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SEND: every child achieving and thriving



Local outcomes

How LG Inform brings the new framework to life **p13**

Healthy place planning

Councils leading the next phase of prevention **p16**

Research on under-5s

Delivering a good level of development **p20**



| From Health Checks to **Action**

Community prevention that doesn't stop at screening

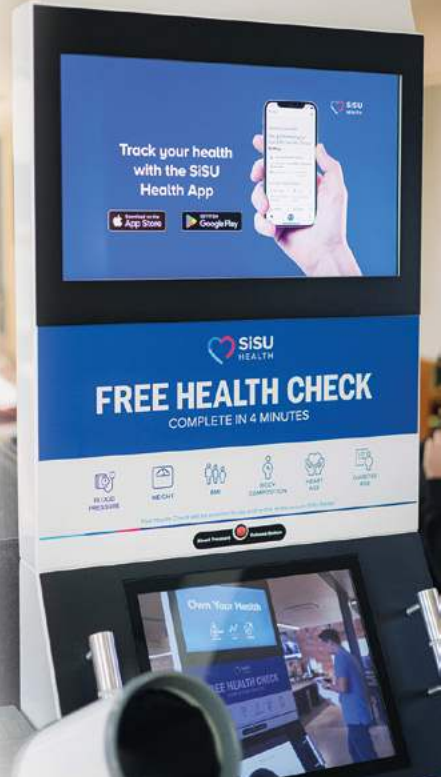
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first



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Planning for health

Addressing health inequalities is one of my priorities as LGA Chair, so I was delighted to open our annual public health conference in February, where planning for healthy places was one of the key topics discussed (p16).

Health, housing and planning all figure strongly in this edition of **first**, with an update on implementing renters' rights reforms (p14), a look at repurposing historic buildings for new homes (p18) and a discussion of how local government is key to improving cancer diagnosis and survival rates (p22).

The LGA continues to digest the implications of the Schools White Paper, 'Every child achieving and thriving' (p7, p10), which shares the LGA's aspiration for more children with special educational needs and disabilities to be supported in mainstream schools.

The LGA has published new research aimed at helping councils and their local partners develop strategies for achieving the target of 75 per cent of five-year-olds achieving a 'good level of development' by 2028 (p20).

The Rural Services Network (p27), the Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities (p23), Employment Minister Dame Diana Johnson DBE and Peredur Owen Griffiths MS, Plaid Cymru Spokesperson for Local Government and Transport (p26), are among our comment contributors. ●

Councillor Louise Gittins
is LGA Chair

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Out and about



Councillor Louise Gittins
is Chair of the LGA

From Taunton and Torbay to visiting neighbours across Cheshire and Merseyside, one of my greatest pleasures as LGA Chair is visiting our member councils to find out firsthand about the incredible work they are doing every day for local residents.

For example, my LGA colleague Cllr Pete Marland, Leader of Milton Keynes City Council, invited me to visit the MK East development.

It was positive to hear about the council's ambitious plans for the development, including solar panelling and ground-sourced energy, and on local transport and biodiversity.

We also toured the brand-new primary school – built before the first house bricks were put down.

It is these key pieces of public infrastructure that are crucial to delivering homes and communities, not just houses, and it was great to see this in action.

In Luton, the council's work across systems, agencies and within neighbourhoods on early intervention

and prevention was brought to life in a visit to the town's family hub, with Leader Cllr Hazel Simmons MBE.

Co-located within Luton's central library alongside housing, welfare and Citizens Advice services, the hub is a key driver in improving children's health and wellbeing and a powerful example of a council delivering wider public health impact.

It is particularly satisfying to see how the LGA's lobbying and policy work is further supporting councils' work in these and other areas – including public health, where we have secured a 'win' on earlier and multi-year funding settlements (p8).

Consequently, I was delighted to talk to more than 1,000 delegates at the LGA's and Association of Directors of Public Health's annual public health conference about health inequalities in England – which remain stark and persistent.

However, they can be changed – because health is created in homes, schools, workplaces and high streets. It is shaped by our planning decisions (p16), housing standards, economic development, environmental health, early years services and community safety.

These services are at the heart of everything councils do – and if health prevention is to be real, local government must be central to it. ●

Tourism levy 'important step in fiscal devolution'

Devolving the visitor levy to local areas will enable significant investment in the visitor economy, boosting local attractions and tourism businesses, says the LGA.

It follows the Government consulting over proposals for an overnight stay levy in England.

In its consultation response, the LGA has called for funds raised from the levy to be more tightly defined in terms of how they can be spent and reinvested in the visitor economy, and on providing facilities and services for visitors.

It wants councils to be allowed to retain a portion of the funding raised to support services that serve the visitor population, such as parks, waste collections and public toilets, as well as those that will attract more tourists, such as culture, heritage and events.

The LGA says that councillors and mayors should be allowed to jointly decide whether to introduce a levy and be free to adapt its scope and rate to reflect the visitor economy. Where areas choose to implement the levy, councils will consult with local tourism and hospitality businesses.

Cllr Julie Jones-Evans, Chair of the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Committee, said: "The visitor levy represents an important step in fiscal devolution and giving local areas the powers to raise new income.

"However, it should be down to councillors as well as mayors, as democratically elected representatives, to decide whether to introduce a levy, in consultation with local tourism businesses." ●

● The LGA's support for the visitor levy is a majority position. The LGA's Conservative Group has highlighted its objections to this policy on consecutive occasions.



Councillors to receive pensions

All elected members who receive allowances in England will be able to join the Local Government Pension Scheme from 11 May.

Cllr Matt Boughton, Chair of the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Committee, said: "This change marks an important step in recognising the increasingly demanding nature of councillor roles and the need for fair, consistent treatment across the UK.

"Councillors' responsibilities have evolved significantly over the past 12 years. Many members, particularly those with special responsibilities, now give up other

paid employment to meet the expectations of serving their communities.

"Their roles can carry responsibilities comparable to or, in some cases, exceeding those of officers receiving similar remuneration. The LGA believes councillors should be aligned with the pension arrangements available to employees.

"The LGA is calling for clarity on which allowances will count as pensionable pay under the proposed regulations. We will continue to work with government to ensure the final scheme is practical, fair and workable for councils and their members." ●

Call for review of fly-tipping sentencing

Fly-tipping court fines must be reviewed, councils have urged, as figures show they are lower on average than penalties handed out directly by local authorities.

The call comes in the wake of the latest fly-tipping figures for England, which show incidents of illegal waste dumping were up 9 per cent in 2024/25.

LGA analysis of the figures reveals the average fine for offenders prosecuted through the courts was £539, which is £87 lower than the £626 average fixed penalty notice (FPN) councils issued for the same offence last year.

Councils are calling on government and the Sentencing Council to urgently review sentencing guidelines for fly-tipping, warning that the lower fines issued by the courts undermine deterrence, weaken enforcement efforts and leave councils out of pocket.

The LGA said councils were taking increasing enforcement action against offenders, but taking cases to court when people did not pay FPNs often required lengthy investigations, high evidence thresholds and significant amounts of staff time.

In York, two offenders were each fined £300 by magistrates for waste offences, despite FPNs of £600 and £1,000 being



issued. In Wiltshire, a fly-tipper who failed to pay a £1,000 FPN was fined just £80 in court.

Cllr Arooj Shah, Chair of the LGA's Neighbourhoods Committee, said: "Fly-tipping is criminal activity that blights communities and costs taxpayers millions of pounds every year.

"Councils are working hard to investigate and prosecute offenders, but when court fines are lower than fixed penalties, it undermines enforcement and fails to act as a deterrent.

"Sentencing guidelines must be reviewed so that the punishment fits the crime and reflects both the harm caused and the significant work undertaken by enforcement officers." ●



Adult social care 'faces a reckoning'

The Government is to establish a national safeguarding board and accelerate dementia trials in response to some "simple asks" from Baroness Louise Casey, Chair of the Independent Commission into Adult Social Care.

In her first public address as the commission's chair, Baroness Casey said the country faces a "moment of reckoning" on adult social care, with the current system "cobbled together" and councils "hollowed out by years of austerity and funding cuts".

Cllr Louise Gittins, LGA Chair, said: "Baroness Casey is right to recognise the need to elevate the true value and purpose of care and support nationally. It is encouraging that she has strongly signalled for this to be a core foundation behind her proposals for the sector's future.

"A focus on safeguarding people who draw on care and support is vital to creating a prevention-focused and person-centred system. There is a strong role for local government in ensuring that people's rights under the Care Act 2014 continue to improve.

"Sustainable resourcing remains key to successful system reform."

The LGA is engaging with councils, the care workforce and people with lived experience through its 'Care where we live' conversation series on the future of the adult social care system. A series of regional events and online consultations will culminate in an LGA Smith Square Debate on 24 March (see local.gov.uk/events), while the LGA's consultation closes on 27 March – visit local.gov.uk/care-where-we-live. ●

Social housing finances 'improving'

The financial outlook for councils' social housing budgets has improved compared with last year, but significant pressures remain that could limit housebuilding, an LGA survey has found.

The poll of council chief financial officers in England found 46 per cent were likely to need to draw on reserves to balance their housing revenue accounts (HRAs) in 2026/27, down from 72 per cent last year.

Confidence in balancing HRA budgets has also increased, with 71 per cent confident of doing so, compared with 61 per cent in 2025/26.

Meanwhile, 61 per cent said they felt able to maintain and repair existing housing stock, up from 52 per cent last year.

However, financial pressures remain acute.

Just less than half (44 per cent) of councils said pressures on their HRA would affect how much they can invest in building new homes.

Nearly all councils (99 per cent) expect to raise rents within permitted limits – and almost two-fifths (39 per cent) do not feel able to maintain existing housing stock to the required standard.

The Government has announced a 10-year social housing rent settlement from 2026/27, alongside plans to introduce rent convergence from 2027/28.

Cllr Tom Hunt, Chair of the LGA's Inclusive Growth Committee, said: "It's good news that the outlook on social housing finance has improved for councils.

"That nearly half say that pressures on their social housing budget will impact their ability to build more new homes is concerning." ●

TA bill 'could reach £4bn by 2030' – LGA

The gap between what councils pay out in housing benefit and how much government reimburses them is projected to hit nearly £4 billion between 2017/18 and 2029/30, new LGA analysis reveals.

The analysis looked at the cumulative cost of the temporary accommodation subsidy funding gap in the past eight years, and projections of costs for the next four years.

It found that, since 2017/18, councils across England have spent almost £1.5 billion more on temporary accommodation than they have been reimbursed. This is alongside cost and demand pressures continuing to outstrip the overall funding available to councils, which has had a damaging impact on council services.

Without intervention, this figure could more than double to nearly £4 billion (£3.9 billion) within the next four years.

Demand for temporary accommodation continues to rise, with more than 132,000 households currently living in it, including around 172,000 children.

In 2024/25 alone, councils spent £1.27 billion on housing benefit for



temporary accommodation, but were reimbursed just £911 million – a gap of £360 million. The shortfall stems from rules that cap what councils can claim back at 90 per cent of local housing allowance rates set in 2011, meaning subsidy levels no longer reflect current housing costs.

Cllr Tom Hunt, Chair of the LGA's Inclusive Growth Committee, said: "The temporary accommodation subsidy gap is a problem that is getting worse each year, but that is fixable. We urge the Government to uprate housing benefits to 90 per cent of the current LHA rate – this outlay could yield significant results for the economy and national wellbeing." ●

Ombudsman highlights planning enforcement delays

Complaints about planning enforcement are increasing and some councils are taking years to resolve cases, according to a new report from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

Planning enforcement systems in England are under growing strain, the Ombudsman has warned, highlighting a rise in complaints from residents who feel enforcement action has been delayed or not carried out effectively, often leaving developments unresolved for long periods.

Planning enforcement allows councils to investigate potential breaches of planning

permission and act where necessary, helping to maintain public confidence in the planning system and ensure development takes place in line with agreed rules.

Cllr Tom Hunt, Chair of the LGA's Inclusive Growth Committee, said councils remain committed to strong planning enforcement, but warned that staffing and resource pressures are making this work increasingly difficult.

He added: "There are acute issues around recruitment and retention of staff, particularly with specialist skills, such as those relating to enforcement.

"An improved and more effective planning system is in everyone's interest, and achieving this naturally requires improving enforcement, which underpins and upholds the integrity of the planning system." ●

Home-to-school transport costs set to soar

New analysis from the County Councils Network estimates that councils in England could be transporting more than 100,000 more young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to school by the end of the decade.

It also found the yearly costs of providing school transport for children with SEND could reach £3.4 billion by 2030/31 – £1.4 billion more than last year.

This would represent a five-fold increase on what councils were spending when reforms to the SEND system were introduced in 2015.

The Government has since set out how it plans to reform the SEND system (see below and p10).

Cllr Amanda Hopgood, Chair of the LGA's Children, Young People and Families Committee, said: "Councils are consistently overspending on home-to-school transport, diverting

funds from other priorities to manage the growing costs.

"To help tackle this, the SEND reforms have to deliver significant improvements to inclusion in mainstream settings, while still ensuring we have adequate provision in special schools for those who need it.

"It is simply not right that a child has to travel a long distance to school because there is no adequate provision near to their home." ●



Government announces SEND reforms

The Government has set out its plans to reform the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system, pledging a "radical expansion in rights" for children with SEND.

Under the reforms announced as part of the Schools White Paper, there will be a new legal requirement for schools to create individual support plans (ISPs) for all children with SEND.

The Government said education, health and care plans will be retained and improved, offering wider legal entitlement beyond an ISP.

It follows the Government also announcing action to end spiralling independent special school costs.

This will see the introduction of national price bands to end unjustified fee variation for the same provision, giving councils the confidence to challenge poor-value placements.

Cllr Louise Gittins, Chair of the LGA, said: "For too long, the SEND system has been failing children, young people

and their families. Substantial reform is desperately needed so that they get the support they need.

"We're pleased the Government shares our aspiration that children with SEND who require support do so in a mainstream setting where appropriate, and that all children can reach their potential.

"Councils want every child to get the support they need without parents and carers necessarily having to apply for a statutory plan.

"For improved mainstream inclusion to be successful, all settings need to be empowered and resourced to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND, with a workforce that has the capacity and right skills.

"Councils have a key role to play and will need powers to lead local SEND systems, and to hold health and education partners to account, to make sure they are meeting children's needs." ●

● See p10

'Unanswered questions' on SEND deficits – MPs

MPs have warned that the Government's SEND reforms have left "unanswered questions" on home-to-school transport and council deficits.

A report by the Public Accounts Committee has said the Government's plans to help councils in England struggling to finance support for children with SEND do not take into account rising home-to-school transport costs, while the plan to tackle spiralling deficits in future years remains unclear. It is urging the Government to clarify the level of support it will provide to councils with ongoing SEND deficits.

Cllr Amanda Hopgood, Chair of the LGA's Children, Young People and Families Committee, said: "Steps to improve mainstream inclusion will go some way towards reducing the need for costly home-to-school transport and long journey times. The announcement that 90 per cent of councils' historic Dedicated Schools Grant [DSG] deficits will be written off also gives councils breathing space.

"To ensure discussions on reform focus solely on meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND quickly and effectively, government must commit to ensuring that all DSG deficits are written off, ahead of the statutory override ending in March 2028.

"It should also provide additional funding for councils to meet the growing need for home-to-school transport for children and young people with SEND." ●



News in brief

LGR toolkit

The LGA has published a new toolkit bringing together resources from across the sector to help councils in England with local government reorganisation (LGR). Developed by Local Partnerships for the LGA, with the support of sector partners, it collates templates, webinars, guidance notes and lessons learned from previous reorganisations. It also includes examples of documents used by councils going through reorganisation and a checklist of actions to be completed at different stages of the LGR journey. See local.gov.uk/lgr-toolkit.

Combined authority peer challenge

The first mayoral combined authority to undergo an LGA corporate peer challenge has published its report. The peer challenge team that visited West Midlands Combined Authority last November found it to be “a self-aware organisation – candid about its strengths and areas for improvement – and willing to embrace challenge as a driver for change”. Key recommendations include integrating the mayor’s priorities into a medium-term plan and creating a ‘West Midlands story’ to articulate the combined authority’s role. See bit.ly/3NkpdXz.

Towns of culture

Applications close on 31 March for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport’s first ever UK Town of Culture competition – recognising that culture isn’t limited to cities, but can be found embedded in communities across the UK. Information on how to bid, and a toolkit, are available at bit.ly/4bB25NU or email uktownofculture2028-competition@dcms.gov.uk.

Local government ‘at its financially weakest’

The LGA has warned that growing cost and demand pressures continue to push councils in England to the financial brink.

Ahead of the Spring Statement in early March, the LGA wrote to Chancellor Rachel Reeves expressing real concern over the sector’s capacity to cope over the coming years.

It said it is good that councils have received some funding growth in recent years, plus a much-needed multi-year funding settlement that has improved councils’ financial certainty.

But the ongoing pressure on local government finances is illustrated by the recent announcement that 35 councils have been granted exceptional financial support for 2026/27.

LGA analysis shows that, while councils’ cash-terms spending on services grew from £45.3 billion in 2010/11 to £68.7 billion by 2024/25, had it moved in line with inflation, wage growth and demographic and demand drivers in this period, it would have reached £96.7 billion by 2024/25 – 41 per cent higher than actual net service spend in that year.

This means that councils made £27.9 billion worth of savings and



efficiencies to their net service spending from 2010/11 to 2024/25.

CLr Louise Gittins, LGA Chair, said: “Councils have delivered billions of pounds worth of savings, while still delivering vital statutory services upon which residents rely and working hard to provide the place-making services that make communities. But councils cannot keep absorbing rising costs and demand without real consequences.

“The current situation in which an ever-growing number of councils are reliant on selling local assets or building up debt from borrowing to fund vital local services – often for the most vulnerable in society – is not sustainable.” ●

Funding increase for public health

Local authority allocations for the 2026/27 public health grant have been confirmed by the Government at £4.4 billion, a real-terms funding increase.

Upper-tier and unitary authorities will be able to use their ringfenced allocations to deliver local stop smoking services, the Swap to Stop smoking scheme, and drug and alcohol addiction treatment and employment support.

The LGA has long called for an increase to the public health grant. CLr Dr Wendy Taylor MBE, Chair of the LGA’s Health and Wellbeing Committee, also welcomed alignment of the grant with the local government finance settlement, the

bringing together of key funding streams, and continued investment in the Swap to Stop scheme.

She added: “We support the introduction of proportionate assurance arrangements, including a sector-led public health peer review offer, to help councils demonstrate impact, share good practice, and strengthen the effectiveness of local public health systems.

“Councils are committed to using this funding to continue delivering the local services that protect health, prevent illness and reduce inequalities in our communities. However, to truly deliver on prevention and reduce demand on the NHS and social care, funding needs to keep pace with inflation and rising demand.” ●

● See p16, planning for health

Neighbourhood health

Unlocking the potential of local places

Delivering the Government’s vision for neighbourhood health services in England will depend not only on workforce and funding, but also on how effectively we use the buildings and spaces where care is delivered.

In the LGA’s submission to the Health and Social Care Committee’s inquiry into neighbourhood health estates, the LGA made a clear case: the future of health and wellbeing support must be rooted in communities and shaped around the realities of people’s daily lives.

People’s health outcomes are strongly influenced by where they live, work and spend their time.

Accessible, welcoming and well-connected spaces are therefore critical to supporting prevention and early intervention.

Councils bring deep insight into local population needs, community assets and transport patterns – making them essential partners in planning neighbourhood health facilities that people can easily reach and navigate.

While the NHS estate will play a central role in neighbourhood delivery, there are substantial opportunities to draw on the broader public estate.

Libraries, leisure centres, community hubs, retail units and housing

developments can all host health and wellbeing services.

Doing so can improve access, strengthen visibility of support, and contribute to wider regeneration by bringing footfall and vitality to local centres.

Councils are already aligning neighbourhood health ambitions with other local initiatives, such as family support hubs (p20) and town centre renewal programmes.

The redevelopment of surplus NHS sites also presents opportunities to deliver new homes and community facilities, while supporting recruitment and retention challenges through provision of key worker housing.

In many areas, local government is well placed to lead place-making and coordinate the strategic use of land and assets.

Examples of good practice across the country demonstrate the importance of strong partnerships and early engagement with communities and frontline staff.

Successful neighbourhood hubs often begin with a focused offer that can expand over time, supported by adaptable, multi-use facilities capable of responding to changing needs.

Prevention and ‘wrap-around’ support are also key themes.

Locally designed models can create neutral, stigma-free environments for sensitive services and ensure provision reflects the realities of rural, coastal or digitally excluded communities.

These place-based approaches underline the importance of tailoring neighbourhood health to local context rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all model.

Despite growing momentum, councils and NHS partners face a range of challenges in making best use of neighbourhood estates.

Complex funding arrangements, lengthy capital approval processes and limited revenue funding for early project development can slow progress and shift financial risk onto already stretched local authorities.

Ownership and governance complexities across different parts of the health system can also make joint planning difficult, while mismatched leasing arrangements and differing organisational timelines may hinder opportunities to secure suitable sites.

Alongside this, effective estate planning depends on better data sharing and cultural change, as providers adapt services to community settings rather than hospital-centric models.

Our message is clear: neighbourhood health services will only succeed if they are built on strong relationships, shared ownership and sustained investment in the enablers of integration – estates, workforce and data.

By drawing on the full range of public and community assets, councils and the NHS can create locally embedded hubs that improve access, tackle inequalities and place prevention at the heart of the system. ●



i To find out more about the LGA’s parliamentary work, please visit [local.gov.uk/parliament](https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament). See also p16, 20, 22

Every child achieving and thriving

SEND reforms are open for consultation



Councillor Louise Gittins is Chair of the LGA

On 23 February, the Government published the Schools White Paper, 'Every child achieving and thriving', alongside a consultation document on reforming provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Councils in England have long been calling for reform of the education system to ensure the needs of more children and young people with SEND can be met within mainstream settings, where appropriate, and without the need for a statutory plan.

The LGA is pleased that the Government has acted on those calls,



with an ambitious set of reforms placing children and young people with SEND at their centre.

The reforms focus on the creation of a single education system for all children and young people, with SEND integrated into the mainstream education system to ensure that support can be provided earlier. The aim is that commonly occurring needs can be met consistently in mainstream education.

For children and young people who need additional help to access education, support will be organised across two additional layers: Targeted (including Targeted Plus) and Specialist.

Specialist support will use new, nationally defined, evidence-based Specialist Provision Packages for children with the most complex needs, which will form the basis of an education, health and care plan (EHCP).

Additionally, £1.8 billion is committed over the next three years to enable local authorities and integrated care boards to establish an 'Experts at Hand' offer, bringing together specialists from speech and language, educational psychology and occupational therapy.

A new £1.6 billion Inclusive Mainstream Fund will also be available, enabling schools and other education settings to plan proactively and flexibly for commonly occurring needs, and encourage earlier, more effective support.

The current SEND system – including all existing duties, rights and funding routes – will remain in place until new legislation begins, and the Government will ensure these duties continue to be met.

After legislation takes effect, children with an existing EHCP will have a



needs assessment as they approach the end of each phase of education. All children transitioning from an EHCP to an Individual Support Plan will retain the right to request a mainstream placement, and no child will move from a special school or college unless they choose to do so.

The white paper also focuses on improving attendance, raising overall education standards and increasing pupils' sense of belonging at school, with a strong emphasis on reducing the attainment gap between poorer students and their peers.

Plans include two new area-based 'challenges' – Mission North East and Mission Coastal – building on the success in the 2000s of the London Challenge, which transformed educational outcomes in the capital through collaboration and targeted intervention.

With one in five education authorities reliant on exceptional financial support from Whitehall, the LGA is clear that tackling the SEND crisis requires a cross-government response.

We look forward to working with the Department for Education (DfE), Department of Health and Social Care, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government – as well as partners, including parents and



carers, and, most importantly, children and young people – to co-produce these reforms with a clear focus on improving outcomes. We will also continue to work with the DfE to support councils and partners to drive improvement in the existing system, ahead of these reforms being implemented.

The white paper acknowledges that reforms to the SEND system will be far-reaching and will need to be phased in over time, while ensuring that need continues to be met within the existing statutory framework.

Timescales need to be kept under review to ensure they are realistic, and there will need to be sufficient funding to build capacity now and to ensure the transition to the new system is effective. ●

i See [local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-response](https://www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-response) to read the LGA's initial briefing on the schools white paper in full. 'Every child achieving and thriving' is available at bit.ly/4aPnqTr. The consultation document, 'SEND reform: putting children and young people first', is at bit.ly/46HaDjz. Consultations close on 18 May – please email your council's submission to clive.harris@local.gov.uk. See also [p20](#)

Early years

The LGA welcomes the inclusion in the Schools White Paper of the early years, and the recognition that getting it right early for children can have long-lasting impacts.

We were particularly pleased to see the national rollout of Best Start Family Hubs, with a specific role for supporting families with SEND.

This needs to be backed up by sufficient funding for the early years workforce, and continued recognition of, and investment into, councils' key role in supporting inclusive early years systems.

'Experts at Hand'

The investment of £1.8 billion over three years to fund the 'Experts at Hand' programme of specialist support is welcome.

We await further detail on how this funding will be allocated to councils and integrated care boards, as well as the conditions that accompany it.

We also ask for confirmation that this is 'new' funding and is not coming from existing budgets for councils or education.

In the meantime, we are concerned that 'Experts at Hand' could unrealistically raise expectations about the level of support that will be available, particularly given the time it will take to embed these proposals in local areas.

Independent special schools and school trusts

We welcome the proposal to change the law on independent special schools to ensure that children get suitable, high-quality placements and that councils pay a reasonable price for them.

The LGA also welcomes the proposal to enable councils to establish school trusts. However, there is no detail on how the intention of 'moving to all schools joining or forming high-quality school trusts' is to be achieved.

We believe that it should be open to schools to choose to become an academy and join a trust, but would not want to see compulsion.

Other models of collaboration should be permitted if they are successful at delivering school improvement.

Financial sustainability

The Schools White Paper reforms must be financially sustainable to ensure they stand the test of time and can deliver the right outcomes for children, now and in the future.

The recent announcement that 90 per cent of councils' historic Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficits will be written off is welcome, and provides councils with some breathing space while reforms set out in the white paper are implemented and capacity in the existing system is increased.

But the 90 per cent write-off implies that councils will have to manage a residual debt of around £500 million, while the Office for Budget Responsibility has forecast that new deficits of £8.7 billion will accrue over 2026/27 and 2027/28.

To ensure that discussions on reform focus solely on meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND quickly and effectively, government must commit to ensuring that all DSG deficits are written off ahead of the statutory override ending in March 2028.

Councils will also need additional funding to meet the growing need for home-to-school transport for children and young people with SEND.

Rethinking public health: why leisure matters more than ever

Local authorities across the UK are facing mounting pressures that threaten essential community services, including leisure provision. Tightening budgets, rising operational costs and reduced central funding are forcing difficult decisions to be made about where resources are allocated. At the same time, poor health outcomes and widening inequalities continue to place strain on public services and local economies in ways that the NHS alone cannot resolve.

Rather than viewing these as separate challenges, there is a clear opportunity to address them together. A stronger focus on prevention, particularly by tackling the root causes of inactivity and health inequality, can help build healthier communities while easing the long-term demand on health and social care services. Central to this approach is sustained investment in accessible, high-quality leisure and wellbeing facilities embedded within local communities.

Addressing inequality through activity

Health disparities across the country remain stark. Childhood obesity rates differ significantly between regions and infant mortality rates in certain cities are markedly higher than in more affluent neighbouring areas. These inequalities are closely linked to deprivation, access to services and opportunities to be active.

Research from the District Councils' Network highlights the measurable impact that leisure and wellbeing services can



have in narrowing these gaps. Increasing physical activity levels improves individual health outcomes, enhances quality of life, and reduces the risk of long-term conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity. It also has the potential to reduce future NHS costs significantly. The evidence is clear: prevention works.

The challenge now is ensuring physical activity is recognised as a core pillar of public health strategy, not an optional extra. Alongside clinical care and medical interventions, movement, nutrition and community-based support must form a central part of the nation's health agenda. Elevating leisure services within strategic planning is an essential step towards delivering meaningful, long-term change.

Embedding health in the community

Recognising the importance of leisure facilities is only part of the solution. To unlock their full value, they must be integrated with wider health and community services, creating accessible wellbeing hubs that support people holistically.



AllianceLeisure

Co-locating leisure centres with services such as physiotherapy, rehabilitation programmes, health checks, maternity advice and other advisory support reduces barriers to access. It normalises prevention, removes stigma and enables residents to engage with health support in familiar, welcoming environments. This integrated model strengthens community connections and encourages sustained participation in physical activity.

At Alliance Leisure, our focus is moving more and more towards the end-to-end delivery of these co-located-style wellbeing hubs, with projects such as North Hykeham's Health Hub and Clay Cross Active in North East Derbyshire. By combining traditional fitness facilities with NHS-linked services and flexible community spaces, these centres create inclusive environments designed to meet the needs of all ages and abilities.

A strategic opportunity

At a time when public finances are stretched and health inequalities remain entrenched, leisure provision should not be viewed as discretionary spending. It is a critical public health asset with the power to deliver social, economic and health returns.

By rethinking the role of leisure and placing prevention at the heart of service design, local authorities can deliver lasting benefits for the communities they serve - improving outcomes today while building resilience for the future. ●



Find out more about what Alliance Leisure does at allianceleisure.co.uk/what-we-do

The Local Outcomes Framework

How LG Inform brings it to life



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

The Government published the first full Local Outcomes Framework (LOF) for England in February, setting out how ministers see central and local government working together to understand and improve outcomes for communities.

The framework also recognises that local government, as leaders of place, work in partnership with other local bodies, residents and service users to deliver local outcomes.

It sets out 16 national priority outcomes – across services including social care, housing, transport, the environment and economic prosperity – along with a set of metrics government will use to assess progress in every local authority area.

The Government's stated aim is to ensure that national and local government measures success through the same lens.

The framework includes a set of principles for its use.

These include setting out how government will use the framework to understand local progress on national priority outcomes, highlight success, and target improvement support or challenge.

Departments will set expectations for delivery and outline how councils and partners will be supported and held accountable, with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government overseeing outcomes across each area.

Where data shows poor or declining results, government will work with councils to diagnose root causes and take appropriate action, from improvement support to enhanced oversight.

Councils are expected to use the framework to: monitor progress; inform strategic decisions; support self-assessment, benchmarking and sector-led improvement; and strengthen collaboration with local partners.

The framework can also support conversations between central and local government on the challenges and opportunities facing local partners in delivering improved outcomes.

While the LGA welcomes the ambition behind the



framework, several key concerns remain.

Local accountability must come first: councils are primarily accountable to residents and businesses. Local priorities – shaped through democratic decision making – may not neatly match the LOF's national outcomes.

Many of the LOF outcomes rely on systems beyond local authority control, meaning that councils cannot be solely held accountable for their delivery.

The LGA has consistently emphasised that delivery of outcomes depends on sustainable, long-term funding. Any assessment of performance must take into account local democratic choices and resource constraints.

Finally, we believe that cross-government alignment is essential. Councils face multiple frameworks from different central departments.

The LOF must be aligned across government to reduce duplication and create coherent expectations.

The Government has plans to develop an official digital tool that contains the new set of metrics. However, the LGA's Research Team has already taken action.

All available LOF metrics have been incorporated into our own data tool, LG Inform, thereby enabling councils to explore the data for their area immediately.

The new 'LG Inform LOF Report' allows councils to monitor and report against the framework, if they choose.

They can also see their performance as compared with other similar councils.

You can check your own council's data here bit.ly/3OPkQV4, by selecting your authority at the top of the report. ●



Delivering rights for renters

Enhanced powers for councils



Councillor Tom Hunt is Chair of the LGA's Inclusive Growth Committee

The Renters' Rights Act 2025 aims to create a fairer, more secure and higher-quality private rented housing sector.

The act introduces new rules, including stopping discrimination against people on benefits, banning upfront rent payments, granting rights for tenants

with pets and making rental bidding wars illegal.

Councils have enhanced powers to deal with these new breaches, allowing officers to demand information for investigations, enter premises and gather evidence.

Increased fines can be up to £7,000 for minor or initial non-compliance, and up to £40,000 for repeat offences.

The Government's roadmap outlines three phases in which changes will be implemented.

In the first phase, Section 21 'no fault' evictions, which are among the primary causes of people presenting to councils as homeless, will become illegal from 1 May 2026.

“Future new burdens funding must be upfront, realistic and multi-year, as landlord penalties are unlikely to fully cover costs”

Councils’ net spend on homelessness services increased by 124.6 per cent in real terms from 2019/20 to 2024/25.

Later in 2026, a private rented sector (PRS) database will be implemented, and all landlords will be required to register with it. This will be linked to the new Landlord Ombudsman.

The new database must be powerful enough to be effective; we’re urging the Government to commit the necessary resources to the database to ensure its longevity.

The final stage of the act extends the Decent Homes Standard and Awaab’s Law to privately rented properties.

Jigsaw is a government-funded project to help authorities prepare for implementation of the act. Its regional leads share good practice and help councils to consider enforcement policies, debt collection, legal support, intelligence sharing, tenant relations and landlord advice.

Officers from every council are receiving in-person training on the new powers and regular webinars.

Many councils have fed back that Jigsaw has been incredibly useful and provided valuable support in preparing for the first phase of the legislation. We urge the Government to continue funding the programme beyond April 2026 to provide vital support to private rented sector teams.

Successful implementation of the act will require proper resourcing and tenant awareness of their rights. Councils may need to consider recruiting additional staff, upskilling their existing workforce and collaborating across departments.

Future new burdens funding must be upfront, realistic and multi-year, as landlord penalties are unlikely to fully cover costs. Councils must have the right powers, skills, capacity and funding to enforce the new laws effectively and provide much-needed security for private renters. ●

Case study

Coventry City Council

With a clear, structured approach and a spirit of innovation, Coventry City Council is ensuring tenants and landlords are well supported, protected and ready for a fairer private rented sector.

Central to its preparations is the creation of a revised Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy, reflecting the Renters’ Rights Act’s new statutory duties, which was due for approval in March.

This policy strengthens Coventry’s already robust and proactive enforcement approach, ensuring landlords and agents meet high legal standards while supporting the One Coventry Plan’s goals of reducing inequality and safeguarding vulnerable residents.

The council’s Safer Housing and Communities Service leads this agenda, championing crime reduction, tenant protection and overall community wellbeing. By aligning housing enforcement with broader social priorities, Coventry is building a safer, more inclusive city for all.

Coventry’s forward-thinking approach is evident in its use of detailed analysis and strategic planning. Internal briefings have identified emerging issues and mapped out solutions relevant to the private rented sector, ensuring officers, tenants and landlords are fully informed, and risks are managed early.

A standout feature of Coventry’s efforts is its robust cross-sector collaboration. Guided by recommendations from its Communities

and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board, the council is working hand in hand with partners such as Citizens Advice and the Coventry Law Centre.

This team effort ensures tenants and landlords receive clear, consistent advice, and a comprehensive suite of advice materials is being prepared for distribution to partners, further strengthening the city’s support network.

Workforce development is at the heart of Coventry’s readiness. Comprehensive training is being rolled out that covers enforcement, rent regulation, tenancy reform and housing standards – equipping officers with everything they need to excel.

Active participation and resource sharing across teams ensure everyone is prepared for the act’s practical realities. Councillors are provided with targeted briefings and in-depth guides, fostering a city-wide understanding of the legislation’s timeline and implications.

By using civil penalties early and reinvesting the proceeds into extra staffing, the council has been able to build resilience and capacity ahead of new burdens funding.

This proactive approach means Coventry is ready to hit the ground running for the first phase of the act.

See [local.gov.uk/case-studies/preparing-renters-rights-act-coventry-city-council](https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/preparing-renters-rights-act-coventry-city-council) to read the case study in full



Planning for healthy places

How councils can lead the next phase of prevention



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

Planning for healthy places is moving firmly up the local government agenda.

That was evident at this year's LGA and Association of Directors of Public Health's annual public health conference, where four dedicated sessions focused on planning and the built environment, and many others touched on how neighbourhood design influences residents' wellbeing.

Across three days, speakers

returned to the same core message: the places where people live, work and travel shape their health long before they reach a frontline service – and councils hold many of the levers that influence those environments.

This growing focus presents a significant opportunity for local government at a time when prevention is rising rapidly up the national agenda.

But it also raises important questions for councillors about leadership, workforce capability and the long-term vision required to create healthier, more resilient communities.

Healthy places are not an abstract idea. They are the result of decisions made every day in planning committees, highways teams, regeneration programmes and

environmental health services.

The width of a pavement, the location of a bus stop, the clustering of fast-food outlets or the availability of green space can all shape health outcomes as strongly as clinical care.

Throughout the conference, speakers highlighted how healthy environments support economic activity and local pride, increase children's independence and mobility, reduce the risk of chronic disease, and improve mental health.

They also help to ease pressure on already overstretched health and care services. As one speaker put it: "If we want healthier residents, we must create healthier environments."

While councils have many of the powers they need, the conference also highlighted a growing workforce challenge.

Healthy place making is a multidisciplinary effort, requiring skills that sit across planning, public health, transport and design.

Many local areas are responding by developing new hybrid roles, such as healthy places officers or planning for health leads, to bridge the gap between systems.

Practitioners emphasised that this capability is essential for embedding health early in the planning process.

Public health teams bring strong analytical skills and a deep understanding of population needs, while



planners lead on development processes, viability, design codes and the complexities of plan making.

Where these skills come together, decisions are more robust and better aligned to long-term health outcomes.

There is growing interest nationally in developing clearer competencies, training pathways and joint professional development across both fields – an agenda councillors can support through strategic direction and investment.

During February's public health conference, councils shared practical models that illustrate what is possible (see bit.ly/4ug765L).

Dr Anjan Ghosh, Director of Public Health at Kent County Council (KCC), described how systems leadership enabled the creation of a principal planning for health officer role, jointly funded by KCC Public Health, Strategic Planning, and Active Kent and Medway, to ensure places and spaces in Kent are well designed, sustainable, and positively impact on the health and wellbeing of communities.

Key resources

The LGA publication 'Empowering healthy places: unveiling the powers and practices of local councils in fostering healthy neighbourhoods' can be downloaded for free at local.gov.uk/publications.

A practical guide outlining councils' powers across planning and public health, the publication includes examples of how local areas are using these to create healthier neighbourhoods.

Presentations from the LGA/ADPH Annual Public Health Conference 2026 can be downloaded from our website, at local.gov.uk/events/past-event-presentations

● See also p22



Amber Nyoni, Strategic Planning and Public Health Lead at Essex County Council, emphasised the value of matrix roles, operationally based within planning but professionally rooted in public health, which has strengthened collaboration on development proposals.

These examples, though diverse, share a common theme: healthy place making requires coordination, confidence and sustained political support.

Councillors can play a highly influential role in shaping healthy places. Key actions include:

- championing health consistently across local plan reviews, growth strategies and major development decisions
- supporting the use of health impact assessments, a tool that helps to identify the health and wellbeing impacts (benefits and harms) of any plan or development project
- asking for clear health considerations in planning committees and reports, cabinet papers and scrutiny meetings

- backing officers to develop joint training and shared priorities across planning and public health
- encouraging developers to demonstrate how proposals contribute to walkability, access to green space, local food environments and safer streets.

Across the conference, speakers highlighted the visible benefits of healthy place making: stronger high streets, safer public spaces, better connectivity and greater community confidence.

These outcomes resonate well beyond public health teams, and support wider local priorities, such as regeneration, economic resilience and local pride.

Looking ahead, planning for healthy places is no longer a niche agenda: it is a central part of delivering equitable, thriving and future-ready communities.

Councils already hold the tools, evidence and influence needed to lead this work, and councillors have a unique opportunity to drive this ambition locally. ●



Better health starts with a book

Every child deserves the best start in life.

Reading with young children supports early language development, strengthens family bonds, builds secure attachments and lays the foundations for lifelong health and wellbeing.

Children enrolled in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library are significantly more likely to be school ready at age five, with stronger language and communication skills when they start school.

The programme delivers a free, high-quality book every month to children from birth to age five, directly to their home.

Local authorities in Camden, East Riding, Hackney, Lambeth, Liverpool, North Lincolnshire, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Salford, Southwark, Wakefield, Wandsworth and Wirral are playing a vital role in making this happen.

We're inviting councils to start an Imagination Library programme in their area, providing an authority-wide offer that supports early years services, families and public health priorities.

Conference Offer

The first 20 authorities to get in touch will receive a free allocation of 200 early years books, published by Penguin Random House, to support local early years settings.

Find out more and start the conversation:

www.imaginationlibrary.com/uk

info@imaginationlibrary.co.uk



Supporting historic buildings



Owain Lloyd-James is Head of Local Government and Communities at Historic England

refurbishing an existing one, while retrofitting can deliver operational carbon reductions of between 59 per cent and 94 per cent compared with a typical Victorian house built around 1894.

The benefits of reuse extend beyond carbon and housing numbers.

Meeting housing, climate and placemaking goals requires a broader focus than new build alone, including the reuse and retrofit of historic buildings.

While heritage buildings may require specialist approaches, the practical experience of Westminster (see right) and the national support provided by Historic England show that this work is far less daunting than it is often perceived to be.

Historic England's recent analysis highlights the significant national opportunity presented by bringing vacant or underused historic buildings back into use.

We estimate that up to 670,000 new homes could be created by repairing or reusing historic residential or commercial property, contributing to the Government's ambition to build 1.5 million homes.

The environmental case for reuse is equally compelling: constructing a new home can generate up to 13 times more embodied carbon than

Historic buildings are valued by communities, with 71 per cent of people surveyed saying local buildings are important to their quality of life.

Bringing historic buildings back into use helps to shape places where people want to live, supporting vibrant high streets and town centres.

Historic England is focused on unlocking opportunities to reuse historic buildings, particularly in high streets and town centres, by identifying barriers, securing investment

and building partnerships.

We are already working with local authorities and the LGA to develop these approaches and will explore them further at the LGA's annual conference in Bournemouth from 7-9 July (see local.gov.uk/conference to book your place) ●

See bit.ly/4bym2Vr and bit.ly/4ddvBdN for Historic England analysis and advice

Delivering housing, climate and place outcomes



Councillor Ryan Jude (Lab) is a Member of Westminster City Council

Under our administration, delivering new housing for residents, ensuring we avoid unnecessary demolition, supporting our historic buildings on their decarbonisation journey, and bringing underused buildings back into use have all been key areas of focus.

Historic buildings are a defining feature of Westminster. With a significant proportion constructed pre 1919, 76 per cent of the city within conservation areas, and more

than 11,000 listed buildings and structures, the challenge of retrofitting buildings with heritage significance is particularly acute.

Having served as a cabinet member for climate and culture, I am clear that achieving our environmental goals must include supporting historic buildings to be fit for the future.

The council is therefore prioritising retrofit over demolition by adopting a 'Retrofit First' planning policy to encourage the retention and upgrading of existing buildings when development proposals are being planned.

The work of our Retrofit

Taskforce will help to accelerate progress. It is exploring how consent processes such as Heritage Partnership Agreements, Local Development Orders and Local Listed Building Consent Orders can enable retrofit measures to be used on historic properties at greater scale and pace.

We hope these approaches can support other councils facing similar challenges.

Westminster is also using its dense urban setting to support low carbon heat infrastructure for historic buildings. This will help buildings that are harder to retrofit to move away from gas-fired heating and transition to low-energy, resilient and healthy buildings.

To find out more about the work of Westminster's Retrofit Taskforce, please visit bit.ly/47jWFES

From ambition to action

Councils can't deliver on VAWG alone



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

The Government's pledge to halve violence against women and girls within a decade is the kind of ambition the country needs.

But women and girls will not be made safer by mission statements.

They will be made safer by what changes on the ground – in services, in schools, on our streets, and in the systems that too often let perpetrators repeat their harm.

Councils have been doing that work for years.

We support survivors, commission specialist services, provide safe accommodation, lead safeguarding arrangements, convene community safety partnerships and drive prevention through public health and education.

Local government is where national policy becomes real – or fails.

That is why the new cross-government strategy must be judged by its deliverability, not its rhetoric.

There is much to welcome in the strategy's recognition that violence and abuse are preventable harms. The focus on prevention and early intervention is right. The emphasis on perpetrator accountability is overdue. And the commitment to trauma-informed support reflects what councils and specialist providers have long argued.

However, the strategy still falls short in a basic respect: it does not treat local



Clapham Common Bandstand with Sarah Everard memorial and tributes

government as the key delivery partner it depends upon.

The document sets expectations for joined-up local action yet overlooks the very partnership infrastructure that makes that action possible.

Community safety partnerships are barely visible. Safeguarding, housing and public health are central to delivery, but too often spoken about as if they will simply absorb new demands.

While headline funding figures are cited, it remains unclear how much is genuinely new, how much is recycled, and how much will reach the services facing the greatest pressure.

We also cannot ignore the context in which this strategy will land.

Councils are being asked to deliver long-term reform while coping with severe financial constraints, workforce shortages and major structural change across the public sector – including shifts in local government structures, policing governance and NHS arrangements.

If implementation guidance is slow to arrive, funding is short-term, or accountability is muddled, ambition will dissipate into fragmentation.

The Government has acknowledged that reporting of incidents of violence against women and girls may rise before it falls.

That should be seen as progress – but it will increase demand for local services immediately.

Ministers must be honest about what that means and back councils and specialist providers with sustainable, multi-year funding and clear delivery frameworks.

If we are serious about prevention, we must be serious about men and boys – about tackling misogyny, challenging harmful norms and reducing reoffending through coordinated local and national action.

Halving violence against women and girls is achievable. But it will not be delivered by central government alone.

It will be delivered in villages, towns and cities by councils, partners, communities and people, and only if government matches its ambition with clarity, trust and the resources to act. ●

“The new cross-government strategy must be judged by its deliverability, not its rhetoric”



A good level of development

New research on delivering for youngest children

Under the Government's 'Giving every child the best start in life' strategy, 75 per cent of five-year-olds in England are expected to have a 'good level of development' by 2028.

Children are defined as achieving this level if they are at the expected level in five of the seven early learning goal categories in the Early Years Foundation Stage. This is assessed in the summer term after a child turns five.

The seven categories are: communication/language; physical; personal/social/emotional; literacy; maths; understanding the world; and expressive arts/design.

Last year, the Leaders' Council – the body bringing together government ministers and local government leaders – agreed to an LGA proposal to co-convene and co-chair a joint, time-limited taskforce to address key policy and delivery issues

for Best Start in Life. To support this, the LGA commissioned research aimed at identifying effective local authority and partner strategies, alongside solutions to key barriers impacting progress towards the national 'good level of development' (GLD) target.

Now published, the research included a rapid literature review, the development of eight case studies, 10 multi-agency workforce workshops, two parent workshops, and individual interviews. In total, 117 multi-agency workforce stakeholders and 20 parents were engaged in the research, from across 60 local areas.

The rapid literature review identified a range of structural and systemic barriers to achieving GLD, including: having English as an additional language; deprivation and poverty; adverse childhood experiences; accessibility and quality of early years education

and childcare; challenges with early identification and access to information and support; workforce capacity and fragmented services.

Local areas are working to overcome the identified challenges through approaches focused on:

- Strategic leadership and alignment across health, education and family support, enabling a shared focus on early years outcomes.
- Early intervention, particularly focusing on system-wide use of the Healthy Child Programme (HCP) developmental checks and providing early attachment, speech, language and SEND support.
- Early years recruitment and retention particularly focused on 'growing your own' strategies for health visitors and early years entry level roles.
- Workforce development, where multi-sector partners come together formally

“Stakeholders often cite that integration and collaboration are key to improving outcomes”

and informally for training and peer support.

- Better use of data from health and education services, to identify where families are not accessing support and to target services effectively, including childcare places.
- Community and parent engagement, developed through partnerships with universal services, voluntary sector providers and parents.

At a local system level, stakeholders often cite that integration and collaboration are key to improving outcomes.

The research identified a range of associated enablers including strong and effective leadership focused on shared outcomes, a clear and shared long-term local vision, shared data, dedicated time for investing in building relationships, equitable sharing of power across sectors, multi-agency workforce development, and an on-going commitment to reflection and improvement in partnership with families.

Areas are developing solutions based on local context and assets to build on what works locally and meet local needs. They are drawing on evidence and expertise from national groups, and commissioning independent support and challenge to strengthen and innovate locally.

Parents in this research perceived that the biggest impact on their child's development would come through: reliable, consistent information about parenting and how to support child development; informal, accessible support and peer connection; improved support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), particularly those who are neurodivergent; and more play-based opportunities for their children – ideally ‘stay and play’ drop-in groups without cost or pressure to participate in more structured activities.

Parents also emphasised that being treated with respect, kindness and compassion enables them to work in partnership with professionals

A collective commitment to early years

February marked a significant milestone for the National Centre for Family Hubs, hosted by the LGA, as we delivered our first national conference, in London.

The centre focuses on supporting all councils to deliver the national rollout of Best Start Family Hubs in England, and to help councils to achieve the Government's target of 75 per cent of five-year-olds reaching a ‘good level of development’ (see left).

This was reflected in the opening address from Early Education Minister Olivia Bailey MP, whose remarks set a thoughtful and ambitious tone for the day ahead, focusing on the importance of connections in local communities.

A particularly powerful moment was shared among attendees with the first public screening of ‘Finding calm’, a short film exploring fathers’ mental health.

The film provides a poignant reminder of the importance of inclusivity in family hubs, and how to ensure they serve all parts of the community and the family.

The rest of the day offered a rich mix of learning and collaboration.

Delegates engaged in lightning talks showcasing innovative practice from across the country, from early communication initiatives to data-driven approaches to improving outcomes.

Workshops delved into core themes including Best Start in Life planning, the National Year of Reading, partnership

with the voluntary and community sector, health integration within Family Hubs, and supporting parental relationships.

These sessions sparked lively discussion and demonstrated both the diversity and alignment of work happening nationally.

Throughout the day there was a strong sense of collective commitment to improving the early years system and ensuring families receive the right support at the right time.

What stood out above all was the energy in the room – a real appetite for connection, learning and change.

We look forward to continuing to deliver high-quality events and support to councils through the National Centre for Family Hubs, ensuring that connections are at the core of the work that we do together and ensuring that councils have the skills, resources and tools to deliver on positive outcomes for their communities.

There is much more coming from the centre in the future, with the production of a series of toolkits – including support for military families, inclusion, and families affected by imprisonment – plus direct support with councils and webinars.

If you would like to know more about the centre then please look at our website: local.gov.uk/national-centre-family-hubs

to support their child's development.

Affordability of childcare, paternity pay and access to professionals were cited as key challenges. Parents want to be involved in design and improvement of services and suggest making it easier for them to participate in co-production and giving feedback, including engaging with families in places where they already are.

Parents and professionals shared a number of consistent messages, which are important to consider when prioritising local and national policy development to improve outcomes for families.

These included focusing on the whole system for newborns to age five, not just three and four-year-olds,

and building workforce capacity and capability to support the growing levels and complexity of SEND, particularly in relation to neurodiversity.

The early years profession needs to be valued and elevated to secure quality of provision and workforce retention; and long-term investment is needed to enable continuity and the embedding of practice needed to consistently improve GLD outcomes. ●

i To read ‘Achieving the best start in life: research to support a plan for partners’ in full, please visit local.gov.uk/publications

Improving cancer diagnosis and survival

Why local government matters



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

When the Government published its new National Cancer Plan for England – with its ambition that, by 2035, three in four people diagnosed with the illness will be cancer-free or living well five years after diagnosis – some observers questioned what this has to do with local government.

The question is understandable, yet it highlights a continuing need to explain how profoundly cancer risk, early diagnosis, treatment outcomes and survivorship are shaped by the environments people live in and the local systems that support them.

For those working in public health, the connection is obvious: councils influence many of the social, economic and environmental factors that determine cancer outcomes.

The plan itself is ambitious. It commits to faster diagnosis, quicker treatment

and major investment in technology, digital tools and improved diagnostic capacity.

It aims to meet all cancer waiting time standards by 2029 and projects that 320,000 more lives will be saved over the lifetime of the plan.

These ambitions rely not only on clinical excellence but also on reaching people earlier, improving prevention and reducing barriers to care.

This is exactly where local government comes in. The plan highlights prevention, early diagnosis and addressing risk factors such as smoking, alcohol and obesity. These are core public health duties delivered locally.

Councils shape healthy environments, provide stop smoking services, oversee licensing, run physical activity programmes and work with communities who face the greatest barriers to health.

It is also essential to recognise that not every cancer is preventable. When treatment is complex and prevention plays a smaller part, the need for strong social care, community support and well-coordinated local services becomes even greater.

Councils help people navigate daily life during intensive treatment and access

practical help that the clinical system alone cannot provide.

Many people living with and beyond cancer draw on social care at various stages, whether to remain independent at home, manage the consequences of intensive treatment or receive support at the end of life.

The National Cancer Plan also emphasises the need for innovation, technology and digital tools to reach every community, including those with the poorest outcomes.

Again, councils are critical partners. They are often the organisations with the deepest knowledge of local populations, trusted relationships with community leaders, and the capacity to design prevention programmes that reflect real lived experience.

Local government also has a unique responsibility as the voice of the unheard.

Councils work closely with communities who can be overlooked in national

policy conversations, and hear from groups facing barriers to treatment and from those communities whose outcomes are poorer because of their ethnicity or cultural background.

They are often the only organisations with the legitimacy, relationships into the voluntary and community organisations, and local intelligence to challenge these inequities and advocate for those who would otherwise be excluded.

It is not possible to deliver on the ambitions of the National Cancer Plan without councils. They are the connectors between clinical advances and the communities that must benefit from them.

They drive prevention, support early diagnosis, and provide the conditions for healthy living. Far from being peripheral, local government is foundational to improving cancer outcomes. ●

i For the LGA's full response, see our statement on the National Cancer Plan for England: [local.gov.uk/about/news/national-cancer-plan-lga-reaction](https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/national-cancer-plan-lga-reaction)

A turning point for local government funding



**Councillor Sir Stephen Houghton CBE is
Chair of the Special Interest Group of
Municipal Authorities**

Over the past 15 years, councils representing the most deprived communities have faced devastating real-term cuts in funding.

By 2023/24, the top 10 per cent most deprived councils in England had seen a real-term cut around three times as high as the least deprived 10 per cent of councils.

This was caused by a combination of significant cuts to grant funding – on which the most deprived councils are more reliant – and council tax and business rates growth making up an increasing share of council funding (both of these funding sources raise more in the most affluent areas).

This was why the introduction of the £600 million Recovery Grant in 2025/26 was such a crucial and welcome intervention.

The Recovery Grant was targeted at those places with high levels of deprivation and low council tax bases – exactly the kind of areas that had seen the biggest cuts under austerity.

Indeed, the authorities that received the Recovery Grant in 2025/26 had seen a real-term cut in funding (-20.6 per cent) more than double that of the authorities that did not receive it (-9.7 per cent).

The Recovery Grant was a lifeline for many of our members representing the most deprived communities. They benefited from three-quarters of this additional funding, which enabled them to invest in new services for the first time in over a decade.

However, it was clear that more fundamental reforms were needed to



create a fairer system, as the core part of the finance system remained broken.

Seizing the opportunity presented by the Government's Fair Funding Review 2.0, we launched 'Towards a fairer future', our campaign to lobby for a fairer funding system, in Parliament in March last year.

Central to this would be ensuring that the wide-ranging ability of councils to raise council tax was properly recognised when grant funding was allocated.

'Full equalisation' would result in a significantly fairer distribution of funding and ensure that affluent authorities with the largest council tax bases would no longer have their low council tax bills in effect subsidised by the rest of the country.

We were very pleased that the Government delivered on this ask in full, while also building in recognition of the fact that the most deprived areas have to provide more significant local council tax support schemes.

Importantly, on top of this, the Government has recognised that the recovery is not over, with many of the most

deprived areas still recovering from the impacts of austerity.

In this context, the continuation of the Recovery Grant for three more years, and the introduction of the Recovery Grant Guarantee ensuring real-term increases as a minimum, were very welcome.

It is also very welcome that the Government listened to our concerns following the provisional settlement about the outcomes for some of our members, and subsequently delivered a £440 million uplift to the Recovery Grant targeted at deprived areas that were to see lower increases in funding.

This announcement, in addition to the positive news about SEND deficits, followed by the well-received Schools White Paper, means that the final settlement marks a turning point for local government funding. ●

i SIGOMA is an LGA special interest group representing urban areas. To find out more, please visit sigoma.gov.uk

GROUP LEADERS



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

Schools White Paper and SEND reform

For years, Labour councils have been clear – our special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system is overwhelmed, under-resourced and struggling to deliver.

The Government's recently published Schools White Paper represents a meaningful step towards a fairer, more consistent and truly inclusive education system for children and families across our country.

Rising demand, stretched resources and inconsistency in service provision have made it harder for too many children to get the support they need at the right time.

This Labour Government has listened: ambitious, system-wide reforms will be



supported by additional investment over three years, including £1.8 billion for 'Experts at Hand' multi-agency specialist support, as well as £1.6 billion for a new Inclusive Mainstream Fund which will go directly to schools, colleges and early years settings to continue support for children with SEND.

As local leaders, we know that strong partnerships are essential for effective SEND support.

Reforms set out in the white paper recognise what councils, educators and families have long said – that children with additional needs should be supported close to home, with education, health and care systems joined up at a local level.

Particularly key is the renewed focus on earlier support within mainstream schools. Combined with plans to expand

“As local leaders, we know that strong partnerships are essential for effective SEND support”

specialist provision in every local area, as well as additional investment, reforms set out by this Labour Government will help children thrive rather than waiting years for help and give families greater confidence that support will be available closer to home.

Combining national leadership with local knowledge and collaboration, Labour stands united in delivering a SEND system that is inclusive, responsive and rooted in community-based support.

Labour local government is ready to work with ministers, schools and families to turn these proposals into reality – and will continue to champion improvements that put children first.

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



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

Looking beyond the two-party system

With local elections approaching, many of you will be balancing the demands of campaigning, council responsibilities, and the everyday challenges facing residents.

These elections look set to bring even greater diversity into local political representation, as voters continue to look beyond the two-party system.

This shift presents an important opportunity for our membership to demonstrate what genuine, locally-led politics can look like in practice and what Independent and smaller party

councillors can achieve when rooted firmly in their communities.

As we enter the pre-election period, I will be carrying forward the ethos of positive and respectful debate and representation.

It is therefore a particular honour to have been appointed by the LGA Board as the LGA's Civility in Public Life Ambassador.

This role is both a responsibility and an opportunity: to advocate for councillors of every background and political affiliation, ensuring they can serve safely, confidently, and free from intimidation.

I look forward to working alongside you to promote a healthier political culture and to strengthen the support available to any of our members experiencing abuse or unacceptable behaviour. Our values as the Independent Group place us at the forefront of this vital work.

I also want to remind group members that our National and Regional Lead Peers – Cllr Adam Paynter nationally for all members, Cllr Sue Shanks for Green

“I look forward to working alongside you to promote a healthier political culture”

Party members, and regional leads Cllrs Sue Baxter, Jo Beavis, Malcolm Grimston, Georgina Hill and Jim McKenna – are available to support you as election results unfold.

Whether you are stepping into administration, forming a multi-party partnership, working independently alongside a national party, negotiating committee places, or establishing a new group, their experience and advice are invaluable.

Their contact details are available on the LGA Independent Group's website (see local.gov.uk/political/lga-independent-group). The LGA's regional teams also stand ready to support whole councils through post-election transitions.



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

Building momentum ahead of elections

The Conservative Spring Conference in Harrogate was a highly successful and energising event, bringing together councillors, activists, parliamentarians, and campaigners from across the country, and helping to build momentum ahead of upcoming local elections.

Local government had a strong presence throughout the conference, highlighting the vital role Conservative councillors play in delivering practical outcomes for residents and providing strong leadership in communities.

The LGA Conservative Group hosted two well-attended and interactive events: 'How to become a Conservative councillor' and 'How your council group can utilise the LGA'.

"Conservative councillors play a vital role in delivering practical outcomes for residents"

Both sessions generated strong engagement and provided useful insights into how the LGA Conservative Group supports councillors and council groups.

It was particularly encouraging to see significant interest from younger activists who are keen to stand as Conservative councillors in the future, demonstrating a strong pipeline of talent and commitment to public service within the Party.

The LGA Conservative Group stand was also visited by senior party figures, including Kevin Hollinrake, Chairman of the Conservative Party, and Kemi Badenoch, Leader of the Opposition.

They spoke with attendees about the importance of Conservative local government and the excellent work being delivered by Conservative councillors and councils across the country.



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

Ensuring diversity in council groups

The LGA's Be a Councillor programme has made a real difference in delivering diversity in council's political groups, but we still have a long way to go.

And, as part of the government's local government reorganisation plans, there is an opportunity to look at the role of councillors, members allowances, training and councillors' working conditions.

"Having parental leave policies for councillors can increase diversity"

I am proud of the LGA's training offer, and it's great to get positive feedback from those members who have taken it up. If you haven't accessed any LGA training, I would encourage you and your colleagues to do so (see bit.ly/3P7qu4S).

Doing all we can to offer help and support once elected can only encourage people to put themselves forward.

Because of their unusual employment situation, councillors are not automatically entitled to the same rights around maternity, paternity or adoption leave as most employees. It is up to individual councils to decide whether to adopt formal or informal policies granting such entitlements to councillors.

Having parental leave policies in place for councillors can help to increase the diversity of people seeking election to local government. Liberal Democrat councils offering this include Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse to name just two.

The LGA uses the model parental leave policy, see bit.ly/4blbaca.

● Last month's comment wrongly said we were already at our spring conference: apologies for any confusion caused.

GROUP LEADERS



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

We need clarity on reorganisation

The Government's justification for postponing local elections was that they would be so disruptive alongside local government reorganisation (LGR), that they simply could not go ahead.

I have consistently raised the issue of LGR and elections with Steve Reed OBE MP, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

I did so in October of last year, and following Reform UK's High Court legal challenge and subsequent legal advice, the Government reversed their decision at the eleventh hour.

The Government must now clarify where this leaves reorganisation.

"The Government must be prepared to review the pace of reorganisation"

If the Government is prepared to argue that LGR in conjunction with elections is too risky, now that elections are going ahead, it must be prepared to review the pace of reorganisation.

To not do this, while trying to deliver vital services, including significant reforms, would be irresponsible.

I have once again raised this with the Secretary of State, to express my serious concerns. I have asked that his department release the full risk assessment and legal advice, and to confirm whether the Government will review its unrealistic promises for LGR.

The LGA's Reform UK Group was the only political group at the LGA to speak up on elections, and now we will do the same with LGR.

These decisions affect millions of people – they deserve clarity. ●

Crisis support for the vulnerable



Dame Diana Johnson DBE is the Minister for Employment

For the first time, local councils can finally plan long-term crisis support to help vulnerable people in their communities, with the introduction of the Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF) in England.

I know councils had felt frustrated by the short-term nature of the Household and Support Fund schemes, which meant they could not properly plan for the long term.

The CRF's three-year funding provides certainty to deliver preventative support for families to build financial resilience and weather financial shocks before they cause lasting damage.

Three-year funding also gives local authorities time to plan how best to spend the money in the most targeted way and develop their schemes over the duration of the CRF.



The CRF will continue to help vulnerable families experiencing emergencies; a family's broken washing machine, the flat tyre on a car relied upon for work and school, or a shortfall in rent which will be met by the incorporation of Discretionary Housing Payments.

Offering people money rather than vouchers means individuals can choose

how best to meet their needs, empowering them to make decisions that fit their own circumstances.

But local authorities can use their judgement – as they know their residents and environments best – to shape the way they offer support. Research has consistently shown no evidence of misuse of cash awards when made.

I am grateful to all the local authorities and stakeholders who have worked collaboratively with the Department for Work and Pensions on the CRF's design, and I look forward to hearing about the impact these innovative projects will have on people's lives, including the Government's commitment to end mass dependence on emergency food parcels.

Alongside the CRF, I am proud of this Government's commitment to reduce poverty; the publication of the Child Poverty Strategy and particularly the removal of the two-child limit.

These interventions will lead to the largest expected reduction in child poverty over a Parliament since comparable records began. ●

Stronger public services in Wales



Peredur Owen Griffiths MS is Plaid Cymru Spokesperson for Local Government and Transport

This could be a historic year for Wales. The 2026 Senedd election offers the opportunity for a change of government here for the first time ever.

This election comes at a time when local government is particularly struggling following years of underfunding at the hands of the Labour Welsh government, and similarly at the hands of Westminster governments, both red and blue, who have failed to deliver the fair funding Wales needs.

What's clear is that Plaid Cymru is serious about delivering for our communities – meaning stronger public services by supporting local government.

It is in that context that we prevented double digit council tax rises or thousands of job cuts in the upcoming financial year – having negotiated a fairer local government settlement for 2026/27 following very stark warnings from the Welsh LGA.

It was Labour's budget to own, but Plaid Cymru stepped in to protect services, council tax bills, and create a more sustainable position for a new government after May's election.

It is also in that context that we look towards what we could achieve in government to build on just that.

During our final party conference ahead of this crucial election, we set

out our priorities for the first 100 days in government if we're elected by the people of Wales on 7 May.

A Plaid Cymru government will always stand up for Wales to demand the fair funding we need – that is something we'll begin negotiating immediately.

We're also committed to reforming the local government funding formula to better reflect local needs in different parts of Wales.

We know that because the comparative needs of our population are higher, relative to the rest of the UK, the demands on local authorities are considerable. This is something we won't delay on addressing.

This year offers Wales, and crucially our councils, the opportunity for change and stronger public services – which only Plaid Cymru can deliver. ●



Councillor Roger Phillips is Chair of the Rural Services Network

It is 30 years since rural councils first came together to ensure the realities of delivering services in sparsely populated places were recognised and acted upon, in national policy and funding decisions.

That founding moment in 1996 reflected a shared understanding among England's most rural authorities that service delivery in dispersed communities brings distinct challenges and costs.

By organising collectively, rural councils secured a stronger national voice, helping to shift debate, improve understanding and ensure that rural services were no longer absent from discussions about funding, policy design and delivery models.

Thirty years on, the need for that clarity remains.

Rural councils and service providers face the same pressures as the wider sector – rising demand, constrained funding and workforce shortages.

However, these are intensified by distance, ageing populations, limited transport and weaker connectivity.

Service delivery models designed around urban density do not always translate to deeply rural or coastal communities. This matters because the funding gap remains structural.

Our analysis shows urban councils will receive 32 per cent more per head than rural councils in government-funded spending power in 2026/27, while rural residents will pay



Thirty years speaking up for rural areas

17 per cent more in council tax.

There is also a persistent misconception that rural England is uniformly affluent. In reality, rural poverty is very much real but frequently hidden.

Lower wages, higher living costs and limited access to housing and services create vulnerability that can be masked by broad datasets and averages.

When need is measured at too large a scale or through metrics shaped by urban experience, deprivation in rural communities can disappear from view, and policy risks missing its target.

It was to address these realities that the Rural Services Network (RSN) was formed, and why it continues to play a vital advocacy role today, driven by the collective experience and insight of our members.

The RSN has evolved from a coalition of sparsely populated

councils into the only national body dedicated exclusively to representing rural local authorities and service providers across England.

Our purpose remains clear: to ensure rural services are understood, fairly funded and effectively designed.

That work extends beyond parliamentary engagement. It includes shaping funding debates, challenging the metrics used to assess need, contributing to consultations, convening rural leaders, and building a shared evidence base to inform national reform.

We work constructively with government departments, parliamentarians and sector partners to ensure rural perspectives are embedded early in policy development.

For local government leaders, this is not about special treatment, but about fair and accurate policy.

A funding formula, service model or regulatory change

that works in a city may require adaptation in a rural county or market town. Designing systems that work everywhere depends on recognising those distinctions from the outset.

Our 30th anniversary is therefore not simply a moment to reflect, but a statement of intent for the years ahead.

The RSN will continue to work to ensure that rural realities, including hidden poverty and unmet need, are properly understood and embedded in national decision-making.

Strong national policy depends on strong local understanding and every person, in every place, deserves the opportunity to thrive. ●

i The Rural Services Network is an LGA special interest group. Visit rsnonline.org.uk to find out more



**Councillor Mark Roberts (Lib Dem) is
Leader of Stockport Council**

What is the high street for? For years, the default answer was retail. When footfall fell and vacancy rose, many town centres were left exposed.

In Stockport, we decided that simply waiting for retail to return was not a strategy.

We needed a joined-up approach: repurposing underused buildings, supporting businesses, improving public spaces, and shaping a town centre that works for people as well as retailers.

It began in 2016 when the council purchased Merseyway Shopping Centre, giving us the ability to unlock long-vacant space.

That led to a series of bold but coordinated interventions: the creation of Stockroom (see below); investment in the Merseyway Innovation Centre, providing start-up, creative and flexible office space; improvements to the public realm that make streets welcoming and vibrant; and a continuing home for retail with the revamp of a former BHS store with two anchor retail tenants.

Together, these interventions combine culture, civic services and business within our Strategic Regeneration Framework, delivering a town centre that works for people and the economy together.

Opened in May 2025, Stockroom sits at the heart of this approach. Bringing together library services, creativity, learning, civic support, and everyday services in one place, it shows how councils



Stockroom, a civic space at the heart of Stockport

Town centres that work for people

can sustainably use existing buildings to create long-term social infrastructure.

Residents helped shape the space at every step, designing furniture, contributing to branding and co-designing the creative programme.

Families, young people, older residents and community groups all had a say, ensuring Stockroom reflects the community it serves.

Feedback from residents constantly tells us how easy the space is to use and how inclusive it feels. It's accessible, friendly, and full of life – a shared living room for the whole town.

Crucially, Stockroom was never intended as a standalone project. It sits at the heart of the UK's largest town centre regeneration, where council leadership and Stockport's Mayoral Development Corporation have unlocked private investment to deliver new neighbourhoods, business space and thousands of new homes.

Culture here is not decoration, it is economic infrastructure.

The impact has been immediate, with visits to Merseyway up 15 per cent, footfall rising, time spent in our town centre up,

and businesses reporting benefits beyond traditional shopping hours.

More importantly, Stockroom changes how residents experience the high street: parents registering a birth can receive early years advice and borrow their child's first book in the same visit, while young people use creative spaces for workshops and gigs, and grandparents bring children for storytime while enjoying a coffee.

Since opening, more than 10,000 hours of public computer use have supported job searches and training, while children's book loans have risen by 285 per cent compared with our other town centre library.

Stockport's town centre continues to evolve, with new homes, workspaces and neighbourhoods. But, as the town changes, Stockroom will remain a constant anchor, a civic space that grows with the community, supports participation and ensures regeneration remains rooted in our people.

By designing town centres around people's everyday lives, rather than solely retail, we have created places that are resilient, vibrant and built to last.

For us, the message is clear: the future of the high street lies in shaping it around its people. ●



Collaboration must drive policing



Emily Spurrell is Chair of the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners

The public rightly expects the police to keep them safe. Yet crime is constantly evolving, with criminals using new tools, technology and tactics to evade the law.

National policing experts – and those of us who hold forces to account on behalf of the public – see this shift every day.

The rapid growth of cybercrime, the persistence of violence against women and girls, and changes in traditional offences such as burglary, theft and antisocial behaviour, all illustrate how dynamic the threat landscape has become.

Against this backdrop, the Government's ambition to reform policing, alongside its wider commitment to devolution, is welcome.

Publicly funded policing must be able to keep pace with organised criminality and change is essential if we are to keep people safe.

The proposal for a new National Police Service could play an important role in helping policing respond to the most serious organised crime, which pays no heed to force boundaries or national borders.

Its leader will be directly accountable to the Home Secretary, reflecting the need for strong national oversight. But accountability must exist at every level.

We know from years of experience that keeping the public safe requires policing that reflects, respects and listens to the communities it serves. Police and crime commissioners (PCCs), and now deputy mayors, have been central to delivering robust local oversight.

While the National Police Service may require direct national accountability, equally strong arrangements must be in place for regional and neighbourhood policing, to ensure that the public interest is fully protected.

Structural reform must always lead to a better service for the public – safer neighbourhoods, more visible policing and communities that feel heard.

The Government's pledge to invest in 13,000 additional neighbourhood police officers reflects what the public consistently tells us: people want officers they can see and speak to. Delivering this is essential to rebuilding trust and confidence, which has been badly damaged in recent years.

Local partnerships have underpinned many of the positive changes delivered so far. PCCs have worked closely with councils and other agencies to cut duplication, drive efficiency and create practical solutions that respond directly to local needs.

Devolution offers the opportunity to go further and faster, with more mayoral areas gaining police governance powers. These gains must be protected.

To tackle knife crime and violence against women and girls, properly funded local decision-making – independent of the police –

is essential. Yet there is a clear tension between the Government's drive to devolve more responsibility to local areas while simultaneously centralising power over policing. Two major reforms pulling in opposite directions risk weakening police responsiveness, not strengthening it.

Local commissioning must also be safeguarded. Whether working with domestic abusers to change behaviour or supporting young people away from offending, these interventions prevent crime before it happens.

When people do become victims, local services help them recover and navigate the justice system.

Whatever the future structure of policing, one principle must guide reform: improvements must be tangible to the public.

That will only be achieved through collaboration between national and local government, policing leaders, councils and the communities we serve. Locally, regionally and nationally, collaboration is where real progress lies. ●



Protecting those in public life



Councillor Sharon Thompson is Deputy Leader of Birmingham City Council and Deputy Mayor of West Midlands Combined Authority

The LGA's Debate Not Hate campaign provides important tools and guidance for councillors. It is a strong and necessary initiative.

But it cannot, on its own, address the structural challenges we are now facing.

It is becoming increasingly normal for councillors to require risk assessments relating to their private homes.

In Birmingham, a significant number of colleagues have had police 'markers' recommended or undergone council-led assessments due to safety concerns.

The majority are from ethnic minority backgrounds or have ethnic minority members within their household. Some have stopped reporting incidents altogether, feeling outcomes can be inconsistent.

That should not be the case in a mature democracy.

Being advised that I may need a police marker placed on my home was the final factor in my decision not to seek re-election as a councillor in May. It was the right decision for me.

I chose public life. My family did not.

There is a clear distinction between scrutiny and intimidation. Robust democratic challenge is essential. Persistent hostility, stalking, coordinated digital harassment, doxing (cyberbullying that uses sensitive documents or information for the harassment, exposure, financial harm, or exploitation of targeted individuals), and intimidation of families is not.

Over three terms, I have witnessed

conduct that goes well beyond scrutiny: photographs of family homes shared online, protests directed at private residential streets rather than civic venues, and threats of violence.

The LGA's most recent Debate Not Hate survey found that nearly three-quarters of councillors reported experiencing abuse or intimidation in the past year, with almost half saying it had increased.

When intimidation becomes normalised, it narrows who feels able to stand and serve.

Campaigns help those willing to reflect on their behaviour. The deeper issue lies with those who justify abuse as 'part of the job'. Public office does

not remove the right to safety, dignity or family life.

Everyone in public life deserves protection.

In my own experience, and in conversations with colleagues nationally, women, ethnic minority, LGBTQ+ and disabled

representatives are more frequently the focus of targeted and personal abuse rather than policy disagreement.

Legislative reform is essential to ensure equal democratic participation.

If public service increasingly requires police markers on homes and risk assessments affecting private homes and family life, we should pause and ask what that says about the health of our democracy.

This is not about shielding individuals from accountability. It is about safeguarding the integrity of our democratic system.

It is now time for Parliament to give serious consideration to strengthening the legal and safeguarding framework protecting those in public life.

i See [local.gov.uk/civility-public-life](https://www.local.gov.uk/civility-public-life) for LGA resources and support



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

Labour's gain of Durham's Murton ward from Reform UK has naturally attracted attention, since it runs contrary to the general trend of Labour struggling to retain seats.

Reform took control of Durham County Council at last May's elections, winning 65 seats with an overall vote share of 37 per cent. Shortly afterwards, it faced by-elections, following resignations of two of its newly elected councillors.

The first seat was lost to the Liberal Democrats, but the other was held.

Following another resignation, Reform selected Theo Bell as its candidate this time, with Labour returning to Julie Griffiths, the defeated councillor last time.

As part of its budget policy, the council voted to reduce council tax relief for the poorest households to 75 per cent from 100 per cent, a decision that may or may not have contributed to Reform's defeat on this occasion.

Those who leap to the conclusion from the Murton result that Reform in power will face a backlash can be countered with a by-election held elsewhere on the same day.

Tamworth's Spital ward was a gain from Labour with Reform polling 44 per cent of the vote from a standing start. Half of Tamworth's voters backed Reform at the 2025 elections for Staffordshire County Council, when the party won 49 of 62 seats.

The broader picture regarding Reform shows that in by-elections held since its breakthrough performance last year, it has retained only half of the seats it has defended. A 50 per cent retention rate sounds poor – and it is, in comparison with the Liberal Democrats (87 per cent), and the Greens (61 per cent).

But the more meaningful comparison is probably with the two main parties. Labour has safely negotiated only 14 of its 62 vacancies (retention rate 23 per cent, or losing almost three in every four seats) while the Conservatives are only

Comparing retention rates

marginally better, retaining only three in 10 of their seats.

The average majority is 20 per cent in the wards Labour has lost and the average change in vote share in those is -25 per cent.

Reform picked up the Labour seat in Peterborough's Fletton and Woodston ward, finishing 36 votes ahead of the Greens with the incumbents relegated to third place after their vote fell by 31 percentage points.

The two remaining Reform gains came in Ynys Môn's Ynys Gybi ward, where Celfyn Furlong polled 44 per cent; and Braintree's Coggeshall ward, where an Independent just failed to retain the seat.

Plaid Cymru made two gains from Labour, with the latter's vote falling from 59 per cent to 11 per cent in Pembrokeshire's Fishguard North East ward. In this case, a ballot of just two parties in 2022 become a list of seven this time, with the winning party's share a lowly 34 per cent on a high turnout.

The explanation for Plaid's win in Caerphilly's Van ward provides another example of Labour haemorrhaging votes to Reform. Its drop in vote matched the support for Reform, a 28-point swing between the two, with Plaid Cymru the beneficiary.

A week before the Greens' dramatic victory at the Gorton and Denton parliamentary by-election, the party took Labour's Leicester seat in Stoneygate ward by 106 votes. Another complicated ballot,



including a candidate from One Leicester, saw the Greens' Aasiya Bora win through.

The Liberal Democrats' gain from Labour in Redcar and Cleveland's Zetland ward was a case of the party recovering from a previous setback. Sitting councillor Alison Barnes was defeated here in 2023, but now makes a return.

The Conservatives made a rare gain

when comfortably winning Hextable ward in Sevenoaks. The vacancy arose following the death of long-serving Independent Cllr Darren Kitchener, first elected for the ward in 2015 alongside a Conservative. He topped the poll four years later when standing for the Hextable Independents before winning for a third time in 2023. ●

By-election results

Bradford, Worth Valley

CON HELD
25.6% over Ref | Turnout 32.2%

Braintree, Coggeshall

REF GAIN FROM IND
2.1% over Ind | Turnout 37.1%

Caerphilly, Van

PLAID GAIN FROM LAB
14.8% over Ref | Turnout 25.9%

Durham, Murton

LAB GAIN FROM REF
11% over Ref | Turnout 28.3%

Leicester, Stoneygate

GREEN GAIN FROM LAB
2.7% over Lab | Turnout 27.8%

North Somerset, Clevedon South

LAB HELD
1.3% over Ref | Turnout 36.4%

Pembrokeshire, Fishguard North East

PLAID GAIN FROM LAB
15.6% over Lib Dem | Turnout 48.6%

Peterborough, Fletton and Woodston

REF GAIN FROM LAB
1.9% over Green | Turnout 25.2%

Redcar & Cleveland, Zetland

LIB DEM GAIN FROM LAB
28.9% over Lab | Turnout 26.8%

Sevenoaks, Hextable

CON GAIN FROM IND
12.6% over Ref | Turnout 47.2%

Southampton, Shirley

LIB DEM HELD
0.6% over Lab | Turnout 35%

Stroud, Thrupp

GREEN HELD
51.0% over Ref | Turnout 41.3%

Tamworth, Spital

REF GAIN FROM LAB
23.2% over Green | Turnout 26.2%

Ynys Môn, Ynys Gybi

REF GAIN FROM PLAID
18.9% over Plaid | Turnout 33.3%

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



CONFERENCE
+ EXHIBITION

7-9 July 2026
Bournemouth



local.gov.uk/conference

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Building lasting futures locally