

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT first

Local  
Government  
Association

No.710 December 2025

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# The Budget

SEND, housing and more...

## Care reforms

LGA to consult members  
on Casey review **p12**

## Men's health strategy

A significant milestone for  
public health **p13**

## Operating models

Putting control of buses  
back in local hands **p28**

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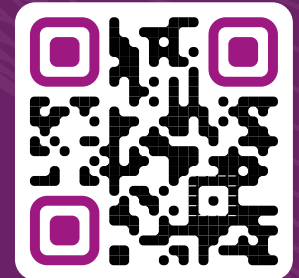
GOOD INVESTMENT

## LGA Local Government Annual Finance Conference 2026

Thursday 8 January 2026, London

The Local Government Annual Finance Conference 2026 will offer perspectives on the 2026/27 provisional Local Government Finance Settlement and the Fair Funding Review 2.0, as well as look to the longer-term for local government. It will also cover issues raised in the Autumn Budget 2025, and key current issues facing local government finance professionals in their local authorities, departments, and organisations.

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## Budget news

**Last week's Budget** saw key announcements for councils, including on council deficits in respect of provision for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) – but there was no significant additional funding to help ensure the financial sustainability of local government.

You can read more about the Budget and the LGA's initial responses to it in this edition of **first** (p4-5, p10). We also hear from the Welsh LGA on the Welsh Government's draft budget (p25).

Also happening last week (26-28 November) was the National Children and Adult Services Conference in Bournemouth, attended by 1,150 delegates, speakers and exhibitors.

As ever, it was an amazing opportunity for dedicated colleagues working in adult social care and services for children and young people to come together, share good practice and discuss key issues for their sectors (p12, p14).

Elsewhere in this edition, you can read about: the first men's health strategy in England (p13); community safety and resilience (p17); LGA guidance for councillors on responding to disinformation (p24); new workforce strategies to help councils with recruitment and retention of key staff (p22); and reform of local bus services – courtesy of Simon Lightwood MP, Minister for Roads and Buses (p28). ●

**Councillor Louise Gittins** is LGA Chair.



## FEATURES

- 10 The Budget**  
Government to take over SEND spending
- 12 Interlocking reforms**  
LGA to consult on Casey care review
- 13 Men's health strategy**  
A significant milestone for public health
- 14 Children's services**  
SEND reform is key to shaping the future
- 15 Rising needs in U5s**  
LGA calls for inclusive early years education
- 16 Healthier children**  
Invest in leadership to tackle inequalities
- 17 Making places safer**  
Councils understand community needs
- 18 Civil resilience**  
Preparedness is about people, says new guide
- 19 The power of peers**  
Building confidence and mutual trust
- 20 Meet the contestants**  
The LGA's flagship LG Challenge launches for 2026
- 22 Recruit and retain**  
Strategies for a future-ready workforce
- 23 Getting active**  
Addressing inequalities for children in care
- 24 Intent to deceive**  
New councillor guide on tackling disinformation

## COMMENT

- 25 Welsh draft budget**  
Beyond stability: the future for councils
- 28 Operating models**  
Putting control of buses back in local hands
- 28 Transport toolkit**  
Help with organising bus networks

## REGULARS

- 04 Chair's comment**
- 04 News**
- 09 Parliament – knife crime**
- 26 LGA group leaders**
- 30 Local by-elections**



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# Budgeting for care



Councillor Louise Gittins  
is Chair of the LGA

**Last month's Budget** coincided with the LGA's National Children and Adult Services Conference, held this year in Bournemouth.

More than 1,100 delegates, speakers, and people with lived experience met to share good practice and discuss the big issues in adult social care and children's services. It was a juxtaposition that highlighted the absence of any reference in the Budget to one of the biggest challenges facing local government – adult social care.

People who rely on care and support, as well as those who provide it, will be understandably worried about the sustainability of services given that no new funding was announced.

Provision for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is another huge cost pressure, so it is positive that, in the Budget, the Government pledged to absorb SEND costs from 2028/29.

As **first** was going to press, however, we await clarity on how this will be funded – and what will be done about

existing high-needs deficits, which are pushing many councils to the brink.

Finally, temporary accommodation completes the triumvirate of major cost pressures facing councils – so we have welcomed the Chancellor's announcement of a Treasury-led review of value for money across government spending, including homelessness services.

However, with the temporary accommodation subsidy gap projected to cost local government more than £3 billion up to 2029/30, it is illogical that the local housing allowance rates councils receive from government are a decade and a half old. The rate must be brought into line with the current reality.

When it comes to overall council finances, the Government has responded to key LGA calls – most notably for greater financial stability and a simpler funding system. We now have a three-year funding settlement for councils in England from 2026/27, and the Government's response to its Fair Funding 2.0 consultation.

But while overall funding has started to go up in recent years, the Budget did not provide the increased funding that councils need to sustain vital local services. We continue to urge government to take steps to protect our sector. ●



## Government 'to fund SEND'

**The Government has** pledged to fund the full cost of provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) from 2028/29.

The announcement, in last month's Autumn Budget, promised further details on plans to support local authorities with historic and accruing deficits, and the conditions for accessing such support, through the upcoming provisional local government finance settlement (LGFS).

Historic high-needs deficits are running at billions of pounds, with the County Councils Network warning last month that councils face "unimaginable" deficits related to SEND spending of £18 billion by the end of this Parliament.

Cllr Amanda Hopgood, Chair of the LGA's Children, Young People and Families Committee, said: "While it is positive that government has committed to absorbing the costs of SEND spending from 2028/29 – and we look forward to clarity on how this will be funded – this does not address existing deficits, which are pushing many councils to the financial brink.

"In the provisional LGFS, we urge the Government to write off these deficits – both the current accumulated deficits and any future deficits expected up to and including 2028/29 – and to fully fund all associated costs, such as home-to-school transport, over this period, ahead of setting out wider, comprehensive reform of the SEND system in the schools white paper." ●

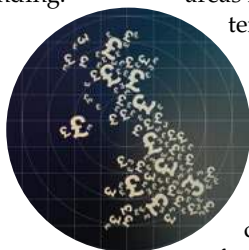
# Budget 'doesn't address pressures on council finances'

**Local government finances** remain "under severe pressure", the LGA has warned, after last week's Budget failed to provide significant increased funding.

Chancellor Rachel Reeves announced a swathe of measures, including the ending of the two-child benefit cap, a council tax surcharge for homes worth more than £2 million, a tourist levy, and a new vehicle excise duty for electric vehicles.

Cllr Kevin Bentley, the LGA's Senior Vice-Chairman, said: "Scrutiny of the Budget will focus on decisions around national taxation. However, while people rightly care about tax levels and the cost of living, they also care deeply about the local services they rely on every day.

"Councils work tirelessly to deliver on the ambitions of residents and are key to solving many of the challenges the Government is looking to address.



"However, local government finances remain under severe pressure, with councils facing huge cost pressures in areas including adult social care,

temporary accommodation, special educational needs and disabilities, and home-to-school transport.

"The Government has acted on LGA calls to provide greater financial certainty and a simpler funding system, which are hugely important for councils.

"While funding levels have increased in recent years, councils will be rightly anxious that the Budget does not provide the increase in funding they desperately need to ensure their financial sustainability, protect services, support local communities and address national priorities.

● See p10. See p25 for WLGA comment on the draft Welsh budget ●

## Local experience 'must inform pandemic planning'

**The LGA has** called for local government's experience of COVID-19 to inform future national planning and decision-making.

The response follows publication late last month of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry's latest report, which characterised the response of the four UK governments to the pandemic as "too little, too late".

Cllr Kevin Bentley, LGA Senior Vice-Chairman, said: "During the pandemic,

local government often had to act decisively. Councils worked tirelessly to protect lives, maintain essential services, and support local businesses and communities.

"Their efforts demonstrate the vital role of local leadership and local knowledge in times of national emergency.

"The inquiry's findings and recommendations underline the urgent need for reform. Future resilience depends on stronger partnership

between central and local government, clearer emergency protocols, and sustained investment in public health and local infrastructure.

"The LGA and our member councils provided extensive evidence to the inquiry on the challenges faced and the solutions needed. This evidence makes clear that local government's experience must inform national planning and decision-making. Councils must be empowered with the resources, data, and authority to act swiftly and effectively when emergencies occur." ●

## New funding formulae published

**The Government has** set out how councils in England will be funded from 2026/27, with new funding formulae based on 2025 indices of deprivation, population projections and service demand.

As part of the Fair Funding Review 2.0, it has also pledged: £2.4 billion for children's social care reforms; £2.4 billion for a new ring-fenced and combined homelessness, rough sleeping and domestic abuse grant; and a £600 million recovery grant for areas with the greatest immediate needs and less ability to raise income locally.

Cllr Pete Marland, Chair of the LGA's Local Government Resources Committee, said: "There are some positive measures included in these reforms, such as multi-year settlements, fewer fragmented ring-fenced grants and reduced reliance on competitive bidding. However, some councils will clearly do better than others from these allocation plans.

"It is good that government has pledged some extra transitional support, but we reiterate our call for all councils, rural and urban, to be protected from real-terms cuts to ensure their financial sustainability.

"It is now critical that the provisional local government finance settlement is published as a matter of urgency, so councils are not waiting until the Christmas period to understand what allocations they will receive.

"Greater financial certainty and a simpler funding system are important, but council finances remain under severe pressure. Councils are facing huge cost increases in areas including adult social care, temporary accommodation, SEND and home-to-school transport, so need a significant boost in resources to prevent widespread financial failure" ●

## Councils ‘essential to reducing economic inactivity’

**Councils must be** at the forefront of national efforts to reduce economic inactivity and strengthen the workforce, the LGA has said, in response to recent government initiatives.

In its final report, published last month, the Keep Britain Working review highlighted how one in five working-age adults is not working because of ill health, costing the UK the equivalent of 7 per cent of gross domestic product; and the disability employment rate, at 53 per cent, lags behind other major economies.

In response, the Government has joined forces with 60 major employers and mayoral strategic authorities, who will act as ‘Vanguards’ – early adopters developing and refining workplace health approaches and trialling new models, with the aim of establishing an evidence base for a voluntary healthy-working standard by 2029.

The LGA supports the report’s ambition to tackle economic inactivity, but has warned that its proposals “will only succeed if local government is fully involved”.

Meanwhile, the Government’s Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper outlines a clearer role for strategic authorities, including in preventing young people from becoming ‘not in education, employment or training’.

However, it is vital that government works with councils within and outside devolution areas to ensure every community benefits from a coherent, responsive and locally driven skills offer, according to the LGA.

Cllr Tom Hunt, Chair of the LGA’s Inclusive Growth Committee, said: “Councils already play an essential role in bringing together a sometimes-fragmented skills offer for residents and employers.” ●

# Temporary accommodation funding gap ‘to hit £3bn’

**The cumulative cost** to councils in England of the temporary accommodation subsidy gap could reach £3 billion by the end of the decade, according to new LGA analysis.

The findings, released ahead of the Autumn Budget, highlight the growing strain caused by temporary accommodation and how the subsidy funding gap – the difference between what councils pay out in housing benefit for households in temporary accommodation and what they are reimbursed by the Department for Work and Pensions – compounds this.

Although households receive their full housing benefit entitlement, the amount councils can reclaim has been capped at 90 per cent of 2011 local housing allowance (LHA) rates for more than a decade.

With demand for temporary accommodation rising sharply, and rents increasing far above 2011 levels, councils are covering an ever-greater share of the bill themselves.

The LGA’s analysis shows the annual gap is set to rise by almost 50 per cent



in the next five years, from around £270 million to nearly £400 million, without government action. In 2023/24, councils spent £1.05 billion on housing benefit for temporary accommodation, but received only £780 million back, leaving a £266 million shortfall.

Councils spent £2.8 billion on temporary accommodation in 2024/25, suggesting the subsidy gap will be even wider once full data is published.

The LGA says uprating the reimbursement rate to 90 per cent of today’s LHA levels would reduce the projected cumulative cost to councils by £700 million by 2029/30. ●

## Guidance published on social and affordable housing

**The Government has** published guidance for the £39 billion Social and Affordable Homes Programme, which aims to accelerate the delivery of secure, affordable homes to ease national housing pressures.

Under the programme, up to £7 billion will be made available across six mayoral regions, with the Government expecting around 300,000 affordable homes to be built — at least 60 per cent for social rent.

Councils will be responsible for

bringing many of these schemes forward, supported by new measures to remove barriers that have historically limited their ability to build at scale.

These include early-stage funding through the Council Housebuilding Support Fund, enhanced flexibility to combine Right to Buy receipts with government grant from next year, and access to Homes England’s new portfolio route to enable larger, more ambitious projects.

Cllr Tom Hunt, Chair of the LGA’s Inclusive Growth Committee, said: “Given the central role of councils in delivering these homes, it is vital that mayors work closely with local authorities to secure the greatest impact from this investment.” ●

## Changes to integrated care

**The Government has** announced a reduction in integrated care board staff numbers and NHS England administrative and managerial staff to redistribute £1 billion a year to frontline care. The moves are part of plans to bring NHS England back into the Department of Health and Social Care within two years.

However, an NHS Confederation report on the state of integrated care systems, published before the announcement, highlighted the positive legacy of integrated health and care in tackling inequalities and improving outcomes.

Cllr Dr Wendy Taylor MBE, Chair of the

LGA's Health and Wellbeing Committee, said that "councils remain committed to working collaboratively with health partners to ensure we retain a steadfast focus on the outcomes needed by the communities we serve, and for people to live healthy and well".

She added that "the vital role of local government must be recognised" to seize the opportunities in the 10 Year Health Plan for England, including the development of a neighbourhood health service. Strong relationships between local government, health and voluntary and community sector leaders "will be key to its success". ●



## Children in care 'up 18 per cent'

**The number of** looked-after children in England is almost 18 per cent higher than 10 years ago, with 81,770 in the care of councils as of 31 March 2025. In 2015, the figure was 69,460, according to the most recent Department for Education figures.

Meanwhile, the number of child protection investigations carried out by councils stood at 230,590 in the year up to 31 March 2025 – averaging 631 every day, according to LGA analysis.

Key drivers behind the increase in children needing support include mental

health concerns and domestic abuse. The rise in investigations has also been fuelled by an increase in schools making referrals to children's social services.

It follows recent warnings by the LGA of the worsening financial pressures on councils, reflected in councils overspending on children's social care by an average of 14.2 per cent annually.

The LGA is calling on the Government to ensure that all councils receive sufficient funding to invest long term into family help, child protection, child in care and care leaver services.

Cllr Amanda Hopgood, Chair of the LGA's Children, Young People and Families Committee, said: "Councils want to do everything they can to support children and young people, and help them to lead happy lives where they can thrive.

"However, these figures are a reminder of the huge pressures that councils are under to provide this support." ●

## News in brief

### Awaab's Law

The LGA has called the phased introduction of Awaab's Law "positive", particularly the decision to focus initially on damp and mould. However, it has warned that chronic pressures on housing stock and funding gaps could limit councils' ability to intervene as effectively as they would like. Cllr Tom Hunt, Chair of the LGA's Inclusive Growth Committee, said: "Everyone has the right to live in a safe, decent, warm and affordable home, and health hazards should be fixed in a timely manner. However, councils need sufficient funding to mitigate the existing pressures on housing stock."

### SEND transport

A National Audit Office report has highlighted rising demand for home-to-school transport and the financial pressures on councils to provide this, particularly for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Cllr Amanda Hopgood, Chair of the LGA's Children, Young People and Families Committee, said: "[It] reinforces the urgent need for government to...tackle the lack of mainstream inclusion in schools for children with SEND. It is not right that a child has to travel a long distance to school because there is no adequate provision near to their home."

### Commissioners scrapped

Police and crime commissioners (PCCs) are to be abolished from 2028, the Government has announced. Cllr Matt Boughton, Chair of the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Committee, paid tribute to the work that PCCs have done, adding: "We are pleased to see that the strong link between policing and local communities will be maintained, particularly in areas that will see the introduction of new local authority-led policing boards."

## News in brief

**Online safety**

The LGA has called for a better response from social media platforms to online abuse of politicians, after a cross-party Speakers' Conference report warned that abuse and intimidation towards MPs and candidates is becoming normalised. Cllr Matt Boughton, Chair of the LGA Stronger and Safer Communities Committee, said: "Too many councillors and candidates, faced with online abuse, have found the major social media platforms to be unresponsive, uninterested or slow to react, even in severe cases. This needs to change."

**Help for NEETs**

More power and resources should be devolved to councils, mayors, providers and others to reduce the number of young people not in education, training or employment (NEET), according to a report from the Lords Social Mobility Policy Committee. Cllr Tom Hunt, Chair of the LGA's Inclusive Growth Committee, said: "Early, preventative measures to support young people who are, or are at risk of being, NEET are vital. This needs to be supported by long-term funding, including replacing the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which ends in March 2026, to be made available to all areas via local government."

**Your views**

The LGA's biennial Perceptions Survey, conducted independently by M-E-L Research, has launched. This important survey gathers feedback from across local government to help us understand how well we're supporting councils and where we can improve. Please look out for an email titled 'Can you take a few minutes to share your views on the Local Government Association?'

# New crisis and resilience fund 'falls short'

**Only 2 per cent** of councils believe funding for the new Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF) will be sufficient to meet local welfare needs 'to a great extent', according to an LGA survey.

The £842 million-a-year CRF for England is set to replace the Household Support Fund (HSF) and Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) from April 2026.

Two-thirds of councils in England report rising household financial hardship and expect this trend to continue, according to the survey.

While councils welcome the aim of combining emergency support with preventative measures to build financial resilience, they warn of tight timelines, funding adequacy and administrative challenges – with just 15 per cent confident that the CRF will be ready by April.

The HSF provides vital crisis support through cash-first help, vouchers and longer-term measures, such as debt advice, while DHP assists with housing costs.

Councils have stressed the importance of retaining these strengths in the new scheme and would support a fully funded statutory requirement for local advice provision.



Cllr Dr Wendy Taylor MBE, Chair of the LGA's Health and Wellbeing Committee, said: "Reducing financial hardship can have a direct impact on reducing existing health inequalities. Streamlining the funds together will be a challenge, as they are currently administered by different tiers of local government, with different rules and purposes.

"Councils should have a key role in the commissioning and delivery of the services, to ensure they can be integrated effectively with local services to improve health and wellbeing... it is vital that the development of the new approach is informed by the experiences of residents, support organisations and councils." ●

## Reforms proposed to councillor standards

**Councils will have** new powers to suspend elected members for serious misconduct for up to six months, and withhold allowances, under proposals for reforming the current councillors' standards regime.

A new mandatory code of conduct will also apply to all types and tiers of local authority in England, holding all councillors to the same standard.

Cllr Matt Boughton, Chair of the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Committee, said: "The vast majority of councillors act with the best of intentions and uphold high standards. Yet, in those cases where standards have fallen, it is clear that the current system does not meet the

requirements of modern local government.

"We support measures that foster an environment in which respectful debate and freedom of speech is encouraged, providing clear national standards through a mandatory code, and robust, but proportionate, sanctions for misconduct.

"Equally, reforms must protect the rights of councillors and complainants, while ensuring local representation is not inappropriately disrupted.

"We urge the Government to work closely with councils to implement these reforms in a way that best serves councils and their communities, and will respond to the Government's legislative proposals in full when they're released." ●

# Tackling knife crime

Reducing violence means confronting the underlying causes

**K**nife crime remains a stark challenge for the country, and local government is uniquely placed to tackle it.

Enforcement is of course crucial, but without long-term investment in prevention, the cycle of violence will persist.

In the year to March 2024, there were around 50,500 recorded offences involving a sharp instrument in England and Wales.

Hospital admissions have also climbed, and in 2023/24 there were 262 homicides involving sharp instruments, up from 243 the previous year.

These figures highlight that knife crime is not a brief spike but a worrying upward trend – one driven by deep-rooted social factors, not just easy access to knives.

The LGA recently reiterated its position ahead of a Westminster Hall debate in Parliament on the issue.

We argued that solely cracking down on knife supply isn't enough. Reducing violence sustainably means confronting the underlying causes: deprivation, cuts to youth services, inequality and the erosion of local preventative capacity.

Councils, working closely with police, schools, health services and community organisations, offer the most promising route for long-term change.

We have called for a public health approach to knife crime – blending social care, education and law enforcement to build resilience and steer young people away from violence.

Yet that kind of intervention depends on sustained, multi-year funding and a funding model that better accounts for deprivation. Cuts in youth services, housing and education have severely weakened many councils' ability to prevent crime before it starts.



Nevertheless, there are successes on the ground.

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council's anti-knife crime awareness drives, Hackney Council's outreach programmes, Liverpool's multi-agency week of action, and London boroughs supported by the Crime Prevention Fund all demonstrate that well-resourced local strategies can have impact.

But local innovation alone won't bridge the gap. National coordination, long-term finance and greater policy alignment are essential.

Eradicating knife crime will not happen overnight. Rather, we need sustained reduction, grounded in pragmatism.

We need a child-first justice system that rehabilitates rather than criminalises young people, and for cross-government collaboration to address poverty, mental health and family instability – the

roots that too often feed knife violence.

Our message is clear: we cannot arrest our way out of knife crime.

Enforcement has a role, but the real opportunity lies in the long game: prevention, partnership and people. Without investing in youth services, education, community resilience and multi-agency working, any short-term drop in offences is likely to be fragile.

The LGA will continue to call for a serious, long-term plan – one that trusts councils, funds them properly and builds on what is already working.

Knife crime isn't just a policing issue; it's a community issue, and local government must remain at the heart of the solution. ●

**i** To find out more about the work of the LGA's public affairs team, please visit [local.gov.uk/parliament](https://local.gov.uk/parliament)

# Autumn Budget 2025

The Chancellor delivered the Budget last week, with several proposals impacting on councils and their communities.

In the LGA's headline response, we said public attention will focus on decisions around national taxation and the cost of living, but that communities also care deeply about the local services they rely on every day.

We made clear that councils work tirelessly to deliver on the ambitions of residents and are key to solving many of the challenges the Government is looking to address.

However, the sector's finances remain under severe strain, with councils facing huge cost pressures in areas including adult social care, temporary accommodation, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and home-to-school transport.

The Government has responded to LGA calls for greater financial certainty and a simpler funding system.

Funding has risen in recent years, but we are anxious that the Budget does not provide the level of funding councils urgently need to ensure their financial sustainability, protect services and support local communities.

There were several significant policy decisions in the Budget, including on bringing SEND spending into government from 2028/29, social rent convergence, and future asylum accommodation changes.

However, these will be subject to further consultation or future announcements, and the LGA will respond on behalf of its members to each one. Councils require early clarity so they can plan services and budgets effectively.

New initiatives across health integration, planning, economic crime, digital transformation and employment support will depend on close collaboration with local government. Ensuring councils have a clear role within design and delivery will be critical to achieving intended outcomes.

New flexibilities and funding for mayoral authorities, such as integrated



settlements, business rates retention zones and growth funds, represent important steps forward.

However, regions outside of devolution areas risk falling behind unless there is a clear pathway to gaining access to the opportunities that genuine devolution can provide.

The Budget's new growth measures offer opportunities to support local economic development.

Councils act as both democratic leaders and practical enablers of local growth. Their close connection to communities provides detailed understanding of local strengths, challenges and priorities – insight that is essential for shaping growth that is inclusive and sustainable.

The Budget introduces multiple changes across welfare, housing, skills, economic regulation, environmental policy and

tax. It will be important that new duties, regulatory requirements and expectations on councils are fully assessed, funded and phased to avoid adding further pressure on already stretched local services.

Finally, the absence of any reference to adult social care in the Budget represents a missed opportunity to address a widely recognised challenge.

People who rely on care and support, as well as those who provide it, will be understandably worried about the sustainability of services given no new funding was announced – despite the pressures across the sector.

Adult social care is the glue that helps hold many people's lives together, supporting them to do the things that matter most to them. Strengthening and investing in this system is an investment in us all, and action is needed now. ●

**i** This is an edited version of the LGA's Autumn Budget 2025 briefing. Please read the briefing in full at [local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses](https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses) for more detail on the issues covered here and responses to other issues in the Budget – including business rates, childcare costs, carer's allowance, social housing, growth, digital skills, apprenticeships, planning reform, potholes, playgrounds, health integration and neighbourhood health, soft drinks industry levy, tobacco and vapes licensing, trading standards, extended producer responsibility for packaging, landfill tax, electric vehicle charging infrastructure, combating crime, police governance, asylum and resettlement, and procurement.

# Budget 2025 announcements

## Council tax surcharge

- **New high-value council tax surcharge of £2,500 to £4,500 a year on owners of residential properties in England worth £2-5 million or more.**
- **Revenue will be used to support funding for local services.**

**LGA view:** We call on the Government to urgently work with us to address practical concerns about how it would work, and how to avoid issues such as the potential impact of non-compliance and appeals on council tax collection rates. Other unintended consequences, such as the implications of the scheme on any future council tax reform, also need to be considered.

## Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

- **SEND reforms to be published in the new year.**
- **Government to take on SEND costs from 2028/29.**

**LGA view:** While it is positive the Government has committed to absorbing the costs of SEND, we await clarity on how this will be funded. It is vital that decisions on SEND funding are not made at the expense of mainstream school budgets (see also p4 re. deficits and home-school transport).

## Alcohol licensing

- **Launch of the first National Licensing Policy Framework.**
- **Updated guidance to ensure relevant authorities consider the need to promote economic growth in their licensing decisions.**

**LGA view:** Councils are best placed to understand the unique needs of their communities and to strike the right balance between supporting local businesses and safeguarding residents. The imposition of a one-size-fits-all approach via a national framework will deny local communities a voice and marks a shift away from local democratic control.

## Child poverty

- **Removal of the two-child limit on the child element in universal credit.**

**LGA view\*:** Councils want to work with government to reduce child poverty and are pleased to see action that supports families who are working hard, but still struggling to make ends meet.

*\* Consensus could not be reached within the LGA on this position, so it reflects a majority view of the LGA's political leadership*

## Homelessness

- **Chief Secretary to the Treasury to lead value-for-money review on homelessness spending.**

**LGA view:** It is important that the sector, including the LGA and local authorities, are involved and support this review to make best use of local government expertise... It is disappointing that there was no announcement around local housing allowance rates being updated...

## Growth funding

- **£902 million over four years for a new local growth fund for 11 mayoral city regions in the North and Midlands.**
- **£500 million Mayoral Revolving Growth Fund for mayors in the North and Midlands with an integrated settlement.**
- **Mayoral strategic authorities to bid for around £7 billion through the successor to the Affordable Homes Programme.**

**LGA view:** We welcome the creation of a new local growth fund for mayoral city regions in the North and Midlands, as well as the Mayoral Revolving Growth Fund. However, the decision to focus investment in mayoral areas underlines the challenge for those areas yet to secure a devolution settlement... Councils outside devolution areas are keen to play their part in driving inclusive economic growth and all communities stand to benefit from new investment.

## Tourism levy

- **Visitor levy on overnight visitor accommodation, to invest in local growth, including the visitor economy.**

**LGA view:** The introduction of a tourism levy... marks a positive first step in recognising that meaningful devolution includes the power to raise appropriate local taxes. Local areas are best placed to ensure this additional funding is directed at the services and communities that bear the cost of welcoming and hosting visitors.

## Skills

- **Announcements on Connect to Work, the Youth Guarantee, and the Growth and Skills Levy.**
- **Launch of independent investigation to tackle rising youth inactivity, led by former Health Secretary Alan Milburn.**

**LGA view:** The Government has not provided successor arrangements to the employment and skills element of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), which will end in March 2026. This will impact areas outside devolution acutely, resulting in a significant loss of local jobs and skills support for residents not eligible or suitable for other more tightly defined national provision.

## Electric vehicle excise duty

- **New mileage charge for electric and plug-in hybrid cars, with effect from April 2028.**
- **Excise duty rates for cars, vans and motorcycles updated in line with RPI from 1 April 2026.**

**LGA view:** This... will add additional costs onto council budgets, and therefore local taxpayers, at a time when many councils are continuing to demonstrate leadership and make savings by the switch to zero and low emission fleets, including electric and plug-in hybrid.

# Interlocking care reforms

## LGA to consult members on Casey review



**Councillor Dr Wendy Taylor MBE is Chair of the LGA's Health and Wellbeing Committee**

**W**e all know health reform is at the top of the national agenda.

As a sector, we are working hard to ensure reform of adult social care is also high up the Government's list of priorities.

But reform is not one programme or one report; it is a constellation of interconnected changes moving at the same time, although often to different timescales.

Each of these reforms touches another – from workforce pay and the Fair Pay Agreement, neighbourhood health models and the 10 Year Health Plan for England's ambitions for a more preventative system, to the evolution of the Care Quality Commission's local authority assurance, the future of the Better Care Fund, and, of course, the Casey Commission (which now feels like it's fully under way).

Improved recruitment and retention in our workforce will help deliver more personalised care and make care work more attractive as a long-term career; neighbourhood

health ambitions will shape integration; and proposed changes to system governance and footprints will have direct implications for how we plan, commission and collaborate on care provision.

Reform cannot be approached in silos. It must be understood as one system, with shared outcomes and shared responsibilities.

Local government is central to these reforms. Councils play a vital role in realising a sustainable NHS and the Government's health objectives. That is why the LGA will shortly start a major engagement exercise with councils on local government's priorities for adult social care reform.

As part of this, we will bring together the sector's experience and expertise, informed by councils of all political colours.

This will run alongside the work of Baroness Casey's Commission, stressing that reform must be shaped with the sector, grounded in lived experience, and informed by the practical realities of councils, providers and communities, while also linking wider reform agendas such as

English devolution and local government reorganisation and the NHS Plan.

Moving towards next spring, when the commission produces its initial report, councils will want to see clarity about what a national care service will look like, and how they will be enabled to work in neighbourhoods with NHS services, care providers and the voluntary sector on prevention.

But if reform is to be successful, we must also change how social care is spoken about.

Too often, stories about adult social care are framed narrowly around cost, crisis or discharge – and if those are the stories we tell, how can we expect the public to imagine anything better?

We know that, at its best, good social care helps ensure that everyone can pursue the things that matter most to them, irrespective of their age or condition.

If we want the public and policymakers to understand the value of social care, the voices of those who live it must be central.

Because without public and political support, the long-term and sustainable investment needed to support it will remain out of reach.

We have a real opportunity with the Casey Commission. While its work is ongoing, we need to lay the groundwork, using stories to shape what is developed.

And when it concludes, it's vital those stories keep being told, so its recommendations don't land cold, but resonate with the public and politicians. ●



**i** This is an edited version of Cllr Taylor's speech to the National Children and Adult Services Conference, which took place in Bournemouth from 26-28 November

# Men's health strategy

A milestone for public health



Councillor Dr Wendy Taylor MBE is Chair of the LGA's Health and Wellbeing Committee

The formal publication late last month of the first-ever men's health strategy in England marked a significant milestone for public health.

A long overdue recognition of the stark inequalities men face in health outcomes, access and engagement, I'm proud of the part the LGA has played in progressing this work.

Alongside colleagues from across local government, we have long championed preventative approaches to men's health in the face of what we called a 'silent crisis'.

'Men's health: a strategic vision for England' responds to evidence that men are disproportionately affected by conditions like heart disease, cancer, Type 2 diabetes and suicide, and that they often delay seeking help until crisis point.

This matters because:

- Men in England live nearly four years fewer than women, on average.
- 75 per cent of premature deaths from heart disease occur in men.
- Men account for three out of four suicides, with suicide remaining the leading cause of death for men under 50.
- One in five men will die before the age of 65, often from preventable causes.
- Screening uptake is lower among men, and they are less likely to go to their GP early.

These inequalities are even more pronounced among working-class men and boys, who face higher rates of chronic illness, mental health challenges and premature mortality.

Insecure work, poor housing, low levels of educational attainment and financial



stress compound these risks, making targeted action essential.

Throughout the LGA's lobbying work on men's health, we have highlighted the amazing work of councils.

For example, many councils have supported local 'Men's Sheds' – a brilliant way to tackle loneliness and improve wellbeing. They provide a welcoming space where men can share skills, make friends and find purpose, helping them connect and thrive in their communities.

Wakefield Council is taking part in the Sport England and Football Foundation's Active Through Football scheme. There are a range of different activities run in deprived areas of the district, specifically targeting men.

Newark and Sherwood District Council worked with barbers to raise awareness of prostate cancer, testicular cancer and mental health. Barbers were trained to start conversations and signpost men to support.

Islington Council has launched a programme to improve the mental health of young black men. The three-year project involves work in schools and community outreach, as well as training for frontline staff such as police.

Melton Borough Council has funded a local farming support service to

run health checks at a livestock market.

Recognising men's health as a national concern is an important step to improving the stark discrepancies in life expectancy and health outcomes, particularly between men living in wealthy and deprived areas.

We know that men face barriers to care, including lower engagement with preventive services, cultural stigmas and distrust associated with seeking help.

Tailored interventions, such as mental health outreach and workplace health initiatives, are essential to overcoming these issues.

Local councils have been working in partnership with community groups and grassroots organisations to effectively address men's health in this way and they remain ideally placed to lead and foster this working.

Together, we can ensure that more men receive the support they need to lead longer, happier and healthier lives. ●

**i** For more on the health challenges facing white working-class males, please see the LGA's public health blogs, at [bit.ly/4oa582J](https://bit.ly/4oa582J).

The Men's Health Strategy for England can be downloaded from [gov.uk](https://gov.uk)

# Shaping the future of children's services

SEND reform is key



Councillor Amanda Hoggood is Chair of the LGA's Children, Young People and Families Committee

**T**his year feels particularly important for children, young people and families – a moment of great opportunity and significant challenge.

Reforms across health, social care and early years are gathering pace.

The new Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, the upcoming schools white paper, the introduction of Best Start Family Services, and a renewed focus on youth policy all signal a system in transition. Councils are ready to play their part in shaping that system, but we need the right national conditions to do so.

One of the key themes that will shape the future of children's services across the country is the Government's reform programmes for social care and for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision.

Across the country, children's social care is under enormous pressure. Councils are facing rising demand, increasing complexity, significant workforce shortages and spiralling placement costs.

A fair, inclusive and sustainable system is not only overdue; it is essential.

The Government's reform agenda represents a real opportunity to redesign the system. I'm pleased that last month's local government finance policy statement announced more than £2.4 billion for the Families First Partnership programme over the next three years.

However, we also want to ensure that any reform is grounded in what we know works: earlier intervention; strong, stable relationships; a diverse, high-quality placement market; support that reflects children's identities, families and communities; and a workforce supported to stay, grow and lead.

Similarly, children's social care placement costs continue to rise rapidly, alongside concerns about profiteering, market fragility and insufficient provision for children with the most complex needs.

Councils cannot deliver meaningful reform unless these market issues are addressed head-on.

We also know the system is at its best when children's voices are heard – so young people's insights must shape not just individual services, but also the narrative of reform itself.

Meanwhile, reform of the SEND system is one of the biggest priorities for councils, and one of the most complex.

The LGA welcomes the Government's intention to improve early identification, strengthen mainstream inclusion and stabilise the system. Such reform is both urgent and unavoidable.

To make it a success, we need:

- capacity and confidence in mainstream schools, so children receive the right support early
- a multidisciplinary workforce strategy across education, health and care
- clarity on the role of specialist and alternative provision
- a sustainable funding model, including a long-term solution to dedicated school grant deficits.

As **first** was going to press, there was some movement on the latter point, with the Chancellor announcing in her Budget that the Government would absorb SEND costs from 2028/29. This does not address existing deficits – now at more than £4 billion and projected to rise to £6 billion by 2026. These deficits pose a systemic risk that no council can resolve alone.

We must also be honest about home-to-school transport costs. Spending has reached £1.7 billion a year. That is a 170 per cent increase in less than a decade, and the system is teetering on the brink of collapse.

Reform must include eligibility, pick-up points, use of public transport and personal travel budgets, and a transparent conversation about funding.

SEND reform will only succeed if it is co-produced with parents, carers, young people and the professionals who support them every day, and councils stand ready to work with the Government to make this happen. ●

# Needs of under-fives on the increase

LGA calls for inclusive early years education



Councillor Amanda Serjeant is Vice-Chair of the LGA's Children, Young People and Families Committee



In response to data and feedback from councils in England showing rising numbers of children aged under five requiring additional support, the LGA commissioned consultants Isos Partnership to undertake independent research into this trend.

This attributed a range of factors to the increase in needs, such as a rise in poverty, family stress and hardship, increasing neurodivergence, and pandemic lockdowns. Research participants did suggest, however, that this has been a long-term trend and is therefore not fully attributable to the effects of the pandemic.

Councils and early years providers who responded to the research highlighted that they are increasingly providing support for children's communication and interaction needs.

Department for Education data supports this, highlighting that the proportion of children under the age of five who access their universal early education and childcare entitlement, and who are identified as having special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), rose from 6.3 per cent in 2024 to 8.9 per cent in 2025.

Education, health and care plans are now most commonly first issued to children aged four and five.

The research found that early years' practitioners feel under increasing pressure, often not considering themselves

equipped to support children, or lacking sufficient staff to cover the appropriate adult-to-child ratios.

Sometimes, children with additional and emerging needs cannot access their early years entitlements, thereby missing out on crucial learning and development.

In response, the LGA is highlighting the opportunity to develop an inclusive early education system that provides support for babies, children, parents and families.

With the Best Start In Life strategy, national rollout of Best Start Family Hubs, the 10 Year Health Plan for England and the upcoming schools' white paper, we can galvanise system change to improve outcomes for babies and children.

Targets for a 'good level of development' – a measure for early years education, defined by a child reaching the expected level in 12 early learning goals covering communication and language, physical development, literacy, maths, and personal, social and emotional development – sit with councils. However, the whole system needs to wrap around and provide support to children with additional and emerging needs, to prevent escalation.

The research highlighted positive

local practice, with early years providers supporting parents to navigate complex local systems, and councils working swiftly and effectively to identify needs and put in place support.

The LGA has long called for more powers and levers for councils to support early years providers to develop inclusive provision, and to ensure more children have access to early years educational entitlements. We've welcomed proposals set out in the Best Start in Life strategy to transform the funding system around early years, suggesting it should be used flexibly by councils to support providers and invest in preventative approaches.

Best Start in Life and the publication of the schools' white paper in the new year provide the opportunity to ensure a transformed, inclusive education system starts from the earliest years. ●

See [local.gov.uk/publications](https://www.local.gov.uk/publications) for the Isos Partnership research and the LGA's response to it. 'Rising needs in the early years' was launched at the National Children and Adults Services Conference in late November

# Raising healthier children

Tackling inequalities requires leadership and investment



Councillor Dr Wendy Taylor MBE is Chair of the LGA's Health and Wellbeing Committee

**A**s we mark 10 years since local authorities first took on responsibility for children's public health, I feel a sense of pride in the work our councils have done to tackle health inequalities among children, alongside a strong sense of urgency.

Over that decade, councils have embraced their responsibilities and made enormous strides in leading the way on tackling health inequalities.

Since 2015, despite real-term cuts of £858 million to the public health grant, we have continued to deliver the core services that matter most for our children – those of health visiting, school nursing and tailored community programmes supporting the youngest and some of the most vulnerable in society.

Yet the latest data tells a troubling story: that 10.5 per cent of children in reception classes are now living with obesity, the highest rate since the National Child

Measurement Programme began in 2006.

We have seen a modest decline in Year 6 obesity, post-pandemic, which is absolutely something to be celebrated. But overall levels, especially of overweight children, remain alarmingly high.

These are not just numbers, they are real children, and they are an early warning sign. When children begin life at an unhealthy weight, the risk of poor long-term health rises.

What's even more concerning is the scale of inequality, with children growing up in our most deprived communities more than twice as likely to be obese than those in more affluent areas.

We know this is not a matter of personal choice, it's about the environments in which our children are growing up.

Councils have been ambitious in leading, innovating, and intervening on children's public health. We're using planning powers to limit the concentration of fast-food outlets near schools. We're also promoting healthier advertising in public spaces, working with local businesses to offer better food options, and campaigning for public health teams to be statutory consultees in planning decisions.

But our efforts can only go so far without stronger national action. Our commitment to raising the healthiest

generation of children could be missed without funding and national leadership.

We're calling for the Government to reverse the 27 per cent real-terms cut to the public health grant since 2015 and to move to multi-year funding settlements so councils can plan with certainty.

Alongside this, we need a review of the distribution of public health funding, ensuring it reflects the current realities of shifting populations, rising deprivation and changing needs.

If councils had greater local control over the revenue from the soft drinks industry levy, it would enable us to reinvest in areas where health inequalities are the most severe and we can have the greatest impact – such as those with high obesity, tooth decay and inactivity rates among children.

Public health isn't a nice-to-have, it's central to prevention, early intervention and long-term wellbeing.

It underpins the NHS 10 Year Plan for England and forms the foundation for healthier, more resilient communities.

With strong national leadership, sustained investment, and real local powers, we can raise the healthiest generation of children. We owe our children and communities a future that is nothing less. ●

**“Children growing up in our most deprived communities are more than twice as likely to be obese than those in more affluent areas”**

**i** To find out more about the LGA's work on children and young people, please visit [local.gov.uk/children-and-young-people](https://www.local.gov.uk/children-and-young-people)



Councillor Matt Boughton is Chair of the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Committee

# Making places safer

## Councils understand community needs

As councils continue to face complex challenges to keep our residents and communities safe, the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Committee will focus this year on supporting them to tackle the issues that matter most to local people. These range from reducing violence and antisocial behaviour to improving local resilience and strengthening our democracy.

Recent months have shown just how vital and tough the role of councils is in maintaining safe, cohesive and resilient communities.

Whether it's working with the police to reduce antisocial behaviour, responding to rising reports of violence against women and girls (VAWG), or ensuring our regulatory and environmental health teams can protect the public, local government sits at the heart of the nation's safety.

A central priority for our committee this year will be the implementation of the Government's new VAWG strategy, due out soon.

Councils play a key role in prevention and support – from funding refuges and domestic abuse services to leading local partnerships that protect victims, and tackling perpetrators.

Working with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and organisations such as the charity Surviving Economic Abuse, we are working on resources to help councils identify and respond to



economic abuse, an often-hidden form of control that undermines financial independence and recovery.

Alongside this, the committee will champion the work of councils to tackle antisocial behaviour. Every resident has the right to feel safe in their home and local area.

Through our partnership with organisations such as Resolve, the national organisation for community safety and antisocial behaviour, we are pressing for government policy and new guidance to reflect the lived experience of councils and the communities they serve.

We are also exploring how data sharing and CCTV can support prevention, ensuring that local action remains proportionate, evidence-based and compliant with data protection legislation.

The committee will consider the implications of forthcoming police reform proposals, including changes to the police and crime commissioner role and the creation of local authority-led policing boards. We are working with the Home Office on how policing boards will operate.

Working closely with councils and partners, we will ensure local voices are heard and ensure reforms strengthen,

rather than complicate our partnership working.

Another key focus is improving councils' emergency preparedness and resilience. From flooding to cyber-attacks, councils are often the first responders when emergencies strike.

The LGA continues to call for a greater role for local government in national resilience planning and we have just published an updated councillor guide on civil emergencies to help elected members lead confidently during crises (see [p18](#) and [local.gov.uk/publications/councillors-guide-civil-resilience](#)).

Finally, we remain committed to cultivating a healthy local democracy, including ensuring that those who serve in local government can do so safely.

We continue to support efforts to lower barriers to elected office, and to lobby for better protections, an improved standards and conduct regime, and flexibilities to allow councillors to attend council meetings remotely.

Across all of this work, one message is clear: safe, resilient communities depend on strong local leadership, and it is councils that understand community needs, bring together local partners and deliver practical solutions.

The committee will continue to make the case that a safer country starts with empowered local government. ●

**i** To find out more about the work of the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Committee and its other policy committees, please visit [lga.moderngov.co.uk/mgListCommittees.aspx?](#)

# Civil resilience

## A new guide for councillors



Cllr Matt Boughton is Chair of the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Committee

**W**hen major emergencies strike – whether floods, terror attacks or tragedies such as the Grenfell Tower fire – communities look to their local councils for visible, compassionate and decisive leadership. The expectation is clear: act fast, work collaboratively with emergency services and partners, and keep essential day-to-day services running.

Once the immediate danger has passed, and the blue-light services have stepped back, it's often councils who stay on the frontline.

Recovery is rarely quick or simple: it's often a long, complex, resource-intensive and highly sensitive process. But it's also a chance to rebuild stronger, fairer and more connected communities – and councillors are central to making that happen.

Under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, councils have a legal duty to prepare for emergencies.

Real preparedness goes beyond plans on paper, however – it's about people. Everyone involved needs to understand their role, have the skills to carry it out and know they're supported to do it well.

For officers, that means developing the operational expertise to manage crises effectively. For councillors, it means stepping confidently into our political leadership role, before, during and after emergencies.

Officers and councillors

have distinct roles, but they're most powerful when they complement each other.

The LGA has recently updated guidance designed to support councils in strengthening their approach to civil resilience.

'A councillor's guide to civil resilience' gives an overview of a council's responsibilities in this area, along with targeted sections outlining the role of ward councillors and portfolio holders.

A new section also outlines how officers can support elected members in fulfilling their civil-resilience roles. Strong collaboration between officers and councillors is essential to ensure that the guidance translates into effective action on the ground.

Since this guidance was last updated, in 2018, the spotlight on the role of elected members in civil resilience has intensified.

The UK Government 2022 Resilience Framework and related Action Plan, published

earlier this year, call for a 'whole of society' approach, suggesting a role for local councillors as community leaders and convenors. They also make clear that local resilience forums – the multi-agency partnerships that bring together emergency services, local authorities, the NHS and other organisations to plan and prepare for major incidents and large-scale emergencies – should be more clearly accountable to democratically elected leaders.

The Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry reinforced this message with stark clarity: councillors, especially those in senior leadership roles, must provide meaningful oversight of preparedness and civic leadership during times of crisis, and will be held accountable if they fail to do so.

The LGA is committed to supporting councils' work on civil resilience. In 2026, we will be working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the UK Resilience Academy and other partners to roll out a training programme for council chief executives, as well as a series of videos to increase awareness of resilience among wider council staff.

We are also working with government colleagues on recommendations from the Grenfell inquiry, and continuing to advocate for local government to have a seat at the table in future pandemic planning. ●

**i** 'A councillor's guide to civil resilience' is available free on the LGA's website at [local.gov.uk/publications](https://www.local.gov.uk/publications). The framework and action plan are available on [gov.uk](https://www.local.gov.uk)





Councillor Jane Scullion is Chair of the LGA's Improvement Committee

# Harnessing the power of peers

## Building confidence and mutual trust

The LGA's Member Peer Conference late last month again highlighted one of local government's greatest strengths: the ability of councils to learn from each another.

Over two days in Kenilworth, more than 170 delegates from across the country came together to collaborate, constructively challenge each other, share insights and engage in practical learning.

Together, we reaffirmed the central role of peer-led improvement in helping councils and combined authorities to navigate change and deliver for their communities.

It was a pleasure to see such a strong sense of shared purpose among delegates, united by their commitment to supporting one another through challenge and transformation.

As Chair of the LGA's Improvement Committee, I believe this collective energy is what makes the LGA's improvement offer so powerful: it is driven by real-life experience, rooted in practice and shaped by a deep understanding of local government realities.

We were delighted to welcome Alison McGovern MP, Minister for Local Government and Homelessness, who recognised the vital contribution of peers in helping councils and combined authorities learn from each other and drive improvement. Her remarks reinforced the value government places

on collaboration and innovation at a local level, and the importance of the sector working together to tackle shared challenges.

One of the conference highlights came from Somerset Council's Leader, Cllr Bill Revans, and Chief Executive, Duncan Sharkey, who shared their council's remarkable transformation journey.

The creation of a new, unified authority from five predecessor councils was no small feat, and their insights offered practical lessons on leadership resilience and the importance of building a strong organisational culture. Their story demonstrated how peer support and sector-led improvement can make a tangible difference in guiding councils through periods of significant change.

Delegates also engaged in a series of interactive, hands-on workshops covering a wide range of topics. These included performance, finance and risk, peer mentoring, local government reorganisation, housing, navigating mayoral combined authorities, corporate parenting, artificial intelligence, and the work of the LGA's regional teams.

I enjoyed meeting fellow councillors, who told me they had particularly welcomed the opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences, helping to shape the next phase of the LGA's improvement support.

As ever, our conference underlined the fact that peer-led improvement is not simply about reviewing processes or sharing advice; it is about building confidence, developing capability and fostering a spirit of mutual trust that strengthens the whole sector.

I left the conference feeling energised and immensely proud of the commitment, skill and generosity of our peers, and the



difference that they make every day.

From providing tailored support to councils facing significant challenges, participating in peer challenges, helping new leaders to find their footing, providing mentoring or other peer-to-peer support, the conference reinforced the vital role of collaboration and shared learning in local government.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to making this year's Member Peer Conference such a success.

I look forward to continuing this important work with colleagues in the months ahead, ensuring that councils and combined authorities have the support, insight and connections they need to thrive. ●

**i** To find out more about the LGA's peer-led sector support offer, please visit [local.gov.uk/our-support](https://local.gov.uk/our-support). See [local.gov.uk/case-studies](https://local.gov.uk/case-studies) for a case study from Somerset Council on its transformation journey





# Leadership challenge

The LGA's flagship competition is launching for 2026

**E**ach year, the Local Government (LG) Challenge takes 10 talented officers and puts them through five real-life challenges hosted by councils across the country – culminating in a final event at the LGA's annual conference in July.

The competition pushes participants out of their comfort zones, encouraging fresh ideas and collaborative problem-solving on issues that councils face every day.

It also builds a strong peer network and hones the skills needed to lead in a rapidly changing sector. Participants gain exposure to different service areas, leadership styles and organisational cultures, while tackling complex issues that matter to communities.

The competition is designed to stretch thinking, build resilience and foster collaboration across boundaries.

For many of the contestants, LG Challenge is a chance to step outside of their day-to-day roles and see local government from a national perspective, developing insights and networks that last well beyond the programme.

As well as being a competition, LG Challenge is a unique learning experience for all involved, reflecting the sector's commitment to innovation and continuous improvement.

By bringing together diverse perspectives and encouraging bold ideas, the programme helps shape future leaders who can navigate uncertainty, embrace change and deliver better outcomes for residents. The aim is to foster learning, sharing and inspiring progress across local government.

Four finalists will emerge from the council-based challenges running from

January to June. They will then pitch their own project proposals to delegates and a judging panel at the LGA's annual conference in Bournemouth, from 7-9 July 2026, (see [local.gov.uk/conference](https://www.local.gov.uk/conference)).

They will be competing for the prestigious Bruce-Lockhart Scholarship, which enables the winner to deliver their proposal back at their home council.

The scholarship has been supported by Essex County Council since the inception of the LG Challenge in 2009, in memory of Sandy Bruce-Lockhart, a former Chairman of the LGA. ●

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**i** Follow the LG Challenge journey on the LGA's YouTube channel at [youtube.com/@LocalGovAssoc](https://www.youtube.com/@LocalGovAssoc) and on LinkedIn at [linkedin.com/company/lg-challenge](https://www.linkedin.com/company/lg-challenge)

**The 2026 LG Challenge contestants****Aaron Clarke****Democratic Services Officer,  
South Cambridgeshire District Council**

I applied to take part in the LG Challenge because it sounded like a unique and exciting opportunity to gain experience and acquire skills in areas that I am not familiar with. I enjoy challenging myself, and this is a great chance to connect with fellow officers with different backgrounds, representing different areas of the country.

**Karl Falconer****Project Manager, Cumberland Council**

The opportunity to test yourself, experience a wealth of different practices and council experiences, and to collaborate with a range of inspiring colleagues was a significant motivator. The challenges of our daily roles become routine all too easily, so the opportunity to radically explore and develop my skills, knowledge and beliefs – and to bring that back to my current workplace – is hugely exciting and pretty unique.

**Harrison Giles****Senior Analyst, Norfolk County Council**

I applied for the LG Challenge because it offers an amazing opportunity for me to not only develop my own skill set, but also to observe working practices at other local authorities across the country – enabling me to share these experiences with my colleagues to support continued development in Norfolk.

**Claire Goldsworthy****Training Officer, Cornwall Council**

I applied for this challenge because I want to expand my current skill set and learn things that will help me continue to advance my career. This programme will present challenges and opportunities that I would not encounter in my current role. I also wanted the chance to work with others, from different local areas, to get a better sense of the issues and challenges that affect local government nationally.

**Tara Hudson****Digital Communications Lead,  
London Borough of Lewisham**

I applied to the LG Challenge because I believe in the power of councils to change lives. In my role as a communicator, I see how local services help people reach their full potential. I want to go beyond influencing and communicating, and learn how we deliver frontline service improvements and transformation.

**Nadia Hussain****Area Coordinator, City of Bradford  
Metropolitan District Council**

I'm passionate about finding innovative, practical solutions that make a real difference in communities. Being part of a diverse team of professionals offers the chance to learn from others, broaden perspectives and strengthen my leadership skills. I'm eager to transform challenges into opportunities, using fresh insights and strategic thinking to drive change.

**Shannon Kennedy****Community Safety Officer, Wirral Council**

I applied to the programme to build on my career experience, and to engage with challenges that foster creative thinking and innovative problem-solving. Having spent my entire career within one local authority, I am keen to explore new approaches and working methods that I can bring back to enhance my current role.

**Victoria Lewis****Strategy and Performance Officer,  
Bolton Council**

In an era of increased financial constraint, I believe the breadth of experience across our sector is an under-used asset that can help drive local government forwards. Through this challenge, I am keen to share and learn new ideas and best practice from other councils across the country.

**N'jaindeh Lungoci****Project and Service Improvement Officer,  
London Borough of Hackney**

The LG Challenge will stretch me beyond my current role and studies, building the confidence, insight, skills and new connections needed to influence meaningful change. The prospect of contributing to innovation across councils nationwide genuinely excites me. I naturally look for solutions to problems and want to challenge myself further through this experience.

**Eden Singh****Principal Tenant Engagement Officer,  
Fareham Borough Council**

The LG Challenge offers a unique opportunity to strengthen my skills by navigating real-life, high-pressure scenarios and tackling complex challenges beyond my usual remit. It will expose me to new service areas, broadening my understanding of local government and enhancing my ability to lead across diverse contexts.



# A future-ready workforce

## Strategies for tackling recruitment and retention challenges



Councillor Pete Marland is Chair of the LGA's Local Government Resources Committee

If you have heard “we just can't recruit”, “we're losing good people”, or “we've advertised three times and still can't fill the post” in council meetings recently, then you would not be alone.

Across England, many councils are facing a recruitment and retention crisis, with issues of persistent vacancies, skills shortages and real challenges in holding on to talented staff in key professional areas.

All of this is happening while demand for services is rising and expectations from residents are higher than ever.

So, what's being done about it – and, crucially, what can elected members do to help?

Over the past two years, the LGA has been working with councils to design workforce strategies and action plans for areas where skills shortages are biting hardest.

Alongside the well-known pressures in adult social care and children's services, detailed engagement and data analysis identified eight further high-risk areas where there is a real risk of workforce failure if we don't act.

The eight are: digital and ICT; building control; civil engineering; town planning; legal; finance; environmental health; and economic development.

These aren't ‘nice to have’ services –

they're the backbone of safe buildings, sound finances, growth, regeneration, climate action and digital transformation.

That's why the LGA, working with more than 60 volunteer councils, has developed practical, evidence-based workforce strategies and action plans for each of these areas.

These strategies weren't written in a back office in London – they were co-designed with councils, drawing on the real experiences of hundreds of professionals.

The work has included: skills gap analysis, to understand where shortages are most acute; workforce planning workshops, to co-create realistic solutions; and stakeholder consultation – to make sure the plans reflect what services actually need on the ground.

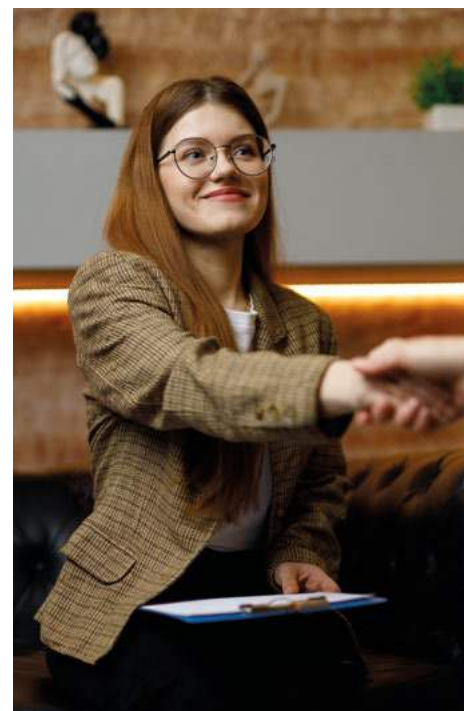
Each strategy is built around three simple, but important, principles:

- contextual and iterative – recognising that local government is changing fast and workforce plans need to evolve with it
- collaborative – developed with and for the local government sector
- action-orientated – not just ‘nice words’, but clear priorities and practical steps.

Put simply, these strategies are a ready-made resource that you and your council can use and adapt locally.

They help councils to build a shared understanding of current pressures and future workforce needs, support peer-to-peer learning through ongoing webinars and workshops, and enable evidence-based planning with tools, templates and diagnostics.

The key goals across all eight hard-to-recruit areas include improving recruitment and retention, strengthening training and development, supporting service redesign, and embedding future-facing skills – such as digital literacy, creativity, and analytical and critical thinking.



Councils are encouraged to take the LGA's workforce strategies and embed them in their own workforce planning and HR practices, and use them to inform leadership conversations, recruitment campaigns and service planning.

The LGA is backing this work with a wide range of practical offers for councils, including: themed workshops and webinars; national recruitment campaigns; recruitment and retention reset programmes; apprenticeship support; national graduate recruitment campaigns; early career networks; and workforce planning tools, diagnostics and templates.

As councillors, your leadership is vital. You can champion workforce planning, encourage participation in our National Local Government Workforce Planning Network (email [welna.bowden@local.gov.uk](mailto:welna.bowden@local.gov.uk) to join, if you're not already a member), support HR and service leads to take a long-term view of skills and capacity – and ask whether your council is making full use of these LGA strategies, tools and networks. ●

For more information, please visit [local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce](https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce)



Councillor Julie Jones-Evans is Chair of the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Committee

**N**ovember marked National Care Leavers' Month – a time to celebrate care leavers and raise awareness of the challenges faced by children and young people in care.

In 2024, there were 83,630 children and young people in care in England, and 50,670 care leavers.

Care-experienced children and young people are among the most vulnerable groups in our society and face significant social and health inequalities, including poorer educational outcomes, higher rates of poor mental health and increased risk of homelessness and unemployment.

However, physical activity is a powerful tool to address these issues. Evidence shows that being active can reduce anxiety and depression, improve mood and boost cognitive function and academic performance. Yet, despite these benefits, care-experienced young people remain a 'hidden group' in physical activity policy and provision, and their needs are often overlooked.

The LGA's new guidance, launched this autumn at our annual culture, tourism and sport conference and co-developed with care-experienced young people, sets out practical steps for councillors, local authority officers, and partners to use their corporate parenting responsibilities to create opportunities for care-experienced children and young people to be active.

The guidance is built on four principles: trauma-informed practice, choice, bodily movement, and physical literacy. These principles ensure that activities are safe, inclusive, and empowering.

**"It was the football thing that got to me the most, because I would come to do a game, I would see everyone's parents there, everyone's siblings there, and I had to just stand there on my own. At the end of the game, when everyone is walking out, I would walk out on my own."**

Care-experienced young person, age 18-25

# Getting care-experienced children active

## Physical activity can help address inequalities



At an LGA webinar held during National Care Leavers' month, we heard inspiring stories that illustrate the transformative power of movement.

Ed, a care-experienced consultant, shared how encouragement from foster carers and social workers helped him pursue his passion for diving, leading to competitive success. His message was clear: "Support care-experienced children and young people by being present, encourage their interest and access to physical activity."

We heard how local authorities like Plymouth City Council are already leading the way by passing a motion to recognise care experience as a protected characteristic. This has enabled the council to offer free swim and gym access to care

leavers up to age 25, with the option to bring a friend.

The council now has a care leavers' champion who is working with care-experienced young people to increase uptake, co-design a bespoke fitness programme, and broker partnerships with private gyms to expand the offer further.

Finally, we heard from innovative projects like those run by the charity Care to Dance, led by qualified social workers and dancers.

It uses trauma-informed approaches to turn physical activity into a source of healing and connection. By creating safe spaces and understanding individual barriers, it helps young people build confidence and social networks.

Similarly, the charity Stormbreak CIO delivers evidence-based therapeutic movement programmes for foster carers, kinship carers, special guardians and adoptive parents, strengthening relationships and resilience within families.

Movement is more than exercise – it's a pathway to belonging, confidence, and future opportunities.

As councillors, you can champion this agenda by embedding physical activity into corporate parenting plans and working with partners to remove barriers – ensuring care-experienced young people have the same chances to thrive as their peers. ●

**i** 'Guidance on improving opportunities for physical activity for care-experienced children and young people' is available for free on the LGA's website at [bit.ly/3XL3861](https://bit.ly/3XL3861)

# Intent to deceive

## New guide for councillors on disinformation

**W**hen does misinformation – false information shared without intent to mislead – become disinformation, where it is deliberately shared with the intent to deceive?

Many councillors view disinformation as a serious and growing challenge to their roles, including their work in representing their communities and deciding political priorities.

Disinformation can also harm local government's ability to deliver vital services.

It might mislead the public about public health measures, create rumours to disrupt council meetings, spread false narratives that radicalise individuals, target elected officials with fabricated claims, or incite violence and criminal damage.

In extreme cases, disinformation can be a criminal offence. The Online Safety Act 2023 has introduced a false communications offence, which occurs when an individual conveys information online that they know to be false, with the intention of causing non-trivial psychological or physical harm to a likely audience.

In response to interest from councillors seeking

support in approaching and countering disinformation, the LGA has recently published new guidance.

This sets out key definitions, provides practical tools and examples, and supports informed decision-making – recognising that responses will vary depending on circumstances.

It is important, when discussing disinformation, to emphasise the 'information' aspect of it. For example, calling somebody 'left-wing' or 'right-wing' is open to opinion and interpretation.

However, stating that somebody is a member of a specific organisation, when they are not, would be disinformation.

The threat lies not only in individual false claims, damaging as these can be, but also in the cumulative effect of repeated examples. Over time, these reinforce harmful narratives about specific communities and erode trust in democratic institutions and processes.

The guidance suggests in the first instance that councillors contact their local authority's communications or community safety teams, where they have concerns about disinformation.

Officers may already be responding corporately to the issue and can advise on how best to approach it.

Officers can also provide access to other helpful services when encountering disinformation online.



Most will have established a protocol – including dos and don'ts – for using social media, and will also offer training for councillors.

Some teams will also use social listening platforms, which enable them to monitor conversations about issues across different social media accounts. This is helpful for determining whether instances of disinformation are isolated or something more widespread and potentially serious.

Sometimes, especially with fringe, low-visibility content, ignoring it is the best policy – a councillor commenting on a post could boost its reach and amplify disinformation.

However, where the issue is serious, the guidance sets out different techniques for challenging disinformation.

These include asserting the truth, fact checking

and debunking; building networks by collaborating with community leaders, interest groups, journalists, and researchers to generate credibility with audiences; developing counter-narratives; and building resilience by working with officers to create information programmes designed to increase the ability of target audiences to critically engage with false or manipulated information.

As the experts on their local communities, councillors can play a key role in this space, especially when it comes to your constituents. This can be when you are doorstepping, at surgeries or simply whenever interacting with your residents.

But if disinformation about you makes you feel unsafe or at risk, contact your community safety team and/or local police immediately. ●

**i** 'A guide to disinformation for councillors' is available free on the LGA's website, at [local.gov.uk/publications](https://www.local.gov.uk/publications), alongside parallel guidance for officers – 'A guide to disinformation affecting local authorities and their communities'. The LGA also provides a range of guidance and tools to support councillors and candidates in their online communications, see [bit.ly/4rkh0ID](https://bit.ly/4rkh0ID)



**Councillor Andrew Morgan OBE**  
is Leader of the Welsh LGA

With the draft Welsh budget and provisional local government settlement now published, we have a clearer picture of the landscape in which councils will be operating over the next year.

Yet even with that clarity, the pressures on councils continue to intensify. The question now is how we protect services for the future.

The draft Welsh budget and provisional settlement give us a clearer starting point. A 2.7 per cent increase in core funding, with a funding floor of 2.3 per cent, provides welcome stability after a turbulent period.

The uplift in core revenue, along with major grant and capital announcements, shows that the Welsh Government recognises the strain councils are under.

However, our pressures run much deeper, and the Welsh Government has committed to working with us as we look to strengthen the support for local government by the final budget settlement, which is expected in January.

The draft budget also restates support for key national priorities.

It continues commitments such as the real living wage for care workers, the programme to strengthen children's services, and investment in education and housing.

Councils will be central to delivering all of this. These commitments matter, but they must be backed with the resources needed to turn them into reality on the ground.

But stability doesn't erase the challenge; councils are facing rising demand in social care, homelessness, education and workforce pressures. These costs are increasing faster than the resources available to meet them.

The reality is simple: the pressures are now structural, not temporary.

This is why the months ahead are so important. Councils need the conditions that allow them to plan effectively. Long-term certainty, clarity on future



## Beyond stability: the future of local government

responsibilities, and a settlement that reflects the true scale of the pressures on the ground are essential.

There is still room for the Welsh Government to go further. With significant unallocated funding in the draft budget, there is a real opportunity to strengthen the final settlement and help councils safeguard the services people rely on every day.

Councils also need clarity on how wider cost increases, such as national pay awards, special educational needs pressures and new statutory responsibilities, will be supported. Without this, planning becomes increasingly difficult.

But this moment demands more than just extra funding. It demands a conversation about sustainability.

How do we protect core services in the long term? How do we support the workforce that delivers them?

How do we give councils the flexibility they need to respond to local needs?

Local government has shown extraordinary resilience over the past decade. Councils have adapted, innovated and continued serving communities despite austerity, rising costs and surging demand.

But resilience has its limits. No organisation can absorb year-on-year pressures without the right tools and resources.

This is a critical moment. A stronger final settlement is essential if councils are to protect the services our communities depend on. The decisions made in the coming weeks will shape the ability of councils to continue delivering essential services across Wales. ●

**i** To find out more about the work of the Welsh LGA, please visit [wlgg.wales/home](http://wlgg.wales/home)

## GROUP LEADERS



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

### Missed opportunity to reset council finances

This could have been a consequential period for local government finance.

The fairer funding announcements were an opportunity to reset council finances on a trajectory that would enable our councils to sort out the challenges of this decade.

Instead, this failed.

Well-managed councils will be punished, and it wedges a divide like never before between rural and urban councils following changes to the 'remoteness' adjustment.

Then we had the Budget. For the Treasury, again this was the moment to reset council finances. Writing off high-needs block deficits; meaningful investment in special educational needs and disabilities provision and home-to-school transport to alleviate pressures; cash to resurface our roads.

Instead, it failed.

What we ended up with were tax hikes to subsidise a welfare state spiralling out of control, presumably to buy off a rebellion on the Labour backbenches.

LGA Conservatives agree with the sentiments of the District Councils' Network and the County Councils Network. First, it does the Government little favour to punish the very councils that will be instrumental in delivering its 'missions' – namely, delivering new housing.

Second, it is grotesquely unfair that councils previously not in receipt of



the Recovery Grant won't be allowed to access it from 2026/27 onward.

Hope is on the horizon! Since the General Election, the Conservative Party has been listening to residents on the doorstep, engaging with the sector and studying the books.

Our leader, Kemi Badenoch MP, through her National Policy Renewal Programme, is taking local government seriously and, while policy announcements will continue to come, the sector should know that we will have a deliverable plan for when we enter government in 2029. Because Kemi knows that to crack on with the day-to-day issues the British people care about she needs to have local government onside!

**"It does the Government little favour to punish the councils that will be instrumental in delivering its 'missions'"**

**i** For more information about the LGA's political groups, see [local.gov.uk](http://local.gov.uk)



Councillor Hannah Dalton is Leader of the LGA's Independent Group

### Preparing for the challenges ahead

As we look towards the LGA Independent Group Annual Conference 2026, our theme – 'Resilience for councillors, community and place' – could not be more timely.

The Chancellor's recent Autumn Budget has underlined the financial pressures facing local government and the urgent need for councils to adapt and innovate.

Key measures such as frozen income tax and National Insurance thresholds until 2031, rising minimum wages and changes to universal

credit will have mixed impacts on our communities. While some households will benefit, others will feel the squeeze, increasing demand for local services at a time when council budgets remain under strain.

The introduction of council tax surcharges on high-value properties, rental income tax rises, and new powers for regional mayors to tax overnight stays signal a shift towards localised revenue generation. But these changes also raise questions about fairness and sustainability.

For councils, financial resilience is no longer optional; it is essential.

The ongoing debate around Fair Funding 2.0 and the distribution of resources will determine whether local authorities can continue to deliver vital services equitably.

At the same time, local government reorganisation and devolution present opportunities to streamline governance and unlock efficiencies,

**"For councils, financial resilience is no longer optional; it is essential"**

but only if implemented with care and collaboration.

Our annual conference will provide a platform to explore these issues in depth. Together, we will examine practical strategies for surviving cuts, strengthening partnerships and ensuring that our communities thrive despite financial constraints.

Join us in Leeds from Saturday 31 January to Sunday 1 February 2026 for the LGA Independent Group annual conference and awards dinner. Book your place today and be part of shaping a resilient future for local government.

**i** Please visit [bit.ly/4ojUSVU](http://bit.ly/4ojUSVU) to register your conference place



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

## Delivering a fairer society for all

From day one of this Labour Government, ministers have been clear that fairness and fiscal stability is at the heart of our Plan for Change, and the Chancellor's Autumn Budget represents a hopeful step for communities across the country.

As local leaders, we know the pressures councils are navigating but – unlike the previous Tory government's approach – local government is being heard.

As well as the new Pride in Place funding, the announcement of local powers to raise a visitor levy is set to invest billions of additional pounds into the communities that need it most.

That's the difference Labour makes.

## "This Government recognises the essential role we play in driving economic growth"

As well as the challenges, this Government recognises the essential role we play not only in driving forward economic growth, but also in community resilience and vital service delivery.

From cutting NHS waiting lists with 250 new neighbourhood health centres, to investment in large infrastructure projects in Darlington, Peterborough and beyond, this Budget represents a continued commitment to a genuine central-local partnership, driving growth and improving public services in every region.

As we look towards the upcoming local government finance settlement, we must acknowledge that the Government is addressing both the immediate financial challenges our country faces, as well as fixing the foundations.

While there are still difficult decisions ahead, Labour is working with councils to deliver a fairer society for all.



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

## Changes are better late than never

The Chancellor has finally decided to abolish the two-child benefit cap.

This change has been long-standing Liberal Democrat policy and the Liberal Democrat Group at the LGA has long championed this – especially our members on the LGA's Children, Young People and Families Committee, who have raised this at every opportunity.

## "Scrapping the two-child benefit cap will help lift 500,000 children out of poverty"

Figures have shown that an additional 300,000 children have been affected by the two-child benefit cap since Labour took power. I don't know why it took the Chancellor so long to abolish this awful policy.

Scrapping the two-child benefit cap will help to lift around 500,000 children out of poverty and ease pressures on many lower-income parents, enabling them to provide for their children and allowing councils to target their limited resources for local welfare schemes more effectively.

Also in the Budget, the Government has said it will fund the full cost of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision from within central government departmental spending from 2028/29.

However, while it is positive news that the government has committed to absorbing these SEND costs, this does not address existing deficits, which are pushing many councils to the financial brink. We urge ministers to write off these deficits, ahead of setting out wider comprehensive reform of the SEND system in next year's schools white paper.

## GROUP LEADERS



Councillor Stephen Atkinson is Leader of the LGA's Reform UK Group

## Using our influence at the LGA

As we approach the end of the year, the LGA's Reform UK Group – with only a few months under its belt – has carried out much of the good work it set out to do in September.

Our Reform UK councillors have taken part in corporate peer challenges, alongside contributing to the LGA's various boards and committees.

Last month, after much speculation, we saw the Chancellor release her Budget. This Budget will be deeply felt by local people, with council tax rises across the board.

We are pleased that Reform UK is now able to put forward a strong voice in forming the LGA's response to the Budget, working cross-party to ensure our members feel their concerns are heard.

## "We are working cross-party to ensure our members feel their concerns are heard"

We are also looking forward to next year's May elections. With many local elections having already been postponed by central government, we feel strongly that there should be no more inexcusable delays, so the people we represent are able to exercise their right to vote on 7 May 2026.

As we are now within six months of these elections, we are also urging the LGA to reaffirm its commitment to the Gould Principle – that no electoral law changes should apply to elections happening within six months of implementation.

It is absolutely vital that our councillors and candidates do not face any unnecessary disruption in this crucial run-up period. ●

# Putting buses back in local hands



Simon Lightwood MP is Minister for Roads and Buses

For decades, bus services have not been up to scratch, with services falling, routes slashed and fares rising.

Long waits at bus stops, rural areas cut off, and patchy Sunday services all serve as a drain on aspiration and make our lives harder.

Part of the solution is investment – and we've committed more than £1 billion this financial year alone to support services across England. This includes recent



record sums for places such as Leicester, Torbay and Cambridgeshire.

Passengers should see faster, more reliable journeys, connecting them to jobs, education, and those special moments with family and friends.

Our roads are also getting an upgrade. This is vital for smoother and quicker bus journeys, while improving things such as footways allows more people to get to bus stops more easily. That's why we've committed £24 billion over the next four years to improve our motorways and local roads – the economic and social arteries we all depend on.

But I've been clear: investment without

reform is throwing good money after bad.

For 40 years, power over bus services sat largely with private operators, who focused on the most profitable routes rather than the specific needs of local communities. In October, we changed this. In what is the biggest reform to our buses in a generation, the Bus Services Act 2025 puts control back in the hands of local leaders – where it belongs.

It means passengers will be back at the heart of the bus network. It means protections for socially necessary routes, and more accessible and safer services provided as standard. It also means flexibility for local authorities to choose the operating model that serves them best – be it franchising, enhanced partnerships or local authority bus companies.

I believe this is devolution at its best: greater control now in the hands of those who really understand local needs. We've seen it work wonders in Greater Manchester, London and Nottingham. Let's now roll out better buses right across the country. ●

## Organising local bus services



Graham Vidler is Chief Executive of the Confederation of Passenger Transport

Local leaders face a crucial choice about how bus networks are organised because of the new Bus Services Act 2025, which allows councils and combined authorities to adopt different delivery models. While that flexibility is welcome, it also demands careful, evidence-led decision-making.

To help, the Confederation of Passenger Transport and consultants Frontier Economics have produced a practical handbook and decision-making toolkit for authorities across England – which has been endorsed by the Department for Transport, the Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers, and the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport.

The handbook and toolkit's value lie

in a structured appraisal method called multi-criteria decision analysis, which can help authorities set clear objectives, shortlist feasible approaches and evaluate them against the outcomes that matter to local people.

The process starts by agreeing priorities: how do you balance aims to reduce car journeys, boost reliability, cut emissions, maintain rural links and improve accessibility for disabled passengers?

The answers shape which options are most suitable. The toolkit makes compromises visible, assesses value for money, tests whether markets can deliver and flags affordability limits, so councils can avoid unwelcome surprises down the line.

Risk assessment is integral to the process, as some delivery routes create upfront financial exposure or procurement challenges, while other partnership arrangements need strong governance to succeed. A documented, repeatable appraisal also strengthens engagement with operators, unions and communities,



because discussions are based on shared evidence rather than opinion.

There is no universal answer to how to deliver good bus services and each area will benefit from its own unique model. But the handbook outlines some of the models available, and how they might work for areas such as compact cities, large urban areas or rural counties.

For authorities serious about reform, we hope these resources will be a starting point for local conversations and, ultimately, help to deliver better buses for all passengers. ●

● 'Models for delivery of local bus networks' can be downloaded from [bit.ly/4429mIV](https://bit.ly/4429mIV)



# Leading not following

## LGA Independent Group Annual Conference 2026

### Resilience for councillors, community and place

31 January – 1 February 2026, The Met Hotel, King Street, Leeds, LS1 2HQ

Join us for the LGA Independent Group Annual Conference and Awards Dinner 2026. A vital opportunity to connect, reflect, share ideas, and plan ahead.

#### Key highlights:

- networking and exhibition from midday Saturday
- awards dinner on Saturday evening
- workshops, debates, and plenary sessions
- conference concludes 2pm Sunday.

**Book now:**  
[local.gov.uk/events](https://local.gov.uk/events)



## LGA Annual Fire and Rescue Conference and Exhibition

Tuesday 10 to Wednesday 11 March 2026  
Mercure Manchester Piccadilly Hotel

The annual fire and rescue conference and exhibition is a key event in the calendar for senior fire officers and members of fire and rescue authorities.

The event provides an opportunity to meet in person and discuss key strategic and practical developments impacting the fire and rescue sector over the next 12 months.

Book your place visit: [local.gov.uk/events](https://local.gov.uk/events)



# Multi-party politics



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

The new multi-party politics is having a noticeable impact on the proportion of seats changing hands and the low share of the vote often needed for victory.

Twenty-seven of the 41 recent contests we recorded saw a turnover, with the winning candidate in 15 instances receiving less than

40 per cent of the total vote. Reform UK gained 10 more seats over the past six weeks, though it did lose the one seat it was obliged to defend in Worcestershire.

On occasion, as in the Salford Priors and Alcester Rural ward in Stratford-on-Avon, it squeaked over the line by a handful of votes.

By contrast, in both Portsmouth's Paulsgrove ward and in Chapel St Leonards, East Lindsey, it took two-thirds of the total vote from a standing start.

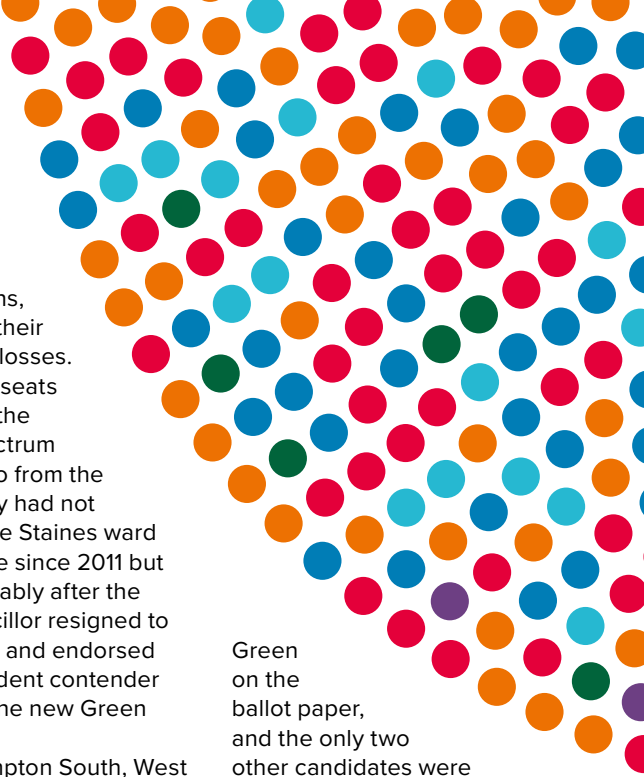
The Liberal Democrats, sometimes seen in the past as the repository for anti-government protest votes, also

made 10 gains, balanced in their case by two losses.

They took seats from across the political spectrum including two from the Greens. They had not contested the Staines ward in Spelthorne since 2011 but won comfortably after the Green councillor resigned to work abroad and endorsed the Independent contender rather than the new Green in his stead.

In Okehampton South, West Devon, on the other hand, the Liberal Democrats were somewhat gifted the seat. There was no replacement

Green on the ballot paper, and the only two other candidates were both former Conservative councillors with one now sporting an Independent label. The success of both Reform



# first



**is essential reading for councillors and chief executives in the LGA's member local authorities and both the magazine and wrapping are fully recyclable**

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



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## By-election results

**Babergh, Copdock & Washbrook**REF GAIN FROM LIB DEM  
3.1% over Lib Dem | Turnout 37.7%**Birmingham, Moseley**LIB DEM GAIN FROM LAB  
10.3% over Lab | Turnout 29.9%**Burnley, Lanehead**IND GAIN FROM LAB  
12.3% over Ref | Turnout 34.0%**Burnley, Queensgate**IND GAIN FROM LAB  
36.0% over Ref | Turnout 27.2%**Canterbury, Wincheap**GREEN GAIN FROM LIB DEM  
15.0% over Lib Dem | Turnout 33.3%**Cheshire East,****Macclesfield Central**  
GREEN GAIN FROM LAB  
13.2% over Lab | Turnout 24.2%**East Lindsey,****Chapel St. Leonards**  
REF GAIN FROM CON  
50.2% over Con | Turnout 23.0%**East Sussex, Ashdown and****Conquest**  
REF GAIN FROM CON  
7.7% over Green | Turnout 31.0%**Harborough, Fleckney**REF GAIN FROM CON  
6.2% over Lib Dem | Turnout 32.0%**Newark & Sherwood,****Balderton North & Coddington**  
REF GAIN FROM IND  
5.0% over Con | Turnout 25.3%**Newark & Sherwood,****Castle**  
REF GAIN FROM IND  
1.6% over Con | Turnout 26.5%**Portsmouth, Paulsgrove**REF GAIN FROM IND  
53.0% over Con | Turnout 27.7%**Preston, Ashton**LIB DEM GAIN FROM LAB  
6.0% over Ref | Turnout 28.3%**Somerset, Dunster**LIB DEM GAIN FROM CON  
20.7% over Ref | Turnout 32.2%**South Derbyshire, Seales**IND GAIN FROM LAB  
31.5% over Ref | Turnout 30.1%**Spelthorne, Staines**LIB DEM GAIN FROM GREEN  
14.4% over Ref | Turnout 30.3%**Stevenage, Roebuck**REF GAIN FROM LAB  
12.2% over Lab | Turnout 25.8%**Stratford-On-Avon, Salford Priors****and Alcester Rural**  
REF GAIN FROM CON  
0.4% over Lib Dem | Turnout 33.0%**Surrey, Camberley West**LIB DEM GAIN FROM CON  
23.6% over Ref | Turnout 27.3%**Surrey, Guildford South East**LIB DEM GAIN FROM RES  
18.5% over Con | Turnout 32.9%**Tandridge, Westway**LIB DEM GAIN FROM CON  
9.3% over Ref | Turnout 25.2%**Thanet, Garlinge**REF GAIN FROM IND  
12.5% over Con | Turnout 21.0%**Torridge, Milton & Tamarside**LIB DEM GAIN FROM IND  
6.4% over Ref | Turnout 33.0%**Trafford, Broadheath**CON GAIN FROM LAB  
14.5% over Lab | Turnout 49.6%**Trafford, Hale**CON GAIN FROM GREEN  
8.4% over Green | Turnout 41.7%**West Devon, Okehampton South**LIB DEM GAIN FROM GREEN  
32.7% over Con | Turnout 22.2%**Worcestershire, Bromsgrove South**LIB DEM GAIN FROM REF  
18.5% over Lab | Turnout 30.3%

and the Liberal Democrats only serves to emphasise the parlous state of the two 'big' parties.

In May this year, the Conservatives were defending the large majority of the council seats falling vacant and promptly lost two-thirds of them. Their record at by-elections since then is eight gains, nine holds, and 29 losses.

Two of those rare gains came recently in Trafford Council. In the Hale ward, they defeated the Greens who had won the 2023 and 2024 contests. Reform polled just 8 per cent of the vote.

In Broadheath, the Conservatives' victory was over the traditional Labour enemy. On an impressive 50 per cent turnout, their share of the vote did decline, but nothing like as far as

Labour's who likely suffered from a modest Liberal Democrat revival locally.

The pattern of next year's contests has yet to be confirmed pending decisions about reorganisation, but this time it will be Labour in the spotlight. The party will defend fully half of the perhaps 5,000 seats on offer across up to 142 councils.

Its record in by-elections over the past six months gives little cause for optimism. It has made no gains, held 13 seats and lost 37 – three-quarters of the original total.

Losses may be mitigated in May in heartland areas such as parts of London and metropolitan cities like Manchester, but Reform lies in wait along the 'red wall' compounded by the challenge from formerly Labour Independents. ●

**“The pattern of next year's contests has yet to be confirmed pending decisions about reorganisation”**

**i** Only results where there was a change of political control are shown above. For the full results, and additional data on other local by-election results, please visit [lgafirst.co.uk/local-by-elections](http://lgafirst.co.uk/local-by-elections)



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