

A crisis Budget

With sustainable funding and devolved powers, councils can support communities through the pandemic and lead the recovery

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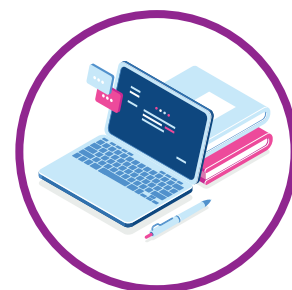


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How to help residents affected by building safety issues



LGA virtual events programme

Annual Culture, Tourism and Sport Conference

Monday 1 March – Wednesday 3 March 2021

Our flagship Annual Culture, Tourism and Sport Conference looks a little different this year and will take place virtually as **three separate webinars**.

The webinars will explore how culture can contribute (1 March); how we rebuild a thriving visitor economy (2 March) and how sports and physical activity (3 March) can play their part in our national recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.



How can culture contribute to our national recovery?

Monday 1 March 2021

10.30am – 12.00pm



How can visitor activity contribute to our national recovery?

Tuesday 2 March 2021

10.30am – 12.00pm



How can sport and physical activity contribute to our national recovery?

Wednesday 3 March 2021

10.30am – 12.00pm

To book your place and for more information visit www.local.gov.uk/events

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Ongoing support

With deaths within 28 days of a positive test for COVID-19 now exceeding 100,000 in the UK,

I know you and your teams continue to work tirelessly on the response to the pandemic, including supporting the vaccination rollout (see p4, p10).

Elsewhere in this month's **first**, we look at the LGA's Budget submission (p12), which sets out how – with sustainable funding and appropriate devolved powers – councils can continue to support communities through the pandemic, and lead on economic recovery.

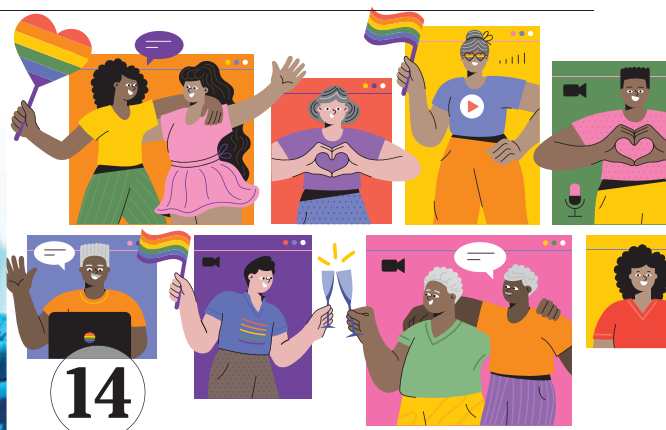
Contributors from across the political spectrum talk about their experiences as LGBT+ councillors and the work of their councils (p14), as we mark LGBT+ History Month this February.

We also reflect on the innovative ways councils have found to support children and young people's emotional wellbeing during a pandemic that has negatively impacted on everyone's mental health (p16).

We also have guidance for councils and councillors on tackling empty shops on the high street (p18) and helping residents living in homes with dangerous cladding (p29).

Can I also urge you to take the time to let us know what you think about **first**, your LGA membership magazine, by completing our readership survey at www.local.gov.uk/first or scanning the QR code on p22.

Cllr James Jamieson
is LGA Chairman



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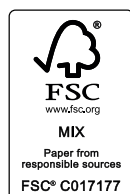
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£23m vaccine boost as deaths pass 100,000

More than 100,000 people in the UK have died within 28 days of receiving a positive test result for COVID-19.

The UK became the first European nation – and the fifth in the world, after the US, Brazil, India and Mexico – to pass the landmark, after a surge in cases in recent weeks driven by a new, fast-spreading variant of the virus.

Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said the milestone was "a heartbreaking reminder of how many people have lost their lives to this dreadful disease and the terrible toll it has placed on family and friends".

"The lives they lived should be remembered and we should never forget that

behind every statistic is somebody's life taken too soon. We must continue to do all we can to protect ourselves and our loved ones from this deadly virus."

He added: "Vaccination uptake remains encouraging and will be our ultimate route out of this crisis."

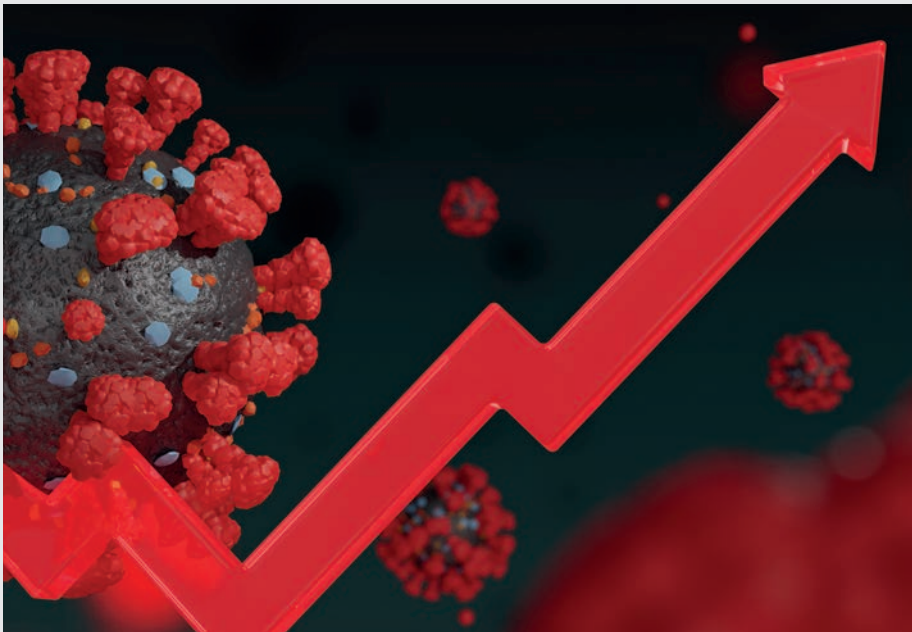
Councils have been at the forefront of encouraging people to have the vaccine, and the Government has allocated more than £23 million to 60 councils and voluntary groups across England to expand work to support those most at risk from COVID-19, and to boost vaccine take-up.

The Community Champions scheme is intended to build trust and provide accurate health information by using helplines, schools, workplaces and training sessions to reach people who are older, disabled and from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Recent studies and surveys have suggested that people from minority ethnic backgrounds may be less likely to get vaccinated, despite being at a higher risk of death if they contract COVID-19.

Cllr Hudspeth said: "Councils' unique relationship with the people they represent means they are well placed to reach out to those in the priority groups and beyond. They will continue to do all they can to make sure that everyone has the information they need to stay safe and healthy."

Meanwhile, as **first** was going to press, Prime Minister Boris Johnson confirmed that schools in England will not re-open to all pupils until 8 March at the earliest, subject to "lots of things going right".



£120m for social care staffing

The Government has announced an extra £120 million for councils to help tackle staffing issues in adult social care. The money can be used for additional care staff where shortages arise, support for administrative tasks so experienced and skilled staff can focus on providing care and help, and overtime payments or help with childcare costs so existing staff can take on extra hours, if they wish.

This will build on what many councils already have in place to increase capacity and

fill staffing gaps, such as: care worker staff banks, where new recruits are paid during training; redeployment models, where DBS-checked staff are trained and moved into operational roles; and end-to-end training and recruitment services.

Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "Social care has been on the frontline throughout the coronavirus pandemic and our dedicated staff rightly need as much support as possible during this incredibly challenging period."

"Going forward, all of those

using and working in social care need a sustainable, long-term funding solution to how we provide care and support, which allows people to live the lives they want to lead. We look forward to government bringing forward its proposals at the earliest possible opportunity."

The Government has also published the allocations and grant conditions for its £149 million Adult Social Care Rapid Testing Fund, to support the rollout of additional 'lateral flow' testing of care home staff and visitors.





Children locked down in temporary accommodation

The LGA has warned that around 450 primary schools' worth of homeless children are spending lockdown in temporary accommodation, amid a chronic shortage of affordable housing.

Latest figures for England show there are 127,240 children living in temporary homes, including 1,440 households with children in bed and breakfast accommodation.

The LGA says the numbers underline the urgent need for the Government to ensure more affordable homes for rent are built. It has also set out a six-point plan of further action the Government can take to protect renters, following the extension to the ban on bailiff enforcement action.

The six-point plan includes powers for councils to acquire empty homes and to build much-needed social housing; improved protection through the welfare system for families facing hardship; and an immediate

review of the overall benefits cap in the context of the pandemic.

In addition, councils need resources to support households at risk of homelessness, as well as a programme of 100,000 social homes for rent to be delivered each year, and the Government to bring forward its pledge to end 'no fault evictions'.

Cllr David Renard, the LGA's Housing Spokesperson, said: "Living in temporary accommodation is disruptive and challenging for children and their families in normal times. These pressures are being compounded by another lockdown, and on top of that some are unable to attend school.

"Our six-point plan would give councils a better chance of being able to move homeless children into permanent accommodation and also minimise the risk of other households becoming homeless as a result of the pandemic."

Fire services 'responded well' to pandemic

Fire and rescue services have responded very well to the pandemic, with services maintaining their ability to respond to fires and many providing pandemic-specific support outside their statutory duties.

However, some fire services were "unable to maximise this support due to outdated and restrictive working practices within the sector", according to inspectors.

Cllr Ian Stephens, Chair of the LGA's Fire Services Management Committee, said an agreement between fire chiefs, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and employers had provided a way for firefighters to respond to the pandemic and that fire authorities were proud of their work in supporting their communities.

"The National Employers played a pivotal role in bringing the National Fire Chiefs Councils and the FBU together after they had failed to reach an agreement on their own about what work could be carried out locally by firefighters," he said.

"We share the disappointment that some activities took time to agree, but the tripartite and subsequent NJC agreement did enable activities to start, and then continue, so the fire service could respond to the pandemic.

"By bringing together all fire and rescue services, the tripartite and NJC agreements provided a single arrangement rather than a piecemeal approach.

"Giving chief fire officers operational independence would not enable them to direct firefighters to undertake new activity. That could only be achieved with a change in their terms and conditions of employment."

'Rocket boost' in funding needed to tackle children's mental health

Damage to children's mental health caused by the coronavirus crisis could last for years without a "rocket boost in funding" for children's mental health services, the Children's Commissioner for England has warned.

Anne Longfield says there have been improvements to services but that hundreds of thousands of children are still not getting the help they need.

In her annual report into the state of children's mental health services in England, she

calls for a major recovery programme including an NHS-funded counsellor in every school and online wellbeing support.

Cllr Judith Blake, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "The pandemic has exacerbated existing mental health problems, particularly for children living in families with lower incomes and whose parents may be experiencing financial difficulties.

"Local councils have a vital role in helping children have mentally healthy childhoods and mental health needs to be at the heart of a

holistic approach to overall health and wellbeing.

"Supporting children early on to reduce the need for clinical interventions means more can receive help when they need it, rather than waiting until they are unwell.

"It is vital that effective and evidence-based mental health and wellbeing services and statutory mental health services for children are able to meet existing, new and unmet demand that has built up during the pandemic."

● See p16

Mental health reforms 'must ensure funding'

'Landmark' reforms of mental health laws must also ensure ongoing funding for councils' mental health services, the LGA has said.

The Government is consulting on changes to the Mental Health Act aimed at giving people more control over their treatment, putting patients' views at the centre of their care, and helping tackle mental health inequalities – such as the disproportionate detention of those from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities.

The White Paper consultation also says a learning disability or autism should not be considered a mental disorder for which someone can be detained for treatment.

Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said mental health inequalities have been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

"We strongly support the objective to give people a stronger say in their treatment.

"Councils play a significant role in mental health, both in terms of their statutory duties under mental health legislation and supporting treatment and recovery.

"The challenges with the current Act are indicative of a system that is under strain because of increased demand and reduced funding. Any reform of the Mental Health Act needs to include ongoing funding for councils' mental health services, so they can continue to invest in effective support to meet existing, new and unmet demand."

The LGA will be responding to the consultation, which closes on 21 April. Please email your thoughts on the matter to kevin.halden@local.gov.uk. See p16



'Review private equity role in care placements'

The LGA has urged the Government's review of children's social care to consider the impact of increasing private equity and stock market involvement in the system, after publishing new research that shows the six largest independent providers of placements made £219 million in profit last year.

The LGA's report indicates that some independent providers of children's residential and fostering placements made profits of more than 20 per cent on their income, while four of the seven largest groups of independent providers had more debts and liabilities than tangible assets.

Nearly three in four children's homes and two in five fostering households are now provided by independent organisations, which includes private and charitable companies.

Rising demand means that, despite increasing budgets, councils still overspent on children's social care by more than £3 billion over the past five years. Four in five councils have reported rising costs for fostering and residential placements because of coronavirus pressures.

The LGA is calling for the children's social care review to lead to greater national oversight of companies providing homes

for children in care, similar to the role the Care Quality Commission holds for adult social care provision.

Cllr Judith Blake, Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board, said: "The potential risks involved in independent providers' considerable debt levels is an issue that the Government must consider, alongside greater financial support for children's services.

"We cannot risk a Southern Cross or Four Seasons situation in children's social care. Stability for children in care is paramount if we are to help them to thrive. An oversight scheme is needed to help catch providers before they fall and ensure company changes don't risk the quality of provision."



Calls to tackle rising child poverty

The Children's Commissioner for England has published a cross-party call from politicians and researchers for an overarching national plan to tackle child poverty.

Anne Longfield said the country has reached a "tipping point" where child poverty is rising and the educational outcomes for children in poverty are getting worse – with the COVID-19 pandemic accelerating these trends.

A separate report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) has revealed that people trapped in poverty in the UK before the pandemic have suffered the most financial hardship during the crisis.

The charity has urged the Government to make permanent a £20 per week rise in

universal credit benefit payments – which is due to be cut from the end of March.

Responding to the JRF's report, Cllr Richard Watts, Chair of the LGA's Resources Board, said: "This report shows the worrying impact that COVID-19 has had on some of the most vulnerable in our communities and has pushed more people on low incomes into poverty.

"Support for children on free school meals and the uplift in universal credit have helped to protect many families most at risk, and it is important that these continue.

"As many households are likely to be economically vulnerable for some time to come, it is vital that the Government restores local welfare funding so councils can provide support to families who need it."

Building safety: testing review and new regulator

The Housing Secretary, Robert Jenrick MP, has announced the establishment of a new national construction products regulator to ensure homes are built using safe materials.

The regulator will have the power to remove any product from the market that presents a significant safety risk and prosecute any companies that flout the rules on product safety.

It will be given enforcement powers, including the ability to conduct its own product testing when investigating concerns.

The Government has also announced an independent review to examine weaknesses in previous testing regimes for construction products. It will also recommend how abuse of the testing system can be prevented.

Lord Porter, LGA Building Safety Spokesperson, said: "It is good that the Government has listened to councils' concerns and announced a review into testing to ensure our national approach is fit for purpose,

alongside the new national construction products regulator.

"We have previously raised concerns over the effectiveness of the BS8414 test used to certify cladding systems on high-rise buildings.

"As well as this, we have raised concerns about the role of test houses in the mass failure of glass-reinforced plastic fire doors following the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

"The Office for Product Safety and Standards will need to work closely with the Health and Safety Executive in its role as the new Building Safety Regulator to ensure that products are not only safe, but also installed correctly."

Dame Judith Hackitt, Chair of the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety, said these latest developments were "another really important step" in delivering the new regulatory system for building safety.

● See p29 – support for residents affected by cladding issues

'Lessons to be learned' on rough sleeping

The number of rough sleepers accommodated during the 'Everyone in' initiative over several months "far exceeds" the number recorded in the Government's annual national snapshot of the rough sleeper population, according to a report by the National Audit Office (NAO).

The report, 'Investigation into the housing of rough sleepers during the COVID-19 pandemic', says the emergency response during the first wave of the pandemic had raised issues that need to be addressed if the Government is to achieve its goal of ending rough sleeping by the end of this Parliament.

Figures show that, in the autumn of 2019, the Government's annual snapshot estimated that there were

4,266 people sleeping rough on any given night, compared with the more than 33,000 people who were helped by 'Everyone in'.

The NAO said understanding the size of the rough-sleeping population and who needs essential support is key if the Government is to achieve its ambition of ending rough sleeping.

Cllr David Renard, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "The success of the 'Everyone in' initiative in getting people sleeping rough off the streets and saving lives shows that we can end the vast majority of rough sleeping.

"As this report suggests, it is vital that we build on the lessons learned, and strive to make this the new normal, rather than a one-off emergency response."



In brief Housing support

Councils have been given an additional £10 million and asked to "redouble their efforts" to accommodate those sleeping rough and make sure they are swiftly registered with a GP, so they can be contacted to receive vaccinations. There will also be an extension to the ban on bailiff evictions for all but the most egregious cases until at least 21 February. Cllr David Renard, LGA Housing Spokesperson, said: "It is good the Government is providing additional funding to tackle rough sleeping, but it is likely that councils will need further financial support in the difficult weeks and months ahead to move people into safe and secure housing."



Science of ageing

Health inequalities are widening and the Government's Ageing Society Grand Challenge target of five extra healthy years of life by 2035 will be missed, according to a report from the Lords' Science and Technology Committee. Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "Councils are ideally placed to support their communities to live healthier, longer lives through joining up their other services – such as housing, transport and leisure – with their existing public health offer, but need adequate funding, as well as the support of the NHS, to do this effectively."

Council finances

The financial sustainability of some local authorities presents a significant risk to government, MPs have warned. A report from the Public Accounts Committee says that, while local authorities have autonomy over their spending, the Treasury is the 'funder of last resort' should a local authority become insolvent. With COVID-19 increasing fiscal pressures, the committee "expects that more local authorities will soon be unable to balance their books and will be forced to issue Section 114 notices to suspend non-essential expenditure". It has called for the Government's response to the Redmond review – which highlighted a lack of Treasury oversight of local government finances – to be agreed and implemented as soon as possible.

In brief first survey

The LGA wants to know what you think of **first**, our membership magazine, and its sister website and e-bulletin – and how we can make the content more useful to you, our readers. If you are a councillor and currently receive **first**, you should shortly receive a personal email invitation to complete our latest readership survey. Alternatively, you can access the survey via the **first** online website (www.local.gov.uk/first) or by scanning the QR code on p22. If you have any queries about the survey, please email karen.thornton@local.gov.uk or helen.wilkinson@local.gov.uk

Getting moving

Sport England has published 'Uniting the movement', a 10-year strategy focused on helping grassroots sport and physical activity recover from the effects of the pandemic and tackling long-standing inequalities in levels of activity. Cllr Gerald Vernon-Jackson, Chair of the LGA's Culture Tourism and Sport Board, welcomed the strategy's focus on black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, those with disabilities, and children and young people. He said: "Councils are working hard to try to ensure sport and leisure facilities are available once national restrictions are eased, and will have a key role to play in realising this strategy's ambitions."

Local elections

Two-thirds of council officials in England are "very concerned" about holding local elections on 6 May and 68 per cent would prefer to see them delayed until the autumn, according to research from the Local Government Information Unit. Most of the concerns centred on preparing for elections only to have them postponed, issues with recruiting and training electoral workers, the ability of candidates to campaign effectively, and disenfranchising voters with COVID-19 concerns. Chloe Smith MP, the Constitution and Devolution Minister, has said the Government intends to proceed with May's elections, although this decision will be kept under constant review. The LGA continues to seek clarity about the public health measures that will be needed ahead of the elections, and that government will ensure they can be held safely and candidates can campaign safely.

Central role for employers in FE reforms

Employers will have a greater say in the development of skills training as part of reforms to post-16 technical education set out in a new White Paper, 'Skills for jobs'.

Other measures – aimed at supporting people to develop the skills they need to get good jobs and improve national productivity – include a flexible, life-time skills guarantee, reforms to funding and accountability for providers, and support for outstanding teaching.

Cllr Sir Richard Leese, Chair of the LGA's City Regions Board, said: "Further education (FE) institutions, working together with their local councils, have a vital role to play in levelling up the country and local communities.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a growing unemployment crisis, and it is vital that we provide the right skills and training for young people and adults in our

communities, to help support them into good long-term employment. It is right that the FE system should align to the needs of employers, and it is good that chambers of commerce will be part of that.

"It is also important for all parts of the FE system to work in partnership across a community, including with independent training providers and adult and community learning provision run by councils and others.

"Together, the FE system should offer routes to help local businesses fulfil their recruitment needs, and stepping stones for people to increase their skills – be they life skills or skills to secure work with an employer, or to become self-employed. That requires a strong role for councils who know their communities best."

● See www.local.gov.uk/topics/employment-and-skills for the LGA's work on employment and skills. See p19

New funding to tackle drugs crime

An extra £80 million is to be invested in drug treatment services across England to give more support to offenders with drink and drug addictions, as part of an overall £148 million package to cut crime and protect people from the menace of illegal drugs.

The extra resources will help police dismantle organised criminal gangs and prevent illegal drugs supply. The funding for drug treatment and recovery is also intended to help cut drug-related crime and the cycle of misuse and reoffending.

Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chairman of the LGA's Community Wellbeing Board, said: "This new funding is a positive step in tackling the scourge of illegal drugs in our communities, while providing much-needed support to those in drug treatment and recovery.

"The causes of substance misuse are complex, but the right support in place can help vulnerable people improve their health, rebuild relationships, find work, and drive down crime and violence.

"Extra funding means that drug treatment and prevention can be at the

heart of councils' local public health responses, working closely alongside the police, health service and charities.

"The pandemic has also reduced access to youth services, limited time in school, and left some young people struggling to find training or employment. Councils are concerned about this increasing their risk of criminal exploitation, so additional funding to tackle county lines will help to support and protect young people at risk."



Tackling domestic abuse

LGA calls for long-term and sustained investment in early intervention and prevention programmes



As first was going to press, the LGA was briefing Peers on the Domestic Abuse Bill, which is in Committee Stage in the House of Lords until 8 February.

This important legislation introduces measures that will help raise awareness of domestic abuse and go some way to providing additional support to victims, while also helping to challenge perpetrators' behaviour.

The LGA supports the creation of a statutory definition of domestic abuse, and the inclusion of economic abuse within this. We are also pleased to see that the Bill will place the role of the domestic abuse commissioner on a statutory footing.

Alongside the Bill's focus on crisis interventions and criminal justice, tackling domestic abuse requires a cross-government response incorporating health, housing and education. We need an equal focus on, and funding for, prevention and early intervention measures that aim to prevent domestic abuse happening in the first place.

So, in addition to the measures in the Bill, the LGA is calling on the Government to provide long-term and sustained investment in early intervention and prevention programmes and wider community-based support, including a national

✧ This important legislation introduces measures that will help raise awareness of domestic abuse ✧

domestic abuse perpetrator strategy. Several Peers were supportive of these measures in the earlier Second Reading of the Bill.

LGA Vice-President Baroness Eaton (Con) said a perpetrator strategy "would be helpful", while Baroness Uddin (Crossbench) said she hoped the Government would "heed the calls of the domestic abuse commissioner and the LGA for an effective perpetrators' programme".

Baroness Donaghy (Lab) called for a "cross-government response, including health, housing and education, and an equal focus on funding for prevention and wider community-based support".

The LGA is supporting an amendment to the Bill that would require the Government to provide a comprehensive perpetrator strategy, within one year of the Domestic Abuse Act being passed.

We are also calling for the key learning and best practice from domestic homicide reviews to be shared at a national level, and are supporting an amendment that

would place a duty on public authorities to do this by notifying the Home Office and domestic abuse commissioner of their findings.

Peers also raised at Second Reading the proposed statutory duty on local authorities to support victims of domestic abuse and their children in safe accommodation. They said this was welcome, but that it must be viewed within the wider context of community-based support for domestic abuse victims.

The Spending Review announcement of £125 million to help local authorities deliver this proposed new duty is welcome. We now need more detail as it is not yet clear how the figure has been calculated and whether it will meet the full costs of the proposed duty – including any increases in demand for services, additional burdens identified by local needs assessments when the duty comes into force in April 2021, and for the inclusion of children in the statutory definition of domestic abuse.

This legislation comes at a time when, even prior to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, local services – and particularly children's services – had already been facing unprecedented demand.

One-off, short-term grants do not allow for long-term planning or consistency in service, which is why sustained investment is needed. This would support councils to improve services and keep their communities safe.



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



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

A terrible toll

Councils are working hard to support the national rollout of COVID-19 vaccines

As **first** was going to press, it was confirmed that more than 100,000 people across the country had died within 28 days of a COVID-19 test – just over a year since the first two official cases were recorded in the UK.

It is difficult to comprehend the tragedy that has unfolded since, with those 100,000 people having lost their lives and the number of coronavirus cases recorded around the world having passed 100 million, with more than two million deaths.

One in eight Britons have lost a close friend or family member to COVID-19, according to a recent poll by YouGov. Even in our worst fears last January, none of us could have imagined the devastating impact the virus would have on all of our lives.

I know you and your teams continue to work tirelessly on the response to the pandemic, including supporting the rollout of the vaccine – which, ultimately, will be our route out of this crisis to a more normal way of life.

The mass vaccination programme continues at a significant pace, with 7,447,199 people having received their first dose up to 27 January – including the majority of over-80s, meaning many of the most vulnerable people in our communities will have some protection from the virus.

While infection rates and patient admissions show some signs of falling, they remain high, with our health and social care services working under severe pressure.

Worryingly, official data on coronavirus-related deaths by occupation in England and Wales show that those in social care occupations had statistically significantly higher rates of death involving COVID-19 when compared with rates of death in the



general population, among those of the same age and sex. Almost three in four of the deaths in social care occupations were care workers and home carers.

This data illustrates how important it is for us all to support and encourage our frontline adult social care workers to take up the vaccination offer to enable them to continue caring safely for our most vulnerable residents.

Along with government, councils are determined to increase the uptake of the vaccine, particularly among those in the priority groups for immunisations.

The Government's allocation of £23 million of funding through the Community Champions scheme, to boost our existing efforts to engage those who are hardest to reach, was welcome. This funding will help councils build on the excellent work they are doing locally to encourage everyone from all parts of the community to get vaccinated and tackle misinformation.

The LGA continues to reiterate that councils want to play their full part in the vaccines rollout, and I know you continue to do all you can to make sure that everyone has the information they need to stay safe and healthy.

Meanwhile, we were grateful to Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick MP for joining us at the first LGA Councillors' Forum meeting of 2021. He offered thanks to councils for their vital local leadership role throughout the pandemic and recognised the stress it has placed on council finances and the wellbeing of staff, who have been working flat-out for many, many months.

It was also good to hear he would be knocking on the door of Chancellor Rishi Sunak if councils need further government funding and measures to support them through the pandemic. You can read about our Budget submission on behalf of local government on p12.



For the latest coronavirus updates from the LGA, please visit www.local.gov.uk/coronavirus or follow us on social media at #LGACOMMS and #LGAnews



Alek from Estonia was the subject of the LGA's second podcast, on homelessness

Forget what you think you know

The LGA's new podcasts shine a light on the work of councils as they tackle societal issues such as housing supply and homelessness

Last autumn, the LGA launched a new podcast series that aims to highlight to the public the inspiring work councils carry out on a daily basis to keep their residents safe, healthy and happy.

Forget What You Think You Know also looks at some of the key societal issues residents face, and what needs to be done to tackle them.

We interview people facing these issues, council staff working on the frontline to help their communities through, and policy and sector experts in each topic area to hear what policy changes could alleviate the problems.

So far, we have published two episodes in the series. In the first, which was released in October, we focused on council housing and how it could hold the key to solving the housing crisis.

We visited Norwich City Council to find out about its national award-winning council housing scheme, Goldsmith Street. It won the prestigious RIBA Stirling Award in 2019, the first council housing scheme in Britain to do so,

beating competition from innovative private developments such as the London Bridge tube station renovation.

We spoke to a number of people involved, including Alan Jones, President of the Royal Institute of British Architects, and the architects responsible for the scheme.

We also talked to Kate Henderson, Chief Executive of the National Housing Federation, about the national housing picture, what needs to change for us to achieve a renaissance in council and social housing, and why it is so important we get building these types of homes again.

In the second episode, released just before Christmas, we focused on homelessness in England, and the effect the pandemic has had on it.

We talked to Alek, a 27-year-old from Estonia, who was homeless and living on the streets of London during the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020.

He told us about how he first ended up living on the streets, how Haringey Council helped him find safe accommodation to shelter from the dangers of the virus, and the continued

support he has received from the council as he looks to progress with his life.

We also spoke to staff at Haringey Council working with the borough's homeless to hear how the pandemic gave them an opportunity to change their approach to tackling street homelessness, and how they are working to sustain this approach in the future.

Finally, Matt Downie MBE, Director of Policy and External Affairs at homelessness charity Crisis, gave us the national picture, and highlighted what policies are needed to help councils help their homeless.

You can find our podcast on Apple, Spotify and Acast by searching for 'the LGA Podcast'.

Alternatively, you can visit our website, where all of the episodes are available, along with a transcript of – and images from – our interviews. Go to www.local.gov.uk/lga-podcast

More shows are being planned for 2021, and will explore topics such as councils' role in public health services during the pandemic and the impact of COVID-19 on skills and employment.

Please visit www.local.gov.uk/lga-podcast for the LGA's Forget What You Think You Know podcasts

The LGA's Budget submission



Despite increased government support, councils need a further £2.6 billion in this financial year to plug funding gaps arising from the pandemic

On 3 March, Chancellor Rishi Sunak will deliver the Government's first Budget since the end of the transition period following the UK's exit from the European Union, amid the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is an especially challenging time for us all – communities up and down the country have suffered unique impacts and will have a unique set of opportunities to grasp as they look to the future.

With sustainable funding accompanied by appropriate devolved powers, councils will be able to support residents through these challenges and seize the chance to deliver on government and local priorities for communities and economic recovery.

The pandemic has highlighted how the public service decisions taken closest to the people they affect improve outcomes and protect lives. Equally, the path to future prosperity cannot be planned from the centre.

Our international competitors have long been able to demonstrate the positive impact greater devolution has had on accountability, financial efficiency and growth.

As we look towards the long process of economic and social recovery, this gap in local power and autonomy across England needs to be addressed if we are to keep pace on the global stage.

With local economies at a standstill during the current national lockdown, it is vital that funding

dedicated to COVID-19 in both the current financial year 2020/21 and in 2021/22 is kept under review to ensure councils are fully compensated for the financial impact of the pandemic, and for their efforts in helping government deliver the vaccination and test and trace programmes.

The LGA estimates that up to £2.6 billion more will be needed to cover the cost pressures and non-tax income losses of 2020/21 in full.

The impact of the UK's new economic relationship with the EU and the potential decline of the pandemic due to mass vaccination provide the Chancellor with an opportunity to give councils the funding and powers they need to kickstart the economic recovery.

Councils are ambitious about delivering high quality services and maximising the economic growth potential of their areas, including redefining and revitalising high streets, while supporting communities to thrive.

Their work supports national priorities, such as everyone having a home they can afford and the employment they need. And it protects the vulnerable, including older people and children. Consequently, the Government must

finally set out the steps needed to ensure a sustainable adult social care system for years to come.

And with children's education disrupted and vulnerable families disproportionately affected by the pandemic, councils need £1.7 billion of early intervention funding reinstated so that local preventative services are there to support children and families when they need it – and before they reach crisis point.

The Chancellor has committed to publishing a final report on the Government's fundamental review of business rates this spring and the Budget is a prime opportunity to do so. He should also restart the Fair Funding Review.

The 2020 Spending Review and the 2021/22 local government finance settlement have provided some financial certainty to councils, especially with the upfront payments to cover COVID-19 pressures. However, there is no basis on which to plan for 2022/23 and beyond.

As soon as possible, the Government must deliver a multi-year comprehensive spending review, covering the rest of this Parliament, which allows councils to support their communities to rebuild and recover from the pandemic.

Above all, local government needs a funding system that raises sufficient resources for vital local services in a way that is fair for residents and gives local politicians the tools they need to be the leaders of their communities.

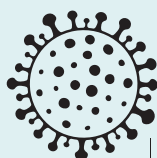


This is an edited version of the LGA's Budget submission. You can read it in full at www.local.gov.uk/parliament/briefings-and-responses/lga-march-2021-budget-submission. It provides more depth on the issues referenced here and covers additional areas including business support, leisure services, tackling health inequalities, skills, roads and local infrastructure, public transport and buses, housing, planning, net zero carbon, waste and recycling infrastructure, children's homes, and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

✧ *The Budget is the final opportunity to compensate local government for doing whatever it takes to help local communities through this pandemic* ✧

The priorities for local government

COVID-19 and funding



The LGA estimates that up to \$2.6 billion more is needed to cover the full impact of the pandemic on councils in 2020/21. Local authorities welcome the COVID-19 funding package for 2021/22 and government pledges to compensate for 75 per cent of lost income from council tax, business rates, and fees and charges. However, the remaining 25 per cent amounts to hundreds of millions of pounds, and an estimated \$0.5 billion of losses in commercial income is not covered.

It is vital that the Government guarantees the costs to councils of COVID-19 will be met in full. The Budget is the final opportunity to compensate local government for doing whatever it takes to help local communities through this pandemic.

Adult social care reform

The pandemic has revealed to the public at large both the strengths and value of social care, and its many challenges. However, adult social care was under significant financial pressure before COVID-19, with care providers in a perilous state and significant unmet and under-met need. The Budget should set out a clear timescale with specific deadlines for how reforms to adult social care provision, eligibility and funding will be introduced.

Children's social care

There is ample evidence that the pandemic will lead to increased demand on children's services. Unfortunately, significant cuts to council budgets over the last decade and increasing demand for child protection services prior to the current crisis mean that universal and early help services have been scaled back or even closed. Returning the Early Intervention Grant to 2010/11 funding levels (an extra \$1.7 billion) would enable councils to reinstate some of these lost services which help tackle and prevent emerging problems and avoid costs escalating later.

Public health

Public health has been at the heart of the local response to COVID-19. The Budget should strengthen local capacity and resources and ensure public health teams can continue to manage local outbreaks effectively, while providing the vital public health services which support communities to be healthy. Local authority public health funding is three to four times more cost effective in improving health outcomes than money spent in the NHS. The Government should commit to increasing the public health grant to at least \$3.9 billion by 2024/25, matching growth in overall NHS funding.

Mental health

Targeted mental health support will continue to be needed for some groups who have been made increasingly vulnerable by COVID-19 and the measures needed to mitigate its spread. The Government should recognise that the mental health and wellbeing recovery is best led locally by councils with their partners, and provide recurrent local funding for children and adult services to invest in effective, locally tailored mental health services to meet existing, new and unmet demand that has built up during the pandemic.



EU, regulation and UKSPF

The 2021 Budget should address the challenges faced by council regulatory services, including trading standards and environmental health, as they tackle COVID-19 and implement the new trading agreement with the EU. The Government should progress the recommendations of the Regulatory Future review on charging businesses that benefit from regulation.

The Budget should confirm that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, as well as pilot schemes, will not be subject to a bidding process, with funding allocated to all areas, while respecting devolved decision-making. The fund should meet the quantum of the EU funds it is replacing and provide the same longer-term planning that the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) programme provided. **See p21.**

Devolution, economic recovery and jobs

Councils are ready to work with the Government and industry to create new jobs and enable local residents to re-skill following the pandemic, but need appropriate funding and devolved powers. A reformed approach to devolution should form a central part of the national recovery strategy, developed by national and local government in partnership. The Government should commit to publishing its Devolution and Recovery White Paper by early summer.



Sector-led improvement

Sector-led improvement (SLI) delivers good value for money, pays for itself multiple times through realised savings, and has proven flexible to changing priorities such as COVID-19 and climate change. Outcomes for councils and value for money for the Government could be further enhanced with a three-year allocation of SLI funding.

Personal freedom and individual responsibility



Councillor **Peter Golds CBE** is Leader of the Conservative Group on Tower Hamlets Council, and Deputy Chair of the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board

I have served as a Conservative councillor on two controversial local authorities in London for 23 years.

I was involved in Conservative politics long before I became a councillor during a period encompassing Gay Liberation, the Aids crisis, Section 28, and, later, equal marriage and a UK Parliament with more LGBT members than any other.

My personal politics revolve around personal freedom and individual responsibility, which are often described as at the core of the Conservative belief and what has made the Conservative Party the most successful political party in history.

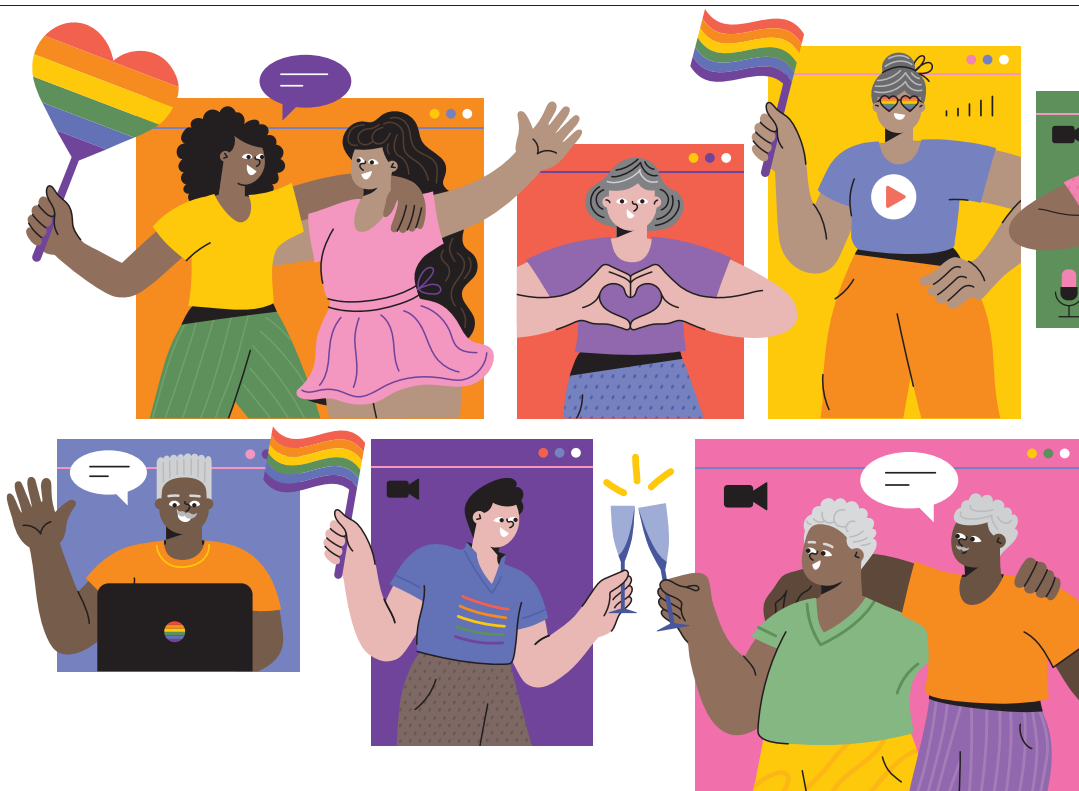
That does not mean the party has always been right.

On LGBT issues, elements of the party were often on the wrong side, though it should not be forgotten that Margaret Thatcher and Enoch Powell were among the minority of their colleagues to vote for legalisation of male homosexuality in the 1960s.

I have never sought to hide who or what I am. I am proud that my colleagues in my group locally and the LGA have elected me to office.

Most of all, I rejoice that I hold political office where sexuality is not an issue and in an environment where, far from "the love that dares not speak its name", we have pride, and now all celebrate the array of achievements by the LGBT community at every level – particularly within local government.

It has for me and many others been a long and difficult journey, but, in 2021, a journey that has led to happier times.



Out and proud

Despite the lockdown, councils around the country will be marking LGBT+ History Month with online events and activities

February is LGBT+ History Month, an initiative by the charity Schools OUT UK that focuses on the celebration and recognition of LGBT+ people and culture – past and present – and on increasing the visibility of diverse LGBT+ histories, lives, and experiences.

It has been celebrated every year in the UK since 2005.

The theme for 2021 is 'Body, Mind, Spirit' and, as in previous years, it is linked to a National Curriculum subject – in this case, personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE).

While the pandemic has put paid to many of the usual events that would be taking place, councils and other organisations across the country will be celebrating LGBT+ History Month with online events, webinars and new

resources. Libraries and museums are also hosting online events as part of the 'OUTing the Past' international festival this month.

We hear from councillors from across the political spectrum about their experiences as LGBT+ elected members and/or their councils' work in supporting LGBT+ communities (see left and opposite).

The LGA's Be a Councillor campaign works to increase the diversity of candidates standing in local elections (see www.local.gov.uk/be-councillor).

We also provide workforce support to councils on equalities and diversity issues. This includes the Equality Framework for Local Government, which covers understanding and working with your communities, leadership and organisational commitment, responsive services and customer care, and a diverse and engaged workforce (see www.local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/equality-diversity-and-inclusion).



Visit www.lgbtplushistorymonth.co.uk for more information about LGBT+ History Month 2021, including events, resources and lesson plans for schools. See p31, letters



Councils' services 'make a difference'



Councillor **Phelim Mac Cafferty** (Green) is Leader of Brighton & Hove Council

LGBT+ History Month is a powerful reminder of the push for equality – but there's still a lot to do.

LGBT+ people at home and abroad still face bigotry and violence. Home Office figures from last year tell us hate crime against LGB people continues to grow, while transphobic hate crime nationally has mushroomed 81 per cent.

The COVID-19 crisis is compounding underlying problems too: before the pandemic, LGBTQIA people were 14 times more likely to be homeless – so not all will have a 'safe place to call home'.

The push for equality continues, and council services make an enormous difference. In 2012, Green Party councillors established the first Trans Equality Scrutiny Panel. The work was

groundbreaking, shining a light on the issues that trans people face, from bullying in schools to health.

Most important of all, that work has led to new approaches and a lasting legacy, including the first health action plan to include the trans community and an inclusion toolkit for teachers to help discuss transphobic prejudice.

We're continuing our successful work with Sussex police to improve hate crime reporting. While the first Green administration here was named the most LGB-friendly local authority employer and top for our work in schools in the country, we benefit too from a brilliant LGBTQIA council staff forum.

Community and voluntary sector funding also allows local groups to raise the important issues of mental health and wellbeing. Through joint declarations against hate, and publicly marking awareness days – such as the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia – councillors are raising our voices to stamp out prejudice and champion equality.

My duties include serving on the council's Adults and Safer City Scrutiny Panel, Equalities Advisory Group, and Non-Statutory and Statutory Licensing Committees. I am Vice-Chair of the Planning Committee and chair Wolverhampton's Labour Group.

Having such a prestigious platform allows me to host various events and undertake other extra activities.

I wrote a specific 'Be a trans councillor' programme that was delivered in Manchester in 2019 – and I continue to provide support via Zoom and to encourage others to stand for public office.

I have been inspirational in getting Wolverhampton council's human resources team to improve its profile of recording the diversity of its workforce, for all of the protected characteristics and not just some.

If you don't collect equalities data, then you are not counted, and you don't count when it comes to commissioning public services. This has been a big issue for the LGBT+ community, as this data is not routinely collected by public services or on the national census.



A responsibility to embrace all



Councillor **Val Keitch** (Lib Dem) is Leader of South Somerset District Council

LGBT+ History Month is a powerful reminder: being a gay woman has not always been easy. However, when I look back, I have been lucky to have a family and friends who have always accepted me for who I am.

There is still much to do to ensure that people perceived as different from 'normal' are treated in an equal way.

I worked in London for many years in a male-dominated organisation and was once told, "well, you only got promotion because you are a woman and gay".

No, I got them because I deserved them!

During the 2015 election campaign, I was asked if I thought it was suitable that I should be a councillor. I attempted to understand why I was so unsuitable, but gave up when it became obvious the lady was not for turning.

We all have a responsibility to ensure that whoever we are and whatever our beliefs they are respected.

I have two gay portfolio holders. Are they there because they are gay? No, it's because they are the right people.

We have moved forward a lot in my lifetime, but not enough. Young people still have to fight for their rights. I often ask myself, why do we have to fight for gay rights?

The acceptance is skin deep, and that needs to change – not just in local government, but throughout our society.

As councillors, we have a responsibility to embrace all, so we get to a point where we are not defined by our gender, ethnicity, religion or sexuality.

Representing **our** communities



Councillor **Anwen Muston** (Lab) is a member of City of Wolverhampton Council's Equalities Advisory Group

I am one of three Labour transgender councillors who are out and proud.

I believe that, if we are to deliver proper, effective public services, we need councillors, local authority officers and others who commission and deliver these services to be representative of their communities.

I stood on having the ability and skills to do the job effectively for my residents, who always come first; having those skills is important, not that I am transgender, which is irrelevant.

I am well respected by the residents as I go the extra mile to ensure my case work is done to the highest standards.



Supporting mental health and wellbeing

Councils have had to find innovative ways to support and promote children and young people's emotional wellbeing during the pandemic



Councillor **Judith Blake** CBE is Chair of the LGA's Children and Young People Board

It is impossible to ignore the impact that COVID-19 is having on the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people, their families, and communities.

Many children are incredibly resilient, adapting to home schooling and different ways of engaging with friends and family. But recent NHS figures suggest that the number of children referred to child and adolescent mental health services is up 20 per cent on last year.

The latest NHS Digital survey, in July 2020, found mental health problems for children aged five to 16 years have increased to one in six

(16 per cent) from one in nine (10.8 per cent) in 2017.

Mental health problems increase with age; the recent Prince's Trust Tesco Youth Index 2021 (see www.princes-trust.org.uk) found that the pandemic has severely affected the mental wellbeing of young people aged 16-25, with one in four saying they felt unable to cope.

Many of the more vulnerable children and young people in society have been more negatively impacted by COVID-19.

For example, more than a million children do not have access to a laptop, desktop or tablet at home,

according to Ofcom, with many using mobile phones. More than 880,000 of them live in a household with only a mobile internet connection.

This can only lead to an increase in the learning gap, hitting the poorest pupils hardest. While children who do not have access to the technology they need to learn from home can now attend school, attendance by vulnerable children in the first lockdown was low, with families concerned about children and family members catching the virus.

Councils, schools, the Government and partners will need to work together to make sure that, where children can attend school, that is the best option for them, and to reassure families that it is safe to do so.

In the LGA's 'A child-centred recovery', published last year, we set out our concerns about the mental health of children and young people throughout the pandemic, as well as the opportunities for referrals if they were seen less by schools or other professionals.

We called on the Government to provide long-term funding to invest in effective and evidence-based mental health and wellbeing services and



The LGA will be sharing more ways councils are supporting children, young people and their families during Children's Mental Health Week (1-7 February) at www.local.gov.uk/cmhw2021.

See also www.local.gov.uk/child-centred-recovery-where-all-young-people-can-thrive

More than a million children do not have access to a laptop, desktop or tablet at home...

statutory mental health services for children, to meet existing, new and unmet demand that has built up during the pandemic, including preventative mental wellbeing.

Children and young people need support to help them cope with the strains and pressures they face, and maintaining good mental health and wellbeing is vital, both now and for their futures.

Local authorities have key roles to play as guardians of mental health and wellbeing in their communities. Many are rising to the challenge of promoting good mental health and preventing poor mental health.

They and their partners have been quick to embrace digital to connect with people in their communities (see 'Leeds MindMate', opposite).

However, digital technology is not accessible for everyone, and services have also adapted to safely support children's welfare face to face during the pandemic (see 'Walk and talk in Northamptonshire', opposite).

Working collaboratively and flexibly with partners has enabled resources to be redeployed, supported new approaches to be delivered rapidly, and has created quicker ways to learn about community experiences.

Children and young people have borne a disproportionate weight of the social impact of the pandemic, navigating their way through changes to their schooling, family life and losing social contact with their friends.

Despite this, there have been some positive experiences, with the lockdown allowing families to spend more time with their children, learning new skills, and enjoying the outdoors, in gardens, parks and green spaces.

As we look to recovery, councils and their partners need to consider how they can maximise the learning and innovation that has happened because of COVID-19.

Mental health needs to be at the heart of a holistic approach to recovery that includes parks and green spaces for both physical and mental health and wellbeing, housing needs, learning and training opportunities to fulfil potential, employment prospects, and social inclusion.

● See p28

Leeds MindMate

MindMate is a Leeds-based website for young people, their families and the professionals who support them, which helps explore emotional wellbeing and mental health issues, offers information about where support is available, and provides teaching and other resources (see www.mindmate.org.uk).

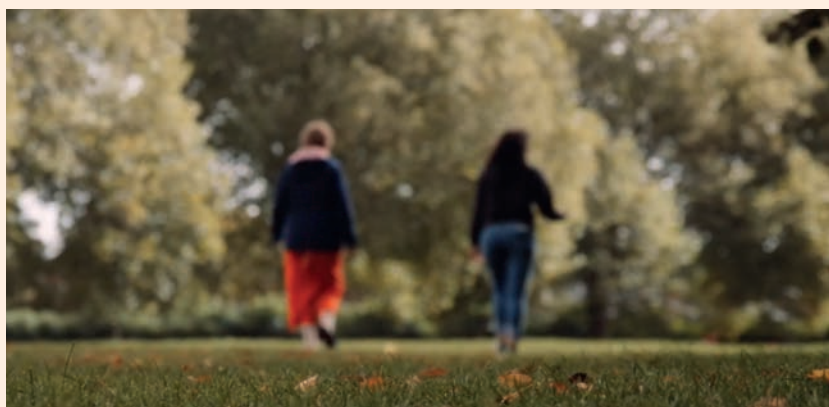
In a recent radio campaign with media group Global, young people had the opportunity to give personal self-care tips, which were then shared online. This was a chance for young people in Leeds to talk about some of the positive ways they can take care of their mental health, especially during such a challenging time.

Young people have also been encouraged to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences on topics relating to mental health via the MindMate blog. A recent example is 'Being Black and Being Me', in which Tamirah – a young black woman from Leeds – discusses how racism can affect the mental health of those who experience it, and the ways we can combat the prejudice that exists in society.

In another blog, 'Being South Asian and the Problem of Stigma', Pratyasha discusses how mental health can often be a taboo topic in South Asian households. Other blogs include 'Experiencing PTSD as a Young Female', 'Body Image' and 'Staying Hopeful During a Pandemic'.

Young people have also been actively involved in informing the Leeds Future in Mind strategy. Their voices have been fundamental in planning how people will work together, across services in the NHS, Leeds City Council and in the community, to improve children and young people's emotional and mental health.

Walk and talk in Northamptonshire



The challenge of the pandemic and lockdown restrictions have led to an innovative approach to children's mental health from school nurses in Northamptonshire.

When COVID-19 hit, they had to suddenly step away from doing face-to-face sessions with young people. Although they were able to maintain support through a text-messaging service, phone and video chat, the physical connection was missing.

They came up with the idea of a socially distanced 'walk and talk' in local parks. The sessions helped them gain a deeper assessment of children's mood and how they were coping physically, and address those issues in a more personal way.

Most importantly, the nurses have had positive feedback from parents about the invaluable support this has offered during the pandemic.

Eva Trkulja, Specialist Community Public Health Nurse, School Nurse, said: "If students are struggling with emotional distress, and they don't get the support they need at an early time, that can often lead to more serious or worrying mental health concerns. So we needed to come up with a solution that meant we could meet with students face to face. We found local parks offered a real sense of tranquillity, which really helped."



To find out more, watch 'Walk and Talk, Northamptonshire' at youtu.be/mrzPERTzRgE



Dealing with empty shops

Councils can help steer their high streets and town centres towards more mixed-use futures



Holly Lewis is a Partner at We Made That, an architecture and urbanism practice

High streets and town centres are undeniably on the frontline of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Restrictions have explicitly closed non-essential retail, hospitality venues, personal care businesses, entertainment and cultural venues – all those places that line our streets and centres. When this is combined with long-term trends, such as increasing online sales, it's unsurprising that, in November 2020, the Local Data Company predicted that there could be 15,000 additional empty high street units in Britain.

In this context, local authorities should find work recently commissioned by the LGA into 'Good practice for dealing with empty shops' helpful.

This document draws together guidance on the powers that authorities have to address vacant premises, as well as national best-practice examples and overarching conclusions. It seeks

to equip elected members and local authority officers with a range of tactics and tools that can be deployed in the short term and over longer timescales to make a difference.

The case studies range from fast and responsive actions in Bath, introducing local art commissions into the windows of empty shops, to substantial investments in adaptive re-use of former department stores as vibrant and diverse hubs for health in Warrington and tech enterprise in Sheffield.

Across all the examples, a clear lesson is the importance of working within a wider strategic framework.

High levels of town centre vacancy are rarely a single-issue problem, and are more likely to be symptomatic of multiple challenges faced by a town centre, such as poor accessibility or dilapidated buildings, alongside changing consumer behaviour.

Actions to tackle empty shops should, therefore, be component parts of multi-layered town centre or high

street strategies if they are to have long-term impact. In this sense, a clear policy context helps to steer action and galvanise stakeholder support.

The actions highlighted in the research also provide reasons to be optimistic.

As local authorities take a key role in steering their high streets and town centres towards more mixed-use futures that are less retail-dependent, there are opportunities for innovation and delivery of public good that may not previously have been possible on such a scale.

For example, programmes such as the Stockton Enterprise Exchange have adapted vacant town centre floorspace to support businesses and enterprise that may not otherwise have had the opportunities – in this case, 85 businesses since its opening in 2012.

Elsewhere, we have seen charitable trusts established to safeguard at-risk heritage (Tyne and Wear), or school students establishing their own, sustainable, retro clothes business (Telford & Wrekin).

Through adaptive and agile responses to changing high street fortunes, local authorities can play a key role, not only in addressing empty retail units, but also in ensuring that meaningful social value can be delivered for the communities they serve.

High streets are notoriously difficult contexts in which to effect change, with multiple stakeholders and interests that cross local authority jurisdictions and departmental divides.

By learning from others who have taken a wide range of approaches to addressing the multifaceted issue of empty shops, the intention is that this guidance will provide a resource that can support action at all scales, from villages to major metropolitan centres.



'Good practice for dealing with empty shops' is available at www.local.gov.uk/dealing-empty-shops **Holly Lewis will be speaking at a free LGA webinar on dealing with empty shops on 10 February**, see www.local.gov.uk/events to book a place



Councillor **Richard Watts** is Chair of the LGA's Resources Board

Skills for the future

Apprentices have played a key role in local government's response to the pandemic

National Apprenticeship Week (8-12 February) is a time when we usually come together to celebrate the work of our apprentices in local government.

The challenges of COVID-19 may mean that this year's celebrations get less attention than normal, but that shouldn't stop us recognising the importance of apprentices to our sector, or the impressive track record local authorities have when it comes to creating opportunities.

Since the Apprenticeship Levy was introduced in April 2017, councils have created more than 43,000 apprenticeships in more than 140 fields – and continue to create extra opportunities, despite the challenges of the pandemic.

Since last March, our apprentices have had to step up and adapt to a completely new normal.

Whether that has been acclimatising to online learning, the challenges of working remotely, or even being redeployed to help keep services running, apprentices in local government have shown adaptability, skill and patience in these testing times.

It is a testament to their hard work – and that of their managers and training providers – that they have risen to this challenge and been a key part of our response to this unprecedented health crisis.

Though recruitment remains difficult, councils and their partners have continued to be innovative in their use of apprenticeships to respond to workforce needs.

From Bury in the north to Somerset in the south, many councils have been

using apprenticeships to upskill more of their existing workforce to boost skills levels, fill internal vacancies and meet new challenges – particularly vital for staff redeployed to new roles.

Many larger authorities have been continuing to support their maintained schools with recruitment throughout the pandemic.

Councils such as Telford and Wrekin, Walsall, and the London Borough of Hillingdon have been working with schools to use apprenticeships to fill some of their skills gaps and vacant posts, and to

help them maintain the kind of staffing levels needed to deliver effective social distancing and keep schools open when restrictions allow.

Using the ability to transfer some of our unspent levy funds to other employers to create apprenticeships is also an important weapon in our arsenal, and it's one that councils are fully embracing. From Brighton to Bradford and Camden to Cornwall, more and more councils are opting to transfer funds to create opportunities in their communities.

Councils had already created more than 1,000 apprenticeships this way before the end of March 2020, supporting new jobs in housing, social care and their supply chains.

Hampshire has transferred £1 million of its levy funds, creating more than 230 apprenticeships, predominantly in the care sector, while councils such as Shropshire took advantage of LGA support to develop and launch their levy transfer scheme in September.

As we get through to the other side of this pandemic, local government will have to adapt to new ways of working to help our communities get back on their feet. Apprenticeships will have a big part to play in this recovery and will play an important role in ensuring our workforce is 'match fit' to face the challenges of the future.

So, this National Apprenticeship Week, take a minute to appreciate the success of our apprentices and the valuable contribution they have made in this crisis – and will continue to make in the coming years.

i For more information about the LGA's work on employment and skills, please visit www.local.gov.uk/topics/employment-and-skills





HAP highlights

Suffolk Coastal District Council appointed consultants to identify the opportunities and issues presented by the increase in affordable home-ownership properties that will result from the Suffolk Coastal Local Plan.

A 'Findings and Options Report' was produced that has provided an evidence base for the production of a separate strategy document. The research has highlighted a preference for shared ownership rather than shared equity. This was an important lesson as the expectation before the study was that shared equity should be the council's target.

Consultants gave strategic support to **Derbyshire Dales District Council** through the development of a business case to help meet one of its key corporate objectives – to identify and deliver new affordable housing sites, and improve housing for vulnerable people, through the direct delivery of new council homes on available council land and through pursuing Section 106 opportunities. The project demonstrated that a national perspective and understanding of the housing market can be combined with a detailed local perspective to develop a well-evidenced and balanced project business case.

The London Borough of Havering commissioned a report to understand the current needs and pressures across children and adults' social care services, and estimate the future accommodation needs for looked-after children, care leavers, and children and adults with disabilities.

The report has brought together social care, housing and regeneration to offer the opportunity to develop a joint vision and approach to supported living and the pathways to supporting greater independence – in part through further developing the wider accommodation offer. The work has moved the discussions forward and opened up further dialogue with colleagues across multiple disciplines, such as the local NHS, public health, education, planning and community safety.

Expert advice on housing

The LGA has been helping councils find the expertise they need to tackle local housing challenges



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

The LGA's Housing Advisers Programme (HAP) is an innovative scheme to help councils overcome housing challenges in their local areas and meet the housing needs of local communities.

It is a key part of the LGA's sector-led improvement offer, which delivers robust peer challenges and support to help councils improve performance, become more efficient and effective in delivering for their local residents, and share good practice.

The HAP has been supporting councils since 2017, by providing grants to secure independent expert advice to drive forward locally led solutions to the housing issues facing their communities.

In the previous three years of the programme, the LGA has funded more than 100 projects across England, helping councils build homes, reduce homelessness and rough sleeping, plan for ageing populations, explore the potential of zero-carbon housing, understand the student housing market,

increase the supply of modular housing, and more (see panel, right).

With an additional focus for 2020-21 on addressing the impact of COVID-19 on the housing crisis, the projects put forward by this year's 17 successful applicants include developing carbon-neutral homes, delivering custom and self-build housing, redesigning homelessness prevention services to address the impacts of COVID-19, and delivering affordable housing through the use of modern methods of construction (MMC).

After the programme, knowledge and expertise learned and developed will be shared with other councils and become part of the LGA's sector-led improvement offer.

HAP has delivered huge benefits to councils since it was first launched, and proven an excellent source of knowledge and expertise for councils – sharing innovative ideas and ways to improve, whether it's building new homes, tackling homelessness, or planning thriving and flourishing places and economies.

i For more information about the **Housing Advisers Programme**, please visit www.local.gov.uk/housingadvisersprogramme or email housingadvisers@local.gov.uk. For the LGA's sector-led improvement offer and support for councils, see www.local.gov.uk/our-support



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

A new relationship

The UK replacement for EU funding for local growth must be driven by councils

The trade deal struck with the EU at the end of 2020 has provided some certainty for councils, albeit a number of issues have still to be tackled following the end of the transition period on 31 December.

From 1 January, the deal immediately allowed continued tariff-free trade with the EU and repatriation of public policy – everything from environmental, waste, and climate rules, though to public procurement and state aid.

The new trading arrangements have begun at a time when councils face multiple pressures over the winter months and arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In its work with government, the LGA's all-party EU Exit Taskforce has continually stated that councils' capacity to undertake additional new work during this unprecedented period is severely limited.

While there is tariff-free trade, EU exit does mean some new paperwork and controls at ports, placing new responsibilities on councils' regulatory services staff, especially at ports of entry – many of whom are also playing key roles in tackling COVID-19 and protecting our communities.

These members of staff are at the frontline of our work on the pandemic and they also continue to deliver important statutory services such as food hygiene and trading standards.

They also need to further prepare for the physical checks of goods at ports that will be introduced in April and July, and to help businesses with new export certificates.

There are already skills shortages

in these professions and councils are reporting severe difficulties in recruiting new staff.

In order to address some of the skill shortages in the longer term, the LGA has worked closely with government to set up the Environmental Health Together initiative (see www.local.gov.uk/EHTogether-candidate-information-pack). This provides a mechanism for councils to recruit qualified environmental health staff.

The LGA's EU Exit Taskforce is also pursuing with ministers some of the longer-term issues and opportunities resulting from leaving the EU; the key one being the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), which will

replace EU funding for local growth.

The Government will be launching pilot initiatives for 2021/22 with a budget of \$220 million, and then will introduce the UKSPF nationally the following year.

Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick MP has indicated local councils will be placed at the heart of the delivery of the UKSPF, something we have long been calling for.

Councils are best placed to bring together different organisations to help create jobs, support small and medium enterprises, deliver skills training, and invest in critical local infrastructure.

We look forward to working with the government to ensure the UKSPF is delivered on time and fully replaces previous European funding.

We have also proposed an LGA member-led taskforce to help co-design the fund with ministers.

The EU Exit Taskforce continues to raise other EU exit issues on your behalf. These range from the implications of the UK's immigration policy for the social care workforce, to ensuring councils have a say in the design of new laws affecting them as previously ensured via the EU Committee of the Regions.

We are also contributing to the design of new public policies, including procurement and state aid, which are being developed following the end of transition.

The LGA will continue to monitor closely how local areas adapt to the trade agreement and the new relationship with the EU.

If you have any comments or concerns about the immediate impact of this new relationship, or if you would like to share any good practice, please get in touch via EUtransition@local.gov.uk



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



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and local authority chief executives in England and Wales

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COMMENT

Our strength in tackling extremism really is in our numbers

Countering extremism



Councillor **Debra Coupar** (I) and Councillor **Hazel Simmons** are Co-Chairs of the Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism



The past months have, of course, been dominated by our collective efforts in response to COVID-19.

A crisis will often bring out the best in people, and this has been no exception, with countless examples across the country of neighbourhoods pulling together and councils doing all we can to support the most vulnerable.

But we have also seen the worst in others, with some looking to spin a more divisive story and exploit the pandemic, to play off widespread fear and uncertainty to extend their reach.

Extremists have long adapted common themes to point the finger at certain communities. Recent months have seen narratives blaming specific groups – nationalities, religions, ages – for the origin and spread of the virus, and for breaking control measures.

We've seen, too, an unprecedented mainstream interest in conspiracy theories linked to the outbreak and increasingly to vaccination programmes – drawing in a broader demographic than we've seen before, united in a deep mistrust of

government and mainstream media.

Last summer, we saw large rises in the number of racially or religiously aggravated offences recorded by police, up a third in June 2020 compared with the previous year.

Counter terrorism police recently noted an increase in hateful extremism-related material online during the pandemic. Councils have also reported significant increases in hate crime and community tensions, with a resurgence in racist and racialised narratives not seen for some time.

Our collective efforts, alongside our

narratives), and the May elections presenting yet another potential focal point for activity, we cannot afford to take our foot off the pedal.

As individual councils, as a sector and as a country, our strength in tackling extremism really is in our numbers. It is in uniting – in working together to build communities where divisive and harmful views and behaviours do not go unchallenged, do not become normalised, and, ultimately, become impossible to take seed.

Over the past three years, the Special Interest Group on Countering Extremism (SIGCE) has provided invaluable support to councils across England and Wales to tackle extremism and promote cohesion.

We are really proud of what the SIGCE network has achieved, bringing councils and partners together through seminars, roundtables, regional councillor networks and an online platform, to build an understanding of activists and ideology, and develop and share practice around disrupting activity, engaging communities and fostering resilience.

The future of counter-extremism policy at national level remains uncertain. However, while the threats posed to our communities from extremism continue to grow, we, in partnership with the LGA, will continue to do our best to keep our communities safe.

We urge the Government to maintain investment in measures to prevent polarisation from taking hold. Without continued concerted efforts in response, we run the real risk of storing up even greater problems for the future.

We have seen some looking to spin a more divisive story

statutory and community partners, to counter extremism continue to play a vital dual role – in responding to the many social harms from extremism at a local level and as a critical part of early intervention work to counter ideology and activists who can radicalise people and draw them into criminality.

As we look ahead to the post-COVID-19 landscape, with fears about economic decline and rising unemployment (traditionally fertile ground for extremist



Cllr Debra Coupar is Deputy Leader of Leeds City Council and Cllr Hazel Simmons is Leader of Luton Council. To find out more about the work of SIGCE or to get involved in its regional elected member networks, please visit www.local.gov.uk/sigce and/or email cohesion@local.gov.uk

Climate change demands action now



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

The United States has come under new management at a crucial time in world history – what could be the turning point in the fight against climate change.

President Joe Biden has already shown more leadership in a week than we saw from his predecessor in four years: the US is again committed to the Paris Climate Change agreement, and Biden has put climate change firmly back on the agenda.

The UK has the same urgent need for a plan that has tackling climate change at its core – and local government must be at the heart of the response.

Among the myriad lessons the

Government should learn from its disastrous response to coronavirus, the most important might be that Whitehall is simply not equipped to tackle big challenges at scale and speed.

If they'd listened to, worked with and empowered local councils on test and trace, shielding, and self-isolation schemes, we'd have made a huge difference.

The same will be true of our fight against climate change.

Local councils have been doing brilliant work on reducing carbon use locally, but with little to no support from government.

We desperately need ministers to empower local councils, by supporting the work we're already doing and giving us the tools and resources we're asking for to support the transition to a lower-carbon future.

If the Government worked with councils, rather than dreaming up unworkable and bureaucratic national

schemes and outsourcing failure – as it has with the stuttering Green Homes Grant scheme – we could put the UK at the forefront of solving the problem.

The UK is hosting the 2021 G7 Summit in June and the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) this November. We can join President Biden in leading other progressive nations and build the response to the climate change disaster that is desperately needed.

There is no time to waste, but we can't do it alone. Let's hope that on climate change – the greatest threat to humanity – we recognise that local action led by local government is the answer to a global problem.

"Local action led by local government is the answer to a global problem"



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

Making progress on devolution

Away from COVID-19, the future of the Union and devolution within it made some news headlines recently, with new polling showing increased support for Scottish independence and former Prime Minister Gordon Brown setting out his thoughts on the issues.

Devolution within England – and, specifically, to councils – will be a vital part of this debate in the coming months, and you can expect to read more about this in future editions of **first**.

Last month, I gave evidence to the Commons' Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee as part of its inquiry into progress on devolution in England.

Alongside LGA President Lord Kerslake, and former Communities and Local Government Secretary Greg Clark MP, I made the case that centralised design and control of public services from Whitehall does not work as well as an approach that enables councils to innovate and create



services that are tailored to their communities and localities.

I emphasised the need for devolution to form a central part of the national recovery strategy, and the importance of long-term, flexible funding – as opposed to complex bidding processes for short-term grants.

Devolution also figures strongly in the LGA's submission on behalf of local government to Chancellor Rishi Sunak (see p12), ahead of the Budget on 3 March.

Our submission makes the case that, with sustainable funding and appropriate devolved powers, councils will be able to support residents through the challenges of the pandemic, and deliver on government and local priorities for

communities and economic recovery.

The pandemic has highlighted how public service decisions taken closest to the people they affect improve outcomes and protect lives. Equally, the path to future prosperity cannot be planned from the centre.

Our international competitors have long been able to demonstrate the positive impact greater devolution has had on accountability, financial efficiency and growth.

As we look towards the long process of economic and social recovery, this gap in local power and autonomy across England needs to be addressed if we are to keep pace on the global stage.



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

Successful rollout of COVID-19 vaccines

As I write this article, we are in another national lockdown to bring the new coronavirus variant under control, which has been spreading very quickly.

The NHS is under pressure as COVID-19 cases are increasing, resulting in more patients being admitted to hospital while the NHS rolls out the vaccination programme.

The good news is that another vaccine, Moderna, has now been approved by the UK regulatory agency and the Government has secured 17 million doses to date.

Moreover, we are making good progress on the vaccination rollout. Thanks to the hard work of our NHS, the Armed Forces and councils, more than 7.4 million people across the UK had received their first vaccination as **first** went to press.

"The vaccine delivery plan emphasises local government's vital role"

I know that the Government is doing all it can to ensure that the vaccination rollout is delivered successfully and promptly, and I warmly welcomed its delivery plan that was published in January.

Under this ambitious plan, all individuals in the top four vulnerable groups will be vaccinated by the middle of February, and tens of millions of people will be immunised by spring.

It is also good to see that the vaccine delivery plan emphasises local government's vital role in the success of this programme.

Government wants to work closely with councils to ensure local implementation plans are suitable to each area and all residents are well informed.

I recognise that we are all tired of the restrictions. However, I am confident that vaccination rollout along with our collective effort brings us much closer to the end of the pandemic.



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

Benefits uplift should be made permanent

Thousands of families rely on universal credit to pay for day-to-day essentials including food, clothing and utilities.

Those in poverty have been impacted the most by COVID-19. Amid months of restrictions, home-schooling, and in some cases loss of income and severe isolation, the £20 uplift was significant and had a massive impact.

The impact of the £20 a week increase reflects the reality that the standard level of benefits was simply not enough and remains inadequate to protect the increasing number of households relying on benefits as the pandemic rolls on.

I have found the deafness of the Government to maintaining the universal credit uplift and permanently increasing the basic rate by £20 per week unbelievable.

Ending this increase would see the level of unemployment support fall to its lowest real-term level since 1990/91, and its lowest ever relative to average earnings.

"The impact of the £20 a week increase reflects the reality that the standard level of benefits was simply not enough"

At a time when local economies and independent businesses are taking a hit from the ongoing restrictions on high streets, the increase in benefit levels has also supported local businesses and local jobs during the pandemic and will continue to do so, as people are more mindful to shop local and support their communities – something the poor do much more than others.

The message is simple: every £1 into local people's pockets and then the local economy has an impact many times its value as it is recycled and re-spent. It is not rocket science, so I hope that the Government will listen to what has now become a cross-party plea.



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

Elections without a doorstep campaign?

As I write, an election is looming. If this is without a doorstep or leaflet campaign, it undermines our democratic engagement and it risks being a battle of the marketing experts.

The important point about local government is that we are part of the same community: local enough to listen and understand.

It is our Independent Group members, at the forefront of local neighbourhood help schemes and putting local interests first, who are best placed to respond in the interests of our communities.

"We are part of the same community: local enough to listen and understand"

We are reeling from new variant coronavirus strains, where tests and vaccines need to keep pace. The importance of good local support remains critical, for residents and local business.

We asked government for help with COVID-19 costs, to secure long-term funding of adult care and to let us keep the local business rates. Instead, we have a funding shortfall.

You would think we should all be focused on tackling the pandemic and a green recovery.

However, we face sweeping proposed changes to planning, centralising more of the decision-making; the reorganisation of local government into bigger, less local units; and the same for the NHS. All this, with lots of risk and little discernible gain.

Now has got to be a great time to make sure your voice is heard in the places where your residents are communicating – online and on the phone, if not on the doorstep.

Hopefully they will know that you are there, trusted and working for them, now and always.

Green connections



Tracy Beverley is Valley Gardens Project Manager at Brighton & Hove City Council

The redevelopment of Valley Gardens is important to Brighton and Hove's future on so many levels that it's hard to know where to begin.

The scheme – to completely reorganise this central piece of public realm, and the settings of the historical buildings, parks and trees within it – has been in development for almost a decade.

The site contains some of Brighton's most important listed buildings and open spaces, and connects the heart of the city to the seafront. It is also where the three major traffic routes into the city converge, and we inherited a counterintuitive highways layout, with inconsistent pedestrian access and high pollution levels.

This project was always going to be significant, in terms of transforming how Brighton's residents and visitors experience Valley Gardens, and how they travel through and around it.

But it's also significant for how we, as a council, intend to lead by example when it comes to the most pressing issues that face cities today: active and safer travel, greener streets, cleaner air, and – even in the most dense urban environment – how we increase biodiversity and champion the use of green spaces for people's health and wellbeing.

As a council, we have a clear goal to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030. This project and others will help us realise it.

The working relationships that have driven this project have been critical to its success. Working with landscape and architecture studio Untitled Practice, and highway consultants Project Centre, we fully examined all these different needs, values and ambitions. Working with public realm designer Urban Movement, we re-evaluated and reorganised traffic routes, to make the most of this redevelopment.

The results are breathtaking. The almost 2.62 hectares of 'linked park system' – inspired by Frederick Law Olmsted's 'Emerald Necklace' in Boston – make travelling through Valley Gardens seamless and uplifting. Highways modifications coordinated with pedestrian

A new system of linked parks in Brighton's city centre has improved air quality, sustainable transport and biodiversity



✧ The working relationships that have driven this project have been critical to its success ✧

crossings have improved accessibility for pedestrians and cyclists. Footpaths are wider, and a new dedicated cycle lane runs continuously through the parks.

Linking pathways weave through the parks, framed by layers of soft landscape. Existing trees have been reintegrated, and new street, avenue, grove and arboretum trees introduced.

There are new perennial gardens, lawns and wildflower meadows – including a 650m-long 'river of flowers' that flows along the east side of the park, screening cyclists and pedestrians from traffic.

The scheme delivers an attractive new public park for the city centre, provides safer walking and cycling links, enhances the appearance and setting of historic

buildings, and creates new urban spaces to support Brighton's major programme of annual events.

The new landscape supports biodiversity, improves local microclimate, enhances air quality, and makes Brighton a healthier, more inviting, enjoyable place to live.

The redevelopment completes at a time when COVID-19 has given us a renewed appreciation of outdoors, and when city cycle routes and green spaces are at the top of every council agenda.

It is an exemplar project in terms of public space creation, particularly as it anticipates a post-pandemic world – a model of how intelligent design can make our cities more liveable, and a fantastic example of how green infrastructure can make our cities more resilient to climate change.

With phases one and two complete, we're looking ahead to the final part of the corridor that will connect the space to the seafront.



Councillor **Keith House** (Lib Dem) is Leader of Eastleigh Borough Council

Good governance of commercial activities

With pressures from COVID-19, changes to official investment guidance and some recent negative media reports regarding council commercial activity, there is a risk that local authorities may reduce innovation and commercial approaches.

The financial stability of councils must always be a priority. Prudent commercial investments can support financial stability, ensuring sustainable income generation that can help to keep running valuable services for our communities.

When refocusing commercial activity, the key to prudent investment is robust governance (see **first** 655).

At Eastleigh Borough Council, we have worked hard to create a culture that supports our commercial ambitions.

The council is not a commercial entity, nor does it aspire to be. At the heart of our commercial activity is profit with a purpose. One result is net commercial and investment income that exceeds income from council tax and business rates.

I was delighted to share Eastleigh Borough Council's commercial approach with attendees at a recent LGA masterclass for councillors on commercial leadership and decision-making. As leader, I have encouraged creative thinking to tackle challenges, backed by clear and robust governance.

Councils have the legal powers to create new income generation opportunities, which Eastleigh has embraced. Our commercial activity includes a market-leading garden waste service, which contributes £340,000 annually to the council.

The council is pursuing an ambitious regeneration strategy, including intelligence-led asset acquisition, and working with developers and as a developer to provide new housing across a range of locations and tenures.

This enables the council to ensure the quality and volume of housing is in keeping with council priorities and the needs of residents.

To help to achieve this, Eastleigh



recruited an experienced commercial manager and created a governance framework that clearly outlines expectations around risk, asset categories and powers of decision-making.

This framework is designed to support innovative approaches, ensuring risk is appropriate to the council's risk appetite and tolerance and that risk is controlled. Eastleigh's governance empowers decision-makers while holding to account investment decisions and investment performance.

All investments require a sound business case that reflects the council's commercial and social values. The

business case is subject to approval by an investment board as well as political approval and scrutiny.

For commercial activity to be successful, it is important to create the conditions for success. Eastleigh Borough Council is working hard to ensure both councillors and officers work together with a single purpose and that they feel empowered to suggest new ideas and to take appropriate risks.

As leader, I encourage innovative approaches from Eastleigh's leadership team, with the opportunity to learn and grow built into the council's commercial strategy.

i The LGA is running free online commercial masterclasses for councillors, throughout February and March. The masterclasses include a case study from an LGA member peer. For dates, course outlines and to book your place, please visit www.local.gov.uk/our-support/efficiency-and-income-generation/commercialisation/free-commercial-skills-councillors

Psychosocial skills manual for business



Councillor **Tim Hutchings** (Con) is Cabinet Member for Public Health and Prevention at Hertfordshire County Council

The COVID-19 pandemic has been well documented as having significant detrimental effects on mental health and wellbeing, particularly for residents in vulnerable groups.

This may lead to reduced personal resilience and an inability to cope, increasing demands on public services.

Across the country, system partners, including local authorities, NHS, partner organisations and the voluntary sector have been coming together to support local populations by preventing as much avoidable psychological morbidity as possible through a range of strategies.

One key area has been developing support for businesses, where the impact of COVID-19 has resulted in disruption to trading, including cash flow and supply chains.

In Hertfordshire, our partners have been helping businesses to navigate emergency government business support measures as well as setting up local provisions to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on their work.

The disruption to business has also brought substantial challenges for business owners, employers, and their workforce, including remote working, furlough, illness, increased workload and caring

responsibilities. As a result, responding to the impact of COVID-19 on mental health and wellbeing is a national priority.

In Hertfordshire, our in-house Behaviour Change Unit and the UCL Centre for Global Non-Communicable Diseases joined forces with Hertfordshire Growth Hub, the central point of access for business support in the county. The mutual concern for the wellbeing and mental health of employees and business owners was clear.

This led to the development of a resource for business advisers and local businesses, to give them the psychosocial skills, knowledge and confidence they need to support the wellbeing and resilience of business owners and their employees.

The partnership's working group collaborated to identify priorities, resources already available and those required, to offer a programme of support. To provide outreach to local businesses, a full-time small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) wellbeing project coordinator was jointly funded by Hertfordshire's Public Health Service and Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, to support employers, business owners and those who advise them.

The coordinator aims to help them achieve and maintain good mental health and wellbeing by:

- positioning wellbeing and good mental health as a key driver in increasing

resilience and productivity for businesses by providing the tools, resources and guidance to help businesses to manage their own mental health; to reach out to colleagues who may be in distress; and to access support through local services

- training frontline advisers and those working with businesses to use our 'Wellbeing during challenging times' guide. Our offering aims to help an adviser to have a balanced conversation with their clients and support them to be proactive in accessing local resources and signposting them to relevant organisations
- working closely with the Hertfordshire ecosystem and voluntary organisations to promote the uptake of existing services for wellbeing and mental health, through virtual events and the Hertfordshire Growth Hub website.

I recommend making contact with your local growth hub or enterprise partnership, as they understand local business needs and will work with you to identify what type of support is required and where it is needed most.

It is through this systems approach that we have the greatest chance of supporting the wellbeing of our businesses and our local economy as we move towards recovery.



Hertfordshire County Council's 'A guide to wellbeing during challenging times' and a suite of papers developed by its Behaviour Change Unit is available for other councils to use at www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/health-in-herts/professionals/covid-19-behavioural-science-resources.aspx



Lord **Gary Porter** is the LGA's Building Safety Spokesperson

Cladding concerns

With almost 1.3 million households affected by dangerous cladding and the exorbitant costs of fixing it, the cladding crisis is one of the key issues facing flat owners today.

After the tragic Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, it became clear that hundreds of buildings were covered in the same flammable cladding and insulation used on the tower.

Since then, tests have shown that a much wider range of cladding types are dangerous, meaning at least 1,700 buildings over 18-metres tall are affected, according to government estimates.

It is clear that cladding defects must be swiftly remediated to prevent another tragedy – we have already seen several major fires in residential buildings since 2017.

Progress, however, has been slower than anticipated, with enormous costs associated with addressing fire safety defects.

At the centre of the current cladding crisis is a fierce debate over who will cover these costs.

More than 95 per cent of the buildings within the Government's remediation programme are flats, where individual flat owners, as leaseholders, are likely to have 'legal' responsibility for meeting the costs of cladding remediation. This is having an extreme financial and emotional impact, with nine out of 10 residents reporting worsening mental health as a result of

safety concerns and financial pressures.

The Government has previously stated its commitment to ensuring that leaseholders will not pay for fixing historic fire safety defects.

The LGA and others have successfully lobbied government to back this with a total of £1.7 billion of funding for the remediation of unsafe cladding on high-rise buildings, intended to speed up works and protect leaseholders from costs.

More recently, the Government has also responded to our calls for funding to cover the cost of interim fire safety measures,

At the centre of the current cladding crisis is a fierce debate over who will cover these costs

which are required in buildings awaiting cladding removal. The £30 million Waking Watch Relief Fund, announced in December, should reduce the need for the most expensive measures, including nightly patrols, which can cost between £12,000 and £45,000 per week per building.

However, this still might not be enough;

the Government itself estimates that the total costs of remediation for the 1,700 buildings affected will be up to £3.5 billion.

What's more, a second issue has emerged. Leaseholders have found that mortgage lenders will not lend on flats without proof that the cladding is safe, regardless of height.

The industry has devised a process for lenders' surveyors to inspect buildings, known as the External Wall Systems (EWS1) survey. But with thousands of buildings within scope, it has been subject to lengthy delays because of a lack of available surveyors.

This is not an easy issue to resolve. Nevertheless, councillors play a vital role in supporting residents who have been affected by these issues.

As the link between your council and your community, you can work with residents to understand their concerns, lobby building owners to drive action, and encourage your council to take more steps to support residents – especially council residents.

In the LGA's recent briefing, we explain the cladding crisis in detail, set out the role of the council in building safety, and provide 'top tips' on how ward councillors can support their residents to manage and respond to building safety issues.

We hope that this will be useful to you. For further queries, please contact charles.loft@local.gov.uk



'Supporting residents who have been affected by cladding issues' can be downloaded for free at www.local.gov.uk/supporting-residents-who-have-been-affected-cladding-issues



ELECTIONS



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



Reaping the winner's bonus

Our 'first past the post' electoral system has two key characteristics when translating votes into seats.

First, the most popular party receives a 'winner's bonus' of seats. Some regard this as a strength, increasing the chance of majority-run council administrations, but others believe it to be unfair.

Second, is the fate of smaller parties. There is a high threshold for success that punishes small parties. Parties winning a quarter of local authority vote share will not win any seats if votes are uniformly distributed. Concentrating votes in a small number of wards or divisions is the most effective strategy.

Previously, we used the 'effective number of parties' to demonstrate that most councils are two-party dominated, but the identity of those parties changes over time and place (see **first** 655).

Devon County Council illustrates important consequences of the voting system. The Conservatives reaped the winner's bonus with a 44 per cent vote share delivering 42 seats – 70 per cent of the total.

Liberal Democrats finished second in votes (22 per cent) but won only seven seats. Labour has the same seat total with a much smaller vote share. Green and UKIP candidates combined received one in 10 votes but won only one seat between them.

Labour benefited as a small party because its vote was focused on Exeter. The Liberal Democrat vote was more evenly spread – in three districts, it received a quarter or more of votes but won only a single division each time.

Cumbria provides a contrary example with a smaller gap between votes and seats. Again, the Conservatives headed the poll but the share of votes and seats this time was almost identical, as were those for Labour and Liberal Democrats.

There is a high threshold for success that punishes small parties

The explanation lies in the geography of vote distribution. Labour's support is concentrated in the towns while the Liberal Democrat vote is strongest in Eden and South Lakeland.

Similar outcomes are evident in the Welsh unitary councils in the same electoral cycle.

In Swansea, Labour received four in 10 votes but won two in every three seats. Despite receiving one in four votes, only eight Conservatives – 11 per cent of the total – were elected.

By contrast, the Liberal Democrat vote was more efficiently distributed. The

party chose not to contest some areas, ran modest campaigns in others and targeted winnable seats in just four divisions.

More rural areas in Wales show a smaller disparity between vote and seat shares. Pembrokeshire's distribution of seats is very close to the spread of votes, a fact largely determined by the strength of Independents. Many of these seats are 'no go' areas for the main parties, whose focus appears to be identifying the more vulnerable Independents.

Variations in the vote/seat relationship are evident, too, on much smaller geographical scales, for example, the densely populated London boroughs.

Barking and Dagenham returned only Labour councillors but three in every four votes were cast in its favour.

Merton provides a different example of how votes and seats are more closely related because party strengths are geographically based. Labour dominates in the east of the borough, the Conservatives in the west, with Liberal Democrats occupying a corridor of seats in the centre adjacent to the Merton Park ward won by the Residents' Association.



i For an extended version of this article, please visit www.local.gov.uk/first You can find out the vote shares in your local authority by visiting http://www.electionscentre.co.uk/?page_id=3755

LETTERS

Equality requires cultural change

In 2007, I first became the Leader of Ashfield District Council. I was 26. I knew that my age and fresh way of working would be a shock to the organisation and officers of the authority. It was. I had not anticipated my sexuality would be an equal shock. It was.

I had never considered that being gay would influence how I transformed the council, but it has, in many subtle and some less subtle ways – not least how we are now a welcoming and supportive environment for all people to work in.

Simply, we needed to shift Ashfield from the 1970s and to embrace the modern world. There are dozens of initiatives, but the main change needed to be culturally – the organisation needed to understand that equality was important. I'm proud to say it now does. Our December employee

survey says 68 per cent of employees strongly agree the council makes sure employees don't suffer discrimination or harassment and 77 per cent strongly agree we are an equal opportunities employer. The number of people who do not declare their sexual orientation has fallen dramatically too – it is heartening that our staff now know we are a safe, encouraging space.

The world is changing fast. Ashfield was behind even further but we continue to push forward, changing cultures and perceptions. Last year, I appointed our first female chief executive. Together with our allies, not just Ashfield but local government is now firmly in the 21st century.

Cllr Jason Zadrozny (Ind), Leader of Ashfield District Council

Training vs jobs

As Cllr Paul Maginnis says (**first** 655), young people's employment prospects have been devastated by the pandemic and the lockdowns it has caused.

Yet while I would never criticise giving anyone more training or education, such measures don't create a single job. I speak from experience of government schemes over the years.

None led to me being offered a properly paid position. It was only when I was elected as a councillor in 2014 that I was able to sign off the dole.

So, what is needed is the creation of genuine jobs paying at least the minimum wage. Councils can certainly play a part here in working with national government to deliver this work and enabling our youngsters to become active participants in the labour market.

Cllr Tim Mickleburgh (Lab), North East Lincolnshire Council

? If you have a letter for **first**, please email karen.thornton@local.gov.uk. Letters may be edited and published online



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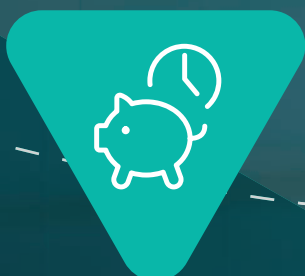
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