showcased at an LGA virtual event on 30 April, alongside findings from a pilot of the campaign in the North East of England (see **first** 691). The campaign is part of the LGA's government-funded Sector Support programme and has been co-produced with local government and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers. With more than nine in 10 councils experiencing staff recruitment and retention difficulties, the campaign aims to encourage people to 'make a difference' where they live with a career in local government, highlighting the roles on offer and challenging preconceptions about the sector. To sign up for the event, please visit www.local.gov.uk/events.

Council tax arrears

Freedom of Information requests have revealed a 70 per cent rise in the total amount of council tax arrears over the past five years, with almost 600,000 residents referred to bailiffs, it has been reported. An LGA spokesperson said: "Enforcement agents should only ever be used as a last resort. Before the situation reaches a stage where enforcement agents are involved, several letters should have been written, people should have been encouraged to apply for financial support, and efforts should be made to arrange new payment plans."

Pothole 'crisis'

The AA was called out to the most pothole-related incidents in five years, peaking at 631,852 in 2023, a situation that it described as a "pothole crisis". Its poll of 11,000 members showed that 96 per cent believed road maintenance was now the top transport issue affecting them. The LGA pointed to figures from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development that showed spending on maintenance for local roads in the UK halved between 2006 and 2019 to £2 billion.

Updated improvement support for councils

New, enhanced improvement tools and a wider range of councillor-focused transformation support are among the additional offers in the LGA's 2024/25 Sector Support programme.

The programme, funded by central government, aims to support local authorities – including combined authorities – to harness opportunities, drive improvement across all regions, and deliver critical services to communities.

This year's offer includes the LGA's strengthened Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) approach and an expanded range of officer and councillor development opportunities, including for statutory officers.

The LGA will introduce a significant new foundation programme for newly appointed chief executives, following a successful pilot in 2023/24.

And a wider range of councillor-focused transformation support will help elected members to develop the necessary skills for change, while continuing to focus on core aspects, such as targeted finance and workforce support.

With the 2 May elections looming, support will continue to be delivered for councils experiencing changes in political leadership or control.

Cllr Abi Brown OBE, Chair of the LGA's



Improvement and Innovation Board, said: "We are delighted to launch this year's Sector Support programme for councils, which has been informed by councils.

"Peer-led support remains a cornerstone of the programme – no-one understands local government better than local leaders and councillors, chief executives and senior officers, who are uniquely equipped to provide advice and support.

"Given the scale of challenges facing the sector, now more than ever it is critical that councils have access to the support they need."

Sure Start 'improved GCSE results'

New research has shown that an early years support programme for families improved GCSE results and reduced the need for additional support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that the Sure Start programme – which ran from 1999 to 2010 as a network of 'one stop shops' for services for families with children under the age of five – generated big improvements in the educational performance of children, particularly those from low-income families or ethnic minority backgrounds.

Living near a centre increased performance at GCSE by three grades for children eligible for free school meals – equivalent to getting five

grade Cs rather than two Cs and three Ds.

And, while Sure Start increased the prevalence of support for SEND at young ages, it reduced it at adolescence, such that at age 16, the need for education, health and care plans (EHCPs) decreased by 9 per cent – or more than 1,000 children per year.

Ruth Maisey, an Education Programme Head at the Nuffield Foundation charity, which funded the research, said: "Local authorities and schools are experiencing significant problems with securing sufficient special educational needs provision to meet families' rising needs.

"It will be important to consider how early provision of integrated services might form part of the solution, given the demonstrable effect of Sure Start in reducing the need for EHCPs."



Social cohesion review warns of ‘significant challenges’

An independent review by Dame Sara Khan into social cohesion and resilience has warned of “significant challenges” that impact the wellbeing of our democracy, threatening to undermine the social fabric of the country.

It says without a strategic approach to social cohesion, we face “a slow erosion” of the country’s democratic rights and freedoms.

Dame Sara warned that local authorities are on the frontline, struggling to prevent, manage and contain the impact of conspiracy theories, disinformation and extremist activity.

She said the scale and challenge of cohesion threats requires a “radically new approach”, and set out 15 recommendations, largely for government.

Ahead of a general election, Dame Sara is calling on all political parties to establish how they will address the issues raised in her review.

Cllr Heather Kidd, Chair of the LGA’s Safer and Stronger Communities Board, said: “This important report reflects our concerns around

the growing threat to democracy and social cohesion posed by conspiracy theories, disinformation and extremist activity, in particular the appalling abuse of councillors.

“Councils have an essential role to play in building and maintaining cohesive communities, but as this report suggests, have been limited by a lack of funding for counter-extremism work while facing significant budgetary pressures.

“In spite of this, the LGA has continued to support the sector through its Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism (SIGCE) and its Debate not Hate campaign (see www.local.gov.uk/debate-not-hate).

“We want to work with government to tackle these long-term challenges and implement the recommendations of this review. However, councils need urgent funding to counter extremism and misinformation, with the restoration of SIGCE funding and effective regional support.”

‘Clarify extreme weather roles’

Long-term plans to respond to floods, storms and heatwaves are needed, MPs have warned in a new report.

Government has identified that a ‘whole of society’ approach is required to develop resilience to the national risks the UK faces, according to the cross-party parliamentary Public Accounts Committee (PAC).

However, the PAC finds that respective roles in this area, at all levels of government, as well as private and voluntary sectors and the public, have not been clarified – leading to uncertainty about what actions to take.

For example, public awareness of the risk of surface water flooding is low and it is not always clear who to contact to report incidents when they happen.

The PAC says local organisations have a critical role in developing the UK’s resilience, for example by preparing emergency plans for different scenarios or specific events like flooding.

However, central government does not check local plans to see if they are fit for purpose, and does not know if local organisations have the capacity and capability to fulfil their functions effectively.

Cllr Darren Rodwell, Chair of the LGA’s Local Infrastructure and Net Zero Board, said: “LGA polling found that just 5 per cent of the public feel prepared for the impacts of climate change, following recent years of excess heat, flooding and storms.

“It also found that the public trust their council the most to lead the effort to prepare villages, towns and cities for the climate impacts.

“This is because councils are rooted in communities and understand places: we must be given the tools and funding needed to make that happen.”



Youth homelessness pressures

Councils in England face a £332 million shortfall in funding to tackle youth homelessness, the charity Centrepoint has claimed.

Its research estimates that, across the UK, almost 136,000 young people asked for help from their local council



in 2022/2023 because they were homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The research is based on the results of freedom of information requests to councils in England.

Cllr Darren Rodwell, the LGA’s Housing Spokesperson, said: “Councils have consistently raised significant concerns about the impact the rising cost of living, multiple asylum and resettlement programmes, and an insufficient supply of affordable housing are having on driving increases in homelessness.

“Currently, councils are spending £1.74 billion on supporting households living in temporary accommodation, with this spend predicted to increase by a further 19.9 per cent in 2023/24.”

Regulating automated vehicles

Self-driving cars need to be accessible

The Automated Vehicles Bill – currently at report stage in the House of Commons – is a welcome step towards regulating alternative modes of transport that can help connect our communities.

However, there are substantial gaps in the provisions that the LGA would normally expect to see in government legislation, which have the potential to adversely affect older people, those with disabilities, and/or accessibility requirements.

It is imperative that this alternative form of transport is safe, trusted and accessible to all. Only by ensuring that sufficient safeguards are in place can we persuade citizens of the reliability of self-driving cars and similar vehicles, particularly among users of existing public transport networks.

Our concerns centre on three themes: co-design and co-production; regulation of features; and protections for disabled and older people.

A recent Women and Equalities Committee report, 'Accessibility of products and services to disabled people', outlined the importance of businesses considering disabled access from the start.

The committee found that this approach would "benefit businesses that currently risk missing out on the spending power of disabled households, which is estimated to be worth £274 billion per year".

It therefore makes social and economic sense to address this point.

However, there is no duty in the bill for the Department for Transport, the Secretary of State nor designers of automated vehicles (AVs) to ensure the disability sector is consulted when co-designing AVs.

The bill also contains no provision for the establishment of an



accessibility advisory board or panel, as recommended by the Law Commission in the bill's impact assessment. The board would be required to give consent before issuing a permit for passenger-only AVs. We believe this is critical, to foster the relationship between the commissioning authority, vehicle provider and user.

Equally, it is also important to consider design accessibility for passengers with health conditions, older people and people with disabilities.

For example, the usual design of the driver's seat in vehicles with some automated functions is already unsuited to these groups, and is not set to be addressed in the current drafting of the bill. There is potential from encouraging an AV sector in the UK to be at the forefront of new technology – but there is also potential to reproduce issues of the past.

Research by the charity Transport for All has highlighted that the biggest barrier to disabled people using a car is

difficulty in finding a driver. As a result, those with disabilities are more reliant on public transport as a means to travel.

We know that lack of priority space, or insufficient provisions to ensure their safety, have been an enduring issue for disabled people.

To avoid a similar situation in the roll-out of AVs, ensuring these vehicles are properly designed with the disabled user front of mind is important.

AVs are a new and exciting option in the travel mix, but there are numerous risks. It is important that these vehicles are accessible and are co-designed as such.

The LGA will continue to work with the Government to ensure effective and sufficient safeguards are in place to protect vulnerable groups. We believe the current drafting of the bill falls short of these expectations.



To find out more about the LGA's parliamentary work, please visit www.local.gov.uk/parliament

Transitioning LEPs

LGA research looks at the key issues for councils



Councillor **Martin Tett** is Chairman of the LGA's People and Places Board

In August 2023, the Government confirmed its intention to integrate local enterprise partnership (LEP) functions into local democratic institutions.

This decision followed the March 2023 Budget, in which the Chancellor announced he was 'minded' to end funding for LEPs from April 2024.

As set out in a March 2022 ministerial letter, the integration process can take three pathways: integrating an LEP into a combined authority or county devolution deal; maintaining the LEP until a devolution deal is agreed; or finding a local solution where existing or future devolution arrangements leave an area of the LEP's geography outstanding.

At the time of the Chancellor's announcement, the LGA was working with consultants Shared Intelligence to produce a guide, 'Supporting the integration of local enterprise partnerships' (see www.local.gov.uk/publications).

As this report notes, the Government's decision rapidly

accelerated the rate at which local plans were being drawn up.

It was against this background that, late last autumn, the LGA's People and Places Board commissioned consultants Henham Strategy to consider the key issues for councils now having to work at pace.

To this end, four workshops were held in early 2024, at which local authority chief executives, senior council officers and local enterprise partnership representatives were invited to talk through the key challenges in: governance, business representation and joint working; growth hubs and careers hubs; freeports and enterprise zones; and funding and asset integration.

These conversations helped tease out some of the things that LEPs did well. They helped support growth in clearly defined functional economic areas; they had strong buy-in from the public, private and academic sectors, with a clear mandate from national government; and they are estimated to have leveraged £1.76 of private investment for every £1 of public money spent.

The researchers found that, while most areas are making good progress with LEP integration – closing their LEP and transferring functions into a local authority – there are a significant minority that will continue to deliver functions through a LEP.

Furthermore, some councils are experiencing highly localised challenges, particularly in areas where

local authority boundaries are not in line with the LEP's geography.

The researchers also heard some district councils express concern at having gone from a seat at the table to being 'squeezed out' of a strategic conversation about what comes next.

More significantly, the research raised some key issues that the LGA intends to put to all the national political parties ahead of the next general election.

First, economic development is a strategic, long-term agenda, and local areas need a clear mandate and funding if they are to attract and retain business leadership.

Second, national guidance on integration has been vague and sometimes contradictory. More needs to be done to help councils focus on strategic issues rather than getting bogged down in operational matters.

Third, the 'prize' for this process of reorganisation is unclear, particularly given the very limited funds available to councils and the few practical incentives for cross-boundary collaboration.

Councils and combined authorities play a crucial role in driving productivity and building sustainable communities. With inclusive growth now at the forefront of the national political agenda, we will be making the case over the next six months that, with the right freedoms, funding and flexibility, a locally led approach will unlock the potential of the national economy.



Challenge and change

The LGA has launched its 2024/25 Sector Support programme for local authorities



Councillor **Abi Brown** OBE is Chair of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board

The LGA has launched its Sector Support programme for 2024/25, again packed full of vital tools and support to help councils and combined authorities deliver critical services to communities, while helping harness opportunities and drive improvement across all regions.

Our programme, which is funded by the UK Government, builds on the five key themes of governance, leadership, finance, workforce, and transformation – offering wide-ranging support that has been updated to reflect current and emerging challenges and opportunities for local authorities in England.

Everything we do is informed by a sector-led improvement approach, which draws on direct insights from councils, ensuring our support is guided by sector needs.

This year, the offer will draw on the important work undertaken to map the different elements that currently provide assurance on the performance of the local government sector, and on insights gained from our consultation

on the assurance framework, which was undertaken in 2023/24.

By enhancing the focus on assurance, we can support councils to improve performance management, accountability and transparency within their organisation.

The LGA will work with specialist partners to create a leadership development offer that brings together chief executives, section 151 officers and monitoring officers, to learn and develop, increase understanding of the interdependencies of their roles, and share good practice.

Meanwhile, our Corporate Peer Challenges (CPCs) continue to be one of the most valued improvement and assurance tools the LGA offers, with 100 per cent of councils in 2023/24 saying that the process of preparing for, and participating in, a CPC has had a positive impact on them.

The newly strengthened CPC programme builds on improvements delivered in recent years to provide robust and consistent challenge. There will be a stronger focus on performance, governance and culture to reflect the current challenges to the sector and the draft statutory guidance on best value authorities.

LG Inform, the LGA's freely available, award-winning data platform, also continues to contribute to greater assurance by supporting councils to create an evidence-based culture and implement data standards across their services (see www.local.gov.uk/lginform).

This powerful benchmarking tool uniquely integrates thousands of local data items to enable councils and the public to compare the performance of local authorities, including those with similar characteristics, such as the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's 'nearest neighbours'.

A number of new reports will be

added this year to provide councils with even more valuable data, and training will be provided through the Office for National Statistics' Data Science Campus, to equip officers with the analytical skills to adopt a data-driven approach in their authorities.

With local elections swiftly approaching, I would encourage councils to continue to draw on the LGA's 'Changes in political leadership and control' support offer, which provides councillors and officers with support throughout the year, before and after elections.

This offer includes mentoring, top-team development, and a range of wider bespoke offers provided by specialist peers and expert regional teams.

Recognising the scale of financial challenges facing local authorities, we have also enhanced our Finance programme, which continues to provide access to expert finance associates, all of whom are current or former chief finance officers (CFOs).

Our enhanced Finance Skills and Knowledge programme provides councillors, finance portfolio holders and audit committee chairs, and CFOs with shared learning opportunities and vital skills and knowledge.

Our refreshed Leadership offer features some exciting new developments, such as the extension of the Chief Executive Foundation programme, piloted in 2023/24.

This will offer training on seven foundational themes – managerial leadership, resource management, continuous improvement, public ethics, good governance, the political interface, and the core chief executive role – alongside a number of resources.

The National Recruitment Campaign, co-produced with Solace, the membership network for public sector and local government professionals, and the local government sector, will be extended across England, following a successful pilot in the North East (see **first** 691).

The campaign aims to attract new talent and highlight the benefits that a career in local government can offer.



“Everything we do is informed by a sector-led improvement approach”



“Our peers’ advice can be tailored to support the needs of your authority”

Supported by major advertising on billboards, radio and social media, the campaign will highlight the infinite variety of roles on offer and the exciting opportunities to develop a career in local government. It will also promote what a difference people can make, while complementing local authorities’ own recruitment activity.

With capacity and capability remaining a concern for local authorities across England, our workforce programme will provide councils with targeted support to address workforce issues.

This includes a new Equal Pay offer to help local authorities adopt and apply measures and interventions that minimise and mitigate risks arising from potentially unequal and inequitable practices, and actions relating to pay, terms and conditions, and equal rights.

As well as continuing management of national collective bargaining, which covers pay negotiations for the

sector, we will deliver an enhanced range of apprenticeships support to address skills shortages, including the Apprenticeship Health Check. This will help councils maximise the return on investment of the apprenticeship levy and improve their overall approach to managing apprenticeships at a local level.

As our Transformation programme enters its second year and becomes more established, the range of support available through this offer continues to grow.

Responding directly to feedback from the sector, there will be a wider range of councillor-focused support, to help elected members develop necessary skills for change – for instance, a new Leadership Essentials course, focused on providing councillors with the skills to champion, lead and scrutinise transformation programmes within their local authority. The Transformation offer will also provide a range of new and

enhanced learning and development opportunities, and transformation peers (previously transformation experts) will continue providing direct support to councils.

Our peers have diverse transformation expertise across service areas, ranging from data and digital to partnerships and culture change – so their advice can be tailored to support the needs of your authority.

The LGA’s Sector Support programme continues to garner high levels of take-up and positive feedback from recipients, demonstrating its value to councils.

Our wider sector support offer covers programmes such as Partners in Care and Health (adult social care), Children’s Services, One Public Estate, the Planning Advisory Service, Pathways to Planning, Procurement and Sustainability, Culture Tourism and Sport, and Cyber, Digital and Technology. See www.local.gov.uk/our-support for more.



See www.local.gov.uk/publications/sector-support-offer-local-authorities-202425 to view the LGA’s new [Sector Support programme](#) in full. For further information about any aspect of the offer, please contact the LGA principal adviser for your region, see www.local.gov.uk/our-support/lga-principal-advisers

Optimism and empathy

The LGA's new chief executive talks funding to **first**

The start of a new financial year can be a time for reflection and a reset in local government, according to Joanna Killian.

But the LGA's new chief executive is the first to acknowledge that the mood in the sector this spring is "much more sombre than usual".

"The world is really tough, demand is high, expectations are rising and there is not enough money in the system," she says.

"I know from conversations with chief executives, leaders and officers in councils of all shapes and sizes that they are starting this financial year more tired, concerned and under pressure than ever before, after months of difficult discussions and tough choices to get 2024/25 budgets over the line.

"I've been a recent council chief executive, and I've worked very closely with a strong political administration. I feel the pain that many councillors and chief executives are experiencing now.

"I particularly recognise how hard it is being an elected member at this moment: the pressure on them as individuals, and the importance I know many of them attach to dealing with casework effectively and being in the shoes of their residents – that's really tough when they can't always instantly meet need.

"But it's also much trickier now, given the amount of abuse and hostility that lots of publicly elected officials face.

"My job as LGA chief executive is about supporting councillors and officers to bear that strain.

"But it's also to continue to lobby and influence to make sure that local government is seen as an equal partner with central government; that we can work together to think about the solutions that are needed to deliver strong public services; and that we can continue to campaign for local government as being the sector that

knows its communities, knows its people and its economies, and is best placed to respond to the pressures and, importantly, the opportunities we face."

With money likely to be tight into the future and "unmanageable" layers of function and expectation layered into local government, she feels the sector needs to "wind back" and help central government deliver change and reform in existing policies to "make sure that we can do what we have to do within the envelopes we've got".

This need for a 'grown-up' relationship with central government – with councils empowered to deliver sustainable local solutions rather than viewed as just delivery agents for national policies – will be key to managing the pressures they face.

It will also be a key theme of the LGA's Local Government White Paper, due out ahead of the general election, which will set out the sector's blueprint for securing a national-local partnership – a new local deal – in which local government can work to its full potential for our people, places and planet.

Despite the financial doom and gloom, Ms Killian remains optimistic.

"I'm optimistic because I know there are brilliant councillors and brilliant officers with great ideas, in local government and the LGA, who go above and beyond every day under extreme pressure, because they are so dedicated.

"That sort of drive and resilience is extraordinary, and I feel really optimistic about that."

It's the kind of drive she has demonstrated in her own varied career. A graduate of Keele University (geography and politics), she first went into investment banking but "hated it".

She went travelling and, on her return, took a temporary job in a housing department, working with homeless people and estate management – and was hooked by the public sector.

She worked in housing and regeneration in the London boroughs of Redbridge, Tower Hamlets and Croydon, before moving in 2000 to the Audit Commission.

There, she helped set up the housing inspectorate and delivered the first round of corporate assessments for local government in 2002.

In 2005, Ms Killian returned to local government as Director for Finance and Performance at Essex County Council, becoming its first woman chief executive the following year at the age of 41.

In 2007, she also became Chief Executive of Brentwood District Council – believed to be the first such arrangement in the country.

She left Essex in 2015 to become Partner and Head of Local Government at consultants and accountants KPMG, returning to the sector as Chief Executive of Surrey County Council in 2018.

In 2021, she was appointed Local Government Commissioner at Liverpool City Council and also became Chair of Trustees at the homeless charity St Mungo's.

Every part of her career has brought something that will help at the LGA, says Ms Killian – from the "very strong frontline practical experience of working with elected members and communities, doing housing, homelessness and regeneration", to her experience as a regulator.

"I learned very positively some of

"My job... is to make sure that local government is seen as an equal partner with central government"

“I feel the pain that many councillors and chief executives are experiencing now”

the benefits that really good, focused, high-quality regulation can bring to lifting standards and improving outcomes, and about the importance of leadership and good governance as the foundations for brilliant public services,” she says.

“But I also know that the dead hand of regulation can be time-consuming and destructive.”

KPMG gave her a “glimpse into very good private sector commercial activity and the importance of relationship management” – but the most profound thing there was being able to see how public services operate across the UK, Europe and the United States.

“Powerfully, in many sorts of countries in Europe, there is a much more acknowledged, balanced relationship between central and local government, some of it constitutionally defined,” she notes.

And while she is standing down from St Mungo’s, it’s clear that housing remains a passion from first to last.

“That role has been important, because in a county you don’t have strategic housing responsibility (although we did create an ambitious plan!), so it’s like a passion for me, and has given me great joy.

“Part of my values is about trying to give back. I think about the vulnerable children I used to have responsibility for, or young people with learning disabilities, or the frustration that residents have about potholes not being filled, and flooding, and air quality – all of those things genuinely inspired me to do things for them in a really responsive and caring and thoughtful way.

“For me, it’s always been about having residents as taxpayers and service users in my mind. We exist to deliver really good services with our communities, support growth, deliver infrastructure, and enable people to thrive, and that’s what drives me, every day.”

A third of local areas in the UK just experienced their **hottest year on record**

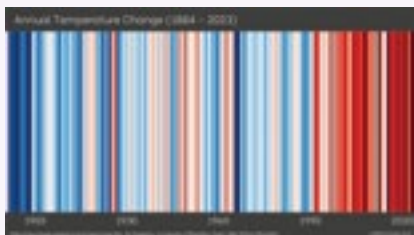
Climate charity Carbon Copy, in partnership with Professor Ed Hawkins at the University of Reading, has just released the latest update to the local climate warming stripes – the blue and red graphic representation of the reality of our heating planet.

First published last year, the local versions of the stripes cover all 379 primary council areas in the UK. Now, with the publication of the 2023 Met Office data on which the stripes are based, Carbon Copy can reveal that for 119 of those areas, last year was the hottest on record.

Carbon Copy's Chief Storyteller, Isabelle Sparrow, explains: "Recent news stories highlighted that last year, for the first time, the global average temperature stayed consistently 1.5 degrees C above pre-industrial levels. The trouble is that global figures are hard to relate to, and 1.5 degrees C to many people seems insignificant. When we are trying to encourage action to tackle climate breakdown, we need a way of telling a story that is relevant to people right here, right now.

"The local warming stripes show people that this is not an 'over there' problem – people are experiencing temperatures like never before in communities across the UK."

Climate scientist Professor Ed Hawkins added: "It might seem odd to talk about global heating when we are just coming out of a winter of storms and floods, but all these extreme weather



Great Yarmouth 1884-2023



Save Hemsby Coastline members Kevin Jordan, left, and Simon Measures at Hemsby

events are interlinked. A warmer atmosphere can hold more water, which in turn creates more rainfall. It's no coincidence that temperature records and precipitation records are getting broken left, right and centre: it's all connected, and it all relates to the ongoing release of heat-trapping greenhouse gases from burning fossil fuels."


One person who has first-hand knowledge of the destruction that more powerful storms can have, is Kevin Jordan. In late 2023, his home of 14 years in Hemsby, on the Norfolk coast, was deemed unsafe and was demolished by the local council.

"When I first moved into my property, I loved listening to the gentle sound of the North Sea, but after the 'Beast from the East' in 2018, the storms became more frequent and stronger, and I started to feel afraid when I heard the waves crashing. In November, I was visited by a council

officer and told I had to leave. I had nowhere to go, no family nearby and little savings. Everything I had was tied up in that house.

"I know for a fact that climate change has had a large part to play in my story. Looking at the warming stripes, the change from the blue to the very dark red since the 1800s gives a clear picture of how things are heating up; and with the experience I've had, I know the true impact."

i To find out if your area had its hottest-ever year last year, visit **Carbon Copy** and download your local warming stripes now

 carboncopy



Improving outcomes for children

Political leadership is key to making a difference



Councillor **Louise Gittins** is Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board

Ensuring local areas and services meet the needs of children and families is arguably one of the most important functions of local government.

This is why the LGA has developed a guide – specifically for council leaders – which has been shaped by current and former leaders, lead members and chief executives with experience of children's services improvement.

As it notes, when things are working well, children's services can be an area that doesn't draw the political or corporate attention of council leadership. But if there are issues, these can escalate and unravel quickly.

Councils have statutory duties to keep children safe and to step in to offer support or look after them when they can't be cared for safely at home, and to support educational excellence for all children and young people in their area.

This includes support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), a complex and growing area.

Demand for children's services has been increasing rapidly, putting significant pressure on council budgets.

Two-thirds of councils cite spending on children's services as the biggest short-term pressure facing local authorities, so getting it right is vital to ensure that children receive

the best support and councils can effectively use their budgets.

Council leaders have to juggle competing priorities and demands for resources, but identifying and addressing issues in children's services early is key.

The financial and reputational implications of a failure in children's services would likely be council-wide and significant.

As leader, you should therefore have an understanding of the conditions for children's services success and improvement, and your role in enabling them.

Council leaders should ensure that their lead member for children's services is supported in their statutory role, their cabinet understands children's services, and that consideration is given to the impact on children when decision-making and budget setting in other policy areas.

It's also important to adopt a whole council approach.

Children's services, including children's social care, SEND and alternative provision, and youth justice services, can only thrive when supported by the whole council and its partners.

Leaders also have a crucial part to play in ensuring that all elected members support children and young people and understand and fulfil their role as 'corporate parents'.

When children come into local authority care, corporate parenting means doing everything you can for every child in your care and every care leaver, to give them the opportunities that other children get.

Every councillor and officer of the local authority is a corporate parent with the statutory responsibility to act and care for that child in the



same way that a good parent would.

All councillors should understand their corporate parenting responsibilities, and how they can fulfil them, but particularly councillors taking up roles on corporate parenting boards, scrutiny committees and cabinet.

As their community representatives, all councillors have a crucial role to play in doing all they can to support children in care to live meaningful and fulfilling lives, to believe in them and fight their corner.

As leader, you can model and champion active corporate parenting by setting the tone for political colleagues and relentlessly asking, and encouraging others to ask: 'Would this be good enough for my child?'



'**Must know: the role of a council leader in improving outcomes for children**' can be read in full at www.local.gov.uk/publications. See also p24 and p27

Influencing devolution

The Devolution APPG provided an open forum for local leaders and parliamentarians

The LGA has long called for genuine devolution to local areas, believing that greater fiscal freedom – the power to raise more money locally and have greater control over how this money is spent in local areas – is a crucial part of this process.

Councils in England are only able to levy council tax and business rates, and both remain subject to significant intervention and control by national government.

Over the years, one of the ways we have sought to influence this agenda is by providing support to the Devolution All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG).

The group provided an open forum for local leaders, parliamentarians and others to discuss UK-wide devolution.

From conducting inquiries to providing witness evidence and bringing key stakeholders together, the APPG explored how national ambitions can be best delivered through devolving powers to local places.

The Government's framework for devolution, introduced in the 2022 Levelling Up White Paper, was a welcome step in ensuring local leaders have the tools and resources to fulfil local aspirations, and continues to be enhanced.

However, there is still much more that can be done, and further powers that could yet be devolved. One example is the LGA's long-standing Work Local campaign, an ambitious programme for the devolution and integration of employment and skills services, for which the LGA continues to campaign.

In making the case for further devolution to local places, the APPG

conducted a series of inquiries over the years, including in 2020 its 'Levelling-up devo' inquiry, which explored the role of local leadership in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (see bit.ly/442fwkF).

The inquiry argued that, when implementing levelling up, the Government should reimagine the British state, empowering local areas to reduce the burden on central government.

The report called for councils to have the right powers to support local recovery post-pandemic, and to ensure continued, place-based economic growth.

Reduced bureaucracy, decentralised policy thinking and departing from the 'one size fits all' approach, echoed throughout the report's key recommendations.

These included a call for a reformed approach to devolution developed in partnership between national and local government, and a move away from the traditional drivers of departmental spending and competitive bidding in line with some of the world's most productive economies.

Building on this work, the Devolution APPG's second inquiry looked at the Government's Levelling Up White Paper and heard evidence on how to best reflect local needs in future devolution deals (see bit.ly/3xAL3hi).

The report set out a series of recommendations for government, including how it should work with councils to enable further powers to be transferred. It also recommended aligning the rollout of integrated care systems and health devolution in future devolution deals.

It found that the White Paper's



approach does not suit every area in England, and that more agile and locally driven deals, set against an agreed set of overarching principles, could better achieve the kind of growth local areas want and need.

Fiscal devolution, for example, was noted as a key area of concern, with a fragmented landscape causing a postcode lottery of investment and opportunity.

The APPG hosted supplementary evidence sessions to reflect on the LGA's own 2022 'Levelling up locally inquiry: place and identity' (see bit.ly/3U548zE).

This outlined how councils are leaders of people and place that want local economies to thrive, our vulnerable people looked after, and our places to be attractive and healthy environments – but that the ambitious levelling up agenda was being held back by centralised powers.

Separate to the APPG's inquiry work, the group invited thought leaders and speakers to explore where further devolution might be possible. It examined issues including transport, high streets, fiscal devolution, and public health.

Baroness Vere of Norbiton, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Transport from 2019 to 2023, met the APPG to discuss

“There is still much that can be done, and further powers that could yet be devolved”



government work on reflecting the different geographies of the UK when assessing local transport needs.

Lady Vere also highlighted the importance of good national relationships with local mayors, to ensure the right level of support is available.

Stephen Joseph, Visiting Professor at the University of Hertfordshire and a transport policy consultant, spoke to the group about his work as adviser to the Rail Devolution Network.

Prof Joseph explained that devolution of local rail services has been shown to work, but that beyond the UK's major cities, transport is not discussed enough. It was argued that devolution could be a useful catalyst in leading to more reliable and locally responsive transport infrastructure.

The APPG also examined research from the Centre for Cities on how high streets could recover following the pandemic. The research demonstrated that the pandemic turned the performance of the high street on its head, with a shift to online shopping, and concluded that high streets needed to incorporate a more experience-based economy.

In August 2022, Cllr Nicolas Heslop, the then Chairman of South East Councils, was invited to present a report commissioned by the

organisation calling for a two-year fiscal devolution trial in the south east; while Andrew Carter, Chief Executive at the Centre for Cities, argued that for fiscal devolution to work, there must be clear incentives for local government.

He told the APPG that reform of business rates and council tax should come first, before any further fiscal devolution.

LGA Vice-Chair Cllr Marianne Overton, at the 'Lessons from overseas' inquiry, highlighted that the UK is an international outlier and one of the most fiscally centralised countries in the developed world.

In November 2022, the APPG heard from Jim McManus, the then President of the Association of Directors of Public Health.

Drawing on experiences from the pandemic, Prof McManus identified two key points to fix the current system: a behavioural and mindset reset to encourage local system design and collaboration; and a new public health act for the 21st century.

Former Care Minister and Health Devolution Commissioner Phil Hope called for national-level support

for local practices and local health funding, and for policies across sectors to reflect public health support. A focus on health inequalities for public health leaders would allow for a better understanding of how different factors drive ill health.

As our work with the Devolution APPG draws to a close (for now), the LGA would like to thank all those who have been involved in the APPG and contributed to its inquiries and meetings.

In particular, we are grateful to the APPG's Chair and LGA Vice President, Andrew Lewer MP, whose long-standing support led to the delivery of the aforementioned reports and provided a platform to explore effective devolution.

We would also like to thank all the officers of the APPG over the years, including LGA vice presidents. We also pay tribute to the late Lord Kerslake, who served as LGA President for six years between 2015 and 2021.

Lord Kerslake was a great advocate for councils and his commitment to devolution and respect for local government has been instrumental in the progress that has been made.



To find out more about [Work Local](http://www.local.gov.uk/work-local), please visit www.local.gov.uk/work-local. See www.local.gov.uk/parliament for more on the LGA's parliamentary and lobbying work.

Public health priorities

Prevention, collaboration and innovation



Councillor **Kaya Comer-Schwartz** is Vice-Chair of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board

Shaping the future of public health was the theme of the recent annual public health conference organised by the LGA, the Association of Directors of Public Health, and the Faculty of Public Health – and it couldn't have been more prescient.

We ran nine bite-size webinars on a huge variety of topics, with more than 1,100 people signing up to join.

I was delighted to be able to open the conference and welcome our keynote speaker, Labour's Shadow Public Health Minister Preet Kaur Gill MP, who envisioned health in 2040.

Other sessions ranged from projecting patterns of health in 2040, to the powers and perils of artificial intelligence.

We also heard from Daisy Cooper MP, Deputy Leader and Health and Social Care Spokesperson for the

Liberal Democrats, who presented on transforming the nation's health.

So... what next?

We know that health challenges persist in 2024: life expectancy is stagnating, inequalities are widening, there's a resurgence in Victorian diseases, and we've seen sustained increases in economic inactivity because of ill health.

Yet, among these trials, lies an opportunity to redefine the narrative of public health.

The future of public health rests upon a foundation of collaboration and innovation. It is a future where local communities are empowered to drive change and where prevention takes precedence over cure.

If we are to make a reality of this vision, it will require significant progress across six key areas.

First, health is more than just health care.

The role of councils in tackling the causes of poor health is crucial, particularly given the strong focus on place and cross-sectoral working, which local government is set up to deliver.

Second – restore public health funding. An increased focus on prevention through an uplift to the public health grant is needed, as well as a wider review of the adequacy of public health funding. This will support wider national aims by improving health outcomes and reducing health spending.

Third, we would like to see the introduction of a Community Transformation Fund.

Providing additional financial support is challenging, especially given the financial pressures across the public sector.

However, without some double-running of additional resources for prevention, we won't see the radical step change required to reduce impacts on the NHS and adult social care.

Fourth, adopt a system-wide approach. It is difficult for councils to build a business case to invest their scarce resources in initiatives where the financial benefits accrue to other agencies, such as the NHS or the benefits system.

Next, address perverse incentives. The healthcare system rewards hospitals for dealing with the very complications we are trying to avoid by increasing budgets, or offering performance payments for treatment services at the expense of investing in prevention and early intervention.

Finally, we need a greater understanding of what we spend on prevention across the system, and an aspiration about what the percentage of total government spend needs to be to improve health and care.

Future generations count, and we can – and we should – make their lives better.



Presentations from the public health conference are available at www.local.gov.uk/past-event-presentations

Towards a healthy weight

Councils are taking action to improve children's health



Councillor **David Fothergill** is Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, and Councillor **Louise Gittins** is Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board

All children should have the opportunity to be healthy, no matter where they were born or where they grow up.

A key health challenge for our nation is reducing levels of obesity and overweight among children and young people.

Children living with obesity are at greater risk of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes and other long-term conditions that last into adulthood.

By the time children enter primary school, almost one in 10 are living with obesity or severe obesity, a figure that rises to almost one in four by the end of primary school.

This issue disproportionately affects children living in the most deprived areas, with the likelihood of living with obesity being roughly double compared with those

living in the least deprived areas.

For children in year 6, the prevalence of severe obesity is more than four times higher in the most deprived areas.

This concerning trend has been increasing for more than a decade and shows that the environments where children grow have a profound effect on their health.

If we are going to make progress as a nation on reducing obesity and promoting a healthy weight, the solution lies in developing a whole-system approach and making this a priority, both nationally and locally.

But the success of the drive will rest and fall on what is done at a local level. If we succeed, the benefits

will be felt for generations to come.

Local councils are embracing a variety of innovative strategies to promote children's healthy weight, including what are known as 'tier two weight management services'.

The LGA has collected some case studies offering valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with promoting children's healthy weight at the local level (see below).

They demonstrate the power of collaboration, innovation, and whole-system approaches in driving meaningful change.

As councillors, we are inspired by the dedication and creativity displayed by our colleagues across the country, and we hope that their experiences will serve as inspiration for other areas.

We commend the efforts of all those involved in these initiatives and encourage continued collaboration and innovation in the ambition to promote children's healthy weight.

While progress is being made, it's evident that a comprehensive, whole-system approach is essential to effectively address childhood obesity and promote healthy weight. By taking decisive steps at the local level, we can pave the way for healthier generations to come.



Integrated whole systems approach

Derby and Derbyshire faced significant challenges because of persistently high obesity rates in children. This was compounded by a lack of comprehensive and coordinated weight management pathways and services, and the complexities of operating across city and county boundaries.

The solution involved

formulating a childhood obesity strategy with two main objectives: developing clear pathways and signposting to enable children who are already overweight or obese to access joined-up and long-term support; and developing preventative approaches for current and future generations using a 'whole systems' approach that

coordinates existing efforts, reveals gaps in provision and supports the efficient use of limited resources.

Key initiatives included expanding children's weight management services, and improving referral pathways between school nurses, primary care, and secondary care.

By delivering children's weight management services

as an integrated care system, more children and families are now getting the support needed when identified as overweight or living with obesity.

"Towards a healthy weight: local government action to improve children's health", which includes several council case studies, can be read in full at www.local.gov.uk/publications

Collaboration on climate action

A new LGA report shares local innovation from abroad



Councillor **Darren Rodwell** is Chair of the LGA's Local Infrastructure and Net Zero Board

Councils are taking innovative steps to tackle climate change, including declaring climate emergencies, developing action plans and rolling out projects. However, they also face significant challenges, such as a lack of dedicated funding and uncertainty over financing options.

Local government is crucial in delivering impactful climate action that helps to create prosperous communities – but effective support from national government is essential.

There needs to be greater clarity over the role of local government in implementing climate action, and improved coordination between the national and local levels, to guarantee success.

Structure and governance can play a vital role in a nation's response to climate change. We can learn a huge amount from the way other countries use local and national collaboration to improve outcomes.

An LGA report explores the ways five other countries with different levels of devolution are tackling climate change. Interviewees from all countries stated the importance of local government being considered as an implementation partner, and having a clearly defined set of roles and responsibilities in national climate action policies, legislation and programmes.

Looking at how other countries' nationally led approaches are impacting renewable energy could help deliver on the potential for success in England.

There are examples of local government going beyond the



ambition of national government, leading to successful outcomes.

In the Netherlands, municipalities have the authority to set and enforce local building energy efficiency standards that are more ambitious than those set by the national government.

In the United States, cities can implement city-wide sales taxes to fund climate action, as seen with the Climate Protection Fund in Denver.

Policies from the Netherlands highlight the importance of vertical coordination throughout the drafting and planning stages, to ensure unifying visions and goals, as well as buy-in and clarity for every level of stakeholder involved.

All regional goals in the Netherlands, together, must ensure that national obligations for climate, water, nitrogen and nature are met.

Across all the case study countries, there are examples of the innovative and successful methods local government is using to fund climate action. New Zealand's national subsidies for the purchase of electric vehicles, for instance, are raised through taxation of high-emission vehicles, and the revenues from its emissions trading scheme finance its national climate emergency response fund, which local government can then access.

Going beyond the raising of funds for climate action, there is also a key insight around how funding is distributed. The Norwegian Klimasats fund is an example of a well-designed mechanism for deploying national grant funding in a way that works for local authorities, and it ensures ownership through requirements to match funds locally.

Collaboration between neighbouring local authorities is a key opportunity to address climate risks. In Florida, for example, local governments have been planning and implementing adaptation initiatives as a collective, without substantial administrative and financial support from the state government.

This research uncovered multiple examples of local governments piloting innovative climate action. Mechanisms to share this knowledge are essential to successfully accelerate the implementation of these actions on a larger scale. Consequently, I have written to the Secretary of State and the Shadow Secretary of State to make them aware of this report and to request meetings to discuss it.



'Climate action: international learnings on the governance of national and local government collaboration' is available to read in

full at www.local.gov.uk/publications

Delivering biodiversity

Planning to leave wildlife habitats better than we found them



Martin Hutchings is a Principal Adviser with the LGA's Planning Advisory Service

Biodiversity net gain (BNG) is a government policy requiring developers to provide at least 10 per cent more biodiversity than was found on a site prior to its development.

BNG has been required for larger developments since February 2024, and became mandatory for smaller sites on 2 April.

There's a lot to learn, and quickly, for developers working with and submitting planning applications, and for local planning authorities (LPAs) receiving and considering them.

There are two big challenges for all of us.

First, where to start? There is an impressive body of work out there – how do I navigate the plethora of guidance, regulations, case studies, and toolkits?

Second, understanding what happens before and after 'my part' of the process. Council planning officers and planning committee members need to understand the sorts of things developers are grappling with, while developers need to know what support the LPA can provide, and what information is required and when.

Colleagues at the LGA's Planning Advisory Service (PAS) have created a wealth of pragmatic BNG advice and established an officers' network of more than 1,000 members.

Standing on their shoulders, I've been working on 'BNG Online' – a collaboration between the government-supported, non-profit making Future Homes Hub and PAS.

BNG Online is a new digital resource that brings together in one place, insight, guidance, and tools for delivering BNG (see www.bngonline.org.uk/).



It is designed to help developers and LPAs work together and factor in BNG at key stages of the planning process, and is organised around four key development stages:

- sites – how are they selected and allocated?
- application – what advice is available, what information is required, what do I need to do?
- delivery – delivering and maintaining habitats, on and off site.
- monitoring – how do we know what's happening and who is responsible?

Some elements of BNG Online are more developed than others; for example, what can anyone really know about monitoring until BNG is a little more established?

The planning application stage includes a summary of each stage, key considerations for LPAs, and links to regulations, guidance and resources that will assist in preparing and processing a planning application.

It is not exhaustive and will grow and be updated regularly as we learn more from the experiences of planners, decision-makers (including planning committees), and applicants using it.

This is a great example of the sector coming together.

As well as collaborating with Future Homes Hub, BNG Online has been developed with the input of Natural England, government departments, private sector companies and development industry bodies representing both large and small developers.

If I have learned one thing over the past month, it is that it is a mistake to think of BNG as a post-permission matter.

Successful strategies for the delivery of biodiversity gain must be considered early and throughout the planning process, which means a really important role for pre-application services.

BNG is new for everyone and the more information that LPAs and applicants can share, the more we can all learn about what makes the process efficient and what works best. BNG Online is designed to facilitate this.

We will update and improve BNG Online as we learn more, and we are also working on some specific advice and guidance for councillors that will be published soon.



See www.bngonline.org.uk to access **BNG Online**, and www.local.gov.uk/pas for more support and information on planning issues



The Local Government Challenge cohort

Leadership **development**

The LGA's competition for council officers has reached its mid-point

In January (first 690), we revealed that the LGA-run Local Government Challenge had again recruited 10 talented officers to take part in five real-life council-hosted challenges in 2024.

Up for grabs is the prestigious £10,000 Bruce-Lockhart Scholarship, sponsored by Kent and Essex County Councils in honour of former Kent Leader and LGA Chairman Lord Bruce-Lockhart, and awarded to the winning contestant to fund a project of their own design.

As **first** was going to press, our 'contestants' had completed three of the five challenges.

LG Challenge 2024 began in January, at Newcastle City Council. Topics vary from challenge to challenge, and Newcastle's was focused on how the council can increase recycling rates and use its influence to reduce waste produced in the city.

Team Dynamic proposed a new waste collection policy, under which food waste collections would become weekly for households and more frequent for those with shared bins, alongside an engagement programme – 'You've bin heard' – targeted at families and students.

Team Victorious's pitch included an online 'cost-of-waste calculator' to help residents identify savings while reducing their waste creation, based on personal habits such as

food purchases, energy bills, and sustainable transport.

For challenge two, the contestants travelled to Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council, where they were tasked with designing a destination marketing plan that would weave the links between two established cultural assets – the Piece Hall, a Grade I-listed former cloth hall, and Shibden Hall, which dates back to 1420 – and an emerging location, Dean Clough Mills, a complex of 16 Grade II-listed Victorian mills.

Team Victorious dubbed their proposal 'Calderdale Calling' – a three-pronged strategy to connect the area with better transport links, attract inward investment, and enhance coordination with local partners.

These themes were also heavily referenced by Team Dynamic, alongside an impressive video representation of an imagined day trip to Halifax, a programme of seasonal events to promote community cohesion, and a review and evaluation system.

More recently, the contestants have completed their third challenge, at Wiltshire Council, where their task was to review information on the Household Support Fund and identify ways to mitigate impacts on the community if future funding were to cease.

Team Dynamic pitched their idea to create a single stakeholder network,

titled 'OWN' (the One Wiltshire Network), that would build on existing, smaller, cost-of-living networks and bring in larger employers, the private sector, and the health, charity and voluntary sectors.

Team Victorious's proposal focused on food insecurity and housing instability funded through social value with strengthened procurement processes, and managed through a new strategic partnership board, including the voluntary and community sector, local businesses, parish and town councils, area boards, and statutory partners.

The contestants are observed throughout and scored individually, with those in the winning team at each council also receiving bonus points, and we switch the teams around at every challenge to ensure everyone experiences the diverse skills and perspectives on the programme. At the halfway mark, Team Dynamic has won each of the three challenges.

Once all five challenges have been completed, four finalists will be revealed and invited to attend the LGA's annual conference in Harrogate (2-4 July). There, they will pitch their proposals to delegates and a judging panel, before the winner is announced.

i To find out more about the **Local Government Challenge**, please visit www.local.gov.uk/lg-challenge-2024

The chief executive's evolving role



Matt Prosser is President of Solace and Chief Executive of Dorset Council

Whether you're a council leader, portfolio holder, backbencher, or member of the opposition, you will know who the chief executive of your council is.

Clearly, it is a high-profile and complex role, but how much do you know about what it actually entails?

The position of council chief executive stems from a long history. Town clerks, the forerunners of today's chief executives, derive from a time not long after the Domesday book, and this unique and vital role has evolved over the centuries as local government has changed, most visibly during the Victorian era, when many of our familiar local institutions were built.

It wasn't until the 1960s, however, that a more corporate and strategic approach to local government was considered, leading to the 1972 Bains report on management and structure, and finally creating the chief executive role and its four principle aspects:

- managerial leadership of the organisation
- providing and securing advice to the council on strategy and policy
- acting in an executive capacity by making decisions or ensuring a system is in place for other officers to make decisions, as authorised by the council
- delivering probity, value for money and continuous improvement.

Alongside this report, the Local Government Act 1972 reconstructed the local government system, with much of the present structure of the sector in the UK deriving largely from these reforms. It was within this context that Solace, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, was born, from an amalgamation of town clerks' associations.

Over the past 50 years since this reorganisation, the precise role of the chief



“What council chief executives do has shifted substantially”

executive has never been clearly defined in law: the last national consideration was in the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, which required councils to designate an officer as 'head of the paid service' and define certain limited functions for that post.

But it is clear that what council chief executives do has shifted substantially over the decades, as the operating environment for local government has become ever more complex.

Solace's recently released 'Rewind' report – a collection of articles written by 20 of the sector's most prominent former council chief executives – is a fascinating account of how this role has evolved in the past half-century since Solace's inception. It provides an in-depth understanding of the chief executive's varied, exciting and challenging role, as well as how different events have impacted on those in post at the time.

A recurring theme throughout this fascinating collection is that a complementary relationship between

officers and councillors, defined by mutual understanding and trust, is key to the health of a local authority.

Another theme is the ever-present need for top-quality local leadership – at both political and officer level.

That is why Solace offers a wide range of learning and development opportunities for our members, and why we were delighted to launch, in partnership with the LGA, our Local Government Chief Executives' Development Framework, a programme that we hope to expand to all senior staff (see www.local.gov.uk/local-government-chief-executives-development-hub).

As Sir Michael Lyons argues in his foreword to Rewind, the next government (whatever its political colour) should invest more in the development of a strong local leadership pipeline so that the council chief executives of today and tomorrow have the skills to ensure the communities they serve, in conjunction with councillors, not only survive, but – most importantly – thrive.



To find out more about the work of **Solace** and to download its 'Rewind' report, please visit solace.org.uk

The **first** place to showcase your business. Contact Polly Boutwood at polena.boutwood@cplone.co.uk or call 01223 378 023

Leaders under challenge



Councillor **Abi Brown** OBE is Deputy Leader of the LGA's Conservative Group

Local government faces existential threats like no other with council risk registers changing ever more frequently.

From the threats posed by artificial intelligence and cyber attacks from hostile states through to the complexities of an ageing population, council leaders in the modern age are challenged like never before to innovate, pioneer and devise a better offer to the communities they serve.

It is Conservative-led councils that are leading this fight.

Take Wiltshire Council as an example. In its recent children's services inspection report from Ofsted, the council received 'outstanding' for its overall effectiveness.

The report specifically mentioned that leaders in children's services "support and encourage innovation" while also acknowledging the "contribution they make to regional and national developments".

To secure this result from Ofsted, Wiltshire implemented an innovative transformation programme which has included the establishment of a new out-of-hours service and a new transitions team to provide better support for care leavers.

We hear about the legitimate pressures the sector faces in the delivery of adult social care, yet some councils have taken it upon themselves to use the current situation to embrace transformation.

Conservative-led Essex County Council is a fine example of this as it has embraced digital care technology in its social care offer.

In an article in the Municipal Journal, it was confirmed that "almost 9,000 people"

are in receipt of this digital care with 98 per cent saying it "improves their sense of feeling safe and secure".

In the recent LGA Conservative Group manifesto, we have called upon government to offer tax breaks for businesses that support councils in delivering transformation within adult social care (see www.local.gov.uk/political/lga-conservatives).

With the LGA's annual conference in Harrogate just around the corner, we will yet again be using the conference's Innovation Zone to highlight innovation across all corners of the sector to share best practice and ideas (see www.local.gov.uk/conference).

"Council leaders are challenged like never before to innovate, pioneer and devise a better offer to the communities they serve"



Councillor **Shaun Davies** is Chair of the LGA

Caring for care leavers

As first was going to press, I was speaking at the launch of a new fund to support young people leaving local authority care.

The £3.6 million Care Leavers' Fund is providing match funding for local projects aimed at helping care leavers with everything from homelessness to one-to-one mentoring at work (see p5).

Support for care leavers is a subject close to my heart, and the LGA's Step Ahead campaign demonstrates our commitment to helping ensure those leaving care are given the best start to their adult life (see www.local.gov.uk/step-ahead).

As part of that campaign, I would encourage you to get involved by getting your council signed up to the Care Leaver Covenant, and encouraging more businesses in your areas to do the same.

I know that you work tirelessly at the local level, both as direct providers of services and conveners of partners, to



ensure every young person leaving care has the best start in life.

The LGA is working to support councils to go further in improving local support, led by the changes care leavers tell us they want to see.

But councils and the voluntary sector alone do not possess all the levers to drive the scale of change that's needed.

We have long highlighted that councils are facing severe and unsustainable funding pressures, which are impacting councils' ability to deliver services and support for children and young people.

We also want national government to fund a national council tax exemption

for those leaving care up to the age of 25, and to ensure that the national benefits system is sufficient and meets care leavers' essential living costs.

Those leaving care today will become the pillars of our community tomorrow. They will enrich every part of our society, whether culturally, economically, or politically.

As communities, it's essential that we come together – the public sector, business and civil society – to equip care leavers with all the support they need to thrive, and work relentlessly to ensure they have access to every advantage in life.



Councillor **Nesil Caliskan** is Leader of the LGA's Labour Group

Running successful local bus companies

I'm delighted that the Labour Party has announced its Plan for Better Buses. Communities all over the country and the cross-party LGA have been calling for change for years.

Buses are by far the most used form of public transport in the country but, discounting London, more than 5,000 bus services have been lost in England since 2010.

The current system is broken and our communities are badly served. It's disgraceful that taxpayers' money is funnelled into the private sector, funding the most profitable routes rather than around need.

"Labour will allow every community to control their buses through a franchising system"

It is certainly possible to run a successful bus company locally, as we have seen in Reading. Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham has also implemented a publicly run bus company, but a Labour government can accelerate the process for local leaders.

Labour will remove legal barriers restricting local transport authorities from taking back control of their bus services. In government, we will empower local transport authorities and reform their funding so local leaders can plan ahead.

We will allow every community to control their buses through a franchising system if they feel it's in their community's best interest. Labour will also step in to safeguard local bus networks and ensure standards are raised.

Finally, we will support public ownership of buses by removing the Conservatives' ideological ban.

Detailed plans demonstrate that Labour is ready for power, and I am excited to support the campaign, but crucially to continue that support if we are elected. Onwards to the local elections!



Councillor **Joe Harris** is Leader of the LGA's Liberal Democrat Group

End postcode lottery of SEND support

I am delighted my party has called for a new national agency for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

We have listened to parents, communities, and councils, and it is clear the current system is broken.

This new 'National Body for SEND' would take responsibility for supporting children with the most complex needs.

It would pay any costs above a certain threshold, helping to end the current postcode lottery that is leaving parents in many areas struggling to access the support their child needs.

The extra funding would be determined by the child's current needs, with the new body also overseeing SEND funding to ensure it is spent as effectively as possible to support each child.

Liberal Democrat analysis has revealed stark regional disparities in education, health and care plans (EHCPs) – legal documents that set out the tailored support a child needs.

"No child, or their family, should have to wait so long or fight so hard to have their needs met"

By law, EHCPs must be issued within 20 weeks of a request for assessment, but in 2022 only 49.2 per cent of children received their plans within the 20-week limit.

My parliamentary colleague, Munira Wilson MP, and Essex colleague, Cllr Marie Goldman, have been at the forefront of our campaign.

The Government has woefully underfunded both schools and local authorities, meaning that many parents simply can't get their children the support they deserve. That is unacceptable.

No child, or their family, should have to wait so long or fight so hard to have their needs met.



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

Inclusive approach to decision-making

Congratulations to our members currently standing in the local elections. In 107 local authorities and 11 mayoral authorities, polling is about to start.

The huge areas covered by the 37 'independent' police and crime commissioners (PCCs), coupled with significant costs just to stand, squeezes out candidates without wealthy backers.

"Residents need real choice and a level playing field"

This year, for the first time, the PCC elections shift to 'first past the post', eliminating second preferences and squeezing out diversity.

To safeguard genuine democracy in our councils, residents need a real choice and a level playing field: the opportunity to vote for an Independent candidate, focused on local residents, or for smaller parties, genuinely representing them and their values.

A steadily growing group, our members are value-driven, determined, hard-working and well connected with their communities.

Currently, 49 councils are led by Independents, Residents' Associations and smaller parties like the Green Party or Plaid Cymru, and more in coalitions or leading opposition. In the LGA's Independent Group, we embrace this diversity as a reflection of the communities we serve.

Diversity requires an inclusive approach to decision-making, ensuring equitable outcomes for all. I wish all our Independent Group members every success in the elections, whether as candidates or supporters.

Amid significant national challenges, it's heartening to see an impressive number of our members are planning to stand and win in the general election too.

It's time for a profound shift towards a more diverse and inclusive government, mirroring our growing success at local level.

Support for shipbuilding



RAdm **Rex Cox** is Chief Executive Officer of the National Shipbuilding Office

I would like to thank the LGA for this opportunity to address a wide range of councillors and local authority chief executives across England and Wales in my capacity as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the National Shipbuilding Office (NSO).

My organisation was established in September 2021 to oversee delivery of the National Shipbuilding Strategy (NSbS) Refresh, published in March 2022, and to provide strategic oversight of all national and local government shipbuilding activity, driving forward transformative change in the sector.

As CEO, I am responsible for ensuring strategic alignment of publicly funded vessel procurements with national policy, on behalf of the Government's Shipbuilding Tsar.

My team works closely with project

and procurement teams across government to optimise their vessel requirements, commercial plans, and market engagement, to best deliver on the objectives outlined in the NSbS Refresh.

These objectives include:

- creating opportunities for UK suppliers, where possible
- creating and supporting UK jobs
- exceeding our legal requirement on low carbon vessels and technology to reduce UK fleet emissions and encourage green growth.

I therefore have a keen interest in any new vessel procurement or vessel support programmes under your authority, and my Shipbuilding Pipeline team would be delighted to hear from you.

We stand ready to assist however we can, whether that be through industrial capability insights, or advising on incorporating green technology and UK areas of excellence.

I would welcome the opportunity to work closely with you to ensure the success of your programme, while supporting the whole UK shipbuilding



enterprise, and look forward to delivering our policy objectives together.

Contact details for my pipeline team are below, should you have any questions or require any programme support.

i For more information, please contact Dan Egglestone, Pipeline Policy Lead, at daniel.egglestone100@mod.gov.uk, and/or Helen Ross, Pipeline Policy Adviser, at helen.ross207@mod.gov.uk. See www.gov.uk/government/publications/refresh-to-the-national-shipbuilding-strategy for the refreshed **National Shipbuilding Strategy**

Local Government Association

first is essential reading for councillors and chief executives in the LGA's member local authorities

and both the magazine and wrapping are fully recyclable

But did you know that we publish all the stories from the magazine online each month, at www.lgafirst.co.uk? If you're not already receiving it, you can also sign up for our fortnightly first e-bulletin, which links to key stories on the website, at www.lgafirst.co.uk/subscriptions

If you find these e-versions of first fulfil your need for information from the LGA, why not think about reducing our carbon footprint by unsubscribing from the magazine? Just email first@oscar-research.co.uk to let us know.

Bringing siblings in care together



Kirsty Hammonds is Child Placement Consultant in Coram's Adoption Activity Days team

A report last year from the Children's Commissioner for England indicated that of the more than 80,000 children in care, 37 per cent have been separated from a sibling.

Children often express strong wishes to spend time with their siblings in different permanence arrangements and there is significant evidence showing that sibling contact is associated with positive wellbeing outcomes for children, including identity formation and overall mental health.

However, the issue of sibling contact is not given prominence enough in care planning reports and assessments, and there is a lack of infrastructure to support sibling relationships.

To address this, Coram's Activity Day team devised the concept of 'Sibling Time' – a fun, supportive, therapeutic and safe environment for children who are looked after or adopted to have meaningful contact with their siblings.

Coram delivered a pilot event with Leicestershire County Council in August 2023 and 10 children and young people attended.



The three-hour session was facilitated by a range of professionals including social workers and play specialists.

The focus of the session was child-led free play with supported activities, as well as a group activity at the end of the session, bringing together children, parents, carers and professionals.

Parents and carers were also offered training around various topics such as supporting sibling contact and 'life story' work.

There were some emotional moments as siblings who hadn't seen each other for years had the chance to reconnect.

An evaluation of Sibling Time found that children enjoyed the session and were keen to see their siblings again.

The professionals who attended hadn't previously facilitated sibling contact, but subsequently felt more confident to do so.

Parents and carers also felt reassured by the supportive setting and presence of professionals, which helped to manage potentially complex family dynamics.

Giving children in care an opportunity to have a positive and meaningful relationship with their siblings delivers many benefits and needs to become a central part of our social care culture.

i To find out more about **Sibling Time**, please email kirsty.hammonds@coram.org.uk

Financing sustainability in social housing



Councillor **Tony Bevis** (Lib Dem) is Member of Horsham District Council and a former non-executive director of a housing association

Domestic housing is a significant contributor to greenhouse gases, so a step change in the way our homes are insulated and heated will be required to achieve net zero by 2050.

Social housing will need to be part of this change.

To deliver, the sector will have to make an enormous investment in changing heating technology and improving the energy efficiency of its estates.

Potentially, this could be delivered as part of periodic maintenance, but this would delay change until late into the 25 years available before 2050 – by which time many thousands of tonnes of CO₂ will have been released into the atmosphere.

One solution to this would be massive central government funding, which clearly is not going to happen. Instead, this article sets out an alternative approach by concentrating on the 'total cost of occupancy'.

A disincentive for social housing providers to act on emissions is that, while they have to bear the cost of improving efficiency, it is the tenants that benefit through lower energy costs.

The Government has already taken

some action on this front by requiring all rental properties to reach minimum energy efficiency standards. This, though, has led to the perverse result of social housing being sold on the open market because social landlords cannot afford the investment required to improve some of their worst-performing stock.

The solution I am advocating is that, if landlords can demonstrate that the 'total cost of occupancy' will be unchanged if they charge for the saving in energy cost, then this will be allowed. This could be done in a similar way to service charges.

The advantage of this approach would be that the housing provider would know that a revenue stream would be generated by the increased charges they could levy from making an energy improvement; and they would have certainty about their income, against which they could potentially borrow. By allowing landlords to charge in this way, the need for central subsidy could be reduced drastically.

Councillor e-learning

Build the knowledge and leadership skills you need to excel as a councillor. **Register for free** on our councillor e-learning platform.

New and updated modules for 2024 include:

- Equality, diversity and inclusion
- Scrutiny for councillors
- The importance of speech, language and communication in early years

Create your own bespoke learning programme. Modules include:

- Councillor Code of Conduct
- Economic development
- Facilitation and conflict resolution
- Licensing and regulation
- Local government finance
- Planning
- Stress management and personal resilience
- Supporting your constituents with complex issues
- The effective ward councillor
- UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

BY-ELECTIONS

A sparsity of results



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



There is usually a sparsity of local by-elections in the weeks before the annual May contests, and 2024 is no exception.

We have recorded results in just 10 wards across England and Wales, and in all but one case the by-election was in a council without scheduled elections this year.

The odd one out, Whitefield in Knowsley, saw an Independent hold on in a seat originally gained from Labour in 2022.

Elsewhere, only two seats changed hands, with the Conservatives suffering defeat in both cases.

In Huntingdonshire's Yaxley and Farcet ward, the intervention of an Independent allowed the Liberal Democrats to win with less than a third of the total poll. The Liberal Democrats are now the largest party on the council.

Of Cambridgeshire's constituent district councils, only Labour-held Cambridge itself has elections on 2 May.

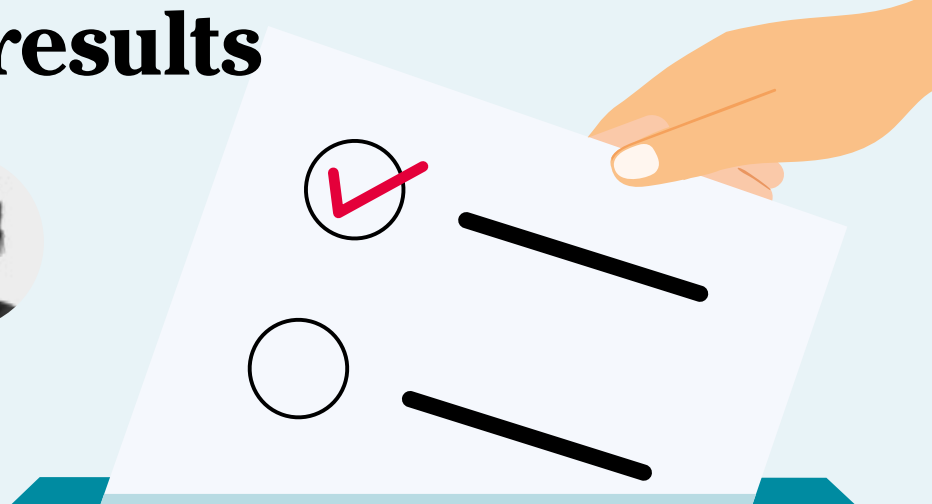
Nevertheless, the pattern of voting in Yaxley will give the Liberal Democrats some encouragement as they prepare to fight the Conservatives in the very marginal South Cambridgeshire parliamentary constituency at the southern end of the county.

The other Conservative loss, this time to Labour, was in rural north Wales.

The two-member Brynford and Halkyn ward in Flintshire was split between Labour and the Conservatives in 2022, with Labour topping the poll. This time, Labour gained the second seat, though with a smaller majority over the Conservatives than previously. The Conservatives now have a single representative on the council.

The Liberal Democrats retained three seats in 'county unitaries' that will, to the understandable irritation of local government enthusiasts, be analysed as much for their potential general election implications.

Harrogate and Knaresborough is 21 on the Liberal Democrats' general election



target list and the Stray, Woodlands and Hookstone ward of North Yorkshire is safe territory for the party.

Its share of the vote fell back by eight points to below 50 per cent compared with 2022, partly reflecting the intervention of Green and Reform party candidates.

Somerton in Somerset lends its name to the Somerton and Frome parliamentary constituency.

It was gained by the Liberal Democrats in a July 2023 parliamentary by-election, having previously been held – though never by more than 2,000 votes – by the party's David Heath at four general elections between 1997 and 2010.

The Liberal Democrats took control of the new unitary council in 2022 and this

result seems to reinforce their dominance, despite having to declare a financial emergency in late 2023.

The Cornish coastal ward of Looe West, Pelynt, Lansallos and Lanteglos re-elected a Liberal Democrat following the death of long-standing Cornwall and Looe Town councillor Edwina Hannaford. However, the party's vote fell quite sharply with Labour more than doubling its share.

The Liberal Democrats won all five constituencies in the county at the 2005 general election, but currently hold none of the now six. They came third here in South East Cornwall last time and the by-election suggests it may be Labour that has boosted its position as the main challenger to the Conservatives.

Local by-elections

Cambridgeshire, Yaxley and Farcet

LIB DEM GAIN FROM CON
2.4% over Con Turnout 19.4%

Cornwall, Looe West, Pelynt, Lansallos & Lanteglos

LIB DEM HELD
14.1% over Con Turnout 27.2%

Flintshire, Brynford and Halkyn

LAB GAIN FROM CON
4.7% over Con Turnout 27.9%

Knowsley, Whitefield

IND HELD
8.3% over Lab Turnout 15.2%

Neath Port Talbot, Neath East

LAB HELD
17.3% over Ind Turnout 20.2%

North Kesteven, Heckington Rural

CON HELD
4.4% over Ind Turnout 31.1%

North Northamptonshire, Desborough

CON HELD
13.7% over Lab Turnout 29.6%

North Yorkshire, Stray, Woodlands and Hookstone

LIB DEM HELD
13.1% over Con Turnout 41.1%

Somerset, Somerton

LIB DEM HELD
13.8% over Con Turnout 29.0%

Wealden, Uckfield New Town

IND HELD
0.3% over Lab Turnout 31.8%



For more data on these and other recent by-election results, please visit www.lgafirst.co.uk/local-by-elections

Local elections 2024 preview



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



On 2 May, 107 councils across England go to the polls, with more than 2,600 seats at stake.

Twenty-one councils are implementing boundary changes and, taking those into account, Labour and the Conservatives defend just short of 1,000 seats each, the Liberal Democrats about 400, and the Greens a little over 100.

Although this is a small cycle of local authority elections, a swathe of mayoral and police and crime commissioner contests mean that every elector in England and Wales will have the opportunity to cast a ballot.

Most vacancies occurring this year were last fought in 2021, when the Conservatives enjoyed their most successful set of local elections since 2008. They have been on a downward slope since, and recent local by-elections illustrate their plight.

Our figures suggest they have lost more than half of all seats defended in the past 12 months, for a net tally of 19 losses. In terms of vote share, the Conservatives are also an average of more than 11 percentage points down in those by-elections where the previous May contest was in 2021.

With a general election looming, though, it is relevant to point out that the Liberal Democrats have been more successful locally in many parts of the country, with their share up by 14 points compared with a less than four-point increase for Labour.

The Conservatives look vulnerable in perhaps half of the 18 councils with elections that the party currently controls. Its overall majority in Thurrock was lost in March following the suspension of two councillors who voted against the budget.

Elsewhere, it is those authorities with all-out elections that pose the greatest threat.

In Dudley, the Conservatives currently enjoy a double-figure majority on the council, but they and Labour tied with 12 wards each last year. A small additional

swing will see Labour home and dry. Nearby Walsall looks safer, however, with only a third of seats falling vacant and a more robust Conservative performance in 2023.

Both councils could also be pivotal in the battle for the West Midlands Combined Authority mayoralty, where Conservative incumbent Andy Street faces four opponents in what is now a first-past-the-post contest.

In Dorset, Conservative control is on a knife-edge as elections are held for the first time since the inaugural contests in 2019.

Labour is a bit-part player across most of the area, but the challenge of the Liberal Democrats and the Greens should not be discounted.

The Conservatives did comfortably hold on in a by-election here in January this year, but were soundly ousted by the Greens in another in 2022.

Among the districts, the Liberal Democrats have been slowly chipping away at the Conservative majority in Gloucester in by-elections since 2021. The Conservatives can now afford to lose no more than a single additional seat.

In Rushmoor, in Hampshire, where 13 of 39 seats fall vacant, the Conservatives won 11 wards in 2021, but only four last year. A repeat of that and Labour could take over.

Labour has been picking up support in Adur, in West Sussex, which elects half its councillors, in a way similar to neighbouring Worthing, with which it shares services. Worthing was won by the party in 2022. Labour's share of the vote in Adur increased by 10 percentage points between 2021 and 2022, but making the two gains needed to oust the Conservatives may be a challenge.

All-out elections following boundary changes could spell a radical turnover in Harlow, Nuneaton & Bedworth, and Redditch.

Labour won most seats in both Harlow and Redditch on the old boundaries in 2023, and will hope that is a good omen for a direct change in control.

In Nuneaton, which normally has biennial elections, the Conservatives have regularly polled more than 50 per cent of the vote in recent years, but the council has been Labour for most of its existence. Once again, the candidate list here is dominated by the two main parties.

Basildon is similarly vulnerable on paper, but Labour has nominated a single candidate in eight of the 14 three-member wards, suggesting that it thinks its chances are slim.

Much as it will welcome what seem like probable gains of both councils and councillors as it consolidates its position as the largest party in local government, there are a number of authorities where Labour needs to look over its shoulder to its own ranks and supporters.

In Kirklees, the resignation of four councillors has left Labour control on a knife-edge. The only one whose seat falls vacant this year is not standing for re-election, though.

In Rochdale, the Workers' Party has candidates in 13 wards following George Galloway's parliamentary by-election success in late February.

In Burnley, 11 Labour councillors resigned to sit as Independents late last year, and, in Pendle, Labour's entire representation on the council went the same way in April.

In both cases, some of those involved are standing against their former party on 2 May. In Pendle, Labour is not even putting up a candidate against two of its former colleagues.

Such behaviour is not confined to the

“Every elector in England and Wales will have the opportunity to cast a ballot”



England local elections 2024

2,636* seats in 107 councils (21 with boundary changes) comprising 31 metropolitan boroughs, 18 unitary councils and 58 shire districts

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Ind/Other	No overall control
Current control	18	45	10	–	34
Seats being defended*	985	965	410	276	

*Accounting for boundary changes but not casual vacancies/defections

In addition, there are 10 combined authority mayoral elections (including three inaugural contests), one direct election for a city mayor, and police and crime commissioner elections across England and Wales.

north of England. In Hastings, where Labour would have fancied its chance of taking control based on 2022's results, six councillors have left the party over 'policy differences', with one standing for re-election as an Independent this year.

If Labour has a tendency to underperform in local elections, for the Liberal Democrats they have remained the party's high spot, even in the difficult years following the national coalition government.

They will expect to retain all 10 of the councils they control that are holding elections, including Hull, where they made a recent by-election gain from Labour, and Three Rivers, in Hertfordshire, where they won seven of the 13 wards last year.

All-out elections in both Dorset and Wokingham offer the party further

opportunities for advancement. Greens and Independents may present an obstacle to an overall majority in Dorset, but Wokingham is essentially a two-party battle, with the Liberal Democrats outpolling the Conservatives and winning eight wards to their four in 2023.

The 2 May elections may also be impacted by the Greens from the left and Reform from the right.

Last year's contests proved a mixed bag for the Greens. They achieved their first ever overall majority in Mid Suffolk, but their second spell as the lead party in Brighton & Hove came to a rather ignominious end.

Their hopes this time focus on Bristol, where they are already the largest party and the post of elected mayor (Labour held) is being abolished. There are several wards

that the Greens split with Labour in 2021; winning all the seats in each of them would put them close to control.

Reform's profile has increased since it contested fewer than one in 20 seats last year and won only in the special circumstances of Derby, where its candidates were already sitting UKIP councillors. This time, the party is contesting every vacancy in Hartlepool and Sunderland, and most in a handful of other authorities – a little more than 10 per cent of seats overall.

Any impact in Hartlepool will be especially interesting. Party Leader Richard Tice came third here at the December 2019 general election, with more than a quarter of the vote, and, at the same time, the council was under the effective control of self-designated Brexit party councillors.





CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION

HARROGATE | 2-4 JULY 2024

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Fatima Whitbread MBE, Retired British athlete, recipient of BBC Sports Personality of the Year Helen Rollason Award 2023

Ben Page, Chief Executive, Ipsos