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Another busy year ahead

I hope you had time to recharge your batteries over Christmas and I wish you a belated happy new year!

There was a flurry of big government announcements at the end of 2024 and we're expecting a busy 2025 for councils as those are worked through into policies, regulations, legislation and budgets.

The provisional local government settlement for Wales was published on 11 December (p29), followed just before Christmas by the provisional finance settlement for English councils (p14) and the English Devolution White Paper (p12). The white paper's proposals, including in respect of local government reorganisation, will have a significant impact on every council and community in England. It's important that we fully understand and represent the views of our members, and the LGA will be consulting widely before responding to the Government's plans.

Finally, the revised National Planning Policy Framework and other planning reforms were announced, including new mandatory housing targets for councils (p16).

On all of the above, the LGA will be working through our member-led boards, political groups, and our work with councils across the regions to scrutinise the proposals, reflect your views, and seek to secure the best possible outcomes for our residents. ●

Councillor Louise Gittins
is LGA Chair

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Editor Karen Thornton
Design CPL One www.cplone.co.uk
Advertising chris.dixon@cplone.co.uk

Write to **first**:
Local Government Association,
18 Smith Square, London SW1P 3HZ
Email karen.thornton@local.gov.uk

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Additional funding for councils 'falls short'

The UK Government has announced additional funding for councils in England, including towards the cost of increases in employers' National Insurance contributions – as called for by the LGA last month (see **first 700**).

But the LGA has warned that the latter falls short of what is needed and that councils continue to face "severe" cost and demand pressures.

Local authorities in Wales will receive £6.1 billion from the Welsh Government Revenue Support Grant and non-domestic rates in 2025/26 – an increase of 4.3 per cent compared with the current year.

While welcoming the increase, the Welsh LGA has warned that "over a decade of savage cuts and lack of investment in the public sector cannot be undone overnight in one settlement" (see **p29** for its analysis of the provisional local government settlement in Wales).

The provisional settlement in England, published just before Christmas, indicates that councils' total core spending power will rise by 6 per cent in 2025/26.

Cllr Louise Gittins, LGA Chair, said the extra funding "will help councils meet some – but not all – of the pressures they face", including in adult and children's social care, homelessness prevention, and support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

While the Government has provided £515 million towards direct employer National Insurance contributions, this falls short of the £637 million the LGA has estimated they will cost – while its estimate of indirect costs, through commissioned providers, stands at £1.13 billion.



Cllr Gittins said: "Councils of all types will continue to struggle to balance the books next year, with many having to increase council tax bills to bring in desperately needed funding but still being forced to make further cuts to services.

"The Spending Review will be critical to the future of our local services. It is good that the Government has committed to multi-year settlements, but it must include significant and sustained increases in overall funding for councils." ●

● See **p6, p14**

Local government set mandatory housing targets

Councils must meet new mandatory housing targets as part of government plans to build 1.5 million homes by the next general election.

The revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), published in December, also sets out changes to the approach to developments in the Green Belt, a definition of 'grey belt', and proposals to localise planning fees.

Councils in England have just a few weeks to commit to a new timetable for their local development plans, with the NPPF prioritising the preparation and maintenance of up-to-date plans.

Cllr Adam Hug, Chair of the LGA's Local Infrastructure and Net Zero Board, said:



"For councils to share the Government's ambition to tackle local housing challenges, there must be a collaborative approach.

"It is councils and communities who know their local areas and are

therefore best placed to make judgement decisions on how to manage competing demand for land use through the local plan-led system.

"Getting housebuilding targets in the right place is a difficult task, so any national

algorithms and formulas should be supplemented with local knowledge and involvement by councils and communities.

"Planning reform also needs to be supported by further work to tackle workforce challenges, the costs of construction and the financial headroom of local authorities and housing associations to build the social and truly affordable homes we desperately need."

He added: "Local authorities must be given greater powers to ensure prompt build-out of sites with planning permission, as well as the ability to set planning fees at a local level." ●

● See **p16-17** for more on the NPPF

Honours for councillors and mayors

More than 1,200 people from fields including local government, education, fire and rescue services, the police, health, and voluntary sector, and ranging from chief executives to foster carers, were recognised in the King's New Year Honours List for 2025.

Mayor of London Sadiq Khan (Lab) and former West Midlands Mayor Andy Street (Con) received knighthoods for public service.

Stuart Carlton, Corporate Director of Children's Services at North Yorkshire County Council, was also knighted, for services to children, young people and families.

Elected members recognised with MBEs include: Cllr Marie-Claire Darke (Ind, City of Wolverhampton); former Westminster City Council member Christabel Diana Beatrice, the Lady Flight (Con); Helen Holland (Lab), a former councillor at Bristol City Council; and Cllr Andrew Proctor (Con), former Leader of Norfolk County Council.

The honours list also included OBEs for two former police and crime commissioners, David Lloyd (Con, Hertfordshire) and Alun Michael (Lab, South Wales), for services to public safety; and for the LGA's Children's Improvement Adviser Caroline O'Neill, for services to education. ●

Casey to chair new adult social care commission

The Government is launching an adult social care commission to "build cross-party consensus" for its proposed new national care service.

The independent commission will be chaired by Baroness Louise Casey, and is set to report on the critical issues facing the sector and make recommendations for medium-term reform and improvement in 2026.

The Government has also announced an £86 million boost to the Disabled Facilities Grant, to help thousands more disabled people to stay in their homes, and better support for care workers, including an expanded national career structure.

LGA Chair Cllr Louise Gittins said: "The announcement of an independent review of adult social care marks a potentially important step in addressing the significant challenges facing the sector.

"For this process to succeed, the review must deliver bold and actionable recommendations, backed by a firm commitment to provide the substantial funding needed to turn those recommendations into reality.

"The full potential value of this work will only be realised if local government, people drawing on care and support, and other parts of the sector are fully involved and engaged.

"This review provides a vital opportunity to create a system that works for everyone, and we are ready to collaborate with the Government and partners to achieve this goal." ●

Devolution 'must not distract from funding'

Two-tier council areas will be forced to reorganise if they don't come up with their own plans under proposals set out in the Government's English Devolution White Paper.

The white paper, published just before Christmas, proposes a new structure in which unitary councils combine to form mayoral 'strategic' authorities in areas that don't yet have them.

However, LGA Chair Cllr Louise Gittins warned that devolution "is not an end in itself and cannot distract from the severe funding pressures that are pushing local services to the brink".

She added: "We want every council in England to be able to secure devolution that works for them, their local economies, and their residents.

"While different areas will have strong views on what that should look



like, genuine devolution of powers and resources can play a huge role in promoting inclusive economic growth, creating jobs, and improving public services.

"In a very centralised country, moving funding and power from Whitehall to local leaders is needed, but it must be done in a way where empowered councils and the communities they serve are at the heart of decision-making.

"While our members are – and always have been – open to change, we remain clear that local government reorganisation should be a matter for councils and local areas to decide."

The LGA is engaging proactively with its member councils as it looks to respond fully to the white paper and will be closely monitoring the forthcoming English Devolution Bill. ●

● See p12, p26

News in brief

Health inequalities

Professor Sir Michael Marmot, author of the groundbreaking Marmot Review into health inequalities, will speak at the LGA's Smith Square debate on 5 February. Panellists will address the critical question: how can councils tackle the growing health inequality gap and improve outcomes for their most vulnerable communities? This inaugural hybrid debate of 2025 promises a thought-provoking discussion on the role councils play in creating a fairer, healthier society. The event is set to be a highlight for anyone passionate about tackling inequality. Visit www.local.gov.uk/events to book your place.

New senior leader

Helen Jenkins has been appointed as the LGA's new Assistant Chief Executive and a member of its Strategic Leadership Team. Helen has considerable experience and understanding of the LGA and local government sector, having joined the LGA on secondment from a council in 2016. She has worked across a number of priority areas, including our leadership programmes, national graduate schemes and improvement support to the sector, and most recently as Joint Head of Leadership and Interim Head of Improvement Coordination and Strategy.

Strategy and policy

Eve Roodhouse has joined the LGA's Strategic Leadership Team as its new Director of Strategy and Policy. Formerly the LGA's Interim Director of Strategy and Reform, Eve joined the organisation last August on secondment from her role as Chief Officer for Culture and Economy at Leeds City Council. She had been at Leeds since 2018, and before joining local government worked at NHS Digital for 15 years.

Call for urgent reform of council funding

An outdated and complex funding model is hindering councils' ability to plan effectively and meet the growing needs of their communities, according to a new report.

'Reforming the local government funding system in England', from the LGA, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, says the local government funding system needs urgent reform.

It urges the Government to consider immediate interventions to address systemic issues, including the introduction of timely, multi-year financial settlements for councils – which the Government has promised from 2026 – and more clarity on system reform, including a review of the data and formulae underlying the funding allocation model.

This needs to be alongside a full-scale, cross-party government review on options to improve the local government funding system, as the current model is out of date, complex and opaque. The review should



also look at the future of council tax and business rates retention.

Cllr Pete Marland, Chair of the LGA's Economy and Resources Board, said: "Councils need a significant and sustained increase in overall funding to meet the requirements being placed on them, but this alone will not address the multiple issues with the current funding system.

"Creating an improved and more sustainable system for local government has the potential to strengthen the value for money of local spending and, most importantly, improve services for communities." ●

National challenges 'require local solutions' – LGA

Councils are key to solving many of the national challenges highlighted by the Prime Minister in his 'plan for change', launched last month, the LGA has said.

Sir Keir Starmer set out six 'milestones' against which he wants his government to be judged, including on housebuilding, NHS waiting lists, children's school readiness (England only), recruiting more police officers (England and Wales), and raising household income (UK-wide).

Highlighting the LGA's recently published vision for children, young people and families (see **first 700**), Cllr Louise Gittins, LGA Chair, said it was pleasing to see a strong focus on children's earliest years.

Councils also have a vital role to play

in driving inclusive economic growth and encouraging and planning for housebuilding, and in delivering clean energy and the benefits of net zero.

Cllr Gittins added: "It is good to get clarity on the next steps for the Government's priorities. However, councils need adequate, long-term funding and the right powers to be able to help bring about the solutions.

"Only by working together as equal partners can central and local government meet the fundamental long-term challenges we face as a country.

"We look forward to continuing to work with – and challenging – the Government, so we can make real change happen for people in local communities." ●

Housing 'move on' period extended

The Government has temporarily extended the 'move on' period – the time between an asylum seeker receiving a decision on their application and having to leave Home Office-funded accommodation – from 28 days to 56 days.

Last September, in an LGA survey, nine in 10 councils said that an extension to the 'move on' period would be the most effective way to reduce costs and impacts associated with the Home Office's asylum

backlog clearance programme, with 84 per cent favouring an extension to 56 days, in line with the Homelessness Reduction Act.

Cllr Louise Gittins, LGA Chair, said: "This temporary extension of the 'move on' period, something the LGA has long called for, is positive news for councils, communities, and people seeking asylum.

"We are keen to work with government to ensure the new process is clear for both councils and those receiving a decision on their asylum claim, and on how the impacts of the change will be monitored and evaluated to support a permanent extension to the period being 56 days." ●



24,000 affordable homes lost to office conversions

Office-to-residential conversions under permitted development have led to the loss of 23,990 affordable homes in the past decade, according to LGA analysis of official data.

Homes created under permitted development rights do not require full planning permission, so there is no mechanism for local authorities to enforce affordable housing or infrastructure contributions from developers. The LGA maintains that, consequently, permitted development undermines and weakens the role of local plans and local communities in decision-making, and compromises councils' ability to manage the supply, location and quality of homes delivered in their areas.

The LGA is urging the Government to revoke unfettered permitted development

rights, or introduce mechanisms by which affordable housing and infrastructure contributions can be secured.

Cllr Adam Hug, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "Permitted development allows premises such as offices, agricultural buildings, shops, restaurants and light industry to be converted into houses without the need to provide any affordable homes.

"These premises can result in poor-quality housing and it means councils face losing out on Section 106 contributions for infrastructure to support new developments and affordable housing at a time when these are most needed.

"To deliver more housing of a decent standard, councils need the right powers, skills, resources and funding to act." ●

● See p16, p18

New registers for children not in school

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, introduced to Parliament last month, includes plans for new registers to identify children who are not in school – something for which the LGA has lobbied for years.

The Government says this will help councils more easily deliver support and ensure such children are receiving a high-quality education.

The bill also introduces a unique identifier number for children across services, which will work in a similar way to how National Insurance numbers work for adults.

Councils will be able to consider proposals for all types of schools, not just academies, and will be given powers to ensure admissions decisions reflect local need.

Failing schools run by councils will also not be automatically forced to become an academy.

Cllr Arooj Shah, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "We are pleased government is acting on a long-standing call by the LGA for councils to have and maintain 'children not in school' registers.

"However this must be combined with powers for councils to meet face-to-face with children, which is vital to ensure children are receiving a suitable education in a safe environment." ●



EV charge point rollout 'on track'

The number of public electric vehicle (EV) charge points is currently on course to meet the minimum 300,000 needed across the UK by 2030, but challenges remain on locations, accessibility and wider barriers such as planning rules.

So says a new report from the National Audit Office, which found that, as of July 2024, 64,632 EV charge points had been installed – in line with government projections.

However, the report identified a regional divide, with 44 per cent of public charge points installed in London and the South East, while only 15 per cent of those in England are in rural areas.

London has more charge points installed per person than any other region.

LGA Transport Spokesperson Cllr Adam Hug said: "It is great to see progress on EV charge point rollout is on track, with councils making a significant contribution to this, despite facing severe funding pressures.

"Certainty and scale of future funding for councils will ensure we help maintain this progress towards the 2030 target.

"Local circumstances, including demand and geography, will shape where EV charge points and supporting infrastructure are located.

"Where there is competing demand for road space, resources and other priorities, councils will continue working to find the best solutions for everyone." ●



Extra £500m for local roads

An extra half a billion pounds in annual local roads funding for councils has been pledged by the Government, from this April.

The total of nearly £1.6 billion for local highways authorities in England is an increase of nearly 50 per cent on last year's allocation.

Councils will also be asked to collect data and proactively maintain roads before potholes start to form, with 25 per cent of the uplift held back as an incentive until they can show they are delivering.

Each local authority can use its share of funding to identify those roads in

most need of repair, to deliver immediate fixes for communities and raise living standards across every area of the country, the Government said.

Cllr Adam Hug, LGA Transport Spokesperson, said the extra funding is helpful, but asked ministers to reconsider holding back a quarter of it so as to give councils the greater certainty they need.

He added: "Councils already spend considerably more on maintaining their highways than they receive from central government.

"Fully funding councils will enable them to plan far more effectively for, and invest in, preventative treatments that keep surfaces in better condition for longer and prevent potholes, which are more expensive to repair.

"Greater long-term investment is needed if we are to reduce the £16.3 billion repair backlog, and the Spending Review provides an opportunity to give councils this funding certainty." ●

CMO: action needed on health in cities

Chief Medical Officer Professor Sir Chris Whitty's annual report has set out a series of recommendations to address health in cities, particularly for people living in areas of deprivation.

It says areas of entrenched deprivation often have the unhealthiest environments, including fewer healthy food choices and higher numbers of fast-food outlets, air pollution, and low-quality housing, which are driving health inequalities.

Recommendations include action on obesity and air pollution, the food environment, and healthcare service planning and delivery.

Cllr David Fothergill, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing

Board, said: "Cities are home to some of the best and worst health outcomes – often side by side. While they can be vibrant hubs of opportunity, this report highlights the pressing health challenges they face, particularly for our most deprived communities.

"Local government plays a vital role in tackling these issues, from improving air quality and expanding access to green spaces to promoting healthier food environments and tackling homelessness.

"We must ensure that our health systems are flexible and responsive to the unique needs of urban populations, so everyone, regardless of where they live, can enjoy a healthy, fulfilling life." ●

Bills before Parliament

A look ahead to new laws affecting councils

Hopefully, Parliament returned from its Christmas break full of energy because, with the next recess looming on 13 February, MPs and Peers are going to be very busy scrutinising government legislation.

For local government, the key bills of interest over the coming months will be the English Devolution Bill, the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, the Renters' Rights Bill, and the Tobacco and Vapes Bill.

Although yet to be published, the English Devolution Bill – which follows the English Devolution White Paper (see **p12-13**) – will provide for the devolution of power from Whitehall, including strengthening mayoral powers, as well as local government reorganisation.

These reforms will have a significant impact on every council and community. While our members are – and always have been – open to change, the LGA remains clear that local government reorganisation should be a matter for councils and local areas to decide.

The LGA is engaging proactively with our members as we look to respond fully to the white paper. At the same time, we will be closely monitoring the bill and working with parliamentarians to ensure we get the best possible legislation on behalf of the sector.

Following on from revisions



last month to the National Planning Policy Framework (see **p16-17**), the Government will make further changes through its Planning and Infrastructure Bill.

Among these will be the power for local planning authorities to set their own planning fees, enabling local variation from a national default fee. In varying or setting their own fees, local authorities will not be able to set fees above costs.

The Renters' Rights Bill will deliver a definitive end to Section 21 evictions, providing much-needed protection for tenants and addressing a major cause of homelessness. It also introduces safeguards against above-market rent increases and backdoor evictions.

By applying the Decent Homes Standard and Awaab's Law to the private rented sector, the bill ensures higher property standards and greater tenant safety.

Additionally, it bans discrimination against tenants in receipt of benefits or with children, which will assist councils in supporting vulnerable residents.

Crucially, the bill enhances enforcement powers for councils by expanding the use of Rent Repayment Orders, giving local authorities more tools to tackle non-compliant landlords effectively.

The Tobacco and Vapes Bill will raise the legal age of sale for tobacco products and bring in rules regulating the marketing, flavours and descriptions of vapes.

We are fully supportive of the Government's 'smokefree generation' ambition, which will improve people's life chances. Local government has consistently led the way in tackling the harms caused by smoking, by calling for a ban on smoking in public places and funding smoking cessation services.

We also welcome the measures to restrict the availability and marketing of vapes to children. Their colours, flavours and advertising are appealing to children, and are a risk to their health.

There should be sufficient lead-in time and guidance given ahead of the legislation coming into force, so councils, retailers and others understand their new obligations and can prepare accordingly.

The LGA will also be keeping a close eye on other bills covering employment rights, terrorism (protection of premises), buses, children's wellbeing and schools, mental health, use of and access to data, non-domestic rating, and lithium-ion battery safety. ●

i To find out more about the LGA's work in Parliament, please visit **local.gov.uk/parliament**

Challenge and change

Local government's resilience and agility will see us through 2025



Councillor Louise Gittins is
Chair of the LGA

As a council leader, I know that our role is one that requires time, energy, and heart all year round.

After a busy year, however, I hope that you and your teams found space to relax and recharge with loved ones over Christmas.

In 2024, no council was immune to rising cost and demand pressures on our services, wider economic and international shocks, the climate emergency, or political change following the general election.

Just as when facing significant cuts in our funding, COVID-19, or the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, local government rose to the occasion and demonstrated a resilience and agility for which you should all take credit.

And last summer, when far-right racist disorder tried to divide communities, it was councils as place-leaders and shapers who helped bring people together, convene the recovery, and learn and share lessons with each other.

Throughout the year, too, the LGA worked tirelessly on your behalf to secure £1.5 billion of additional grant funding for 2025/26 (£880 million for social care), as well as a further £3.7 billion in other revenue funding.

This included significant additional monies for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), homelessness, and the Household Support Fund's extension.

We also secured £20 million for councils that joined our collective action against Visa and Mastercard, and represented councils in England and Wales at the UK COVID-19 Inquiry.

We welcomed the creation of a Leaders' Council, answering the central call in our Local Government White Paper, published last June, for a new, equal partnership between national and local government in England (see local.gov.uk/local-government-white-paper).

We also earned a range of policy successes, from the Tobacco and Vapes Bill and Renters' Rights Bill to more control over local buses and a temporary

extension of the asylum move-on period.

Plus, with a dedicated safety liaison officer forming part of a £31 million package for councillor safety across all police forces, and the Government announcing that councillors will soon no longer have to publish home addresses, our Debate not Hate campaign went from strength to strength (see local.gov.uk/debate-not-hate).

I hope that you and colleagues were also able to make use of our extensive events, leadership and graduate programmes, Corporate Peer Challenge programme, national recruitment campaign, and, of course, our fantastic annual conference in Harrogate last October.

We have so much to build on and, across councils and the LGA, I am grateful to members and officers for their dedication in helping us to achieve what we have.

Our collective weight and voice remains our most powerful tool in lobbying for positive change for our residents and showcasing good practice, and in leading the system for sector-led improvement.

Thank you all for your efforts – please



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“Our collective weight and voice remains our most powerful tool in lobbying for positive change for our residents”

do continue to share case studies of your work and complete our surveys so we can keep making the argument on your behalf as the national voice of local government.

Looking ahead to 2025

It is no secret that 2025 will be a challenging year for councils, and I know that some members will enter this new year feeling uncertainty, even trepidation, about what the future may hold.

As your member-led organisation and your Chair, I want you to be assured that the LGA knows, understands and recognises this – and as a council leader serving both a rural and urban area on its own devolution journey, I myself appreciate the depth of feeling and range of views across the sector.

As I said in December in response to the Government’s English Devolution White Paper, local government reorganisation should be a matter for councils and local areas to decide (see **p12**).

We will engage proactively across the country on the white paper, and I will be holding sessions with members of our Leaders’ Council, special interest groups, the LGA Board and members across regions.

Crucially, we are stronger as a sector when we act together, so we will also be working with parliamentarians to ensure we get the best possible legislation on your behalf.

To do so, we want and need to hear from you: please do send your reflections to your LGA principal adviser (see **local.gov.uk/our-support/lga-principal-advisers-and-regional-teams**).

Following our initial response to the provisional local government finance settlement (see **p14**), I know that balancing the books will also be high on your agenda.

While the extra funding next year will

help meet some – but not all – service pressures, we remain concerned about the impact of the rise to employers’ National Insurance contributions.

We will shortly seek further evidence from members to help strengthen our case, but, in the meantime, please do share your views and data via your principal adviser.

While 2025 will no doubt bring challenge and change, I cannot think of a sector whose track record stands it in better stead to navigate that course together, for the people and places we serve.

It is therefore fitting that we start 2025 with so many in our local government family recognised in the King’s New Year Honours – my congratulations to them all.

In this spirit, I look forward to continuing to work with you across all tiers, regions, parties (and none) in 2025, and I wish you all a happy and, above all, healthy new year. ●

i To find out more about the work of the LGA, please visit **local.gov.uk**



Pathways to devolution

The LGA is increasing its support to its members



Councillor Louise Gittins
is Chair of the LGA

Since the publication of the English Devolution White Paper just before Christmas, we and our member councils have been working at pace to digest the proposals and their respective risks and opportunities.

While it is still relatively early days, and the full, detailed analysis will need to be completed, it is clear the proposals represent the biggest changes to our sector in 50 years.

Earlier this month, as **first** was going to press, the deadline passed for

councils to express an interest in being part of the Government's 'devolution priority programme', with a number of our member councils expressing an interest in being fast-tracked for devolution deals.

We also know that other members have expressly ruled themselves out of this process, while others are still debating what course of action is right for them and their local communities.

These differing directions of travel underline the diverse range of views about devolution and local government reorganisation that exist within our sector, and we respect each perspective and each choice equally.

The LGA's position is clear: we want every council in England to have the ability to secure devolution that works

for them, their local economies, and their residents.

Genuine devolution of powers and resources can play a huge role in promoting inclusive economic growth, creating jobs, and improving public services.

In a very centralised country, moving funding and power from Whitehall to local leaders is needed.

We know that local government reorganisation is a controversial issue for some of our member councils.

Proposed reforms in the white paper will have a significant impact on every council and community.

While our members are – and always have been – open to change, we remain clear that devolution and local government reorganisation should be a matter for councils and local areas to decide.

This is why we will continue to engage with members of all types and views across the country and with all our partner special interest groups. We are also reviewing our support offer so we can help those embarking on rapid devolution or reorganisation journeys, alongside those who have already been through – or are still going through – the process, and those who are not.

It is important to recognise that many areas have already gone through their journey of devolution. Some are now well-established entities while others are more recent in their development.

We will be working through what these historic changes to the sector mean for them and the impact on planning, regeneration and housing, as well as funding

“We want every council in England to have the ability to secure devolution that works for them”

and spending powers relating to economic development.

As part of this, we are working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to embed learning from the sector as they develop the local government reorganisation and devolution processes, and to shape the programme of support that is needed.

We will be working with key partners over the coming weeks to develop a coordinated support offer for the sector. We continue to lobby for the necessary funding to be able to provide that support at pace and scale.

Areas fast-tracked along this process will need extra government funding and support to have the capacity to deliver, and so their ability to provide existing services is not negatively affected.

The LGA Board has set up a cross-party ‘task and finish’ group, comprising elected members and officers, to develop the LGA’s rapidly evolving policy position and inform our ongoing work across government.

At the same time, we will be closely monitoring the forthcoming English Devolution Bill and working with parliamentarians to ensure we get the best possible legislation on behalf of our members.

In the coming days and weeks, we will be updating our FAQs, introducing new – and updating our existing – communications channels

A new framework

The Government has published its devolution plans for England

Reforms in the wide-ranging English Devolution White Paper will have a significant impact on every council and community.

The Government has said it wants to see all of England benefit from devolution.

According to the Institute for Government, as of June 2024, devolution covered 48 per cent of England’s population, 54 per cent of its economic output, and 26 per cent of its land area.

By completing the map, the Government says it will oversee the rebalancing of power from central government so that local leaders can take back control and increase prosperity for local people.

It is the Government’s strong preference that, in filling in the map, places do so with an elected mayor over a large economic geography – with unitary councils in the area coming together to form its ‘strategic authority’.

The white paper says the Government will facilitate a programme of local government reorganisation

for two-tier areas and for those unitary councils where there is evidence of failure, or where their size or boundaries may be hindering their ability to deliver sustainable and high-quality services for their residents.

Foundation strategic authorities will include current non-mayoral combined authorities and combined county authorities, and any local authority designated as a strategic authority without a mayor.

Mayoral strategic authorities will include the Greater London Authority, and all mayoral combined and combined county authorities.

The white paper also sets out principles for agreeing strategic authorities. These include that: they cover an ideal combined population of 1.5 million or more; they reflect current and potential travel-to-work patterns and local labour markets; boundaries are in line with constituent councils and don’t create devolution ‘islands’; they ensure the

effective delivery of key functions, including spatial development strategies, local transport plans and get Britain working plans; they promote alignment between devolution boundaries and other public service boundaries, including police, fire and health; and they promote local identity.

The Government says that areas that agree to take on a mayoral strategic authority will see major benefits, including a significant devolution offer that will continue to grow over time, flexible allocated funding with a long-term investment fund, and – once an area has qualified for it – funding granted through a flexible integrated settlement.

Mayoral authorities will also have a representative sitting on the Council of Nations and Regions, with the Prime Minister and first ministers from the devolved governments; and a representative on the Mayoral Council to work with the Deputy Prime Minister on developing devolution and local growth policy.

and products, and inviting members to a new series of online sessions to find out more about devolution and/or local government reorganisation, and the support the LGA and partners can provide in navigating them.

Simultaneously, we will be continuing to fight for a fair deal for our members in the forthcoming Spending Review, when we will be reiterating our call for long-term, sustainable funding and certainty. ●

White paper support

The LGA has refreshed its Devolution Hub (local.gov.uk/devolution-hub) to be your one-stop shop on devolution and local government reorganisation. It will also host the latest information about how the LGA will continue to engage our members and partners throughout this process.

If you have local intelligence on devolution and reorganisation that may be of interest to the LGA, please share this with us via your LGA regional advisors (see local.gov.uk/our-support/lga-principal-advisers-and-regional-teams).

See local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses for the LGA’s factual briefing on the English Devolution White Paper. The white paper itself is available at moredetails.uk/4f5m4GR

Addressing challenges

The provisional finance settlement will shape the future of local services

An increase in core spending power and additional resources from new initiatives contained in December's provisional local government finance settlement for 2025/26 are recognition of the mounting pressures facing local authorities.

However, significant challenges remain, and councils in England continue to grapple with difficult decisions to balance their books while ensuring they can deliver essential services.

As local authorities prepare for the final settlement and this year's Spending Review, critical issues around equity, sustainability, and the broader funding model remain.

Core spending power

The provisional settlement includes an increase in core spending power of 6 per cent – a positive step in helping councils address cost and demand pressures.

Particularly noteworthy is the introduction of £1.1 billion from the new Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) scheme for packaging, which is additional to core spending power for 2025/26.

By shifting the cost of managing packaging waste to producers, the scheme aligns financial support with

environmental goals. This approach, which ensures councils receive additional funding outside the settlement, has long been called for by the LGA.

However, the methodology behind EPR allocations must be transparent, with sufficient funds to cover actual costs rather than estimates. Councils need assurance that the funding will grow in line with demand.

Another positive is the £515 million that has been allocated to compensate councils for increased employer National Insurance contributions.

While this funding is gladly received, it is insufficient to cover the total impact on local government.

The £515 million allocated falls short of the £637 million the LGA estimates councils are expected to incur directly; and indirect costs, through commissioned providers, could add another estimated £1.13 billion.

Smaller care providers and charities are particularly vulnerable, potentially jeopardising delivery of vital services.

Variations across councils

The impact of the settlement varies widely across different councils, depending on their specific circumstances

– including their size, demographics, and economic conditions.

For some councils, the introduction of the new 'recovery grant' and the continuation of grants such as the New Homes Bonus (NHB) offer valuable support. Shire district authorities, for instance, rely heavily on the NHB and have welcomed confirmation of another year's funding.

However, the Government's decision to repurpose grants and use new allocation methods for certain funding streams has raised concerns.

Rolling grants into the settlement promotes simplicity, but it must be executed transparently to ensure councils are not inadvertently disadvantaged.

Similarly, the cancellation of negative revenue support grant is a step in the right direction, but broader issues surrounding the settlement funding assessment remain.

The methodology, unchanged from previous years, should be reviewed. The Government issued a consultation document on local government funding reform in December, to which the LGA will be responding, and councils have called for sufficient funding to ensure no authority has a loss of income during the transition to any new system.

Public health funding is another area of concern. The absence of an announcement on the public health grant for 2025/26 leaves councils uncertain about their ability to plan effectively for health and prevention services, which are critical to reducing long-term pressures on care services.

Social care

Social care remains one of the most pressing challenges for local government.

While additional funding for adult and children's social care has been announced, it does not address the £3.4 billion cost pressures projected for 2025/26.

This ongoing shortfall threatens not only the sustainability of care services, but also the Government's broader agenda, such as breaking down barriers to





opportunity and implementing its 10-Year Health Plan.

The social care funding shortfall is exacerbated by rising employer National Insurance contributions (see above) and increases to the National Living Wage.

While councils will receive some compensation, it falls short of covering the full financial impact.

Care providers, already under strain, may well seek higher fees from councils, adding further pressure to local budgets.

The sector's reliance on small providers and charities amplifies concerns about the potential for service disruptions.

The £250 million Children's Social Care Prevention Grant, earmarked for initiatives such as Family Help, is a positive addition. However, concerns have been raised about its distribution via a new children's needs-based formula and its focus on new burdens introduced by the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

Ensuring that these new duties are fully funded is critical to maintaining the viability of children's services.

Finance reform

The forthcoming final settlement and this year's Spending Review present opportunities to address the systemic issues underlying local government finance.

The LGA has long called for a significant and sustained increase in overall funding, paired with reforms to create a more equitable and sustainable funding model.

Council tax, as currently structured, is inadequate for addressing national-level pressures such as adult social care.

The 5 per cent cap on council tax places additional burdens on households while failing to reflect local needs.

Moreover, reliance on council tax as a primary funding source disproportionately affects areas with lower property values and higher socioeconomic challenges.

The LGA has proposed abolishing referendum limits, alongside the conclusion of the needs and resources review, allowing councils and communities to determine appropriate tax rates based on local priorities.

Equally important is the Government's commitment to multi-year settlements, which offer councils greater financial certainty and planning capacity.

However, this commitment must be accompanied by comprehensive reforms, including:

- a needs and resources review, updating outdated formulas and ensuring funding reflects current service demands. This is covered in the Government's consultation referred to above.
- prevention-focused investments, prioritising preventative services to reduce short-term and reactive spending in the future.
- business rates reform – while it is positive that some councils will receive compensation because of the

decision to freeze the small business rates multiplier, it has also removed buoyancy from the system, and reduced medium-term council income.

As the final settlement approaches, the LGA is calling on the Government to take bold steps to create a sustainable, equitable funding model.

Collaboration with local authorities will be essential to ensuring that funding reflects both current demands and future challenges.

This is essential not only for councils, but also for Government to achieve its wider ambitions of delivering on its priorities, as well as its devolution agenda.

By prioritising transparency, equity and prevention, the Government can support councils in delivering the services that communities rely on every day.

The Spending Review must go beyond immediate fixes, setting the stage for a long-term vision of local government finance that supports thriving, resilient communities across the country. ●

i You can read the LGA's response to the consultation on the provisional local government finance settlement in full at [local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses](https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses). See **p29** for the Welsh LGA's analysis of the provisional settlement in Wales

Building blocks

The Government has revised its planning policies for England

The reintroduction of mandatory housing targets and restoration of five-year housing land supply rules were among the changes set out in the revised National Planning Policy Framework, published before Christmas.

The framework – which sets out the Government's planning policies for England and how these should be applied – also includes updates on the approach to developments in the 'grey belt', with more details expected this month.

The Government is prioritising the preparation and maintenance of local plans in order to deliver housing and other development 'in a sustainable manner', and has made other announcements on planning issues including localising planning fees, funding to support delivery of local plans, and support for the build-out of sites with planning permission.

LGA support for planners

The LGA's Planning Advisory Service (PAS) provides high-quality help, advice, support and training on planning and service delivery to councils, helping officers and councillors to stay effective and up to date using a 'sector-led' improvement approach.

PAS is hosting a series of webinars in January and February, providing structured briefings on the key changes in the National Planning Policy Framework, with updates from senior officials at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Further details, including registration information, is available at local.gov.uk/pas/find-event



You can read more about some of the changes to the NPPF and other planning reform proposals below and right.

Ahead of the revised NPPF, the Government also published a planning reform working paper on modernising planning committees. The paper invites views on how the Government could reform planning committees to support a plan-led system and ensure appropriate democratic oversight.

Proposals include that planning applications that meet local development plan requirements would not need to go before council committees, with planning officers given a strengthened role in decision-making and committee members getting new, mandatory training.

While councils recognise that swift decision-making on planning applications is critical, it's essential that reforms consider the importance of local, democratic decision-making, and the LGA will be engaging with government on the proposed changes to planning committees.

The LGA has also flagged that, with nearly 9 in 10 applications granted, people cannot and do not live in planning

permissions. Councils are currently limited in the role they play in facilitating private housebuilding – they grant planning permission, but it is up to developers to build the houses.

If the Government is to achieve its ambitious target of delivering 1.5 million homes over the current Parliament, councils need to be given greater powers to incentivise the build-out of sites by developers once sites have been allocated and granted permission.

These would include 'use it or lose it' reforms, such as being able to charge full council tax for every unbuilt development from the point the original planning permission expires; and compulsory purchase powers to acquire stalled housing sites or sites where developers do not build out to timescales contractually agreed with a local planning authority.

Planning is about creating communities linked with the right economic activity and public services, while conserving and enhancing the natural and local environment. Local democratic discretion and flexibility need to remain important elements of the planning system. ●

i See **p18**. The LGA's factual briefing on 'Revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and other announcements on planning reform' can be read in full at local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses. The NPPF itself, which came into effect immediately, is available on gov.uk. The discussion paper on planning committees is at bit.ly/3DAyndb

Planning reform

House building targets

The NPPF reintroduces mandatory house building targets for councils. Revised planning practice guidance on assessing housing needs and additional guidance on setting a housing requirement have been published.

Local plans

Planning authorities have until 6 March to produce an updated local development scheme setting out clear, realistic and specific dates for consultation on, and submission of, their local plan.

Land supply

The Government confirmed that local planning authorities are again required to demonstrate a five-year housing land supply. There are many authorities whose local housing need figures will be substantially larger than their adopted or emerging local plan housing requirement figures. To help close the gap, a new requirement is being introduced – that authorities with plans adopted under the old standard method provide an extra year's worth of homes in their five-year housing pipeline.

Grey belt

The 'grey belt' policy will be introduced, and the NPPF provides a definition of grey belt as "land in the Green Belt comprising previously developed land and/or any other land that, in either case, does not strongly contribute" to specified purposes. Further guidance for local authorities will be released this month to ensure a consistent approach to Green Belt land.

Affordable housing in the Green Belt

The Government believes local planning authorities are best placed to set tenure mix, but notes concerns that a national 50 per cent affordable homes target could lack flexibility and fail to account for regional variation. So, it will allow local planning authorities to set their own 'Golden Rules' in relation to affordable housing through their new local plans. To balance the need for an ambitious affordable housing target with the viability challenges that may occur, particularly in low-value areas, it will adopt a 'policy plus' approach, in which Green Belt development should deliver an amount of affordable housing that is 15 percentage points above the relevant local affordable housing target that would otherwise apply, subject to a cap of 50 per cent.

Build-out

The Government plans to bring greater transparency and accountability, and take the steps necessary to implement build-out reporting. This includes implementing provisions in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 (following technical consultation) that would: require housing developers to formally notify planning authorities before they commence development and to then report annually on actual housing delivery; and empower planning authorities to decline future planning applications made by developers who fail to build out earlier planning permissions granted on land in the authority's area at a reasonable rate.

Localisation of planning fees

The Government has announced that it intends to take forward measures in the proposed Planning and Infrastructure Bill to introduce a power for local planning authorities to set their own fees. It will conduct a comprehensive review of all national fees to establish a baseline for full cost recovery of fees and to inform a national default fee. The Government intends to pursue a model that would enable local variation from a national default fee. In varying or setting their own fees, local authorities will not be able to set fees above costs.



A long-term housing strategy

Councils need the tools to build the homes we need



Councillor Adam Hug is Chair of the LGA's Local Infrastructure and Net Zero Board

Housing, or the lack of it, is one of the biggest issues facing councils.

Housebuilding has failed to keep pace with the rising population, particularly when it comes to affordable and social homes.

Government data shows the proportion of housing for affordable or social rent in England has fallen from around 20 per cent in 2000 to 16 per cent in 2023.

Despite various government schemes over the years, increasing the supply is challenging, with providers citing issues such as access to funding and increasing construction and land costs as barriers to delivery.

The shortage of affordable housing is a key driver of homelessness, which has been exacerbated by the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, as those on lower incomes are unable to keep up with rising bills



and housing costs. The latest government figures show that homelessness rates have increased by more than 10 per cent in the past year, with 358,370 households seeking support from their local authority in 2023/24.

This is putting extraordinary pressure on budgets, with councils now spending vast sums of money – £1.75 billion collectively – housing people in temporary accommodation because of a lack of social and affordable housing.

What's clear is that we are beyond crisis point and we are urging the Government to take bold action to tackle the housing shortage.

Councils share the Government's commitment to building more homes, but

need to be given the right tools, powers, resourcing and funding to do so.

In our Local Government White Paper (see [local.gov.uk/local-government-white-paper](https://www.local.gov.uk/local-government-white-paper)) and in our consultation response to the National Planning Policy Framework (see [local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses](https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses)), we set out some short-term and longer-term measures that would help councils boost the supply of housing and provide sustainable funding for those in need.

As building houses takes time, we need some immediate measures to help alleviate the pressure on councils' budgets from housing and temporary accommodation pressures. This would include an increase

in the subsidy for temporary accommodation, so that it is no longer frozen at 90 per cent of 2011 local housing allowance (LHA) rates.

Over the past five years, frozen LHA rates have left councils to pick up more than £700 million that they are unable to claim back from government (see **first 700**).

Coupled with this, we need a commitment to uprate LHA rates to the 30th percentile of local rents beyond 2025/26.

These measures would enable councils to invest the money being spent on costly temporary accommodation into replenishing their housing stock and homelessness prevention services.

We would also like to see the Government go even further

“We would like to see the rollout of five-year local housing deals to all areas that want them”

with its reforms to the Right to Buy scheme, to truly stem the annual net loss of social homes and to allow councils to use their receipts to deliver replacement homes.

This would include allowing councils permanent flexibility to combine receipts with other government grants, and the ability to set the size of discounts locally and to exempt new-build homes.

In the medium term, we would like to see the rollout of five-year local housing deals to all areas that want them.

Our research suggests this would lead to 200,000 additional social homes being

built over 30 years, delivering a steady stream of desperately needed new social housing (see **first 696**).

We need to see strengthened housing revenue accounts via a long-term rent settlement and restoration of lost revenue because of rent caps and cuts, to give councils certainty on rental income and support long-term business planning.

The future of council housing finances hangs in

the balance because of the cumulative impact of historic and proposed government policies and regulatory burdens, as well as recent turbulence in the economy and markets, with high inflation and interest rates.

Combined, these are forcing councils to make trade-offs, such as reducing their new housebuilding programmes.

Ultimately, we would like to see government take a longer-term approach, focusing on sustained housebuilding and preventative services, which includes homelessness and supported housing.

Previous analysis has suggested that investing £1.6 billion in supported housing would create savings of more than £3.4 billion.

Various pots of piecemeal funding for supported housing improvement and commissioning are coming to an end, so we are asking ministers to consider how they fund housing-related support for the future in a way that is flexible and sustainable, and encourages long-term and strategic commissioning.

Our message to government is simple: work with us and give us the tools to build the homes our country needs. ●

i The Government is expected to publish a long-term strategy for housing in spring 2025. See local.gov.uk/topics/housing-and-planning for more on the LGA's work on housing and planning. This article was first published in Inside Housing



LGA Annual Fire Conference and Exhibition

11-12 March 2025

Hilton Hotel, Newcastle Gateshead

The Annual Fire Conference and Exhibition is a key event in the conference calendar for senior fire officers and members of fire and rescue authorities and provides an opportunity to meet in-person and discuss developments impacting the fire and rescue sector.

We will hear from a range of expert speakers about some of the key issues facing fire and rescue services and consider how we can meet these challenges.

To book your place visit: local.gov.uk/events



Get Britain working

A government white paper envisages a place-based approach to employment and skills



Councillor Liam Robinson (l) is Chair of the LGA's City Regions Board and Councillor Martin Tett is Chairman of the LGA's People and Places Board

Launched late last year, the Government's Get Britain Working White Paper aims to promote higher employment rates and reduce economic inactivity, by helping individuals enhance their skills and transition to better jobs.

It has three strategic pillars:

- a modern industrial strategy and local growth plans to generate quality jobs nationwide
- improving job quality and security through a plan to make work pay
- major reforms to employment support by integrating skills and health.

Proposals outlined in the white paper closely align with the LGA's Work Local campaign (see www.local.gov.uk/work-local), through which we have consistently made the case for reform, set out our ambition for devolved and integrated employment and skills services, and developed a cost-benefit analysis.

Our most recent employment and skills offer on boosting inclusive growth, published last summer (see www.local.gov.uk/publications), set out how a new government could work with local government to move forward on these ambitions, and we were involved in ministerial discussions ahead of the launch of the white paper.

A key feature of the white paper is its adoption of a place-based approach to employment and skills. For example, every area in England will have a local Get Britain working plan (LGBWP) to tackle economic inactivity. These plans will be developed by mayoral authorities where they exist, and across groups of

local authorities elsewhere. LGBWPs will be backed up by a new supported employment programme, 'Connect to Work', grant funded to all of local government in England and Wales, and starting with £115 million going to local areas in 2025/26.

Some mayoral authorities will go further by trialling new ways to join up work, health and skills.

Connect to Work marks a significant shift in policy for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

The programme aims to help disabled people, those with health conditions, and people with complex barriers to employment find suitable work. It will be delivered via grants across 43 clusters of local authorities in England and four clusters in Wales.

Lead local authorities will spearhead the design of their local offer, shaped around local services and priorities to help people find and fulfil their potential to work.

It is a supported employment 'place, train and maintain' service to help 'economically inactive' people.

Voluntary for participants, it will be phased in from April 2025 and run to the end of this Parliament.

The LGA has worked closely with the DWP to shape this policy.

For areas outside of devolution, Connect to Work is a clear building block for councils to take on new devolved powers.

The LGA is now urging the Department for Education (DfE) to also take a more localist approach and empower councils outside of devolution with a new 'community skills' function, so they can plan and coordinate the adult skills offer locally.

Another area in which the LGA has

"The new jobs and careers service must see itself as part of a wider place-based employment eco-system"





successfully shaped government thinking is in the need to tackle the sharp increase in youth inactivity.

The Government announced it will establish a 'Youth Guarantee' in England – similar to our Work Local proposals for 'youth pathways' – so that every young person aged 18-21 has access to further learning and help to get a job or an apprenticeship.

The new Youth Guarantee includes:

- £40 million invested in new foundation apprenticeships
- eight mayoral Youth Guarantee trailblazers
- preventing young people from becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) by providing councils with new data tools and guidance to support 16 to 17-year-olds at risk of disengagement.
- an offer of work experience and careers advice for under-18s not in school or college
- partnerships with industry organisations
- a Youth Guarantee Advisory Panel, so young people can shape the design of the guarantee.

The eight Youth Guarantee trailblazers will be trialled in mayoral authorities. To be effective, mayoral authorities will need to work closely with their constituent councils, who have statutory duties for 16

“A thriving and inclusive labour market is essential for growing the economy, improving health, and creating an environment in which everyone... [can] progress”

to 17-year-olds. The success of this will inform a future rollout across England, led by local government.

The Government also announced the integration of Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service into a new jobs and careers service. This is positive and fits with the public service reform agenda and calls within the LGA's Work Local campaign.

The new service must see itself as part of a wider place-based employment ecosystem, recognising that employment services are increasingly delivered in different community locations.

Effective local mapping, referral and signposting are vital to ensure all local partners deliver seamless employment support services for their customers.

Building a thriving and inclusive labour market is essential for growing the economy, improving health, and creating an environment in which everyone has the chance to participate and progress in the workforce.

Employment offers individuals a sense of purpose, financial stability, and benefits for their physical and mental health.

For communities, a more skilled workforce and increased job opportunities

can drive productivity, innovation and investment, and lead to greater spending in local economies, thereby helping reduce regional disparities.

It is a positive step to see the Government embed all of local government – mayors and councils – in its policy thinking.

Equally positive is that place-based trailblazers will trial new approaches to develop the Youth Guarantee and join up work, health and skills systems to reduce economic inactivity because of ill health.

The LGA will continue its engagement with the Government and key partners on the detail, in order to put these proposals into practice. It will also carry on working with the DWP, DfE and other departments to share best practice and shape policy.

Councils already lead the way in coordinating provision and supporting local inclusive growth. It's our job to ensure local communities seize the opportunities before them. ●

i The Get Britain Working White Paper can be read in full at www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-britain-working-white-paper

In the zone

Share your innovative ideas at the LGA's annual conference



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

We've only just recovered from the Innovation Zone at the LGA's 2024 annual conference – but it's time to start thinking about its return at the 2025 event, which will take place from 1–3 July in Liverpool.

Applications are now open for councils, and organisations working with councils, interested in taking part this year (see www.local.gov.uk/innovation-zone-2025).

The Innovation Zone offers a vibrant, creative space and programme within the conference and exhibition, where delegates have the opportunity to attend

interactive sessions, sharing learning across the sector.

It brings case studies to life and sheds light on potential solutions to the challenges and issues councils face.

Last year's programme was the most successful yet, featuring more than 100 speakers from 40-plus local authorities, with standing room only at many sessions.

To provide some inspiration, previous presentations, taking place as part of the main programme, have showcased innovative ideas and practices across a range of topics. These included: using artificial intelligence (AI) to reimagine case management in children's social care; building sustainable transport links; transforming town centres; or creating a carbon-literate city.

Our 'Spotlight on' talks provided more discussions that inspired delegates to think creatively and engage with big ideas.



© LGA/Joe Outterside

Questions at a carbon-literate cities session in the 2024 Innovation Zone

Subjects ranged from climate change to financial innovation, to how the LGA's strengthened corporate peer challenge approach can support councils, including those facing the most significant challenges.

The 2024 Innovation Zone programme also featured a series of sessions on adult social care – such as Cheshire's creation of an integrated, patient-centric discharge pathway, or Hertfordshire's assistive technology solution to support residents to remain at home for longer.

Solutions to the workforce challenges faced by local government were also a prominent feature of the zone, including a presentation featuring the Pathways to Planning graduate scheme (see www.local.gov.uk/pathways-to-planning) and a session by West Midlands Employers on collaborative workforce planning for the future.

All applications are welcomed and encouraged, and, this year, there is particular interest in hearing from projects and perspectives that traverse one or more of the following categories:

- financial resilience
- transformation
- workforce challenges

- community engagement and resident participation
- adults' and children's services and managing demand
- managing housing pressures
- climate change, net zero and promoting sustainability
- data-informed decisions
- equalities, diversity and inclusion
- cyber, digital and technology.

If you would like to apply but are unsure whether your idea is the right fit, or if you have any other questions, please email innovationzone@local.gov.uk and LGA colleagues will provide guidance.

Successful applicants will need to present in person and presentations should be as interactive as possible, to ensure stories are told creatively and in an engaging manner. Sessions will be approximately 30-45 minutes in length, including time for audience questions. ●

i To apply for a slot in the Innovation Zone, please visit www.local.gov.uk/innovation-zone-2025, or email innovationzone@local.gov.uk if you have any questions. Applications close on Monday 3 February



The Innovation Zone offers the chance to share learning across the sector

© LGA/Joe Outterside

Graduates who make an impact

It's not too late for councils to apply for new trainees

The LGA's flagship graduate scheme – Impact: The Local Government Graduate Programme – has provided a pipeline of more than 2,500 high-calibre graduate trainees to the sector.

Previously known as the National Graduate Development Programme (NGDP) for more than 20 years, the scheme has helped councils across England and Wales to build crucially required capacity while providing a platform for ambitious graduates to springboard their budding careers.

After running a rigorous multi-stage recruitment campaign annually on behalf of councils, the LGA matches driven and highly capable graduates with participating authorities.

Graduates are given the opportunity to work on high-level pieces of work over a two-year period through a minimum of three placements at their host organisations.

They also undertake a bespoke learning and development programme, culminating with a Level 7 postgraduate qualification accredited by the Chartered Management Institute.

The structure of the programme, coupled with the benefits of a national network of peers, enables trainees to add value early on and deliver real change.

The 2024 Local Government Chronicle Workforce Awards highlighted a noteworthy example of this, as a recent alumna of the programme, Shona Galt, won the 'Graduate of the Year' award.

Shona is a Project Manager in the People Delivery Team at the London Borough of Redbridge, having successfully completed the Impact (NGDP) programme in 2023.

The award is testament to her extraordinary dedication and tireless



Shona Galt (l) with fellow Impact graduate and Redbridge Council Community Safety Officer Sophie Wroblewski

efforts to support care leavers in Redbridge.

Shona has spearheaded numerous high-impact projects, including embedding the Care Leaver Covenant throughout the borough.

Her innovative approach, compassionate leadership and commitment have significantly improved the lives of young people transitioning out of care (see box, right).

At a time when local government is facing considerable challenges, attracting top talent, like Shona, to the sector has never been more important.

Impact has received more than 8,000 applications from graduates across the UK for the autumn 2025 intake, attracting diverse candidates from all regions of the country with a range of backgrounds and academic disciplines.

Graduate



Shona Galt is a Project Manager in the People Delivery Team at the London Borough of Redbridge

I'm so grateful to the Impact graduate scheme for the opportunities it afforded me at Redbridge Council: first, working with UNICEF UK on the Child Friendly Cities and Communities programme; then in the Exploited Children's Team, bidding for Home Office grants to implement local modern slavery and gang exit support measures; and then in Housing Needs, working on homelessness prevention.

These placements, and the qualification, laid invaluable foundations for me when I became a project manager in our People Directorate Delivery Team, working across adult and children's social care to improve outcomes for residents.

Without my breadth of experience gained through Impact, I wouldn't have had my existing network within the council and across local partners, which was crucial to joint working and delivering on the objectives set out by our care-experienced young people.

Demand appears to be growing, with more and more graduates interested in fast-tracking their careers in local government.

To ensure increasing demand is met, the number of places offered needs to increase in line with this; councils are encouraged to partner with Impact to take on as many graduates as possible each year. ●

i To find out how Impact could help your council build capacity and develop the future leaders of your workforce, please visit moredetails.uk/40rbt10, or, for an informal chat with the team, email impact@local.gov.uk. Councils have until **28 February** to confirm their interest in taking on at least one Impact graduate trainee in 2025



The importance of local government finance

LGA resources can help councillors ensure value for money

All councils will be in the middle of setting their budgets for 2025/26, following the publication in December of the provisional local government finance settlements for England and Wales.

Councillors have a key role to play in ensuring value for money in everything their local authorities do, but the budget process can be daunting and complex.

The LGA provides resources and training to help with this, including recently updating its 'Councillor workbook on local government finance'. This sets out the legislative and wider context, looks at financial planning and budgeting, and discusses the roles and responsibilities of councillors.

It also covers sources of revenue and capital funding, and the differences between

them, reserves and balances, and specific areas such as the housing revenue account (for councils that own council housing), school budgets, the public health grant, the adult social care council tax precept, and other 'ring-fenced' budgets.

Every council requires money to finance the resources it needs to provide local public services. Therefore, every councillor should take an interest in the way their council is funded and the financial decisions it takes.

Legislation is clear that every councillor is responsible for financial control and decision-making at their council.

The Local Government Act 1972 (Section 151) requires every local authority to make arrangements for the proper administration of its financial affairs, while the Local Government Act 2000 requires full council to approve the budget and council tax demand.

However, it is recognised that councillors may well not be financial experts and so legislation also requires that every council has a named and suitably qualified 'responsible financial officer', known as the council's 'Section 151 officer'.

This person is usually the head of the council's finance function and is central to providing:

- effective financial advice to councillors and officers
- organising and maintaining a sound system of financial governance and control
- ensuring the council follows all of its legal duties in financial matters
- preparing and approving a budget.

A sound budget is essential to ensure effective financial control in any organisation and the preparation of the annual budget is a key activity at every council.

The central financial issue

at most councils is that there are limits and constraints on most of the sources of funding open to them. This makes finance the key constraint on the council's ability to provide more and better services.

What is the councillor's role in all of this? Put simply, it is to consider finance and funding as a central part of all decision-making and to ensure that the council provides value for money, or 'best value', in all of its services.

There is unlikely to be sufficient money to do everything the council would wish to provide, because of its budget gap.

Therefore, councillors need to consider their priorities and objectives, and ensure that these drive the budget process. In addition, it is essential that councils consider how efficient they are in providing services and obtaining the appropriate outcome for all its services. ●

i 'A councillor workbook on local government finance' is one of a suite of similar distance learning aids available on the LGA's website at [local.gov.uk/councillor-workbooks](https://www.local.gov.uk/councillor-workbooks), covering everything from chairing skills to working with town and parish councillors. To access the LGA's full range of training, support and events, designed for new councillors to experienced leaders, please visit our councillor hub at [moredetails.uk/3BQFQER](https://www.local.gov.uk/moredetails/3BQFQER)

Making devolution work locally

Councils should be close to their communities



Councillor Sam Chapman-Allen,
Chair, District Councils' Network

The English Devolution White Paper is a difficult document for many District Councils' Network (DCN) member councils to absorb. However, now is a time to be constructive.

We wholeheartedly back the Government's aim of extending devolution nationwide. Relatively few district council areas currently have combined authority mayors, but our communities' desire for empowerment is no less than those in metropolitan areas, in which mayors are the norm.

While DCN accepts structural reform in some cases, we oppose the setting of a minimum population size of 500,000 for new unitary councils. We believe this is a straitjacket that is irresponsive to local geographies and economies. Councils should be close to their communities and there is a danger that local democracy is diminished if councils are this big.

We are also sceptical about many of the claims of huge savings, and alive to the potential for reorganisation to prove a distraction from service delivery. The Government wants us to prioritise housebuilding and jobs – as do we – and the danger is that this gets in the way.

Services provided by district councils – including housing, waste collection, business and economic development, leisure centres and parks – should be enhanced by reform, rather than running the risk of being sidelined as new councils have to focus on plugging gaps in social care budgets.

If we are moving to a new system, it must work better for our citizens and businesses than what we have now. The aim should be to design a local public sector that is best equipped to meet the challenges of the coming decades, rather than to shave a relatively small amount, if any, from budgets now. We should be seeking to move towards preventing problems rather than dealing with their consequences. The citizen and community should be at the centre of both the vision for the future and the debate now, rather than an inconvenient afterthought. The danger of rushing local government reorganisation is

“New unitary councils must be small enough to be genuinely local”

that you end up with new councils that are inferior to what they should be.

DCN and our member councils want to work alongside our counterparts in the rest of local government to devise a new system that works. New unitary councils must be small enough to be genuinely local, democratically accountable to communities and focused on delivery. We also believe the debate should consider how best to inject democratic accountability and responsiveness to neighbourhoods into the entire local public sector. This could be an opportunity to tackle the silos between social care and the NHS, community safety and policing, and all public services – not just county and district.

District councils have no monopoly on wisdom – and the same is true of counties and unitaries, mayors and central government. By working together, we're more likely to be successful, but the chances for positive results will surely be greater still if we involve our communities and businesses.

DCN holds its hand out to the rest of the sector – we are your partners. Together, let's make this work for our communities. Together, let's be ambitious. ●



GROUP LEADERS



Councillor Bev Craig is Leader of the LGA's Labour Group

Empowering local decision-makers

Let me take the opportunity in this first **first** magazine of 2025 to wish all LGA member councils a very happy new year.

The past year has been characterised by change, but your dedication and hard work for your residents has been consistent throughout, and that is to be applauded.

As we look back on 2024 and ahead to 2025, there is much to reflect on and plan for.

A new Government – which I know Labour councillors campaigned so hard for

– the first Labour Budget in 15 years, and the publication of the English Devolution White Paper stand out as clear milestones.

Challenges remain, the summer's violent disorder underscoring the pressing need to strengthen our communities in the face of far-right rhetoric and online misinformation.

However, for the first time in years, we have a government that is on the side of local government; that recognises the role local government has in delivering its five missions and so appreciates the need for empowered local decision-makers.

There is much for Labour councillors to celebrate as we mark six months since the general election.

From kickstarting the construction of 1.5 million homes to announcing free breakfast clubs for children, introducing the Renters' Rights Bill, and unlocking new funding for foundation apprenticeships for young people, the Government is delivering on its ambitious plan for change.

“For the first time in years, we have a government that is on the side of local government”

Local leaders have been heavily involved in this programme from day one, formalised through the new Leaders' Council, and we can expect this collaboration to continue into the new year.

With crucial local elections in May, I want to remind everyone of the power of collective responsibility, and of being proud of the movement that you all represent. The past six months show us that, together, we have the ability to change this country for the better.

i For more information about the LGA's political groups, see www.local.gov.uk

Taking the lead



Councillor Louise Gittins is Chair of the LGA

As we begin 2025, I want to reflect on a key event from the end of 2024 that will inform how we approach the next 12 months.

In December, the second meeting of the Leaders' Council took place, bringing together leaders from the LGA, our sector, and representatives from central government.

The Leaders' Council answers a central call of our cross-party LGA Local Government White Paper for a new, equal partnership between national and local government (see www.local.gov.uk/local-government-white-paper).

This second meeting was a hugely valuable chance to continue the

dialogue between councils and government on many of the key areas affecting LGA members, including early intervention, homelessness, asylum and the Government's English Devolution White Paper.

We emphasised that the key is devolution that works for councils and their individual circumstances – importantly, their local areas, economies, and communities.

We also made plain that local government reorganisation should be a matter for councils and local areas to decide.

More local freedoms and control over local services were also discussed, to allow councils to try new ways of working that are tailored to their area, with a focus on prevention. The Government recognised this and indicated that it will help facilitate a 'test and learn' approach.

The provisional local government finance settlement, published just days after the Leaders' Council, was also raised.



The introduction of multi-year finance settlements and an end to funding pots was good news, but the impact of increased employer National Insurance contributions remains a cause for concern.

Councils continue to face severe cost and demand pressures and this year's Spending Review will be critical to the future of our local services.

The Leaders' Council recognised that these are all complex challenges to address and that it is crucial that we get them right.

Our discussions so far have established a good sense of the collaboration and communication needed to achieve that, but we will continue to make the case as your membership body and the national voice of local government.



Councillor Kevin Bentley is Leader of the LGA's Conservative Group

Local consensus needed on reorganisation

I hope colleagues across local government had a good Christmas and I am sure everyone is back into the swing of things as we enter 2025.

Last month, we finally had the publication of the Government's English Devolution White Paper.

The position of Conservatives in local government is a simple one. We do not believe that local government reorganisation should be forced upon areas without a local consensus.

"Reorganising local government needs to be about the best-value benefits to communities"

There cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to reorganisation, and Conservatives will only back changes in areas where we can see a strong local consensus.

If we want to reorganise local government, it needs to be about the best-value benefits it can bring to communities, while delivering better with new technology, involving all our partners across the sector.

As Conservatives, we believe in best value when it comes public services, and we must ensure we constantly look at how these are delivered to residents.

Local government reorganisation is an opportunity, but we must only support such moves where it has a strong evidence base, and all partners and the public are involved.

Transferring powers from Whitehall to local areas is a must to ensure residents have a greater say in how their areas are run, therefore devolution is critical.



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

Unitary debates and social care commissions

It will be another busy year for local government in 2025.

Many councils will be affected by the Government's devolution agenda, with local government reorganisation being a key component of this, including forced unitary arrangements in currently two-tier areas. I continue to believe that it should be up to local councils, not Whitehall, to decide how they are governed.

In addition, forcing unitary arrangements risks distracting councils from working with the Government on issues we all care about, such as providing more genuinely affordable housing.

On a different matter, there is the issue of social care. Since 1997, the BBC reports, there have been three government commissions, three independent

"It should be up to local councils, not Whitehall, to decide how they are governed"

commissions, five white papers and 14 parliamentary committee inquiries into adult social care.

We all know what needs doing, but if there has to be another commission, it should be cross-party, report within the year (as Liberal Democrat Leader Sir Ed Davey has said), and the Government must commit to implementation. Liberal Democrats stand ready and eager to bring our ideas to the table – but we can't afford to wait three more years for a new plan.

We're worried that what's been announced looks like an excuse to kick the can down the road for another decade. That would be unforgivable for the care of our elderly and disabled people.

GROUP LEADERS



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

Devolution looks like centralisation

Wishing you a healthy and successful 2025!

From a resident's view, the Government's so-called 'devolution' looks very like centralisation to a region.

The big decisions, such as on housing, transport and the economy, currently made by our districts, counties or unitaries, move up into very few hands with a mayor.

If residents think their current district council is hard to influence, how about something covering an area 10 times as big?

"Local reorganisation should be a decision by local councils together, not imposed"

That leaves residents worse off, as these few hands are necessarily less diverse and less representative of the electorate.

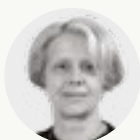
The new subsidiary councils would then focus more on delivery of the Government's objectives.

The LGA's Independent Group has called for any reorganisation to be a decision by local councils together, not imposed.

Many feel a referendum on such a big decision would be more appropriate, and I put the case for appointed members of the upper strategic authorities to be politically balanced, but this now seems unlikely.

Dissolving and setting up new authorities is not to be under-estimated – the distraction from the delivery of services at a time when we need to be at our sharpest, with a negative impact on countless staff and loss of expertise.

For the sake of democracy, we need to set our path on increasing our numbers at May's elections, positioning ourselves better for any future changes. ●



Ivana La Valle is a Visiting Scholar at the University of East London

Improving take-up of the early education entitlement among disadvantaged children is key to meeting the government target of 75 per cent of five-year-olds being 'ready to learn' by 2028.

Research funded by the Nuffield Foundation has highlighted how policy developments in the past decade could be undermining efforts to reduce inequalities in participation in early education, by prioritising working families and failing to tackle barriers for disadvantaged children.

The Government has signalled its intention to establish a better balance between the dual policy aims of supporting a better start for children and facilitating parental employment.

The early years pupil premium for disadvantaged children has been increased substantially, although it remains less generous than the primary school premium, particularly for looked after children. Furthermore, the funding rates for three to four-year-olds are still considered inadequate.

The research has also highlighted the key role local authorities can play in supporting take-up of the early education entitlement among disadvantaged children.

Take-up rates vary considerably across councils, from below 50 per cent to more than 90 per cent. Our research focused on councils with take-up rates well above what could be expected, given their local context, to explore how they supported disadvantaged children's participation in early education.

In these councils, early education was a key element of the local early years strategy developed by senior managers and supported by elected members, who understood the long-lasting benefits of good-quality early education, particularly for disadvantaged children.

Commitment from service leaders and lead members was reflected in approaches to support take-up, which



Reducing inequalities in early education

included a relentless focus on supporting disadvantaged children's participation in early education – even when national policy was pulling them away to deliver the working families' entitlements.

Other approaches included:

- An expectation that all family-facing professionals, from health visitors to library staff, helped parents make informed choices about their child's early education.
- The involvement of parents in promoting the benefits of early education within their communities and in identifying barriers to take-up of the entitlement.
- Sufficient resources to reach disadvantaged children and give tailored support to families facing barriers to take-up, such as the entitlement application or finding a suitable nursery.
- Working with settings that offer genuinely free places to disadvantaged families that cannot pay 'top ups', which are becoming very common, as the entitlement is under-funded and local authorities do not have the powers and resources to regulate how nurseries offer funded places.

In addition to learning from these councils, the research shows there is more that senior managers and councillors could do to reduce inequalities in early learning experiences. These include: supporting early years teams to robustly challenge settings' admission practices that exclude and stigmatise disadvantaged children, as these are becoming increasingly common; developing strategies for supporting settings that cater for disadvantaged children and communities, as these are declining and are being replaced by nurseries that cater mainly for working families and more affluent areas; monitoring early education attendance, which is considerably lower among disadvantaged children; and removing barriers that may prevent children from enjoying and benefiting from their early education experience. ●

i 'Early education for disadvantaged children: how local action can support take-up of the 15 hours entitlement', see bit.ly/3ZLc3VM

Part of the solution



Councillor Andrew Morgan OBE
is Leader of the Welsh Local
Government Association

While eagerly awaiting the local government settlement at the end of 2024, Welsh councils were yet again called on to respond to widespread damage and disruption wrought by appalling weather conditions.

Successive storms Bert and Darragh battered all parts of the nation as local authority teams worked tirelessly, alongside colleagues in the emergency services, to support residents, communities and businesses.

From setting up and managing overnight shelters, to helping to evacuate people, clearing debris and working to minimise risk to the public, dedicated council workers in all parts of the country went above and beyond the call of duty to urgently respond to the effects of ferocious winds and flooding.

Councils are now leading on the longer-term recovery efforts to respond to badly damaged infrastructure and ongoing flood risk in many places.

It was against this backdrop that the Welsh Government announced its draft local government settlement.

Councils in Wales will receive an average funding increase of 4.3 per cent in 2025, representing £6.1 billion in real terms, alongside a range of other previously announced additional funding packages.



Storm Bert batters the south Wales coast

As Leader of the Welsh LGA, I warmly welcome the Welsh Government's commitment to supporting local government.

Notably, this settlement was the first since the new UK Chancellor's Autumn Statement; extra funding announced for Wales has enabled the Welsh Government to inject more than £1 billion extra in additional cash for councils than would have been the case under the previous UK administration.

This is a statement of intent to be welcomed, which will help to maintain essential local services in our communities.

Nevertheless, more than a decade of savage cuts and lack of investment in the public sector cannot be undone overnight in one settlement.

Ever-rocketing service demand and costs will continue to strain councils' finances and their ability to balance their budgets.

We are also pressing colleagues in the UK Government for urgent clarity around support for employers' National Insurance contributions, to give councils certainty in budget planning.

Local government is wholeheartedly committed to continuing to work in close partnership with the Welsh and UK Governments to secure essential local services for the future, so that they are still there to support those who need them.

I'm particularly grateful to Jayne Bryant, Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government, for her close engagement with us, and will look forward to continuing our constructive dialogue during the settlement consultation period to explore introducing a funding floor to support those authorities receiving less-than-average increases.

The outlook across the public sector is teeming with difficulty, including the crisis in social care, public finances, and climate change, to name but a few.

But as councils across Wales continue to support communities in the wake of brutal winter storms, I am reminded that local government is a key part of the solution to the defining challenges of our age because of its intimate local knowledge, ability to mobilise at speed, and role in delivering national policy.

In an uncertain world, these qualities will mark local government as an indispensable partner to UK and Welsh Governments alike. ●

i To find out more about the work of the Welsh LGA, please visit www.wlga.wales

Disengaged voters



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

The final by-elections of 2024 only served to emphasise what we have been pointing out for months – that the electorate appears both volatile and disengaged.

Labour lost four seats – two each to the Conservatives and Reform.

Its share fell back in every case where a comparison with a previous election could be made; the Conservative share was also down in both cases where Reform was victorious.

Reform polled an average of a quarter of the vote from a standing start in the 10 out of 13 vacancies it contested.

Yet all this activity passed the vast majority of voters by.

In seven contests, fewer than one in five electors cast a ballot; the highest turnout, just 24.4 per cent, was in the Liberal Democrat safe seat of Dodworth, Barnsley.

Attention now turns to the largely county-level contests in May. It's currently uncertain how many authorities will actually have elections pending discussions on devolution and unitary status.

However, the legacy from when these seats were last fought in 2021 (and indeed 2017) could not be clearer.

Taking into account boundary changes due to come into force in 16 of the 32 authorities scheduled to go to the polls,

the Conservatives will be defending more than six in 10 of all 2,240 vacancies.

Labour and the Liberal Democrats, by contrast, each defend more than 1,000 seats fewer than the Conservatives.

This rather skewed picture is the product of two successful electoral cycles for the Conservatives.

In 2017, the party secured nearly half of all votes cast in the English counties at a time, just five weeks before the general election, when it looked as if Theresa May was on course to win a landslide victory.

In 2021, Boris Johnson's government was still basking in public approval of its

"In the current climate, neither major party can be looking forward to May"

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handling of the pandemic – the vaccine rollout in particular – winning control of all but three of the now 21 county councils, and of seven of nine ‘county’ unitaries.

In the current climate, neither major party can be looking forward to May.

The Conservatives can surely only go backwards from an historic high point. Labour faces a set of elections that are always among its weakest and with its poll ratings below where they were in either 2017 or 2021.

So, inevitably, speculation will mount about the degree to which Reform can exploit the public mood.

Looking back to the 2013 county and unitary council elections, the wild card in those contests was also a Nigel Farage-led party – UKIP.

UKIP’s 20 per cent vote share pushed Labour very hard for second place – across the counties, the party polled just 250 votes fewer overall than its rival – but it is the geography of the party’s success that offers the best clues.

In Boston, where, in 2024, former Reform Leader Richard Tice captured the second safest Conservative parliamentary constituency in the country, UKIP won five of the seven county divisions; in Great Yarmouth, won by Reform’s Rupert Lowe last year, it was five out of nine.

Other parts of East England and the south coast where UKIP attracted the

By-election results

Barnsley, Dodworth LIB DEM HELD

25.4% over Reform | Turnout 24.4%

Cardiff, Splott LAB HELD

16.7% over Green | Turnout 19.0%

Chelmsford, South Hanningfield Stock and Margaretting CON HELD

74.0% over Green | Turnout 24.0%

Dudley, Brockmoor and Pensnett CON GAIN FROM LAB

5.3% over Reform | Turnout 15.7%

Essex, Stock CON HELD

11.6% over Reform | Turnout 19.0%

Fylde, Kilgrimol CON GAIN FROM IND

18.4% over Reform | Turnout 21.1%

Greenwich, West Thamesmead LAB HELD

12.4% over Lib Dem | Turnout 14.9%

Runnymede, Ottershaw IND HELD

20.7% over Con | Turnout 21.0%

South Oxfordshire, Cholsey LIB DEM HELD

38.5% over Con | Turnout 20.5%

St Helens, Blackbrook REFORM GAIN FROM LAB

6.5% over Lab | Turnout 16.3%

Swale, Milton Regis REFORM GAIN FROM LAB

8.0% over Res | Turnout 17.0%

Wakefield, Featherstone LAB HELD

16.3% over Lib Dem | Turnout 16.4%

Wokingham, Shinfield CON GAIN FROM LAB

30.0% over Lab | Turnout 21.7%

i For more information on all recent by-elections, please visit lgafirst.co.uk/local-by-elections

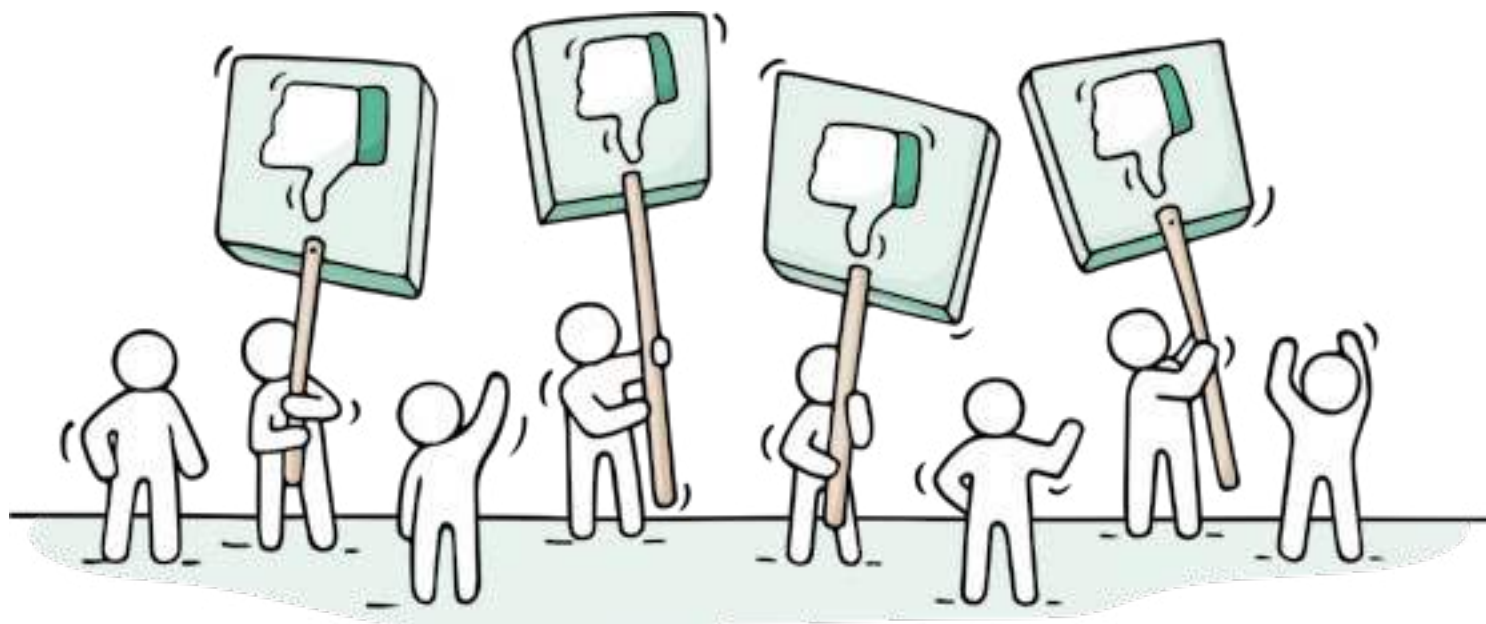
“The focus on Reform should not lead us to overlook either the Liberal Democrats or the Greens”

support of a third or more of electors a dozen years ago included Basildon and Castle Point in Essex; Folkestone & Hythe, Swale, and Thanet in Kent; South Holland in Lincolnshire; and Adur in West Sussex.

And, of course, UKIP’s actual and potential electoral success had already been a factor in persuading a reluctant David Cameron that there was little alternative to conceding a referendum on EU membership. Could Reform have a

similar impact on the big picture of English politics again this year?

The focus on Reform should not lead us to overlook either the Liberal Democrats or the Greens. Although their showing since July has been rather low key, they proved at the general election that in parts of counties such as Cambridgeshire, Devon, Suffolk and Wiltshire they are well placed to pose an alternative threat to the Conservatives from the ‘left’. ●





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