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‘Inadequate’ funding

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‘Disappointing’ Budget extends cost-of-living support

Support for vulnerable households has been extended for another six months in what was otherwise a “disappointing” Spring Budget for councils, the LGA has said.

Chancellor Jeremy Hunt announced that the Household Support Fund (HSF) in England will be extended to 30 September, with an additional £500 million for local authorities to help residents with the cost of essentials such as energy and food.

The £500 million includes Barnett funding for the devolved administrations.

Cllr Shaun Davies, LGA Chair, said: “We are pleased the Chancellor has extended the HSF, which has helped millions of households facing hardship.

“It is disappointing that we had to wait until the very last minute for an extension, and that it is only for a short period. Three-quarters of councils expect hardship to increase further in their area over the next 12 months.

“The Government needs to use the next six months to agree a more sustainable successor to the HSF.

“Councils need certainty and consistent funding to efficiently maintain the staff, services and networks that help our most vulnerable residents. Without this, we risk more people falling into financial crisis as we head into winter.”

Elsewhere in the Budget, there was some additional funding for specific housing projects, plus £45 million match funding for additional open children’s home



placements and £120 million for maintaining and rebuilding secure children’s homes. But there was no new investment for adult social care or temporary accommodation.

Cllr Davies said: “Looking at the Budget as a whole, the lack of additional funding for councils and our communities was disappointing.

“We know that councils of all political colours are facing record cost and demand

pressures and are having to do a lot more with a lot less.

“They are starting this financial year in a precarious position and having to scale back or close a wide range of local services, so the continued squeeze in public spending in the years ahead is a frightening prospect for communities.”

• See p10

‘Make adult social care a priority’

The next government has been urged to make social care a priority after years of reform being “consistently dodged or delayed”, a think-tank has said.

In its annual report, The King’s Fund said that financial eligibility for care has continued to tighten, with the threshold for help remaining unchanged for more than a decade. Local authorities are also facing rising costs with the bill for purchasing

care continuing to rise faster than inflation, according to the report, which the LGA supports.

Cllr Kaya Comer-Schwartz, Vice-Chair of the LGA’s Community Wellbeing Board, said: “We need to see further urgent investment in adult social care and a boost to the workforce, to ensure the best possible care for those that draw on it.”

Meanwhile, a new report from the Commons’ Public

Accounts Committee has warned that the Department of Health and Social Care is failing to provide the leadership required to deliver a social care sector sufficient to meet the country’s future needs.

Initiatives to support the workforce have so far only been short-term, while a long-term and comprehensive workforce plan is lacking, they said.

The report stated that MPs “remain unconvinced” about

whether the department knows if it is achieving value for money from additional funding going to adult social care.

Cllr Comer-Schwartz said: “Any reforms need to invest in prevention and recovery in both health and social care in order to be successful. It is crucial that the impacts of any social care reforms on councils are thoroughly assessed and are manageable, costed and centred on people who draw on care.”

Asylum housing costs up – NAO

Government plans for asylum accommodation will cost more than using hotels, and new large sites are housing fewer people than planned, according to the National Audit Office.

The parliamentary spending watchdog found that the Home Office expects to spend £1.2 billion on its 'large sites' programme, including at least £230 million by the end of March on the Bibby Stockholm barge, the former RAF bases at Scampton and Wethersfield, and former student accommodation in Huddersfield.

At the end of January 2024, these were housing approximately 900 people and the Government had stopped using 60 hotels, but costs were £46 million higher.

Cllr Roger Gough, the LGA's Asylum, Refugee and Migration Spokesperson, said: "Councils

want to work with government on developing a better system for accommodating and supporting asylum seekers.

"Councils need advance engagement on alternatives sites opened up for those leaving hotels, and for ongoing new arrivals, and an active role in deciding which hotels to close.

"These new sites need to open in areas that are not already facing unsustainable pressures because of asylum and resettlement, and be in line with regionally agreed plans.

"We are also keen to work with government on how to keep people safe and supported, as well as ensure councils are properly prepared in advance of the expected increase in arrivals over the summer, and to understand the potential impacts of the Illegal Migration Act."

• See p12, p28



Councils face 'urgent and important' challenges

The LGA's new Chief Executive has written to council chief executives, pledging to work with them to "deliver the best public services possible".

Joanna Killian has joined the LGA after six years as Chief Executive Officer of Surrey County Council, having previously been Chief Executive of Essex County Council and Head of Local Government at consultants KPMG.

In her message to council chief executives, Ms Killian said: "I know that many of your residents and communities are under intense pressure, and your organisations, in partnership with others, are crucial in supporting their health, wellbeing and happiness.

"There are urgent and important challenges for councils themselves, too.

"The continued squeeze in public spending planned over the coming years will have an impact on all communities, and councils therefore need all the powers, freedoms and levers to enable them to deliver their local ambitions and priorities.

"I know that improving the wellbeing and outcomes for children and young people is a fundamental principle for many of you, as is the drive to deliver the social infrastructure that enables families to thrive in tough times.

"There are many other significant challenges that we want to address collectively, from net zero to housing provision, from safer neighbourhoods to adult social care reform, and from devolution to establishing a more equal relationship with government.

"It's a genuine honour to represent you all in our shared endeavour to deliver the best public services possible."



Red tape 'stopping local climate action'

A bureaucratic system of bid-funding is hampering efforts to reach net-zero targets, according to a new survey for the LGA.

The survey found that local climate action is being 'strangled' by a complex web of hard-to-reach Whitehall funding pots, with more than half of councils being dissuaded from bidding into a government fund because of the time and resources needed to write bids.

The survey also found that two-thirds of councils were not confident in hitting their net-zero targets, putting the Government's net-zero strategy in doubt.

With more funding, councils could install more rooftop solar panels to cut bills, revitalise green spaces, electrify transport to clean up toxic air, and get more people walking and cycling.

The LGA is calling on all parties to back local climate action, supporting a local

approach that can achieve net zero by 2050 for half the cost of a national approach and deliver three times the financial returns.

Cllr Darren Rodwell, the LGA's Environment Spokesperson, said: "Councils are leading transformative projects across the country, but their innovation is being strangled by the national approach to the transition to net zero.

"We must rise to the challenge of climate change.

"With an impact on more than 80 per cent of emissions from their area – from transport and housing to renewable energy – government will not reach net zero without empowering councils to deliver local climate action in every village, town and city.

"With the right support, local areas could deliver net zero quicker and for less money, while boosting the local economy and ensuring local people benefit."

In brief

Decarbonising home heating

The low take-up of heat pumps by householders is slowing progress on decarbonising home heating, the National Audit Office has warned. Home heating represents 18 per cent of UK greenhouse gas emissions, but heat pump installations by December 2023 were less than half those projected. Cllr Darren Rodwell, the LGA's Environment Spokesperson, said: "Decarbonising homes and other buildings will play a huge role in achieving national net zero ambitions. It is time to shift to a locally led approach, which would mean councils can target the homes that need the support most, while working with local businesses to build skills and growth."

Working-age benefits

The Commons' Work and Pensions Committee has called for an annual 'uprating guarantee' on working-age benefits and local housing allowance (LHA), and for the Household Support Fund to be made permanent. Cllr Pete Marland, Chair of the LGA's Economy and Resources Board, said: "A sufficient social security system is vital to protect people on low incomes, jobseekers and those who cannot work. We have long called for LHA to be increased in line with rents and for the national benefits system to cover essential living costs. This would allow councils to target local welfare to households with the most complex needs."

Menthol cigarettes

Councils need extra resourcing to enforce a ban on menthol cigarettes, the LGA has urged. The call comes after research by University College London showed that 20 per cent of smokers use the product, despite a ban being in place since 2020. Cllr Heather Kidd, the LGA's Trading Standards Spokesperson, said: "Many councils are struggling to fully staff their enforcement services and it's important local trading standards get the funding to enforce this ban properly. This needs to include funding for the proposed ban on disposable vapes as well."

Shisha bars 'should be licensed'

The LGA is calling for a new licensing regime for shisha premises.

It says new, tougher powers are needed to crack down on shisha bars that breach smoking laws and are linked to anti-social behaviour.

The number of shisha premises has increased significantly in recent years, but councils currently lack the tools with which to regulate them and take enforcement action when needed.

A licensing regime would enable councils to grant or refuse licences for new shisha premises, revoke or suspend licences, and add conditions to licences to improve safety.

This follows a series of incidents where some shisha premises have allowed smoking indoors, flouted fire safety, and sold illicit shisha.

Shisha bars do not require a licence or registration unless they serve alcohol, have other regulated entertainment or serve food between 11pm and 5am.

The LGA is also calling for an increase in the level of fines for indoor shisha-smoking and for these to be levied against businesses, not just customers. It also wants a ban on flavoured shisha tobacco, as is currently the case with regular tobacco products.

In addition, the LGA is calling for mandatory health warnings on shisha products, including smoking paraphernalia, and mandatory warning signs on every shisha bar table that tobacco must not be sold to under-18s.

Cllr Heather Kidd, Chair of the LGA's Safer



and Stronger Communities Board, said: "It is not right that a venue requires a licence to serve a hot drink after 11pm, but not for smoking shisha.

"Licensing shisha would also send a stronger and clearer health message around the potential dangers of shisha smoking, as there is a common misconception that it is a safer alternative to smoking cigarettes."

• See www.local.gov.uk/publications for 'Reducing the harm of shisha', an LGA policy paper

Vape ban 'needs heftier fines'

Businesses should face tougher fines if they flout the proposed ban on disposable vapes, says the LGA.

Under the Government's plans, businesses caught selling disposable vapes after the ban has come into force could be given a fixed penalty notice of £100.

The LGA is warning that a minority of irresponsible businesses might see this as a price worth paying to continue to sell the products, post-ban.

It is calling on ministers to amend the Tobacco and Vapes Bill to allow councils to impose heftier fines to prevent the illegal sale of disposable vapes, as well as enforce the new 'age of sale' legislation on tobacco products.

Councils are also calling for new duties on vaping liquid, announced in the Budget, to be used to fund local environmental, public health and enforcement services.

Cllr Kaya Comer-Schwartz, the LGA's Public Health Spokesperson, said: "We're delighted that the Government is taking decisive action to ban disposable vapes.

"However, proposed penalties will be a drop in the ocean to a minority of unscrupulous businesses looking to make a quick buck after the ban comes into place.

"Allowing councils to issue bigger fines would act as a strong deterrent and ensure the ban on disposable vapes is effective, as well as creating a new smokefree generation."



Waste rule changes ‘could lead to sofa mountains’

Councils need funding to tackle waste sofas and other discarded soft furnishing items that contain dangerous chemicals before rules change this year, says the LGA.

Without funding to invest in new equipment and infrastructure, efforts to avoid ‘sofa mountains’ and comply with the new rules risk being undermined, it adds.

New Environment Agency rules will force councils to treat waste sofas differently from other items, including separating how they are collected, processed in waste centres, shredded, and incinerated. This is because the majority have been made using hazardous ‘persistent organic pollutants’ (POPs), which can be harmful if not disposed of properly.

The LGA predicts that meeting these rules will cost councils hundreds of millions of pounds, at a time when they face

ongoing funding pressures and almost half (43 per cent) are already having to cut waste and recycling services in 2024/25 to balance the books.

In the long term, councils are calling for manufacturers to meet the full costs of processing waste items containing POPs, and for improved transparency on, and reduced use of, chemicals in products.

Cllr Darren Rodwell, the LGA’s Environment Spokesperson, said: “Waste and recycling is a doorstep service reaching every one of our residents.

“Satisfaction with local waste services remains consistently high, which is a source of pride for local government and that we work hard to achieve.

“It is crucial that councils get the support needed to comply with these regulations, or there is a risk of further cuts to waste services as councils work to avoid the buildup of waste ‘sofa mountains.’”

In brief Childcare places

The availability of childcare in England has decreased, with only 6 per cent of councils reporting sufficient childcare for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The charity Coram’s annual childcare report also found that families across Britain are grappling with rising childcare costs, with a part-time nursery place (25 hours per week) for an under-two costing an average £158 per week, a 7 per cent increase on 2023. Cllr Louise Gittins, Chair of the LGA’s Children and Young People Board, said: “As the proportion of childcare places delivered through government-funded entitlements goes up in April, councils need to be given the right levers and powers to manage local childcare markets and lead local SEND systems effectively.” • See p22

Child poverty

Former Children’s Commissioner Anne Longfield has called for greater support ‘inside the school gates’ to tackle child poverty, including free school meals in the worst affected areas. The Centre for Young Lives, which she set up, analysed data on more than 60,000 children. Cllr Pete Marland, the LGA’s Resources Spokesperson, said a new cross-government approach is needed to reducing child poverty, including a strengthened focus on improving outcomes for children. The most effective way of lifting people out of poverty is through “an adequately resourced national safety net and sustainable long-term funding for vital local services,” he added.

Extremism definition updated

Communities Secretary Michael Gove has published an updated definition of extremism in response to an “increased extremist threat” since the Israel-Gaza war, which he said posed “a real risk” to the UK.

Organisations or individuals deemed extremist under the new definition will not be criminalised, but will be barred from contact with government and will not be able to receive government funding.

Alongside the definition – which is not statutory and updates what was introduced in 2011, under the Prevent strategy – the Government has published a set of ‘engagement principles’ to ensure public bodies do not provide a platform, funding or legitimacy to groups that are deemed to “negate our fundamental rights

and freedoms and overturn the UK’s system of liberal parliamentary democracy”.

Cllr Heather Kidd, Chair of the LGA’s Safer and Stronger Communities Board, said: “Councils have an essential role to play in building and maintaining cohesive communities, and in preventing radicalisation and tackling extremism.

“This is a task that has faced unprecedented challenges because of the conflict in the Middle East and a lack of funding for councils’ counter-extremism work.

“Investing in a long-term approach, which includes a multi-agency support offer for those at risk of radicalisation, is vital in addressing some of the wider issues that may contribute to individuals becoming radicalised and creating tensions in our communities.”

Road repairs

More than half of local roads in England and Wales could fail in the next 15 years, a report has warned. The Asphalt Industry Alliance’s latest ALARM survey said councils expect to fix two million potholes in 2023/24 and the repair backlog is £16.3 billion, up 16 per cent on last year. Cllr Darren Rodwell, the LGA’s Transport Spokesperson, said inflation had eaten into councils’ maintenance budgets, and added: “Only with a long-term plan, with year-on-year funding certainty, can we begin to reverse this decline, bring our roads up to scratch and save lives and costs for all roads users.”

In brief

Councillor safety

The LGA has welcomed government plans for councillors to have a named local policing contact for security matters. Cllr Marianne Overton, Chair of the LGA's Civility in Public Life Steering Group, said: "Our recent analysis showed that eight out of 10 councillors felt personally at risk while fulfilling their elected role last year, up 10 per cent from the year before. We want to work with government to help take much-needed steps to protect local councillors... This includes ending the legal obligation for a council to publish a councillor's home address and providing greater police protection." See p24

Levelling up

The Commons' Public Accounts Committee has warned of a lack of transparency and waste of public resources in the Government's funding approach to levelling up, with just over 10 per cent of promised funds spent. Cllr Martin Tett, Chairman of the LGA's People and Places Board, said the Government had provided greater flexibilities for councils on how they can spend existing funding to take account of delays caused by the pandemic, inflation, and supply and skill shortages, as noted in the report. He added: "We need to continue to move away from costly competitive bids between areas, so we can save money, drive up productivity and truly deliver levelling up as envisaged."

New audit chair

As first was going to press, Bill Butler was due to take over from Steve Freer as the new Chair of Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA). The PSAA is an 'appointing person', appointing audit firms for principal local government and police bodies. Cllr Abi Brown OBE, Chair of the LGA's Improvement and Development Agency, said: "Bill will play a significant role with our key partners to make the sustainable improvements needed to public sector audit and, in particular, local government audit. I would like to extend a huge thank you to Steve Freer, who has done an outstanding job as the founding Chair of PSAA over the past nine years."

Coastal water-quality concerns



A continuing deterioration in coastal water quality is affecting residents' health and impacting local industries, such as tourism and fishing, the LGA's Coastal Special Interest Group (SIG) has warned.

A survey by the SIG found that 70 per cent of coastal councils reported loss of tourism because deteriorating water quality – caused by sewage, farming run-offs and waste – was deterring visitors. Almost 90 per cent felt there was not enough water-quality testing in coastal waters, and more than 45 per cent said the reason for a decline in bathing water classification ratings was unknown.

Councils say more testing by the Environment Agency (EA) is needed to allow greater recreational use of coastal waters, and more detailed analysis would help them know what action to take to improve water quality.

The LGA Coastal SIG is calling for an

independent review of water companies, the removal of self-monitoring, changes to the monitoring programme, a review of pollution risk forecasting, and appropriate resourcing of the EA to enable it to deal with the issue.

"Coastal councils have long recognised the impact poor water quality can have on local communities, tourism and the shellfish industry," said Cllr Sandra Squire, the SIG's Member Champion for Coastal Water Quality and Cabinet Member for Environmental and Coastal at Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk.

"This report highlights that poor bathing water quality affects councils around the country and shows how it is now critical that water pollution is taken seriously as a national problem, with steps taken to improve all of our coastal waters as an urgent priority."

• See p26

New alliance to support cultural services

A fresh approach is needed to sustain culture services in the future, according to a new partnership of organisations representing local government, including the LGA.

Councils are the biggest public funder of culture in England, but rising demand in adult and children's social care and homelessness services, alongside a 23.3 per cent real-terms reduction in core spending power from 2010/11 to 2024/25, is squeezing all other budgets.

The new National Alliance for Cultural Services brings together the principal representative organisations for local government to: provide a collective voice for cultural services; offer a clear point of contact for consultation on these services with the experts who run them; inform debate

on their funding and governance; and support councils to deliver and shape cultural services that meet the needs of their communities.

Cllr Liz Green, Chair of the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, said: "Everybody has a right to access culture within their community, and while these services are under huge pressure, the benefits of them far outweigh the cost.

"Cultural services boost local economies by driving high-street footfall, and support creative industries and the visitor economy. They also promote wellbeing and support educational outcomes, while bringing joy and hope to people.

"Councils need sustainable and fair funding to invest in these essential community services."

• See p16, p19

Reforming the private rental sector

Delays to legislation 'exacerbating homelessness'

The Renters (Reform) Bill is a flagship piece of legislation introduced by Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Secretary Michael Gove to deliver on the Government's 2019 manifesto pledge to reform the private rented sector.

The LGA welcomed the Bill, which has the potential to deliver a fairer, more secure, and higher-quality private rented housing sector (PRS) for both tenants and landlords.

In its first draft, the Bill introduced a range of reforms to achieve this, including: abolishing unfair Section 21 'no fault' evictions; ending the system of assured shorthold tenancies; creating a new register of PRS landlords and a property portal to improve data on the PRS, to drive up standards across the sector; and establishing an ombudsman to help tenants and landlords resolve disputes.

We have argued for the Bill to go further in supporting tenants' rights by providing stronger regulatory and enforcement powers, and for government to ensure sufficient funding – especially for councils – to enforce these measures.

Subsequently, the Bill's progress has been marred by delays and the walking back of key measures, most concerningly the inclusion of a new commencement clause that would allow the Secretary of State to delay the implementation of the ban on Section 21 evictions indefinitely.

We have raised strong concerns about this delay with the Government.

Since November, no progress has been made on the Bill. While other key pieces of legislation have continued their journeys through Parliament, the Renters (Reform) Bill has been left behind.

This has drawn the ire of the voluntary and community sector and politicians across both Houses of Parliament, amid media and political speculation about possible amendments to the Bill that could weaken key measures, including the ban



on 'no fault' evictions, the redress scheme and essential enforcement measures.

The National Residential Landlords Association (NRLA), in collaboration with leading anti-homelessness charity Crisis, is among those who have called on the Government to provide clarity on the future of the Bill.

In a letter to Mr Gove, the NRLA warned that time is running out to ensure the Bill can complete its passage through Parliament "with the proper consideration it deserves".

It continued: "The lack of progress and uncertainty about the future is destabilising and damaging for those living and working in the private-rented sector."

While the Bill has stalled, the LGA is concerned that no-fault evictions have reached record levels and homelessness figures have soared.

The latest mortgage and landlord possession statistics show that during 2023, landlord claims increased significantly across all repossession procedures.

The data shows that between

October and December 2023, 7,527 landlords in England began a claim through the accelerated possession procedure, otherwise known as a Section 21 notice or no-fault eviction.

This represents a 23 per cent increase compared to the same period last year, which saw 6,101 claims.

The ending of a private rented tenancy is the most common reason for a household being at risk of homelessness.

At a time of acute housing shortages, when councils are spending at least £1.74 billion annually on supporting 104,000 households in temporary accommodation because of a lack of social housing, it is imperative the Government put an end to Section 21 evictions without delay.

The LGA will continue to lobby government and work with MPs from all parties who support these much-needed reforms.

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

Spring Budget 2024

No new funding for key local services

The last Spring Budget before the General Election did not contain any measures to adequately fund the local services people rely on every day, the LGA has concluded.

Councils continue to transform services but, given that core spending power in 2024/25 has been cut by 23.3 per cent in real terms compared with 2010/11, it is unsustainable to expect them to keep doing more for less in the face of unprecedented cost and demand pressures.

LGA analysis shows by 2024/25 these cost and demand pressures will add £15 billion (28.6 per cent) to the cost of delivering council services since 2021/22.

Almost two-thirds of service spending by councils with social care responsibilities in 2023/24 was on services for adults and children – this is up from 56.5 per cent in 2016/17.

An LGA survey also found that 85 per cent of councils would still have to make cost savings to balance their 2024/25 budget, despite the extra £600 million announced in the final local government finance settlement.

The Chancellor did announce a last-minute six-month extension of the Household Support Fund, which will help councils to continue supporting households facing hardship. While this was welcome, uncertainty over

the future of the fund has left councils and their charitable partners unable to plan effectively.

Councils could find themselves in this position yet again in September.

There was also some additional funding for children's social care, and plans to expand capacity and ensure children receive the help they need in the most suitable homes.

Fixing the broken market for children's social care placements will take time and ongoing investment, but this is a step in the right direction.

However, it is disappointing and concerning that the Spring Budget provides no new investment for adult social care nor temporary accommodation.

People who draw on care and support will understandably be worried about the continuing impact of significant pressures on the service; while councils are spending at least £1.74 billion supporting 104,000 households in temporary accommodation – both the highest figures since records began.



This year also saw the sixth one-year settlement in a row for councils.

Keeping councils on a financial drip feed in this way has led to the steady weakening of local services.

Councils need greater funding certainty through multi-year settlements to prevent this ongoing decline and to also ensure key national government policies – such as boosting economic growth, creating jobs and building homes – can be achieved.

See bit.ly/3VurAsD to read the LGA's 'Spring Budget 2024: on-the-day briefing'

Departmental spending

- After 2024/25, planned departmental day-to-day spending will grow at an average 1 per cent a year in real terms.

LGA view: "Councils of all political colours are starting this financial year (2024/25) in a precarious position and having to scale back or close a wide range of local services, so the continued squeeze in public spending in the years ahead is a frightening prospect for communities."

Long-Term Plan for Towns

- £400 million to extend the Long-Term Plan for Towns to 20 more places across the UK.

LGA view: "This extension will bring benefits to those 20 places that will receive additional funding. Inclusive economic prosperity and growth is a priority for all councils. We want to work with government so that all areas will be able to deliver more through a single, flexible, and fully devolved long-term funding pot."

Household Support Fund

- Additional £500 million (including Barnett funding for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) to extend Household Support Fund to September 2024.

LGA view: "This will enable councils to continue to provide vital support and advice to households facing hardship. It is disappointing that we had to wait until the very last minute for an extension, and that it is only for a short period."

Children’s social care

- £45 million match funding for 200 more open children’s home placements.
- £120 million for maintenance and rebuild of existing secure children’s homes.
- Proposals later this year on combating profiteering and creating a more sustainable market for residential placements.

LGA view: “Councils have been highlighting for some time that with more children needing help with increasingly complex and challenging needs, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find suitable homes for children in care.
 “The astronomical costs of some care placements means there is less money available for councils to spend on earlier support for children and families.”

Adult social care

- No new investment.
- LGA view:** “Waiting lists for care assessments or the provision of support/direct payments or care plan reviews remain stubbornly high. Serious recruitment and retention challenges continue to beset the workforce. Unmet and under-met need remains, pointing to issues with access to care and support.”



Early years education and childcare

- Increases in hourly rates for free hours childcare for the next two years.
- Eight-week window for local authorities to communicate final hourly funding rates to providers.
- Local authorities to pass at least 97 per cent of funding to providers.

LGA view: “The expansion of early years entitlements to support more families into work is welcome. However, historic underfunding and wider pressures mean the early years sector will remain under pressure without further reform. Councils...need to have sufficient resources and be given the right levers and powers to manage local childcare markets.”

Business rates

- Empty Property Relief ‘reset period’ extended from six to 13 weeks from 1 April 2024 in England.
- Government to consult on a ‘General Anti-Avoidance Rule’.
- 40 per cent reduction on gross business rates bills for eligible film studios in England until 2034.

LGA view: “The LGA has long been concerned about business rates avoidance. It welcomes the Government’s commitment to tackle this issue and... to extend the reset period for empty property relief, however, we believe this should have been extended to six months.”

Levelling up for culture

- £100 million of funding for culture projects (subject to business case).

LGA view: “Investment in cultural infrastructure drives local economic growth, reduces spend on acute health and wellbeing services, drives educational outcomes, and improves quality of life. Access to culture is not evenly distributed and measures to address this challenge are very welcome.”

Vaping

- New duty on vaping products from 1 October 2026.
- One-off tobacco duty increase of £2 per 100 cigarettes or 50 grams of tobacco from 1 October 2026.

LGA view: “There is an important balance to be struck in making sure that cigarettes remain taxed at a higher level than vapes, which can be a useful tool to cut smoking.

“While a new duty on vapes is welcome, we continue to highlight that local authority trading standards teams have seen a significant reduction to core budgets over recent years, and continue to face acute staff shortages.”

Special free schools

- Initial £105 million towards 15 new special free schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) across England.

LGA view: “Feedback from councils is that the speed at which new special school places can be brought online is too slow and will not solve the worsening financial crisis in supporting children with SEND.”

Temporary accommodation

- No new investment.
- LGA view:** “We are disappointed that the Budget provides no support to address the spiralling cost of temporary accommodation. Building more genuinely affordable homes remains the best way to help families struggling to meet housing costs, provide homes to rent, reduce homelessness and tackle council housing waiting lists in the long term.”

Right to Buy

- Cap on percentage of a replacement home that can be funded from Right to Buy receipts to increase from 40 to 50 per cent.

LGA view: “This policy change is welcomed. However, this Budget missed a key opportunity to allow councils to permanently retain 100 per cent of sales receipts.”

Supporting asylum-seeking children

A joined-up approach is needed to help all those seeking refuge



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

Councils have a proud history of welcoming new arrivals and supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to settle and thrive in their new homes.

This remains the case even as the number of children has risen significantly over recent years, and at a time when councils are under increasing strain.

Councils have a responsibility to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking (UAS) children who are identified in their area, including

providing accommodation and support for those aged under 18 and supporting those young people as care leavers after they turn 18.

As arrivals disproportionately affect port authorities, the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) was established to move children to care placements around the country.

However, rising numbers of UAS children and the ongoing pressures of supporting UAS care leavers is putting significant strain on councils' ability to provide the best possible support.

The number of UAS children in councils' care rose by 29 per cent last year – up to 7,290 – while former UAS care leavers now account for more than a quarter of all care leavers aged 19-21.

Home Office funding does not cover the true cost of supporting UAS

children, and councils are particularly concerned that funding for care leavers is only 27 per cent of that for under-18s.

Certainty that funding is sufficient to cover the costs of appropriate support to a young person is vital if councils are to feel able to offer homes to UAS children.

This comes at a time when pressure on council services has been growing, with record numbers of children currently in care, and increased demand for social care services and housing support.

An additional £500 million for adult and children's social care was announced in the final local government finance settlement, published in February.

However, the scale of pressure means most councils still had to make cuts to their 2024/25 budgets.

Those funding pressures are being driven by the increasing costs of placements, with councils warning of an insufficiency of homes for all children in care.

LGA research found that 91 per cent of councils had at least one placement costing more than £10,000 a week last year – up from just 23 per cent in 2018/19. The number of these placements had increased from 120 to more than 1,500 in the same period.

The Chancellor did acknowledge the pressures on children's services in his Spring Budget, announcing £45 million match funding for local authorities to build an additional 200 open children's home placements and £120 million for maintenance of the existing secure children's homes.

Fixing the broken market for children's social care placements will take time and ongoing investment, but this is a step in the right direction.

Age assessment also remains a challenge, both from child protection and legal perspectives.

Challenges to UAS children's age assessments can be lengthy and expensive for councils, drawing on significant financial and human resource.

The new National Age Assessment Board will eventually carry out a significant proportion of assessments, though it is currently only working on a very small number of cases.

We also need to see a joined-up approach across partners and government departments to the totality of the asylum and migration system to make sure all those seeking refuge in the UK can receive the right support.

• See p28



A blueprint for local government

Place-based approaches to meeting need can be more effective



Lord **Bichard** KCM is an LGA Vice President



Anyone working in local government will have experienced the frustration that comes from too many decisions over local public services and investment being taken in Westminster and Whitehall.

According to research by the OECD, the UK is one of the most fiscally centralised countries in the developed world. Analysis from the independent Institute for Public Policy Research finds that countries with a greater level of devolution experience lower levels of regional inequality.

All the evidence points to the fact that place-based approaches to meeting the specific needs of communities are more effective, while approaches such as the Supporting Families programme demonstrate the value of early intervention and preventative activity.

It is therefore essential that local leaders are given the tools and resources to tailor services to local needs. Given opportunities, councils will deliver better outcomes than a centralised system characterised by micro-management and duplication.

These were some of the central themes of the Total Place initiative, which I led back in 2009. Total Place sought to reassess the relationship between local and central government and establish a new direction for local public services and local authorities, with a range of freedoms and a new relationship with government.

One of its central ambitions was to

enable collaboration between public service providers at a local level to improve outcomes for local people, and secure better value for public money spent locally.

Much of this aligns with the LGA's own aspirations for a White Paper for local government. This work aims to consider the benefits of place-based policy making, with the intention of developing a plan for the first King's Speech after the General Election to secure a national-local partnership in which local government can work to its full potential for people, places and the planet.

It is essential that the next government establishes a clear vision for the future of local government, one that is based on the public's priorities, including councils and local communities.

It was therefore useful to discuss the practicalities of the LGA's White Paper proposals with parliamentarians, academics and think tanks at a recent cross-party discussion, which I chaired.

Among the participants were local leaders; former Communities Secretary John Denham, who has produced a new paper calling for place-based budgeting; Clive Betts MP, Chair of the Commons' Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee; and think tanks, such

as the Institute for Government and the New Economics Foundation.

We sought to establish what powers and responsibilities should be further devolved closer to communities and how we could collectively reignite a place-based approach to local public services.

This discussion will help frame the LGA's White Paper and support councils and their partners to develop a plan for the next King's Speech which will unlock the potential of places and strengthen public services in a period of continued fiscal restraint.

Local leaders must be able to access devolved powers and investment without the need for complex or lengthy institutional change.

Over the last decade, national government has taken steps towards greater decentralisation, with devolution deals now covering more than 60 per cent of England.

However, a more radical approach is needed.

Councils want genuine partnership with central government. Public services can be delivered faster, better, and more efficiently at a local level.

Empowering councils can drive economic growth, improve people's life opportunities, and deliver better value for money for public spending.



Lord Bichard is a crossbench Peer, and was previously Chief Executive of two councils, Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education and Employment, Director of the Institute for Government, and Chair of the National Audit Office. To find out more about the [LGA's White Paper work](#), please visit www.local.gov.uk/local-government-white-paper

Look who's turning 50

Current district and county councils started out in 1974



Colin Copus is Emeritus Professor of Local Politics at De Montfort University and Visiting Professor at Ghent University

It's a big year for turning 50, in 2024: Kate Moss, Bear Grylls, Joaquin Phoenix, Leonardo DiCaprio, Victoria Beckham; and Playmobil, Rubik's Cube, the Watergate scandal, The Six Million Dollar Man and Happy Days – to name a few.

The most important on the list, however, are those remaining Local Government Act 1972 councils in England that came into effect on 1 April 1974 and are consequently celebrating their 50th birthdays.

In creating many of today's

councils, the 1972 Act swept away two-thirds of those then existing, reducing 1,245 to 412.

The Act's aim was not universally accepted and was hotly contested across the country and in Parliament, giving rise to the campaign slogan 'Don't Vote for R.E.Mote!' – a slogan designed to bring attention to how the Act consequently increased the size of councils.

Yet, the two-tier system introduced by the Act was a better outcome for keeping local government 'local' than the 58 unitary councils proposed by the Royal Commission on Local Government in England, chaired by Lord Redcliffe-Maud, which Harold Wilson's government

supported: its 58 unitary councils today would have each had an average population of more than 960,000.

Edward Heath's government, however, rejected the Redcliffe-Maud proposals and the 1972 Act created the two-tier structure and most of the councils we recognise today.

Had Redcliffe-Maud looked further through the telescope to view the consequences of population growth on its proposed unitaries (it was responsible for introducing the term 'unitary' into the lexicon of local government), it might have reconsidered, particularly as its democratic considerations posed an upper limit on any council running all services and democratic control by councillors is made more difficult as councils increase in size.

In a powerful admission, the report noted that local people should feel as though they were included in any 'unit' – note, 'unit', not 'community'.

While the report that led to the sweeping away of more than 800 councils in England was aware of limits to structural reorganisation, it also argued there were no firm limits on population size, suggesting 250,000 as a starting point.

Local government managerial and professional organisations at the time wanted 250,000 populations; where that figure came from is, however,



#LocalGov50



shrouded in mystery. Yet, Redcliffe-Maud and the 1972 Act did not end the debate about structure or size – even less the purpose – of local government.

Indeed, they set many structural hares running that continue to chase local government. Especially, as every new local government minister – who may never have mentioned local government structure in their entire political careers – seems, within days of taking office, to suggest reorganisation might be a good idea.

Is a copy of the Redcliffe-Maud report dusted off and presented to new ministers as a jolly good way of getting rid of all those pesky councils and councillors?

The commission's terms of reference asked it to consider: 'the structure of local government in England... in relation to its existing functions; and to make recommendations for authorities and boundaries, and for functions and their division, having regard to the size and character of areas in which these can be most effectively exercised and the need to sustain a viable system of local democracy'.

The councils created by the 1972 Act have shown that they are skilled and adept at striking the balance the commission saw as vital to sustainable local government.

One could be forgiven for thinking the 1972 councils were set up to fail; as with most centrally inspired reorganisations, no new autonomy and freedoms were given.

The report and Act simply ignored the purpose of local government, preferring to see structure as the solution. If only we could identify the problem!

Rather than reach for the reorganisation revolver, it is time to explore exactly what freedoms, powers,

autonomy and responsibilities cash-strapped councils need.

The 1972 Act councils are the bedrock of the local government structure; those that remain have stood the test of time and what rough times they have been.

They have shown resilience, fortitude and success in governing and serving communities. Those we have lost were no less able to do that but succumbed to the centralising and unitarising tendencies of the centre.

So, hitting the big 5-0 should not be ignored.

Let's see mayors, council leaders, chief executives and councillors proudly celebrate their birthday with public recognition of all they do and have achieved for citizens and communities.

Put out the banners, hoist the flags, inflate balloons and bouncy castles and celebrate our great traditions of civic pride, local patriotism and local government.

If 50 is the new 30 then it's time to overcome any reluctance to showcase the value local government adds to communities and the country's governance.

The occasion must not disappear: if we don't celebrate the best of local government we will, over time, lose it.

Over the past 50 years, 412 councils have become 317. So, while raising a glass of champagne, let's not forget those that didn't make it to their half-century.



Search hashtag **#LocalGov50** on social media or go to www.local.gov.uk/localgov50 for more ideas on how to celebrate **the 50th anniversary** of county and district councils

Central control of finances



Councillor **Tony Page** (Lab) is Mayor of Reading Borough Council. He is retiring as an elected member at the 2 May elections after being first elected in 1973, aged 19

After 50 years of increasing control over local councils and their finances, England is now one of the world's most centralised countries.

The 1976 Layfield Committee report into local government finance offered ministers a choice: a more centrally controlled system of local authority finance or one with greater local autonomy.

The latter was anathema to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and there was a series of centralising measures in the 1980s. These included rate-capping controls, the abolition of the Greater London Council, and a whole tier of six metropolitan county councils.

In 1990, we had the 'community charge' or poll tax, with control over business rates removed from local councils and shifted to the Treasury.

For more than 40 of the 50 years I have been a councillor, central government has decided annually the maximum percentage increase in council tax. This, along with centralised business rates, remains the greatest act of central control ever exercised by governments over English local councils.

Governments of all political colours have maintained the huge dominance of Whitehall, with directly elected mayors subject to the same restrictions as councils.

Financial independence and revenue-raising powers must be the real test of genuine devolution.

Notwithstanding real-term cuts in government funding for local authorities of more than 40 per cent since 2010, I believe English local government remains the most efficient part of the public sector.

In fact, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the 'stars' were local authorities. They responded swiftly and effectively as partners, and were crucial to the vaccination roll-out, and wider health and financial support.

I hope the next government will reinvigorate councils within a genuinely devolved structure, based on a framework of unitary local government and a regional tier (which could also nominate members to a streamlined and reformed upper house in Parliament).

Financing needs to be made much fairer, recognising the need for continuing central grants to less well-off councils, while permitting new and diverse sources of revenue.

There is no need for another Royal Commission. It just needs a re-reading of the Layfield report – and a bit of political will.

Culture and devolution

Cultural services deliver growth and hope



Councillor **Liz Green** is Chair of the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board

In December 2022, the LGA published 'Cornerstones of culture', the final report of a year-long Commission on Culture and Local Government (see **first** 679).

Drawing on engagement with more than 80 cultural services and organisations, and more than 50 case studies, the commission was overseen by a group of 16, led by its Chair, Baroness Lola Young. Its report explored the role publicly funded cultural services could play in helping recovery from the pandemic and how councils could support this.

Since its publication, the context in which cultural services operate has deteriorated further, as inflation, growing demand for statutory services, and wider pressures on local government finances place strain on our national cultural infrastructure.

Last year marked the 75th anniversary of councils investing in the arts and culture.

Local councils still remain the biggest public funder of cultural services, but how can this continue when the LGA recently calculated that there would be a \$4 billion gap in their overall funding by March 2025, just to keep all services standing still?

Although the additional \$600 million announced in the final local government finance settlement for 2024/25 is welcome, the underlying problem persists. Without a long-term, sustainable funding settlement for local government, the situation is unlikely to stay the same, let alone improve.

Despite this, there are causes for optimism. Councils have never had a statutory requirement to fund culture: it is a discretionary service.

The fact that they continue to do so regardless, demonstrates that they see its value: as a tool for economic growth; as a pillar of health and wellbeing; as a foundation of high-quality places for residents and visitors; and as a source of hope and joy for everyone in difficult times.



We saw how resilient and creative the sector could be during the pandemic. I truly believe that, by working together, we can overcome present challenges to secure the future of our national cultural offer.

We cannot afford to be divided. Only by working together to target

Culture benefits places

Paul Bristow is Director, Strategic Partnerships and Place Policy, at Arts Council England

Devolution has already impacted culture.

Alongside local government's ongoing support, mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) have sought to provide a strategic framework for local development.

Prior to 2022, only two MCAs referenced culture in their devolution deals. Since then, 11 devolution deals have included culture alongside a commitment from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's arms-length bodies to work in partnership with the MCAs.

These deals reflect something long accepted across national and local

government – not only that people, wherever they live, deserve to have high-quality cultural opportunities, but also that culture benefits places and communities.

It supports regeneration and local economic growth, stronger communities and wellbeing.

It also shows that national and local partners understand that achieving these ambitions depends on good partnership between different tiers of government...

...Amid all this possibility, however, we must not lose sight of the local tier.

Local authorities will remain the most important strategic and delivery partner for the Arts Council for the foreseeable future.

The health of the cultural sector relies upon the co-investment made by local government and the Arts Council into the museums, libraries and arts organisations that are the backbone of England's cultural sector.

Councils will remain leaders of place and are constituent bodies of MCAs. We must remember the importance of local government in our discussions about devolution.



Place-led working

Val Birchall is immediate past Chair of the Chief Cultural and Leisure Officers Association

Discretionary local government services are under severe financial stress as the gap continues to widen between demand-led pressure on statutory services and councils' capacity to meet the increasing cost.

We are in need of a national rethink about how we support and, yes, grow cultural provision as an essential component of place-led working.

The current national system is fragmented and un-strategic and fails to connect effectively to local structures.

Relationships are at the heart of success in local working.

Local cultural strategies, with the ownership and commitment of relevant local structures, should guide and manage the application of the settlement and take responsibility for monitoring and delivery of associated outcomes.

our shared investment effectively can we explore every avenue for delivering and protecting these vital community services.

This is why I am delighted that the LGA has launched a set of new think pieces on the future of local, publicly funded cultural services, exploring the role of government, arms-length funding bodies, combined authorities, and councils in establishing a supportive environment in which they can operate. See the panels for excerpts and quotes from just some of those we have published so far.

We hope this work will bring the ideas of influential thinkers to bear on the future of local, publicly funded culture and the role of the council, helping us at the LGA to build our own understanding of what might be possible – and supporting us to work with national government on behalf of our member councils and the sector.

 See www.local.gov.uk/culture-and-devolution-series-think-pieces to read these and other LGA culture and devolution think pieces in full

The case for cultural infrastructure

Michael Kenny is Director, **Owen Garling** is Knowledge Transfer Facilitator, and **Steph Coulter** is Research Assistant at the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, University of Cambridge

We are exploring what it means to consider cultural (and social) assets, both public and private, as infrastructure.

The main implication of this idea is that we start to see a rich and diverse set of cultural assets, both in terms of their instrumental benefits to the prosperity and cohesion of communities, and the platform they provide, along with other kinds of infrastructure, for a healthy and functioning community...

...Adopting the framework of cultural infrastructure would represent a further step-change by a future UK government, we would suggest, towards recognising the value created by the arts and

cultural provision in policy terms.

It would help decision-makers appreciate the intrinsic importance of artistic endeavours and cultural consumption to the life and wellbeing of communities throughout the UK.

And it would enable local and national leaders to articulate better what many intuitively understand: that culture, sport, heritage and the arts are not luxury items, or mere supplements to the services and amenities that people rely on in their daily lives.

They are, in fact, integral parts of the social plumbing that makes communities prosper, democracies flourish, and individuals live more fulfilling and healthy lives.



Get up and go

Share your schemes helping women and girls to be more active



Councillor **Liz Green** is Chair of the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board

The LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board is committed to promoting equality and supporting councils to help communities to be active.

Over the next two years, the board will take an in-depth look at a range of inequalities with the aim of sharing effective practice within the sector. The first of these projects will focus on women and girls.

Why women and girls? Well, research shows that women are persistently less active than men and that the gender gap starts from a young age.

Being physically active is important because it has been shown to improve health and wellbeing, manage and prevent many long-term health conditions, improve social connectedness and decrease feelings of loneliness and exclusion.

Despite this, four in 10 women are not active enough to ensure they get the full health benefits.

Over the past five years, Sport England's Active Lives survey has shown little progress being made: in 2021/22, men were 4.8 per cent more active than women, similar to the

gender gap recorded in 2014/15; while in 2022/23, boys were 6.8 per cent more active than girls, the same gender gap recorded in 2017/18.

Disparities also exist within ethnic groups. Black men are 11 per cent more active than black women. Asian boys are 10 per cent more active than Asian girls.

Women's and girls' attitudes towards prioritising and participating in physical activity significantly differ to those of men and boys.

Insights from Sport England's ground-breaking 'This Girl Can' campaign highlight that women feel that spending time with friends and family or studying/working should be more important than being active.

Thirty-one per cent of women say lack of time is a factor when trying to increase the amount of physical activity and exercise they do. Likewise, girls report prioritising schoolwork over being active.

Girls report more negative associations with physical activity and lower levels of enjoyment compared with boys; while 22 per cent of women have concerns about sexual harassment when doing sport or physical activity, a figure that doubles outdoors in the dark.

Turning the tide is not easy, but momentum to get more women and girls active is growing at the national level.

'This Girl Can' helped to kickstart it in 2015. More recently, Sport England's 10-year strategy, the

'Uniting the Movement', prioritises positive experiences for children and young people.

The Government's 'Get Active' strategy wants to get a million more children and 1.25 million more women active by 2030. It's the focus of the Commons' Culture, Media and Sport Committee's current inquiry into women's sport.

Councils will be important in delivering on these shared ambitions, and at the LGA we want to understand more about what local government is already doing to get women and girls active.

From hyperlocal interventions to shaking up the system, we want to hear about how your council is effectively tackling inactivity and low participation levels in girls and women.

We also want to hear about the challenges stopping you from delivering on this agenda and what the solutions might look like; and to gather evidence on the impact national funding is having on your ability to help more women and girls get active.

We will use your examples to share effective practice with the sector and inform our lobbying work on behalf of councils.



The LGA's **call for evidence** on supporting women and girls to be active closes on 12 April 2024. To find out more, please visit www.local.gov.uk/call-evidence-supporting-women-and-girls-be-active

Harnessing the power of culture

The LGA can help improve your strategic approach



Councillor **Carolyn Healy** (Lab) is Cabinet Member for Climate Action, Green Spaces, Heritage and Leisure at Telford & Wrekin Council

Many of us in local government are facing very tough choices in determining where we spend our limited resources, following a Spring Budget which did not include measures to adequately fund the local services people rely on every day.

Arts and culture can often seem like the easiest thing to cut during these times when the demand for social care or homelessness support seems to inevitably swallow more and more of our budgets.

However, let's not forget that these cultural services are vital and well-used community-facing services that are valued by our residents.

In these tough times, people do need to see something that gives them hope and that they value, somewhere that can boost their mental health, gives them access to free learning and skills to apply for that next job, or simply a quiet place in the warm away from their over-crowded household.

That's not to say that these services must, or can, continue to be delivered in the way that they have been.

It may be that some of these cherished buildings are no longer fit for purpose, or no longer in the right place.

Could closing one or two free up room to create a new co-located facility, with new outreach activity in neighbourhoods reaching those people who never walked through the door of the old facility?

Or have you tried that and now



want to assess how it has worked, with feedback from your partner organisations, team members and residents?

This is where the LGA and Arts Council England can help.

The LGA offers a range of fully funded improvement programmes for culture and library services, to support councillors and lead officers to articulate the potential power of culture and libraries within their own strategic work.

These offers, which are funded by and co-designed with Arts Council England, are themed around the areas that councils tell the LGA are most relevant to them.

My council, Telford & Wrekin, recently took part in an LGA culture peer challenge.

We worked with the peer team to co-design a targeted brief to provide greater insights regarding our local theatre and wider cultural offer, in the context of levelling up and community engagement.

We were impressed by the experience and professionalism of the peer team.

The process was transparent and collaborative, and enabled us to hear good practice examples from the peer team, as well as insights from stakeholders and partners. We received initial recommendations, followed by a more detailed report, which we are using to help inform our strategy.

Based on our experience, I recommend that you find out how an LGA culture or library peer challenge could help to inform your strategic work.

There are both face-to-face and online opportunities, and the LGA has a real focus on making sure the peer challenges will deliver useful and practical insights.

i **To find out more** about the LGA's culture and library improvement programmes, please visit www.local.gov.uk/arts-culture-and-libraries-2023

Encouraging allyship

The LGA's Be a Councillor campaign is celebrating transgender councillors

Local government is all about communities – about ensuring that our local areas provide a pleasant and safe place where everyone can thrive, access the right services and amenities, take up the opportunities they want to seize, and play a full and active part in the community.

The International Transgender Day of Visibility, on 31 March, celebrates and honours the transgender and non-binary community, educating about what it is like to be transgender and non-binary, and encouraging allyship

through speaking up and acting on the challenges faced by the community.

When we create a safe space for people to discuss issues, it can help everyone to feel more seen and encouraged to get involved in their communities.

This, in turn, can help motivate new pipelines of talented people to take on leadership positions and play an integral part in shaping the future of a local area, and ensure that decision-making includes a diverse range of perspectives that reflect our local communities.

The LGA's Be a Councillor campaign believes that diversity contributes to effective leadership and it works to encourage more people from under-represented groups to come forward for election.

Everyone in local government has a part to play in helping promote the role of a councillor, and the campaign provides bespoke support and resources to help councils inspire and raise awareness locally with information and events.

i To find out more about the campaign, please visit our website at www.local.gov.uk/be-councillor, and you can get in touch with the team via beacouncillor@local.gov.uk

'Building consensus and connections'



Councillor **Chris Northwood** is Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group on Manchester City Council

I was nervous before committing to stand as a council candidate with a full campaign behind me, but, with support from my local party, I was encouraged to go from activist to candidate, and stand up for my area.

I'm naturally a conflict-averse person. This might look incompatible with being a local councillor in opposition, but I spend more time on building consensus and connections in my community than on the 'rough and tumble' of politics.

Standing as a trans woman brings an extra dimension to this, as my identity has become heavily politicised in the so-called 'culture war'.

Fortunately, away from the echo chambers of the internet and certain corners of the media, people are more interested in who can get on top of fly-tipping, champion road safety and fight for more affordable housing.

Sadly, I have received hate and abuse that originated online, but support and allyship from council staff, my

political group and campaign team have been steadfast and strong, including where the police were brought in to investigate an incident.

It's important to not just be 'the trans councillor'. Although I'm able to be a visible representative for the trans community, I bring my whole self to my duties as a councillor.

I balance my councillor duties with working part-time as a software developer for a national charity and have found that my skills in user-centric design transfer well to putting residents first, as well as to problem solving.

My professional knowledge also helps me to scrutinise high-budget IT and cybersecurity decisions effectively.

Democracy is strongest when elected representatives do actually represent the whole gamut of lived experience of our society.

I'm proud to be able to add to that and, with appropriate support, it is an option open to others too.



'Adding to the effectiveness of local government'



Councillor **Raphael Hill** (Green) is Opposition Spokesperson for Culture and Tourism at Brighton & Hove City Council

I am a Green Party councillor in Brighton & Hove City Council, representing Round Hill Ward.

My reasons for getting involved with local politics and being a councillor have nothing to do with being transgender. Truthfully, I knew I wanted to be a councillor before realising I was transgender.

In a sense, the real question for me was whether I should continue to try to

get elected despite the barriers that being transgender and transitioning in public office would bring.

I was elected in May 2023, which was the culmination of five years of working towards that goal.

I am confident that I was right to stick to my goal of getting elected, despite the additional difficulties that I knew being transgender would bring.

My identity does act as a barrier to my ability to carry out the role of a councillor in a safe manner as, sadly, being in a public position such as this does make you a target.

That for me is something I am willing to bear for the privilege of having this role, which I love.

I am, however, lucky to have many wonderfully supportive people around me in my personal life and within my local party, which helps a great deal.

I stood previously in the 2019 local elections, when I came 87 votes from winning. It helped that I was standing with five other Green Party candidates who were all aged under 30, three of whom were elected in May 2019.

Without them and their support, I would have found it much harder to imagine myself running for office at that time when I was starting out.

In a similar way, I hope I can support other people who want to stand for office, as their experiences can add to the effectiveness of local government.



Inclusive early years provision

Families with SEND children struggle to find childcare

The early years foundation stage statutory framework requires all early years' providers to have arrangements in place to support children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

However, the Coram Family and Childcare's 2024 childcare survey has found that only 6 per cent of local authorities in England have enough childcare places for children with SEND.

Recent research showed that one in five families of children with SEND reported being turned away by early years settings.

Often families who do manage to secure childcare for their children with SEND are unable to access all of their early years-funded entitlement, and there are concerns that this situation will get worse with new early years entitlements starting soon (see **first** 692).

The LGA has been working with the charity Dingley's Promise to look at how childcare sufficiency is measured, as it is a complex question that, to date, no local area has managed to address effectively.

We have facilitated several online discussion groups with local

authorities and Dingley's Promise has worked to develop suggested systems and resources that will enable councils to gain a better understanding of their local provision and services.

Ultimately, our aim is to ensure that the childcare sufficiency assessment in every area actively focuses on supply and demand for children with SEND, to clearly understand whether there is a gap that needs addressing.

Dingley's Promise is also delivering a training package to address some of the barriers to inclusion.

The package aims to help more early years settings to be inclusive of children with SEND and feel able to offer more places to children, with the confidence of being able to support their needs fully.

The training – funded by Comic Relief as part of a five-year grant – has been designed for flexible remote learning and includes webinars and resources for practical application of the learning.

Courses available include: an introduction to early years inclusive practice; early years SEND transitions; behaviours that challenge; managing difficult conversations with families; and the voice of the child.



Practitioners who have completed the training report feeling confident and skilled in supporting children with SEND to learn inclusively in their settings.

Critically, 96 per cent of trainees report that they can support more children with SEND as a result of completing the training.

Learners have not only developed the skills to deliver high-quality early intervention but have improved their confidence and feel part of a bigger movement for change.

The training also increases parental confidence about the early years and childcare settings their children attend and will improve the experiences of families trying to access provision, something that is a real issue within the sector.

We are working with several local authorities to understand more about the current barriers to delivering early years places for all children with SEND and are exploring what is behind the rapidly increasing number of requests for an assessment for an education, health and care plan.

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

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

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

i To find out more about **Dingley's Promise's** courses, please visit www.dingley.org.uk/training. To discuss the LGA's early years **SEND** support for your local authority, please contact elizabeth.hodgman@local.gov.uk

Partners in supporting our communities



Councillor **Sam Chapman-Allen** is Chairman of the District Councils' Network

The annual conference of the District Councils' Network took place in mid-March, little more than a fortnight before most of our member councils celebrate their 50th anniversary.

However, it was not an event at which we basked in the glories of the past half-century.

Our conference theme was looking ahead to 2030 and beyond – facing up to the challenges of the coming years and examining the opportunities they will bring.

Like the rest of local government and indeed society, district councils operate in a difficult age.

Demand is rising and our resources are more severely constrained than ever before.

The increases in homelessness and in migration have placed further demands on our already stretched housing services – we want to ensure there are affordable homes for everyone, not unsatisfactory temporary accommodation.

The recent rise in the cost of living means more of our residents seek support and our expertise is valued because we have a track record of taking action when people need it most.

It's a similar story on economic support, where we are on the frontline of protecting our much-loved high streets, which are so ravaged by changes in shopping habits.

But change is more fundamental than even the immense increase in councils' workload.

Our conference heard how climate change is becoming ever more real. We have much more to do to reduce the emissions of councils and, in particular, our communities, as well as shaping our places to withstand intensifying temperature and rainfall extremes.

We also had a session dedicated to artificial intelligence, the eventual impact of



“We all know challenges and solutions extend beyond lines on local government maps”

which we cannot comprehend, but for which we must nevertheless prepare.

District councils are not alone in facing ever-greater challenges or seeking certainty in an increasingly uncertain world.

We want to work alongside you, the rest of local government, and indeed the rest of the public sector, business and society, in navigating a path through this complexity for the benefit of our communities.

My message to our partner councils is one of cooperation.

Districts are the closest principal authorities to our communities. We have a unique ability to reach individual people or businesses needing help.

By intervening early there is scope to reduce the burden on our county council colleagues – and the same is true of our NHS partners.

Similarly, district councils have a long-standing expertise on economic

development and regeneration which we will use alongside and in support of counties.

Together we are stronger.

District councils' small scale and closeness to our communities is the perfect complement to the benefits that larger scale offers county and unitary councils over some services.

We all know that challenges and solutions extend beyond lines on local government maps.

As we contemplate how best to lay the foundations for the next 50 years, no-one can be sure what a council will look like in 2074. And we certainly cannot be sure about what type of world in which they will be operating.

But I am confident that being close to our communities will continue to bring results, as will partnership. I look forward to working with you – our partners in local government and beyond – as we contemplate the huge task ahead of us.



To find out more about the work of the District Councils' Network, please visit www.districtcouncils.info

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

Raising awareness of the financial crisis



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

We're just back from the Liberal Democrat spring conference, where we had a busy and successful time, if a bit exhausting!

As we gathered in York, we celebrated the news that we now have 3,000 principal authority Liberal Democrat councillors following a string of by-election gains – for the first time in more than a decade.

Our reception included the local government version of the Oscars, with party leader Sir Ed Davey MP presenting the 'Council Group of the Year' awards to some of our excellent council groups. It is good to see how the party

leadership values the work we do in local government.

We also ran a fringe meeting on community safety and tackling crime and anti-social behaviour, and the contribution councils can make – very timely in advance of the police and crime commissioner elections on 2 May. There was also a meeting to recognise the work our groups in areas such as Liverpool and Southwark are doing to support communities in our cities.

Liberal Democrat councillors tabled two amendments and a policy motion to the party conference on the financial crisis in local government.

We called for more government support for councils, and raised the warning, loud and clear, that if that did not happen, local government as we know it will cease to exist. My thanks to Somerset Council Leader Cllr Bill Revans for seconding the motion and for

outlining the challenges his council faces.

We also spoke out on funding for community sports facilities and, again, for government funding over the party's plan to tackle persistent school absences.

So, onwards to the General Election, whenever that will be.

We have met with the Lib Dem manifesto coordinator, Lord Newby, to discuss Lib Dem Group and LGA priorities, and will be following up.

And there is plenty of common ground; for example, an agreement on hosting cross-party talks to find a solution for social care funding.

Let's keep working together across the party divide to get the best possible deal for local government.

"Without more government support for councils, local government as we know it will cease to exist"



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

Civility and service

With council, mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections just over a month away, I wanted to say thank you to everyone in local government who helps ensure our local democracy works effectively.

I know from my own council that the unsung heroes of every election are our hardworking elections staff and democratic services officers, who pull out all the stops to ensure things run smoothly and fairly.

I also want to thank those of you who may be stepping down as elected members in May, for your service to your local communities.

Whether that's been for one term or 50 years, and whatever your political colour, you will have changed lives and made our local places better by standing up for what you believe in.

I particularly want to pay tribute to



those of you standing for re-election and any of your colleagues who may be standing for the very first time.

This is not an easy time to be in local government.

The political and personal challenges are huge, given rising demand for services and increased cost pressures, and rising levels of abuse and intimidation, both on the doorstep and on social media.

We are pleased that locally elected representatives will now have dedicated police support for security matters for the first time. This is something the LGA has long called for, as part of our demand for civility in public life.

We continue to raise public awareness of the role of councillors in

their communities, encourage healthy debate, and improve the responses and support for local politicians facing abuse and intimidation, as part of our Debate Not Hate campaign (see www.local.gov.uk/debate-not-hate for more information and resources, and to sign up to the campaign).

We'd encourage councillors to use our 'Safer canvassing' guide, to help them proactively consider their safety during this pre-election period (see [first 691](http://www.local.gov.uk/publications), and www.local.gov.uk/publications).

Debating and disagreeing with one another is a healthy part of democracy, but abuse and intimidation crosses the line into dangerous territory. The right engagement matters.



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

Delivering the very best for our communities

In March, LGA Conservative Group colleagues were invited to Downing Street to attend a meeting of the political Cabinet with the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister spoke highly of our efforts across local government to deliver the very best offer for our communities.

He reminded the political Cabinet that, despite the challenges facing the local government sector, it is Conservative-led councils that continue to deliver more for less in our communities.

“Conservative-led councils continue to deliver more for less”

Just take Conservative-controlled Fenland District Council as an example.

Over the past few years, it has continued to cut its share of council tax for Cambridgeshire residents, while still delivering good quality services.

The Prime Minister, himself a former Minister for Local Government, is acutely aware of the challenges we face, but also recognises the incredible work that Conservative councillors do in their communities up and down the nation.

It is worth noting the Prime Minister's personal intervention earlier this year to secure local government an additional £600 million following the publication of the 2024/25 local government finance settlement and lobbying from the Conservative local government family.

On a separate note, LGA Conservatives will shortly be discussing with parliamentarians the impact of Labour's plans to introduce 20 per cent VAT on private school fees, should they get near the doors of government.

As many of you will know, many councils use independent schools to support children in care, and we remain concerned about the added financial pressures such a proposal may bring to councils.



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

Spring Budget ‘a missed opportunity’

The Spring Budget on 6 March was the final chance for this Government to turn around 14 years of economic mismanagement and try to put the British economy back on track.

It turned out to be yet another missed opportunity.

One small positive was a short-term extension of the Household Support Fund, which has already helped millions of households struggling because of the cost-of-living crisis triggered by former Prime Minister Liz Truss's disastrous mini-budget.

However, a six-month extension is simply not good enough: three-quarters of councils expect hardship to increase over the next year.

Stealing Labour's longstanding policy of scrapping non-domicile tax loopholes demonstrates the Chancellor has resorted to copying other people's ideas.

“One small positive was a short-term extension of the Household Support Fund, which has helped millions of struggling households”

If only he had picked up Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves' wider plan for a decade of national renewal, with fully costed promises and a new fiscal lock to bring economic security back to family finances.

Instead, the Chancellor chose to revive the corpse of Trussonomics, with a proposal to abolish National Insurance contributions altogether – a £46 billion unfunded commitment that could see NHS funding cut to the bone.

Remarkably similar to Liz Truss's disastrous fiscal event, which crashed the entire economy on the back of £45 billion unfunded tax cuts, it was proof that the Conservatives have learnt nothing.

History repeating itself, first as tragedy, then as farce: perhaps that could be Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's slogan when he eventually decides to call the General Election?



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

Thinking about future generations

It was a great pleasure to spend time with colleagues from Plaid Cymru at their spring conference in Caernarfon in late March.

My grandfather was a Welsh minister, and I hear his voice echoing through his powerful speeches, calling for a better life for local people.

As the LGA, we also represent our colleagues in Wales, especially in lobbying for funding and tackling central government issues.

“Public bodies in Wales are required to think about the long-term impact of their decisions”

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 requires public bodies in Wales to think about the long-term impact of their decisions; to work better with people, communities and each other; and to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change.

How would it be in England if government had always to consider future generations and their wellbeing?

It was fantastic to join so many of our district councillors at the District Councils' Network's annual conference in St Albans.

Our group delved into issues with the current Government's model of devolution, which is leading to more centralisation of power into very few hands, losing local transparency as every deal is different, and reducing democratic voices.

As **first** was going to press, we welcomed Joanna Killian as the LGA's new Chief Executive.

We have already met and discussed the significant contributions our growing group makes to the LGA, and the importance of consensus-building to get the right decisions for all our members.

The very best of luck to those of you taking part in elections for police and crime commissioners, some mayors and many councillors on 2 May. I look forward to seeing our group grow from strength to strength.

The challenges of coastal change



Councillor **Caroline Topping** (Green) is Leader of East Suffolk Council

Local authorities around the country are grappling with a range of issues caused by coastal erosion.

Here in East Suffolk, we are feeling the pain acutely, with one of the fastest-eroding coastlines in northern Europe.

Coastal erosion is unpredictable and likely to get worse with climate change.

However, where communities on the coast are at risk, there is limited funding available to help them adapt or relocate.

Coastal Partnership East manages our response on behalf of councils across Norfolk and Suffolk, and communities are essentially reacting to coastal change and challenges as they happen.

They face uncertainty, worry and distress because of the difficulty with planning ahead or how to solve issues in a positive and controlled way.

Funding for protection is rarely

available on our coast, as there are not enough properties at risk to trigger government funding – so, in most of our communities we are having to look at other adaptive options.

For some, this will be too late and the council will need to support these people to demolish their homes.

Councils will then face pressures on dwindling resources to rehome those with housing and social care needs. However, we will continue to work hard for our communities and seek out solutions.

Our Resilient Coasts programme is an £8.4 million, five-year project that aims to support coastal communities to become more resilient.

It will support those communities at the highest risk of erosion, enabling discussions and planning for adaptation to climate and coastal change.

Meanwhile, we will continue to work on options for affected businesses so they can remain economically viable, and continue to lobby at national level for more integrated business and economic approaches for those at risk.

We know we cannot solve everything



and this is why we will continue to lobby for greater government support. However, we hope that the creation of bespoke adaptation and resilience plans, developed with our communities, will enable them to have affordable, achievable, and resilient options for the future of our rapidly changing coast.



See www.coasteast.org.uk to find out more about Coastal Partnership East



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Making women and girls feel safe



Councillor **Kemi Akinola** (Lab) is Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for the Voluntary Sector, Business Engagement and Culture at Wandsworth Council

Growing up and living in vibrant London, being vigilant when navigating the night-time as a woman comes as a given.

Since my youth, I have worked in hospitality, so I am used to late nights and solitary journeys through dimly lit streets in south London.

While I have always felt safe, I have always operated with caution.

The routine of staying alert, texting your mates when you get in and carrying your keys in your hand is something I will never grow out of.

My perspective is rooted in the female experience; however, through this piece of work it became apparent that this experience is shared among members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

The fear of being attacked at night and no-one being around.

The heartbreaking losses of Sabina Nessa, and sisters Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry, shook every woman everywhere, but it was the tragedy of Sarah Everard's murder in 2021 that struck a personal chord.

Why? Because this happened right next to Wandsworth and so close to home.

In 2018, I was honoured to have been selected and elected by neighbours and friends to represent them in local government.

Despite the challenges of being in opposition for the first few years, instigating initiatives that would make women and girls feel safe remained at the top of my priorities, only preceded by increasing food security.

In 2022, we managed to take control of the council after 48 years, so I was honoured to be asked to speak at a cross-party event organised by the think-tank Radix about our success.

It was there that I met Bristol's night czar, who introduced me to the Women's Night Safety Charter.

Immediately, I was determined to see this in Wandsworth.

I engaged officers on a night safety walk around our borough and asked them to explore adoption of the charter; they suggested the development of a comprehensive night-time strategy focusing on activity between 6pm and 6am.

I gave the officers my confidence and the freedom to try innovative consultation methods, as well as traditional ones.

Views were gathered through

interactive art, focus groups with young people, and an online platform called Commonplace, which engaged more than 150 people in a week.

These insights informed not only our night-time strategy, but also aspects of our violence against women and girls strategy.

In November 2023, we launched the first night-time strategy in London, 'Night Time, Our Time', with the London Night Czar, Amy Lamé.

Subsequently, we have used the annual refresh of our licensing policy to integrate compliance with the Women's Night Safety Charter into the conditions of our licence agreements.

I am proud of the work we have done to write this strategy and, in the coming months, my team and I will be working across council departments and with fellow cabinet members to implement other aspects of it.

It's sobering to note that, in 2022/23, 174 women were murdered in the capital.

These are not just statistics, but our sisters, daughters and mothers – a stark reminder that this work isn't over.

Night-time safety is everyone's business and demands our continued attention.



To find out more and to view [Wandsworth's night-time strategy](https://www.wandsworth.gov.uk/night-time-strategy), please visit www.wandsworth.gov.uk/night-time-strategy. [The Women's Night Safety Charter](#) is available at bit.ly/3wRx7zc

Wasteful words



Allison Ogden-Newton OBE is Chief Executive of Keep Britain Tidy

While we have made a lot of progress on tackling waste by emphasising the last part of the ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’ mantra, we can’t recycle our way out of the climate emergency.

A 2023 National Audit Office report found that household recycling rates in England have stalled since 2011/12, with a national target of recycling 50 per cent of household waste by 2020 missed and recycling rates stagnating at 43-44 per cent.

At Keep Britain Tidy, we believe we urgently need to shift mindsets and make reuse and consumption reduction a social norm – and how we talk about waste is key to doing this.

Our research indicates that the public still largely defaults to recycling, and lacks understanding that this is only the third-best option – behind reducing and reusing.

There is also confusion surrounding ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’, with almost a third of people (30 per cent) feeling that

these commonly used terms are interchangeable.

We have come up with a newly designed and tested version of the waste ‘hierarchy’ (see graphic) as part of fresh, practical and evidence-based guidance to help councils and industry better educate the public about waste prevention and mindful consumption.

Our new hierarchy features logically grouped levels and more detailed descriptors than the catch-all ‘reduce, reuse and recycle’ – such as ‘have a “buy less” mindset’ and ‘use it again and again’.

It is also highly visual, with images and symbols suggesting types of items and behaviours to consider.

After seeing the new hierarchy, 71 per cent of research participants said it was clear what it was asking them to do, 58 per cent recognised better ways to minimise their environmental footprint beyond recycling, and 51 per cent felt motivated to protect the planet.

Embracing better, insight-led communications such as this new waste hierarchy is an essential piece of the puzzle if we are to engage the public on waste prevention, encourage ‘reduce and reuse’ behaviours, and, ultimately, accelerate the UK’s transition to a circular economy.



i Keep Britain Tidy’s waste hierarchy and other resources are available to download at www.keepbritaintidy.org

Evidence-based support for UAS children



Dr **Jo Casebourne** is Chief Executive of Foundations

Unaccompanied children seeking asylum are a vulnerable group in need of sensitive, evidence-based support.

These children have often overcome significant and unique challenges in search of a safe environment, facing distressing and sometimes traumatic events before attempting to adjust to unfamiliar settings.

In March 2023, more than 7,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking (UAS) children were recorded as living in England – but we don’t always know how best to support them.

This is particularly true in relation to wellbeing support, where these children often fall through the gaps of mental health provision.

However, our new findings demonstrate how My View, a specialised therapeutic intervention developed by the Refugee Council, can have a positive impact on the wellbeing of UAS children.

We are calling for My View to be made more widely available, so that all children who would benefit are able to access the support they need and deserve.

Our recently published evaluation, conducted by Ipsos and the Centre for Evidence and Implementation, found that My View can reduce psychological distress and improve the wellbeing of UAS children, leading to improvements in mental health, social connections, sleep, diet, and relaxation.

Young people also described how My View helped improve their mood and hopes for the future.

These positive findings are extremely important, as UAS children are at higher risk of experiencing mental health problems than their peers, but often

struggle to access support – or the support available lacks sensitivity to the realities of their lived experience.

Our findings show an effective approach to improving their wellbeing that emphasises the importance of considering the specific needs of vulnerable children.

Investing in support that has been shown to work is essential if we are to ensure that all children are given the opportunity to thrive, and this cannot wait.

With rising numbers of UAS children in England, and an increasing number of children in mental health crisis, it is imperative that the next government prioritises mental health and wellbeing support for children, and that this is grounded in high-quality evidence.

i Foundations is the What Works Centre for Children & Families. See www.foundationsof.org.uk/our-work/reports/my-view for its evaluation of My View

AI and children's social care



Kevin Yong is Managing Director of Coram-i

In 'Stable homes, built on love', the Government outlined its strategy to reform children's social care and its aim to develop 'a system that continuously learns and improves, and makes better use of evidence and data'.

Local authorities generate an enormous amount of data, but do not have the capacity to extract insight which could deliver important benefits in safeguarding and prevention, as well as significant cost savings at a time when soaring social care costs are placing pressure on local budgets.

With rising demand for services and the increasing complexity of the challenges that families face, it is clear that the sector needs to innovate.

The use of AI in social care can support professionals to better understand and act upon key data about children and families.

The Coram Innovation Incubator (CII) is a vehicle for generating, testing and scaling new approaches to the most important and intractable challenges in children's services.

Coram and partners including local

authorities across the country, Microsoft, Ernst and Young, and PA Consulting, are developing a series of innovative digital projects that are shifting the dial.

North Yorkshire Council is pioneering a new tool that uses AI to trawl through a mass of both structured and unstructured data about a child to develop an 'ecomap' to highlight the people and places important to the individual.

The tool, funded by the Department for Education's Children's Social Care Digital and Data Solutions Fund, and supported by CII, provides social workers with key information at the click of a button, enabling them to identify those who can help to keep a child safe and those who may pose a risk.

Social workers are over-burdened with administrative tasks that contribute to burnout. AI tools could allow social workers to automatically record and transcribe home visits, eliminating laborious note-taking and allowing a firm focus on the family in the moment.

AI, within its current capabilities, could also easily be trained to identify and redact confidential information.

Even better, AI could be used to write a summary that includes the key information while omitting anything confidential so that care leavers are no longer presented with pages of redacted text that are practically impossible to make sense of.

With tools such as generative AI, it is

now possible to ask questions and receive a written answer, rather than relying on a search tool that finds pre-existing text.

Care leavers could explore their case file in a more natural way, asking questions in plain English to find information rather than searching through countless pages manually.

By analysing large amounts of data quickly, AI could help identify an effective way to deploy resources, estimate the likely impact of an intervention and help social workers to prioritise their work.

Local authorities could use AI to help check policies to ensure they comply with legislation, standards and guidance. It could also review policies to check for any contradictions.

AI is not a panacea and will always need human intervention. Its application needs to be a collaborative effort, drawing together experts from across sectors and co-produced with citizens, to mitigate risks and improve outcomes for children and families.

But by automating time-consuming and complex processes, social workers would be able to spend vital relationship-building time with children and families that is so central to social care practice.



Coram-i is the insight and innovation consultancy of the **children's charity** Coram, see www.coram.org.uk



Lancaster tops by-elections table



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



At the very end of February, the Conservatives made a gain from the Liberal Democrats, their first since November 2022.

It happened in Horsham's Southwater North ward, which the Conservatives lost last May, albeit by just over 100 votes.

The 2023 elections saw long-standing councillor and then council leader, Claire Vickers, defeated, as were a large number of her council colleagues.

The Liberal Democrats doubled their numbers then and took majority control, repeating their feat of the late 1990s.

However, the resignation of Cllr Mike

Wood provided the opportunity for Vickers to recover her seat, which she did with some ease this time around.

Any hopes the Conservatives could make it a double in Horsham by winning the Henfield by-election were dashed by the Greens.

The vacancy arose following the death of Independent councillor Malcolm Eastwood, who in 2023 finished just 13 votes ahead of the sole Conservative candidate in the two-member ward. Gill Perry, for the Greens, however, missed out on securing the second seat by just 11 votes.

This by-election saw her back again, while the Conservatives selected another councillor defeated last May, but Perry was not to be denied a second time.

The Greens enjoyed further success when safely defending their seat in Lancaster City Council's Castle ward for the second time, something Labour did once before in the mid-1980s.

Electors in Lancaster are no strangers to by-elections, with no fewer than 66 contests since the early 1980s, more than any other council.

For those interested in such matters, only two other councils have exceeded 60 by-elections. With 62 by-elections, the now abolished Allerdale Borough Council lies in second place with 14 of those contests also filling vacancies on the then Cumbria County Council.

Hackney leads the way in London with 61 by-elections, with Wandsworth, on



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just 20 contests, recording a third fewer.

Among the metropolitan boroughs, which until recently were all observing the same electoral cycle, the most frequent by-elections were in Manchester (42) and the least (13) in Gateshead.

Of course, these are headline figures and do not make adjustments for a council's size; for example, while Gateshead has 66 councillors, Manchester has 96.

Returning to this set of by-elections, Labour and the Liberal Democrats each made two gains.

Labour's gains came in the East Midlands and Wales while those for the Liberal Democrats were both in the South West, a region that has supplied 16 per cent of its by-election gains from the Conservatives over the past three years.

Derbyshire Dales was another of the councils the Conservatives lost in 2023 as councillor numbers halved. The new local

administration sees Labour working alongside Liberal Democrats (the largest party) and the Greens.

The vacancy, in Bakewell, arose following Conservative Mark Wakeman's resignation and the incumbent party were certain to face a tough struggle to retain the seat.

Wakeman had topped the poll previously, over 400 votes ahead of his fellow Conservative, who in turn was just 55 votes ahead of Labour in third place.

Without Wakeman's strong personal vote, the Conservative defence was unsuccessful but Labour's winning margin was just 15 votes.

Labour's second win, Bridgend's Aberkenfig ward, became almost a formality when Plaid Cymru decided not to contest the vacancy brought about by the resignation, on health grounds, of their sitting councillor, Ellie Richards.

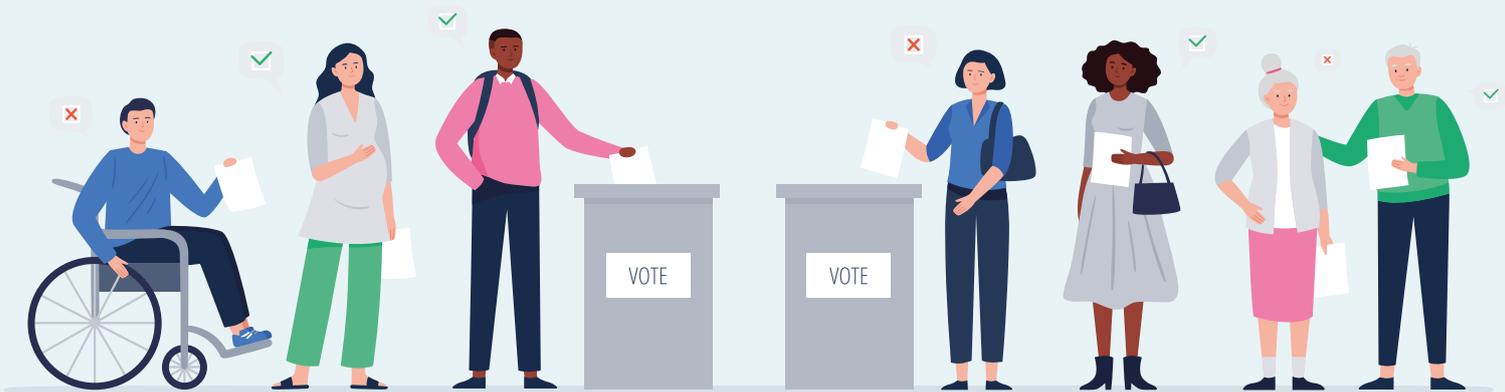
Despite the Bridgend Independents group endorsing the Independent in the two-horse race, it was Labour's Gary Haines who prevailed and improves his party's narrow council majority.

The Liberal Democrats enjoyed victories in Wiltshire and Devon.

The 20-point gap between Conservative and Liberal Democrat in the 2021 contest for Wiltshire's Calne Chilvester and Abberd ward was easily overturned by a 17-point swing in vote shares.

There was little prospect the Conservatives could safely negotiate the by-election for their seat in Mid Devon's Upper Yeo and Taw ward.

Last May, the ward split its support, electing a Conservative and Liberal Democrat. The defeated Conservative then, Peter Heal, chose to stand again, as did a former Liberal Democrat councillor, Alex White, who emerged a clear winner.

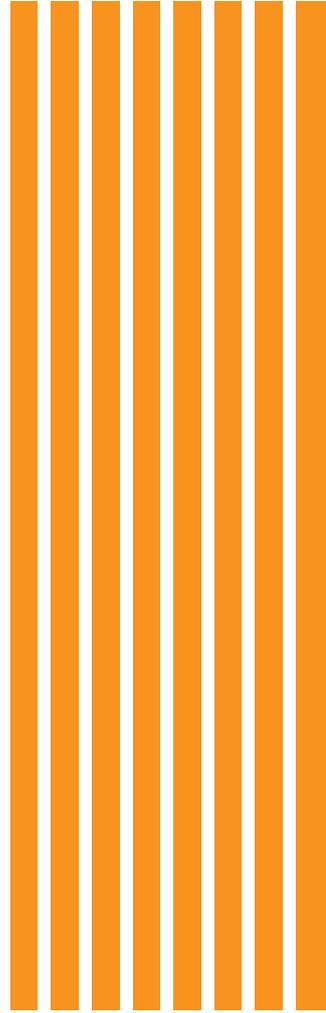


Local by-elections		
<p>Bridgend, Aberkenfig LAB GAIN FROM PLAID CYMRU 10.4% over Ind Turnout 27.0%</p>	<p>East Riding of Yorkshire, Minster and Woodmansey LIB DEM HELD 25.8% over Con Turnout 21.1%</p>	<p>Lancaster, Castle GREEN HELD 38.7% over Lab Turnout 15.8%</p>
<p>Buckinghamshire, Farnham Common & Burnham Beeches CON HELD 10.3% over Lib Dem Turnout 23.2%</p>	<p>East Riding of Yorkshire, Tranby LIB DEM HELD 31.8% over Lab Turnout 21.6%</p>	<p>Mid Devon, Upper Yeo & Taw LIB DEM GAIN FROM CON 23.1% over Con Turnout 24.2%</p>
<p>Buckinghamshire, Hazlemere CON HELD 1.8% over Ind Turnout 25.7%</p>	<p>Folkestone & Hythe, Romney Marsh CON HELD 3.3% over Green Turnout 26.5%</p>	<p>Milton Keynes, Loughton and Shenley LAB HELD 6.7% over Con Turnout 25.1%</p>
<p>Carmarthenshire, Elli IND HELD 9.6% over Con Turnout 36.0%</p>	<p>Great Yarmouth, Central & Northgate LAB HELD 20.3% over Con Turnout 15.5%</p>	<p>Wiltshire, Calne Chilvester and Abberd LIB DEM GAIN FROM CON 15.0% over Con Turnout 24.0%</p>
<p>Derbyshire Dales, Bakewell LAB GAIN FROM CON 1.2% over Con Turnout 35.0%</p>	<p>Horsham, Henfield GREEN GAIN FROM IND 6.6% over Con Turnout 33.3%</p>	<p>Wiltshire, Cricklade and Latton LIB DEM HELD 57.3% over Con Turnout 23.8%</p>
<p>Derbyshire Dales, Norbury CON HELD 48.2% over Lab Turnout 27.0%</p>	<p>Horsham, Southwater North CON GAIN FROM LIB DEM 18.3% over Lib Dem Turnout 28.8%</p>	<p>i For more information on these and other recent by-election results, please visit www.lgafirst.co.uk/local-by-elections</p>



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